



OCCULT DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE



BUMPER 2021 PROMOTIONAL ISSUE #0

Edited by **Dave Brzeski & John Linwood Grant**



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#0 (Bumper 2021 Promotional Issue)

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INTRODUCTION

Dave Brzeski

This special promotional issue of *Occult Detective Magazine* has been a long time coming. I originally suggested it back in the *Occult Detective Quarterly* days. The magazine was getting such good feedback. The readers we had seemed to really like what we were doing, but very few people were even aware we existed!

We currently live in a time when it's really easy to get things published. The downside of that is that there's an awful lot more competition for the reader's hard-earned money. Every week countless thousands of new books and magazines are added to the servers at Amazon. The upshot of this is that it's much, much harder to market a product well enough that it actually sells enough copies to break even, let alone make any money.

Don't get me wrong... money has never been a huge factor for us. We just want to make enough to pay the authors and artists properly, and on time, and make the magazine better. Neither John Linwood Grant, nor I (or anyone else involved in the production side of the magazine) has ever made a penny out of it through three publishers. In fact it would be fair to say that it owes us all money. On the other hand, we do want the magazine to be read by as many people as possible.

So, I came up with the idea of an ebook only, promotional issue which would feature freely donated reprints of stories that weren't actually ever published in the magazine, but could have been.

We were overwhelmed by the support we received when I put the word out about our plans. Not only do we have reprints of great stories from some excellent authors, but we even have several originals – never before published stories!

Josh Reynolds has supported us from the beginning, and we're so grateful that he decided to offer us an unpublished tale of Charles St Cyprian and Ebe Gallowglass. Bev Allen's character Mrs Lillicrop first appeared in *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents* – an anthology we created to make a home for some of the great stories we'd received that were simply too long to go in the regular magazine. Bev has graciously donated Mrs Lillicrop's second adventure to this promotional issue. S.L. Edwards has given us a brand new Joe Bartred story, and Adrian Cole, sent us an interesting piece on his British Fantasy Award winning creation – Nick Nightmare.

There's some amazing material amongst the reprints too. Best-selling crime author, Paul Finch has donated a story featuring his occult detective, Major Craddock. You'll notice that this one is a bit longer than usual for the magazine. While we don't plan on publishing a second volume to *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents*, we have decided to make the tenth issue of the regular magazine a bumper, longer stories special issue, so we figured it wouldn't hurt to include a story that represented that side of our output. The best news of all is that Paul Finch has promised us a new tale for a future issue.

We also have a superb story from no less than BAFTA Award nominated author Mike Carey! I dare to hold out some hope that he'll offer us something new at some point.

You may have noticed Jilly Paddock's name in the production credits as publisher and formatter. In fact, Jilly is the person everyone has to thank for the continued existence of *Occult Detective Magazine*. When our great friend, and previous publisher, Sam Gafford, tragically died,

we all thought we were done. Jilly suggested we could publish it ourselves, under her Cathaven Press imprint. I confess that I was initially against taking it on. It was when Jilly pointed out the serendipity of all those authors who had stories accepted back when we were published by Ulthar Press, stories that were now homeless... how could we not take them in at Cathaven press? Devotees of the works of H.P. Lovecraft will get the reference, I'm sure.

Cathaven Press was initially set up to publish Jilly's own science fiction books. While Jilly may be ostensibly a science fiction author, she's never yet encountered a genre boundary she couldn't kick aside. It's not at all unusual for the supernatural to make its presence known in her work – especially in her stories of Afton and Jerome, police officers who operate out of a precinct on the back end of nowhere planet, Siobhos. The story reprinted here is a case in point.

Opinions on editors using their own stories in the books they edit are divided. Many don't worry about it. Some even employ pseudonyms to sneak more than one of their own tales in. But some simply will not do it, as they consider it to be an unfair advantage. John Linwood Grant is firmly of this latter persuasion, which is why none of his stories has ever previously appeared in an issue of *Occult Detective Quarterly/Magazine*. This is fine, I agree with his principles... but I also strongly believe that the magazine has been the poorer for it. I consider John to be one of the finest authors currently working in our little corner of the market, so I was very pleased when he relented this once, and agreed to allow me to include one of his Mamma Lucy tales in this special issue.

The fiction is rounded out by tales of I.A. Watson's popular Vinnie de Soth, Mike Chinn's Damian Paladin, Rosemary (Mary Ann Allen) Pardoe's Jane Bradshawe, S.L. Edwards' Joe Bartred and E.J. Stevens' Ivy Granger, among others.

If any single character can be claimed to be the biggest influence, and therefore a major factor in this magazine's birth, it would be William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki, The Ghost Finder. I am especially pleased to include one of Carnacki's weirdest cases, from the pen of William Meikle.

We also have a selection of non-fiction, from Tim Prasil, G.W. Thomas and myself, plus our usual review column.

This promotional issue should, we hope, give readers a good idea of what to expect in regular issues of the magazine. The only major difference is that you'll find many more excellent full-page illustrations in a regular issue. This wasn't possible in this promotional issue, since we'd have had to commission new illustrations specifically for the stories, which would have pushed the costs up considerably. We do however have a couple of fine illustrations, which were very generously donated by Autumn Barlow, and Adam Shaw.

This issue of *Occult Detective Magazine* will be permanently available free at our website (<http://greydogtales.com/blog/occult-detective-magazine/>) in Kindle, .epub and .pdf formats. Please feel free to share it around on your website, blog or mailing lists. If you see it listed on Amazon at any price other than free, please make use of their 'Would you like to tell us about a lower price?' feature. This should, hopefully, cause them to make it free there too.

We are looking in to the logistics of producing a strictly limited, pre-order only paperback edition at some point. If you think you might like to purchase one of these paperback copies, please join the *ODM* mailing list (details elsewhere in this issue) as that's the best way of making sure you don't miss any announcements.

A HISTORY OF MEDDLING

John Linwood Grant

It is probably never a good idea to start a magazine. To do so on the basis of fannish enthusiasm, without substantial seed money, proper marketing or dedicated staff, is an even worse idea. So when *Occult Detective Magazine* was founded (initially as *Occult Detective Quarterly*), there was every reason to believe that lots of things would go wrong. And they did...

The heart of the original idea came from the late Sam Gafford and myself, and was based on a shared love of classic occult detectives and, in particular, of William Hope Hodgson's *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder*, from 1910. Add a touch of Sam's interest in the TV detective *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, and my own Edwardian 'weird' stories, and it seemed irresistible. There was NO other magazine publishing and encouraging new stories in this fascinating sub-genre, after all.

With a fledgling publisher, Travis Neisler, on board, we agreed to give it a go, and went straight for a Kickstarter campaign to create both interest and a small pot of money to get it all started. The hope was (wildly) that as we had plenty of casual curiosity from weird fiction and horror readers, and as we had little likelihood of making a profit – breaking even was the initial aim – little damage could be done.

The initial campaign worked, and we launched in 2016 with a super first issue, illustrated, and rich with different interpretations of the occult detective concept from some great writers. It was popular with writers – naturally – and with a core of dedicated fans and supporters. It received very positive reviews. But...

For starters, not enough people even knew we existed. Neither of the editors were paid – Sam and I did it out of love for the field – and there was no spare money for promotion. So it was almost impossible to break into the wider market that probably still exists out there. And then we hit other snags, like the costs of distribution, mailing of hard copies and all the other logistical horrors which chew magazines apart. The workload was heavy, done outside of and on top of our day jobs, and we drew in UK editor Dave Brzeski, who soon became a mainstay of the team.

At the same time, and with the same fannish enthusiasm, we found we were receiving far too many long stories – novelette to novella length – some of which really were very good, and so we had a second modest campaign to fund an anthology, *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents*, in the hope that we could offer a venue for these to be seen. Again costs ate away at what might have helped bolster up the magazine, and sadly, the fledgling publisher could no longer cope.

Sam stepped in with his own small press, Ulthar, and we stabilised what we had. We were determined not to do another Kickstarter, given the problems with the other two, but to bite down and keep putting out a good, imaginative magazine, illustrated when we could afford it, perhaps not quarterly. Sam and I put the odd extra dollar in from our own pockets, and we were on the edge of that break-even point – with *Occult Detective Quarterly #5* – when, tragically, we lost Sam to a massive heart attack. Which looked like being the final straw.

It wasn't. With myself (the remaining founder) and Dave Brzeski now at the helm, we made an interim decision, partly in honour of Sam. We would try to publish a couple more issues, maybe going out on a highlight. And then, to our surprise, Cliff Biggers, an American writer and owner of a

comics and games store, stepped in and said he felt like we did. With enormous generosity, Cliff offered us enough financial sponsorship for those two issues at least, enough that the three of us could begin to see a way to continue the whole darn Occult Detective thing as an open-ended project.

Dave's (and his partner, Jilly's) micropress in the UK, Cathaven, took over the publishing duties, and he and I laid plans for the future. Ironically, the relaunch issue (as *Occult Detective Magazine #6*) proved very popular and paid for itself, probably the first to do so; that and the issue which followed, *ODM#7*, are still selling.

We're proud of what we've achieved, though we're still overworked and none of us – including Jilly, who took over the formatting duties – make any income whatsoever from it, of course. In five years we've published – and paid – some fifty or sixty authors from different countries, showcasing some fantastic work which has explored the whole Occult Detective concept with great inventiveness and style. We've commissioned new illustrations, and we've added reviews, articles and all sorts as we went along. It's been a hair-raising ride, fraught with difficulties, and yet in 2021/22, we expect to publish not only *ODM#8* and *ODM#9* but also an issue (rather than a separate anthology this time) of longer stories, *ODM#10*.

Here's to Sam, and to Cliff, to our readers and supporters, and to the talented contributors who have provided us with so much new, original entertainment – for a project which should probably never have been...

JOIN THE
OCCULT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
MAILING LIST!

For quite a while now, we've relied on the [Occult Detective Magazine Facebook group](#), and the Doomed Meddlers page on John Linwood Grant's [GreyDogTales](#) blog to keep people informed about what's happening with the magazine... Not everyone is on Facebook however, so we decided an email based mailing list might be a good thing.

The list will contain information about upcoming issues, open calls for author/artists, special projects and the like. We will not spam you with endless emails. In fact, we'll only send an update when we have something specific to pass on. While it's possible that you may get two emails in one week, it's just as likely that you'll go months without seeing one.

To sign up for the mailing list, simply send an email with "Join the *ODM* Mailing List" as the subject line to occultdetectivemagazine@gmail.com.

WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

Mike Carey

I will take the trouble to set this out for you, because I feel it's important that you understand. I must ask you to listen and to refrain from asking questions while I speak. I believe the most pertinent issues between us will be very clearly explained in the course of my story. If at the end of it you still find yourself puzzled, unclear as to why you are about to die, then in that respect and that respect alone you will have good reason to reproach me.

In the 14th arrondissement of the city, close to the Brooklyn Bridge and the Alhambra, there is – or used to be; it is hard to be categorical – a patisserie whose terrace looks out directly onto the Seine. It had been my custom ever since I found the place to have a breakfast croissant there, watching the lazily ambling waters of the river while the particulars of the cases on which I was currently working flowed through my brain with a similar lack of haste or direction. This ritual had afforded me many valuable insights, and I had come to rely on it more and more in these recent times of turbulence and irreplaceable loss.

So naturally, this was where the latest body had been found.

I was summoned to the Rue Asselin at 6:00 a.m. on a morning in October – this last October, which was neither mild nor merciful. You remember it, yes? The chill of winter was already in the air despite the warming smell of baking Viennoiseries carried on the westerly wind. The Cafés had not opened at that hour, but they were already preparing for the early morning onslaught.

The corpse was lying at the edge of the pavement, one arm stretched out into the road. He looked as though he had met his demise in the act of hailing a cab. He was formally dressed in a black tuxedo whose satin edgings had lost their lustre forever, stained as they were with their late owner's cerebral matter. His skull was not only smashed, it was also seriously truncated. Monsieur Crâne, very evidently, had struck again.

The Irishman, Sergeant Riordan, was there before me and was scraping at the dead man's fingernails, where presumably something of value was to be found. An assailant's blood and tissue, perhaps, or the rare earth of some specific and identifiable quarter of the city. I don't care much for Riordan's irreverent manner but I admire his stubborn perfectionism and his dedication to duty. When the dead rose and became the undead he fought indefatigably in the city's defence. It was said that he had put a bullet in the head of his own wife when she clawed her way out of the body bag and tried to eat their only child. Afterwards he had carried her corpse three miles to lay her down in the mass grave in the Jardin du Luxembourg along with all the other *zombis*. Respect must be paid to such a man.

A young woman, her hair wet as if she had just stepped out of the shower, was standing beside him. She was taking photographs of the crime scene. Not of the body, but of the buildings round about. Curious, I thought. She was curious herself. Her pale blue eyes and ash blonde hair, the extreme pallor of her skin seemed to belong to another place and time. She might have been one of the city's marble statues come to life. Or she might have been one of the *zombi* revenants, but there were no revenants now. We had won that war, at a cost – to each and all of us – almost too high to reckon.

I took up a station immediately behind Riordan, leaning against the wall of an adjacent building. I was resigned to a long wait. The Irish detective's methods are exhaustive, and exhausting. "So," I said to pass the time, "do you have any ideas as to the cause of death?"

The woman – apparently Riordan's partner or assistant – looked around as I spoke, her gaze taking me in from toe to crown. Her stare allowed the possibility that I might be, or become, interesting. It explicitly did not go any further than that.

"You're a very funny man, Inspector Philemon," Riordan murmured. "It's a struggle to restrain my merriment with you making such jocular observations."

The woman walked across to the edge of the pavement and took a series of photographs of a small dog that had wandered up to join us. It stared into her lens with a long-suffering patience, as though it was used to such impertinences. "Is the dog a suspect?" I asked Riordan.

He looked around at the woman, at the animal, and gave a little snort that conveyed no information at all.

The woman took my picture next. The magnificent frontage of the Hotel Belle Epoque provided a very photogenic backdrop, but I doubt it did anything to offset the shadows under my eyes or the rumpled, lived-in state of my clothes.

Riordan straightened. He was looking similarly lived-in, to be honest. Both of us had been on this case more or less continuously since it had first broken more than a month before, and we were far from the only ones. The body of a young woman, a streetwalker, had been found lying in the middle of the Champs Elysees. In swerving around her, the cars had made hundreds of concentric ruts in the autumn mud, roughly circular but tapered at either end: a *yoni* mark, as though in deference to her profession.

The top of her head had been removed. There was nothing above the bridge of her nose. The resulting damage, however, had none of the neatness of an incision. It had not been done with a scalpel or a bone saw. It was more in the nature of a crush injury, as though someone had pounded the woman's head repeatedly with a hammer until the resulting mass of pulped flesh and bone fragments could be scraped away. What was left of the skull and the head bore the typical signs of crushing: the bone fragmented along parallel lines of stress, and pulled free of the muscles in the same vertical plane. Striated trauma artefacts extended all the way down into the shoulders and upper back.

Monsieur Crâne had left his calling card. He was to do so again a further twelve times in the following weeks. Today's corpse brought the overall total up to fourteen, and still we were no closer to an arrest, or even to establishing a suspect.

We were still recovering, of course, from the great war between the living and the dead. Perhaps on some level we could not help but see the victims as potential enemies. Certainly we carried our scars from that war, every one of us. We were the walking wounded, emotionally and psychologically depleted. The world we lived and moved in seemed drained of colour. It was as though that high tide of death had left us beached and we were only waiting for another wave to carry us away.

There were, of course, more prosaic problems with the investigation. Logistical ones. The victims were bafflingly diverse. The first, a prostitute who must have been attacked in the course of her nightly work – an occupational hazard, one might have thought. But the second body to appear was a Japanese commodities broker well known on Wall Street, and the third was a respectable lady who ran a cantina on Juarez Hill. Back to the gutter for victim number four, a homeless drunk. And so, and so, and so. Perhaps there was no scalpel involved, but Monsieur Crâne's needle pricked the fabric of society at every level and pulled it into a tight, unlovely gather.

I took these musings to the establishment I mentioned earlier, the Café Moche on Fifth and Taylor, just off Unterdenlinden, and stirred them into lethargic activity with a double espresso. I ordered a croissant too, but left it untouched. I considered lacing the coffee with brandy, a great specific both against the weather and against unpleasant thoughts, but it was still very early in the day. I usually endured my stations of the cross without anaesthetic until the middle of the afternoon. Otherwise I would have been drunk all the time. To make a continuing investment in what was left of my life and work required me, occasionally, to be sober.

But the waiter, Sam, must have seen the temptation cross my mind. “You want a slug of something hard in that, Phil?” he shouted from the bar.

I shook my head. “Not unless you have the Koh-I-Noor diamond ready to hand.”

He laughed – a loud and raucous sound. “Still on order. I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll take a brandy, though, if you’re offering,” said the young woman from the crime scene. She slid into the seat opposite me and shot me a cold smile. “Lutetia. Lutetia Lumière. In case you’re wondering, you’re very pleased to meet me.”

I looked around for Riordan. He was not on the premises.

“You seem to have misplaced your partner, Madame detective,” I observed. “Should I telephone the precinct and ask them to conduct a search?”

The woman – Lumière? A good name for a photographer, I supposed – ignored the question. She pushed some photos across the table at me. I pushed them back, which caused her to twist her very expressive lips into a warning frown. “I need you to look at these,” she said. “They’re part of my inquiry.”

“But not of mine,” I pointed out mildly. “The Sûreté and the Garda are not collaborating on this case. I’m sure Sergeant Riordan would be quite homicidally distressed to know you were canvassing the details of his investigation with an officer of a rival organisation.”

Lumière grinned. “Sergeant Riordan can keep his investigation. I’m talking about mine. And I don’t work for the Garda.”

“Then why...?” I began, but she stopped me with a raised finger. She was still smiling, but something hard and sharp glinted beneath it like broken glass in a flowerbed. “Hey. Excuse me. I said I don’t work for the Garda. I also don’t work for the Sûreté or the Policzni or the Aktionsstyrke or the Kogu-Keisatsu. I’m strictly freelance, inspector. Which is why I’m sitting here talking to you now, under the possibly mistaken impression that you actually give a shit about all these dead people we keep tripping over. If I’m wrong, I’ll just move right along.”

It was an impressive speech, though it was slightly undercut by the arrival at that precise moment of her brandy, delivered by Sam with a wink and a smirk. I knew very well what had put that leer on his face. We had fought together, the two of us, and killed together those who were already unarguably dead. He was misinterpreting this meeting as a romantic liaison and he was pleased on my behalf. He was an optimist, and looked out continually for signs of a thaw in my perpetual winter. And I continually disappointed him.

Lumière thanked him for the brandy, then turned the searchlight of her attention back to me. “Okay,” she said, “Let’s start at the beginning. What do we have?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Assuming, for the sake of argument, that there is a composite entity that could reasonably be called *we*, what *we* have is fourteen bodies killed at various places around the city in a one-month period. Nothing to tie the suspects together, and nothing for that matter to link the murders themselves apart from the manner of death, which in all cases is severe crush injury to the head.”

Lumière shook her head sternly. "Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy," she said. "Three times over, for the three things you left out. If we're going to work together, I'm going to need you to be a little more forensic."

I considered what might be added to my summary. The alternative would have been to get up and walk away, which I wasn't inclined to do since I had been there first. "All the killings were at night," I offered. "At least, the bodies were found in the morning in the vast majority of cases."

"Good. What else?"

"The crush injuries aren't the only consistency in the evidence. In all cases the crime scene was surprisingly clean. There was blood and cerebral tissue to be found, and some bone fragments, but far less than one would expect from such an extreme physical trauma. Oh, and some of the bodies also bear lacerations to their lower legs and ankles, as though they had been bitten, *ante mortem*, by a large animal."

"And that's two. Finally?"

I shrugged irritably, taking another sip of my coffee. "I don't know. You tell me."

"Accelerating pace, inspector. The intervals between the killings have been getting shorter. These last two were on successive nights."

This was true. I had shied away from saying it because I was trying not to think about it. It meant that tonight would almost certainly yield a new horror which I would have to face come tomorrow morning. I had had enough of such sights. Possibly I had had too much. On a day like this it was hard to shake the feeling that I was nearing some psychological terminus at a reckless and irrevocable velocity.

"So that is what *we* have," I summed up, with brittle emphasis. "What we don't have is anything in the way of witness testimony, any fingerprints or physical clues left at any of the scenes, or any clinical evidence that might help to identify a suspect. Therefore, after one month and fourteen bodies, *we* are still very much where we were at the outset. Which is to say, desultorily masturbating while the world goes to Hell."

I would not have used such a crude analogy if the woman had not insulted my professionalism. But Lumière didn't seem shocked or taken aback. She drained half of her brandy in one gulp, rolling it around her mouth before she swallowed. "When I masturbate, inspector," she said, "it's never desultory. Look out of the window."

I took a glance. The fog had settled in thickly, conclusively deciding the uneven struggle between afternoon and evening. "It's foul," I agreed.

"Not my point," said Lumière. "Now look at your plate."

I glanced down at my uneaten croissant and said, "Perhaps I was not so hungry as—"

The sentence remained unfinished as the pale woman lashed out, as quick as a snake. I was suddenly lying on the floor of the Café with my own blood welling up thick and cloying in my mouth.

She stood over me, holding the stem of her broken brandy glass. Her face was calm and perhaps a little solicitous. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "But the liquor will sterilise the cut. And if it needs a stitch or two, I've got a kit right here in my pocket. Get up, inspector."

I did so, but I drew my Chamelot-Delvigne as I rose, and by the time I was on my feet again I had it pointed at her face. The Café's other patrons had mostly remained seated, but were watching us warily. A debacle like this one could turn serious very quickly. Sam was watching too. He had picked up the stout shillelagh he kept behind the bar, but seeing that I had the situation in hand he made no move to deploy it.

"You're under arrest," I told Lumière coldly. "For assaulting a police officer."

She seemed unperturbed. "Tell me again about your croissant," she invited me.

“What?” I demanded. “What in the world are you...?”

Once again I faltered into silence, although this time not because of an incised wound. It had been morning when I came into the Café. That was why I had ordered a croissant. Now it was evening. The day had passed in the space between two breaths.

“*Merde alors!*” I exclaimed.

Lumière laughed. “I know, right? It gets easier to see through the bullshit, trust me, but the first time you pretty much have to be in severe pain. I got my hand slammed in a revolving door. Blessing in disguise, although I fucked and blinded like a longshoreman at the time. All these things are tied together, inspector. I can show you how. Are you up for this?”

I hesitated, but only for a heartbeat – and mostly because her idiom had left me a little confused. “Up for, *c’est quoi?*”

“Ready. Motivated. Inclined to pursue a specific course of action.”

“Yes,” I assured her. “I am very much up for this.”

She took me first back to the site of the latest murder. There was no fog now. We had opened the door of the Café to find the street cold, clear, and lamplit. “I tried three times with that Irishman,” she told me as we walked through the frigid dusk. “Smacked him in the mouth, bit him, and stabbed his hand with a letter opener. He couldn’t see it. So I thought I’d try you. Glad I did.”

“You weren’t tempted to work alone?” I asked her. “If you’re still walking around loose after doing all those things to Mr Riordan you must be a woman of formidable talents.”

“Thank you, Inspector Philemon. But this is much too big for me to handle on my own. Probably too big for the both of us together but hey, misery loves company.”

My own misery did not. I almost said as much, but she slowed and stopped. We had come to the exact corner, the place where the dead man had been lying when I first arrived on the scene that morning (or an hour ago, for both of those statements seemed correct). There was no body to be seen now. The liveried doorman in front of the hotel stood with his hands clasped at his back, his fastidious sneer making any crime here seem not just impossible but *déclassé*.

“You said earlier,” Lumière reminded me, “that there was no physical evidence left at the crime scenes. I think there is, but people are missing it for the same reason they miss all this messed-up time-shifting.”

I looked around, but at first could see nothing.

“Try chewing your lip,” Lumière suggested. “The torn bit. Stick your tongue in the wound to make it smart.”

I felt no inclination to do that, and it wasn’t necessary. Just grimacing so that the wound cracked open again was enough. I winced in pain, and at the same moment saw what I had failed to see before.

“The hotel!” I said, pointing. “I think... I’m almost sure...”

Wordlessly the pale woman handed me one of the photos she had tried to show me in the Café. It was a photo of me that morning, standing exactly where I was standing now. To my left, a brass sign announced with many Romanesque flourishes that this was the Hotel Belle Epoque.

Now it stated in stiffly seriffed copperplate that it was the Waldorf Astoria.

“That... That isn’t possible!” I whispered.

“And eighty-minute days are?” Lumière’s tone was sardonic, even flippant, but there was tension in her face. She held out the rest of the photos for me to take.

I leafed through them with shaking hands. I easily recognised the common theme. Each of them showed one of the scenes where a body had been found. Each of them ignored the body and concentrated on the physical landmarks in its vicinity. A street sign, an awning, in one case the elegant neo-classical facade of the Bundesbank.

Looking at them made my head ache. I sensed in each case that a substitution had been made similar to that which I had just witnessed. Tverskaya Street had once been the Boulevard St Germain. The Hafiz Mustafa was formerly the Patisserie LaRochelle.

“What is happening?” I demanded. “What does all this mean?”

“I have no idea,” Lumière said sourly. “All I know is that the murders are accompanied by these inexplicable phenomena. These transformations. And that most people walk right past them without even slowing down. They’re completely unaware that anything has changed.”

A memory struck me, coming out of nowhere. “This morning,” I said. “Your hair was soaking, though the weather was dry.”

Lumière nodded approvingly. “Very good, inspector,” she said. “You’re getting the hang of this. A block away, it was raining. I walked through it to get to the crime scene. The weather changes, as well as the buildings and the time of day. And as my last exhibit, suppose I were to ask you the name of this city? The one in which you’ve been living for – I would suppose – the last several years.”

“I was born here,” I told her. “Right here in...”

I had to struggle to finish the sentence. The word just wouldn’t come. I twisted my lips to form the opening consonant, fought to push the breath out of my throat.

“Almost there,” Lumière encouraged. Or did she mock me?

“Paris!” I yelled like a lost soul. “I was born in Paris!”

Lumière clutched my shoulders, her eyes shining. I was wrong, there was no mockery here. “Oh, nicely done!” she said. “Excellent! This was Paris once. But it takes an exceptional man to remember that. I knew as soon as I heard your voice, inspector, that you wouldn’t let me down!”

I took no comfort from these words. Indeed it is hard to describe the anguish and rage I felt right then. I thought I was inured to sorrow, that it had become my element, but this new pain cut through the dullness of my despair like a scalpel. Paris was my home, my second mother, and she had been taken from me in the way a sneak-thief takes your wallet, *en passant*, leaving you none the wiser. I almost wept. I almost screamed.

Lumière put a hand on my shoulder. “Bear up,” she told me, with gruff compassion. “There’s work to be done.”

I shook my head, meaning both that I would survive the blow and that I did not believe her. “What work?” I asked her, when I trusted myself to speak. “What can anyone do against this?”

“You’re a cop investigating a murder. So I humbly suggest that you investigate. I’ve given you pretty much everything I’ve got. Now it’s your turn. Maybe you can see something I haven’t. Something that will let us come at this from another angle.”

I was about to say that I had nothing. It would have been true only an hour before. But I realised, with a startling suddenness, that it was no longer true. Lumière’s photographs had given me a fresh perspective on things I had thought I already knew. A kind of parallax. And from this novel position, novel vistas were abruptly visible.

“We must go to the precinct house,” I told Lumière. “I need to access my files.”

We rode on a trolley car whose route, according to the sign painted on its side, ran along Van Ness and Market Street. Upon reading those words, alien geography stirred obliquely in my mind. We got out at the Boulevard Raspail, however, and it looked – praise God! – the same as always. We walked past the statue of Napoleon, eclipsed now by the huge memorial to the dead and undead of our recent war. Grieving citizens had heaped the steps leading up to the memorial (two men facing each other over an open coffin) with bundles of cut flowers or in some cases bare branches.

I stopped to pay my respects. I did this nightly, seeming to leave behind each time a larger piece of my soul.

“Did you fight, inspector?” Lumière asked me.

I shrugged the question away. “Of course. Everyone fought who could. I would have given my life to keep the city from succumbing to that plague.”

Lumière nodded and asked no more.

It was late. Or rather it seemed late. When we arrived at the precinct house there was no clerk on duty at the desk. We rode up in the rickety elevator, whose creaks have always seemed to me to be the complaints of an unhappy poltergeist. Normally I find that reflection amusing: just then it filled with foreboding those few hollows in my mind that were not already too full to take any more.

“So this is where you work,” Lumière said, walking beside me down the rows of empty desks. “It’s charming.”

“It’s an office,” I replied brusquely, in no mood for badinage. “A place of work. It’s not required to be charming. Only functional.”

When we reached my desk I took off my jacket and the shoulder holster beneath it, hanging both on the back of my chair.

I pushed armloads of open files off my desk onto the floor. Each of them represented a stranger’s life and some measurable part of my own, but right then they were unwelcome distractions. I unfolded the map on which I had plotted the current epidemic of murders, as a doctor might plot the spread of some actual epidemic. I added both today’s and yesterday’s to the tally, and then stood back to study the map at a distance.

“Is there something I should be seeing?” Lumière asked me.

“There is a pattern,” I said. “There was already the suggestion of one, but with these two latest atrocities it stands out much more clearly.”

Lumière leaned over the map, glaring at it in deep concentration. “There’s no pattern,” she said. “The placing of the bodies seems almost random. The Marais. Bloomsbury. Greenwich Village...”

My pride was a little restored at this proof that I saw some things more clearly than she did. “It’s not random at all. We can join all the crime scenes with a single line, thus.” I did it as she watched. “They are all, as you see, on the circumference of what one might loosely describe as a circle. Not a single body has been found within that circle. I am taking it for granted, of course, that the bodies are found some distance from where the victims were actually killed.”

“Hence the lack of physical evidence.”

“Exactly. So. The place where all these poor souls met their end must be somewhere within our circle,” my hand hovered over the map, “and probably close to its centre. The murderer may well have thought that he was placing the bodies at random. Certainly he chose a random direction in which to walk after each killing. But he walked for more or less the same length of time, the same distance – so keen to keep his location secret that he was impelled always to stay on a straight line that led away from it.”

I took a ruler from the desk drawer. “It might be possible, therefore,” I said, “to use those same lines to track him backwards to his source. If we were to connect the dots through the centre, rather than around the periphery, we might be able to discern the centre of this atrocious web. The place where the spider sits.”

“Do it!” Lumière urged me.

It was a rough and ready form of divination, at best. I took the northernmost and southernmost points and drew a line between them. Then I did the same for their nearest

neighbours, and so on, going clockwise around the edge of the circle. Fourteen murders produced seven straight lines. There was no common centre, but it was close. Very close. All seven lines passed through the Rue Garanciere, most of them within a hundred yards or so of the point where it is crossed by the Palatine. Something about that location pricked my memory in a way that was far from pleasant.

Lumière was staring at my face. "What?" she demanded.

I tapped the map. "There was a murder at exactly this point," I murmured. "Or at least, a possible murder. The body was never found. Only blood. A great deal of it. The man who called us said that there had been a body. That of a woman. But she was gone by the time we arrived. He said he had recognised her as one Sylvia Astor, a student of literature at the Sorbonne. I arrested and held him for a time, thinking that he might have killed and abducted the woman himself, but he knew no more than he had told us. And Sylvia Astor was not seen again."

Lumière's fixed stare still interrogated me. I shrugged, for I had nothing more to add. "This was before Monsieur Crâne began his reign of terror, of course. That has somewhat monopolised our attention since."

"How long before?"

"Five, perhaps six days." I held up my hand, for she seemed about to break in. "Yes, Lumière, I know. The timing is perfect for Mademoiselle Astor to have been the first victim. And the place of her death, if indeed she was killed, was here. Here at the confluence of these lines, at the very centre of the web."

"The Church of St Sulpice."

I nodded. "There is a stairwell at the side of the building, leading up from the crypt. The blood was pooled on the steps. If the woman had been attacked down there and then had tried – wounded, bleeding – to find her way back up to the street, that would match what I saw."

Lumière's face was cold and hard. Once again, she reminded me of a statue. "Is that enough evidence to call in a manhunt?" she demanded.

"More than enough," I assured her. "I will put it on my superintendent's desk as soon as he arrives tomorrow."

"I don't want to wait that long."

"No?" I confess I was not surprised. I felt the same impatience myself. "What should we do then? I suppose I could call on him at his home, and ask him to swear out a warrant tonight."

"Or we could go there ourselves, right now, and make the arrest ourselves."

I pondered this invitation for several moments. It held some appeal. Clearly, however, I must not go to St Sulpice without leaving some record of my discovery. I found a scrap of paper and quickly scribbled down a message, a letter to Superintendent Faber explaining the discoveries we had made and what we now proposed to do. I took it to his desk, found an envelope and addressed it to him.

Lumière was at my shoulder the whole time, full of urgency. "Let's go, Philemon. You know there's going to be another murder tonight."

I hesitated, uncertain of where the letter would be the most likely to be seen. Finally, Lumière snatched it from my hand and tucked it under the arm of the winged Victory statue of which the superintendent is so inordinately proud.

"I said let's go," she repeated. Her voice had a grating edge to it and her eyes were dark. There was something personal at stake for her in this, clearly. Well, so there was for me also. I was desperate to see the face of the killer who was murdering not just my city's inhabitants but – however insane it sounded – my city herself.

The trolley car or the Metro would have taken us to St Sulpice, but Lumière set off at a brisk walk, almost a run. It seemed the urgency of our business and the agitation of her spirits would not allow her to wait. I fell in beside her.

"When we get there," I told her, "you should wait out on the street. It's unwise for both of us to go inside." She made no answer to this, but only speeded up her stride.

It was now well past midnight, if such terms retained any of their meaning. The streets were all but empty. Here a demi-mondaine staggered home from some sordid tryst, tottering on dysfunctionally high heels. There a homeless drunk sorted through the rubbish behind a trattoria in hope of finding either a late supper or an early breakfast. Nobody accosted us, or even seemed to see us.

The church's frontage, that breath-taking arcade with its towers and doubled array of columns, was completely dark. It had been closed by order of the city some years earlier, after a fire had all but destroyed it. It looked most unwelcoming. If a building could be said to have an aspect, the aspect of this one was solitary and introspective.

I approached the main doors. Above our heads, in faded black paint, was the legend that had been added to the facade in the days following the revolution. *Le Peuple Francais Reconnoit L'Etre Suprême et L'Immortalité de L'Âme*. It is good to be explicit about such things. A thick chain had been threaded through the handles of the doors and secured with a heavy padlock. There was no getting in that way.

"The crypt," I said, "is to the..." Lumière did not wait on my words, or my pointing finger. She led the way around the building to the north side, where a flight of marble steps led down into profound darkness. By the time I reached the top of the steps she was already at the bottom, invisible to me. Her voice floated back up to me. "There's a door!"

I followed, taking the steps with care. Even so I almost tripped and fell when I reached the bottom, the sudden levelling of the terrain deceiving and unbalancing me. I groped around until I felt the outline of the door Lumière had described. It stood open. From beyond it came a whiff of immemorial dust and damp.

Had I searched the crypt on the day when Sylvia Astor's body was found? I could no longer remember. Too many other bodies had intervened.

"Over here," Lumière's voice said from the pitch dark.

"I can't see you," I told her.

"Follow the sound of my voice."

I drew my service revolver and advanced. One step, a second, then a third. My skin was prickling, wanting to recoil from a touch it had not yet felt. There might be a murderer in this room with us. Monsieur Crâne, with his inexorable hammer and his burning madness.

"To the left," said Lumière.

I turned and moved in the direction of her voice.

I had gone perhaps two steps further when something bit down on my leg just above the ankle, all the way to the bone. The shock was almost as terrible as the pain. I screamed aloud, and fell to the stone floor, clutching at my injured leg. A band of thick metal had closed on it. Or rather two half-bands, for there were hinges or brackets at either end.

As I wrestled in vain with the trap, an electric torch clicked on a few feet away from me. Its beam was pointed directly at me so I could see almost nothing beyond it: only the vague outline of a shape that had to be Lumière.

"Sorry about that," she said.

I took aim with my revolver and fired it repeatedly. The forlorn click of the hammer striking an empty chamber sounded with each stroke of my finger on the trigger.

"Emptied it," Lumière said. "Back at the precinct. While you were writing this." She set the torch down, and an envelope right beside it. The envelope bore Superintendent Faber's name, in my own hand.

She sat down facing me, almost close enough to touch. But the leg-trap, I saw by her torch's light, was secured by a chain that was embedded somehow in the floor of this wide, low-ceilinged room. My freedom of movement was not very great.

"I hate to lie," Lumière said. "Especially to a man like you. A native. It goes against the grain. And since there's no need for it now, let me tell you that my name, when I was alive, was Sylvia Astor."

I must have groaned or cried out at this. Certainly I felt a movement of despair. We had fought so hard, so bitterly, to scour our city of the *zombis*, and now they were back.

"It's not as you think," Lumière assured me quickly. "Let me explain. You deserve that, at least."

What she told me was simple enough, and terrible enough. The undead had indeed been defeated, and eradicated. But their infected bodies had been laid in mass graves hastily dug in the city's many parks. The gardens of the Luxembourg Palace, the Champ de Mars, the woods of Boulogne.

The infection had continued to spread, unseen. It sank into the soil.

"The city got sick," Lumière said. "With the *zombi* sickness. It forgot what it was. It thought it was other cities of which it had heard or dreamed. Fantastic places with names like New York. London. Lima. Dublin. Some of the undead had been tourists. Perhaps the city could not tell their memories from its own.

"And it hungered, with the *zombi* hunger. It ate me first, after I committed suicide on the steps of this church. It drank from me and clutched me to its heart. I became its servant. Willingly. My memories of my old life were gone. I was reborn in that moment, a part of something very old, very strong and very beautiful."

Lutetia, I thought. The Roman name for Paris. And my city has always been called the City of Light, which is what *Lumière* means.

"I procure the bodies, for the city to eat," the pale woman went on. "But I'm very careful. I have to get to know them first. Only native Parisians will do. Only those who can remember the city as it used to be. That way, when it assimilates your cerebral tissue it takes your memories too and is able to claim back some portions of itself." She smiled sadly. "I showed you the photos out of sequence, inspector. I hope this will console you. The changes... they're going the other way. Paris is remembering. With each death, each feeding, as she eats the brains of her *citoyens*, she heals. Recovers some of her lost memories."

"But the hotel," I objected. It was hard to think through the pain, but I wanted very much to understand. "The Belle Epoque. It changed into a building from New York."

"Well that was me cheating," Lumière said. She actually blushed, which produced a strange effect on those bleached-bone cheeks. "The building didn't change at all. I just took down the old plaque and put up a new one. I paid the doorman ten francs to look the other way. I needed you to believe me, and to believe me you had to see with your own eyes. Or think you had seen."

She reached into the darkness beyond the torch's beam and retrieved, from somewhere, a sturdy hammer whose head was foul with blood and brains. "I use this," she said. "Mostly it's enough. The leg trap is for those who are biggest and most dangerous. To hold them still while I strike.

"I smash the skulls and pulp the brains. The brains are the part that matters, of course, and a semi-liquefied state seems to be best from the point of view of absorption. I scrape them up, take them away in a bucket or a picnic hamper and sow them in the parks and gardens where the

zombis were buried. Apply the medicine to the site of the infection, as it were. *Je sème à tout vent*, like a good daughter of the Republic.”

She paused, and regarded me. After a long moment she reached out to touch the back of my hand. “I really am sorry,” she said softly. “You’re wrong when you say that everyone fought against the *zombis*. A lot of people just ran and hid. I hate to take someone like you, who did his duty and never asked for thanks. But your memories are very vivid. You still speak French, which almost nobody else does. You eat croissants. You have a hip flask which I would bet good money is full of cognac. You’re just too tasty, Inspector Philemon.”

“That is not an accusation I’ve ever had to defend myself against,” I answered her. Lumière laughed, but her face was sad.

“It’s all right,” I told her. And it was almost true, although I was afraid that having my brains bashed in would hurt. “Do what you have to do, Lutetia. I like the sound of being part of... what was it you said?”

“Something old and strong and beautiful. But I don’t know if it will be the same for you, Philemon. The city drank my life blood. Absorbed me. But it didn’t devour me.” She tapped her temple. “There’s still a brain in here.”

I considered this fine distinction, fascinated.

“Then let it absorb me too,” I suggested at last. “And I’ll help you find new subjects. The two of us together will be able to accomplish twice as much.”

Lumière seemed taken aback. “You’d do that? As a policeman, you’re pledged to protect and serve.”

“To protect and serve the city. That was both the letter of my oath and its spirit.”

Silence again. Lumière bowed her head and knelt in complete stillness for what felt like a very long time.

Then she looked up, and abruptly smiled. “She says yes,” she told me. “We’re going to be partners.”

She gathered me into her arms, which were as hard and cold as funerary monuments. Something woke inside me, and opened. I did not recognise it at first, because it had been so long since I experienced it.

It was joy.

So now, you see, I have given you – in telling you my story – the most circumstantial explanation of your fate. You say you are not French, but your accent is good and your grasp of idiom very convincing. You certainly have very recent and very vivid memories of the city.

I look forward to sharing them.

~~~~~

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He wrote the movie adaptation for his 2014 novel *The Girl With All the Gifts*. Produced in the UK by Warners, the movie opened the Locarno festival in 2016 and subsequently went on international release. Mike received a British Screenwriters Award for his screenplay (as best newcomer, ironically – he was 59 at the time).

Mike has worked extensively in the field of comic books, completing long and critically acclaimed runs on *Lucifer*, *Hellblazer* and *X-Men*. His comic book series *The Unwritten* has featured

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Check him out at <https://www.mikecarey.net/>

## CRIMES BEYOND REASON, METHODS BEYOND THE NATURAL



From noir to arcane, from Victorian London to modern Tokyo, compelling stories by leading writers of the strange

OCCULT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE ON AMAZON NOW

# CARNACKI: THE PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

*William Meikle*

*It was a crisp clear night in early November. A heavy waxing moon hung over the Thames as I made my way to Cheyne Gardens in response to Carnacki's summons. As ever I had a sense of growing expectation; looking forward to hearing his latest tale.*

*For once I was on the early side, arriving first. Carnacki kept me plied with sherry, but would not be drawn on the subject of his reason for the invitation. The others arrived shortly afterwards and Carnacki showed us to a fine table of fresh salmon, minted potatoes and fresh peas. We were all pleasantly full by the time came to take our places in the parlor. With our glasses charged and fresh smokes lit we quickly settled around the fire and went quiet. Carnacki wasted no time in getting started.*

"I have thought long and hard whether to tell this particular tale," Carnacki began. "For it is by far the strangest of all the adventures I have ever related to you chaps, and if it were told it by another, I would struggle to believe its particulars. Please bear with me, for this will become rather outlandish, and at some times positively comical.

\* \* \*

It starts, like all good stories do, with a knock on my front door last Friday, the 31<sup>st</sup> October. I had been sitting by the fire musing over a variation of a ritual in the Sigsand mss., and I was so lost in thought that I almost didn't notice the sound at first, for it was less of a knock and more of a *tap-tap* noise.

The noise persisted; indeed it grew more persistent the longer I ignored it. In the end I gave in to curiosity and went to investigate.

I opened the door a second after the latest tap and looked out over an empty street. There was no sign of anyone there. I was most perplexed, and even more so when a voice spoke at my feet.

"I'm right sorry to bother you, guv'nor," the voice said, "but could I have ten minutes of your time?"

I looked down. A small, rather bedraggled Tawny owl stood on my doorstep.

*Carnacki paused to check that his pipe was still lit. Arkwright, as we all knew he would, immediately chimed in.*

*"I say, old man," he said. "This isn't one of those talking animal stories is it? Please tell me you are not trying to pass this poppycock off as one of your tales?"*

*Carnacki smiled.*

*"I told you it would be outlandish, old friend," he said. "Bear with me. You may yet find yourself pleasantly diverted."*

*He puffed on his pipe and, content it was well alight, continued.*

Of course, I was just as astonished as Arkwright here. The small owl looked up at me, and shook its head firmly. I got the distinct impression I was being admonished for some transgression.

"The Great Detective away in France, Adamant still on ice, Hannay up and gone to Rhodesia. *Fetch a Closer*, they said. Never mind that all the good ones are never around when you need them. Then when I find the right man for the job, what does he do? Only stands there, mouth open, gawping like an imbecile. Ain't you never seen a talking owl before?"

I decided to play along. For all I knew this was a manifestation of the Outer Realms I had never previously encountered, although I was all too well aware of the *Trickster* motif in mythology, and decided to be on my guard.

"I am sorry, sir," I said. "I have forgotten my manners. Won't you come in?"

The little owl cocked its head, spat up a ball of partially digested fur and bone, and did a dance on top of it. It looked down at the scattered remains of the pellet then back up at me.

"No time," it said. "I'm far too witty to woo. Ten minutes. That's all it will take, Guv'nor. Will you come?"

I could not in all honesty refuse.

"Lay on, MacDuff," I said. "And don't spare the horses."

"Don't talk to me about bloody horses," the owl said, and without explanation, flew off. He landed on the first lamppost to the south, turned his head almost a hundred and eighty degrees, and looked straight at me.

"Come on, Guv'nor. It's not far. Parliament is sitting tonight." With that he flew off, keeping just ahead of me at a stiff walking pace. I followed.

It quickly became clear that we were not heading anywhere near Westminster. After ten minutes my curiosity was quickly turning to annoyance.

"I say, it's rather a long ten minutes, isn't it?"

The owl flew back and landed on my shoulder. He cackled in my ear.

"I only said that to get you moving. Worked a treat, didn't it? Say, you wouldn't have a mouse on you would you? I'm famished."

I almost gave up there and then, ready to write off the night as a bad joke, when the owl spoke again.

"Left here, then right, and we're there," he said. I did as he requested, and walked into a small square of late Tudor houses I had never previously seen.

"I wouldn't go asking too many questions, Guv'nor," the owl said. "The Parliament can get testy right smartish if riled. Get in, get out and leave a good impression, as the actress said to the bishop."

I was at a loss in trying to make any sense at all of the situation, but it seemed I had arrived at some sort of destination. Tall trees ringed the square, and as I walked into the centre of the area twelve pairs of yellow eyes followed me. I looked up to see a circle of a dozen white, almost luminous, snowy owls looking down at where I stood.

One of the owls blinked twice, then spoke, not to me, but to the little tawny owl on my shoulder.

"We told you to fetch a *Closer*. Who is this?"

I was about to reply for myself when the owl dug his talons in, hard, piercing my topcoat and bringing a flare of pain that shocked me into silence.

"Begging your pardon, Guv'nor," he said, replying to the circle above us, "but Adamant is under two feet of solid ice. Ain't no way he's waking up for another sixty years. I tried Baker Street, but the Detective is not at home, and this gentleman here has form in our area, if you catch my drift?"

The snowy owl that had spoken before turned his gaze on me.

"He knows about the Great Game?"

The little owl cackled at my ear.

"No, Guv'nor. That little secret has eluded him. But he has studied, and used, the Sigsand and..."

The snowy owl let out a raucous *hoot* that forced silence in the circle.

"We ask you for a *Closer* and you bring us an amateur?"

It gazed at me again, a fixed stare that I could not break; it felt as if I was being scrutinized to my very depths.

"Will you stand on the side of right, in this the time of our greatest trial?" the great owl said.

"That is always my intent," I answered.

The great owl stared at me again, then gave out a very human sigh.

"He will have to suffice, for there is no time to waste on more searching."

"Suffice in what way?" I started, but that only got me another raucous *hoot*.

The snowy owl addressed the smaller owl on my shoulder.

"You know where he must go," he said.

"We won't let you down, Guv'nor."

And with that all twelve of the circle of owls took flight as one and were quickly lost from view over the rooftops.

"I thought that went rather well," the little owl said. "Call me Nestor. I'll be your guide for this evening. Follow me." He took flight again, heading away to the north.

Now you chaps know me, I can be bally stubborn when I put my mind to it and, by Jove, I had taken just about enough nonsense for one night. I stood my ground.

The little owl flew back and circled around my head, so close I felt the air move from the beat of his wings.

"I ain't letting you back out now, Guv'nor. Not after it's all been agreed proper like."

"I have agreed to nothing," I said.

The owl cackled.

"The Parliament has spoken," he replied. "That's gospel around these parts."

"Then these are parts with which I am not familiar."

"Familiar?" the owl said. "There's an appropriate word for tonight. There won't be a blue moon on All Hallows for another fifteen years... and it's been twenty since the last Great Game. *Openers*, *Closers* and *Familiars* are scattered to the ends of the earth, Nobody thought they'd be needed, see?"

"That's the problem," I replied. "I don't see much of anything at all."

The owl landed on my shoulder, and sighed deeply.

"Best keep this simple then, Guv'nor. What if I told you that there's a madman intent on opening a portal and letting the Outer Darkness in to gain a foothold here on this plane? Is that something you'd be interested in averting?"

*Carnacki paused, and rose from his seat, which we took as a signal to refill our glasses and light fresh smokes. As always, Arkwright was keen to know more.*

*"This Adamant cove that was mentioned? Wouldn't be Adam Adamant would it? I met him once. Crashing bore. Knew absolutely nothing about cricket. I remember..."*

*Carnacki smiled, and put a hand on Arkwright's arm.*

*"I never heard the name mentioned again," he said. "Don't fret, old man. It is not pertinent to the rest of the story. And now we are getting to the meat of the matter. If your glasses are charged, let's get back to it."*



The owl, Nestor, gave me directions to our destination, which proved to be a tall handsome town house in Belgravia.

“Someone is attempting to open a portal here?”

“It’s been sacred ground from pre-Roman times,” the owl said. “You know how these things go? First it’s a wooded glade, then a temple, then a church. Then, whoops-a-daisy, the city catches fire. Now the beautiful people live on top of a ticking bomb, and they never notice. Until a night like this.”

He coughed up another pellet of partially digested matter.

“Lend us your hand, Guv’nor,” he said. I put out a palm and he rolled the pellet on it, then prised the thing apart with his beak. He looked at the resulting mess.

“Round the back,’ he said. ‘The kitchen door’s open.”

He flew off, leaving me with a sticky palm that I wiped off on some shrubbery before following my new companion to the rear of the house. There I found that his reading had been right. The back door lay open, with only darkness beyond.

“Easy does it now, Guv’nor,” Nestor said. “Our man is inside, and he is protected.”

I made my way into a the dark scullery. Almost immediately I felt the old familiar *tingle*. Somewhere in this house an invocation ritual was underway. I would need to hear the words of the chant to know exactly what was being invoked, but I already knew enough to chill me to the bone. The darkness seemed to thicken and become heavy as I walked though into the main part of the house.

“*Courage, mon brave,*” Nestor said.

“You don’t have to worry about me, old man,” I replied.

The owl cackled in my ear again.

“Actually, I was talking to myself, Guv’nor. Never expected a pickle like this in my lifetime. Thought I’d flake out in a warm nest on a summer’s night surrounded by a new batch of owlets and some fresh mice.”

I know you chaps will find this strange, perhaps even silly, but just having the small bird as company going through the dark house did much to ease my apprehension.

It was immediately obvious that our target was on the upper floor of the house. I started to make out several phrases from the ritual being performed. I will not relate them here, for the mere utterance of them would bring you chaps too close to that foul blackness. Suffice to say, I went up the stairs knowing that a formidable task awaited me, one that I might not survive.

\* \* \*

Halfway up the stairs, Nestor leaned over and spoke in my ear.

“Just wanted to say, Guv’nor, in case we don’t make it, you’ve been a real gent about all of this.”

I did not get a chance to reply, which was probably just as well, as having an owl give me a compliment was rather outside my normal range of experience. We arrived at the top of the stairs just as the darkness thickened further and the air went bitterly cold. I now knew the essence of the ritual being performed. It was more than just the opening of a portal. What was being attempted here was no less than the bringing to Earth of the Outer Darkness itself, and if the performer of the ritual succeeded, it would return this plane to its most primal nature, one of darkness and complete chaos. The owl had been right on one thing; only a madman would attempt such a task.

So it was that, on walking into a large library, my first glance was not at the protective circle on the floor, but at the man who stood inside it, arm raised, reciting the invocation in a ringing voice. A sparrowhawk sat on his shoulder. It saw us enter and shouted in the man's ear.

"We've been rumbled, Guv."

The man turned towards us, momentarily startled.

That should have been the moment when I made my move to disturb his ritual and bring it to an abrupt end. But I'm afraid I too had been startled into immobility for, you see, I knew the man. I hadn't seen him for many years, but I was in no doubt. The man inside the circle was none other than Arthur Raffles.

*Arkwright broke into Carnacki's tale with a loud oath.*

*"That bounder. I hope you gave him a dashed good thrashing."*

*At first I thought Carnacki might be annoyed, for it was considered jolly bad form to interrupt him in his own home during the telling of one of his tales. But Carnacki took it in good enough humour. He used the chance of a break to refill his pipe.*

*"I think you might like the end of this tale, Arkwright," he said, and continued.*

Like you chaps, I had thought the cad to be dead, killed in the Boer War. But here he was, large as life, that same devil-may-care grin on his face. He looked me in the eye and continued with the ritual, raising his voice until it echoed through the room.

Something *ripped*, as if a piece of cloth had been torn near my ear. Above the protective circle the ceiling swirled, like paint being stirred. Raffles faded, going dim.

Nestor spoke at my ear.

"Begging your pardon, Guv'nor. But if you're planning on doing something, I think now would be a good time."

I had regained my composure somewhat, enough in any case to put a plan into action. I raised my own voice in a chant to counter the invocation; a ritual I knew from previous adventures would prove efficacious against the Outer Darkness.

*"Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala."*

"No. Not that one, you idiot. Not yet," Nestor shouted in my ear.

But it was too late. The rip in space widened, a hole that became a swirling vortex, a wind that grew to a howling gale, sucking and tearing at me until I was lifted bodily off my feet and dragged into a black maw that sucked me away into the utmost darkness.

There was a brilliant flash, then all was velvet blackness again. It took several seconds for my eyes to adjust, then I realized just where I was – floating in the vast extent of space between the stars. I had more questions than answers, such as how I was managing to stay alive in the midst of such emptiness, and also just *where* I was being taken. But such thoughts were fruitless and I pushed them away, the better to observe as much as I could so that I could tell this tale later.

I had quite forgotten about Nestor, but he had not forgotten me.

"Well," he said, in a strange American accent, and cackled. "This is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Don't ask me, Guv'nor," the little owl replied. "I only work here."

It seemed that we travelled for an age, past dead and dying stars giving out their last gasps of heat, through nurseries where blue flashes showed new stars being born, and into clouds of gas that engulfed whole galaxies. There are no words to describe the wonder and awe – but

somewhere deep inside me there was also terror, of what waited for me at the end of the journey, and of the difficulty of finding a way home.

Finally I saw that we approached a dim red star, spluttering and fizzing in its death throes. Several planets, mere dots travelling across that red surface at first, span around it, and it seemed we had reached our destination. With some renewed haste, we *tumbled* down towards one of them; a rocky globe, its surface studded with craters, punctuated by purple growth that infested the planet like patches of moist mould. There was no sign of any seas, nor clouds for that matter. As we approached the surface I saw, far to the north, a volcano that reached to the sky, sending long plumes of lava *spurting* into the heavens.

We slowed, hovering above a plain under a dark purple sky, with black stems rising, casting shadows from a moon, too large for the sky, a red moon that rose above jagged hills. Things moved among the stems, low-slung and insect-like, farmers tending to the growth.

We were tugged north and west, across a barren plain. I came to see, in the far distance at first, a black pyramid sitting like a bloated spider waiting for our approach to its lair.

We descended into the luminescent glow inside the pyramid.

*Carnacki stopped and stood. It was time for another refill. This time Arkwright remained quiet, perhaps aware of his earlier faux pas. But Carnacki himself seemed keen to impart more information, and in a break from tradition, spoke as we were charging our glasses.*

*"You chaps may remember the case of the Dark Island," he said. "It was there that I first encountered the black pyramid, and I am coming to believe that I am destined to travel there again, for it is a focal point, perhaps even the origin, of many of the mysteries I am sworn to try to pierce. Even as we were taken inside I felt, not fear, but a strange exhilaration at the thought that part of the mystery might be about to be revealed."*

We looked down from a great height at first, but quickly descended towards what looked to be a huge empty space. As we got closer to the floor I saw a circle of a dozen bent and withered trees, and from closer still could see a dark form sat in each. Raffles stood in the centre of the circle. He looked up, saw us approaching, and smiled.

"Behold, my lords, the Opener of the Way," he shouted as we landed, softly, at his side.

I looked up to see a dozen pairs of red eyes staring down at me. Their owners resembled the great white owls only in size. They were black as sin, with a stare so malevolent I was forced to avert my eyes.

Nestor felt no such aversion.

"Greetings, gents," he said, jauntily. "You've got a nice day for it."

One of the black owls leaned forward, speaking to the sparrowhawk on Raffles' shoulder.

"It is done?"

"Yes, my Lord. The way is open."

"Then let it begin," the dark owl said, and let out a *hoot* that rang throughout the whole of the pyramid. The entire structure vibrated in sympathy, and started to hum. Black tendrils snaked across the floor and started to spin, first in small, discrete vortices, then joining and growing until a tall funnel of blackness rose up and way out of the pyramid itself.

All of the dark owls hooted, loud and long.

"I believe now would be a good time, Guv'nor." Nestor said.

I must have looked perplexed, for the little owl sighed deeply.

"You didn't come all this way for the scenery, did you?" he said. "It's time for that special bit from Sigsand. You know, the bit at the end?"

And this time, I did indeed know what was required. I raised my voice and began the last incantation from the Sigsand Mss.

Now you chaps already know that I cannot reproduce such a powerful ritual here in this room, for to do so would seal the doom of us all. But back there, on the floor of the great pyramid, it started to have the desired effect. The vortex faltered and began to fall in on itself.

The black parliament of owls *hooted* loudly, but somehow my own voice rose high and pure above them.

“We’ve got them on the run, Guv’nor,” Nestor shouted. “Keep at them.”

Soon we had two voices raised in the chant, my thicker, courser tones in counter point to Nestor’s higher pitch. As the incantation continued, so too did the dark owls’ ever more frantic *hooting*, but I felt in total control, never in any danger of faltering. Although I have never tried to memorize it, I chanted the incantation the whole way through to the end, and I did not miss a word or a beat. The black funnel sputtered, the wind fell, and suddenly the pyramid was once more quiet, and quite empty.

“One nil for the white team,” Nestor shouted, then squawked as the sparrowhawk launched itself from Raffles’ shoulder, straight for the little owl. I felt a jolt as it hit Nestor, hard, and both birds flew from my own shoulder in a flurry of feathers. At the same time Raffles strode across towards me and aimed a right hook at my jaw. My old varsity training kicked in. I feinted left, went right and placed a perfect left jab on the point of his chin. He went down like a sack of potatoes.

“Remember when I said *not yet*, Guv’nor?” Nestor shouted. He had his talons embedded in the sparrowhawk’s breast, having already torn the bird open at the throat. “Well now is *yet*.”

This time I caught his meaning immediately. I shouted, my voice ringing through the vastness of the pyramid.

*Ri linn dioladh na beatha, Ri linn bruchdadh na falluis, Ri linn iobar na creadha, Ri linn dortadh na fala.*

The last thing I saw before a blinding flash took everything away was the twelve black owls swoop down on Raffles’ prone body. There was a burst of red as his throat opened.

Then I was once again lost in blackness.

\* \* \*

I blinked, and when I opened my eyes I was back in London, standing in the centre of the wooded grove in the Tudor square. Dawn was just breaking over the rooftops. Twelve great white owls sat above me, all hooting gently.

“Say *thank you*,” Nestor said in my ear.

I bowed at the waist.

“Thank you, my Lords,” I said. The *hooting* got louder. It seemed I had said the right thing.

The leader of the Parliament spoke.

“It seems our go-between chose wisely,” he said. “We are pleased to welcome you into the ranks of *Closers*. We will call when you are required.

And with that the Owl Parliament took wing, and were once again quickly lost to sight over the rooftops.

Nestor danced a little jig on my shoulder, flew to the ground and coughed up another pellet. He tore it to shreds with his talons.

“Tastes of sparrowhawk,” he said, and spat. “But it tells me one thing. You won’t be needed until there’s a Blue moon on All Hallows. You’ll be playing the Great Game the next time, and I’ll be long gone by then, Guv’nor. But I’m sure whoever they send for you will do you just fine.”

He looked up at me, and I'll swear he winked.

"Now let's get you home."

"Before we part," I said. "There's one more thing. I'm right in thinking that the place I *needed* to go was the Black Pyramid? You intended all along that we should be taken there?"

Nestor danced another jig.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," he said, and winked again. I could get nothing else out of him."

*Carnacki stopped, and looked around the room at us.*

*"And there you have it, gentlemen. My Halloween story, such as it is."*

*"Dashed peculiar, that's what it is, if you ask me," Arkwright said. "Although you were right about one thing, Carnacki. I am very happy to hear of the fate of that boulder Raffles."*

*As for myself, I only had one question for our host.*

*"The Great Game, Carnacki. Did you discover what that is?"*

*Carnacki laughed.*

*"No. And I suspect I won't until the time comes when I am called to stand in front of the Owl Parliament again. But I have checked the almanac. The next blue moon on All Hallows is indeed not due until nineteen twenty-five. I can only hope that we are all still here so that I may have another tale to relate.*

*"Now, out you go," he said, and shepherded us out into the night.*

*An owl hooted as I walked along the embankment. I looked up to see a small bird on a branch above me.*

*It winked, and danced a little jig before flying off, never to be seen again.*

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WILLIAM MEIKLE is a Scottish writer, now living in Canada, with over thirty novels published in the genre press and more than 300 short story credits in thirteen countries. He has books available from a variety of publishers, and his work has appeared in a large number of professional anthologies and magazines.

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He lives in Newfoundland with whales, bald eagles and icebergs for company. When he's not writing he drinks beer, plays guitar, and dreams of fortune and glory. Find him, and details of all his work at his website at <https://www.williammeikle.com>

FROSTBITE

E.J. Stevens

“What a beautiful cat, Miss Granger.”

I frowned, but let the comment slide. I didn’t have any pets, not unless you counted the dust bunnies collecting beneath my desk.

Jess ‘Jinx’ Braxton raised a questioning eyebrow, but I shrugged. I didn’t have anything helpful to share with my rockabilly business partner. The frail woman tottering along at Jinx’s elbow either needed new glasses or she was nuttier than weresquirrel poop.

Mrs Boyd wouldn’t be my first loony client. Working for a client who sees things that aren’t really there is an occupational hazard when you advertise as the city’s best (and only) psychic detective.

Who was I to judge? One of my special talents is the ability to see through glamour. A lot of supernatural creatures use glamour to hide in plain sight, and my gift cuts through the glitz and glitter of vampire compulsion and faerie magic. It’s not as fun as it sounds. I’ve seen things no human should ever see.

Second sight is a blessing and a curse.

Monsters walk the streets of Harborsmouth. If it slinks, slithers, flies, or oozes, I’ve probably had the dubious pleasure of making its acquaintance. The fact that some of those things cross the street to avoid me hasn’t escaped my notice. A detective’s job is to take note of the little things, the small details that can break a case wide open, but having anthropomorphic snot treat you like you smelled worse than a troll fart could give a girl a complex. Some things are best to ignore or chalk up to sunny disposition.

I gave our client my best smile and waved a gloved hand at the seat in front of my desk. She flinched and latched onto Jinx’s tattooed arm, huddling like a gryphon chick beneath its mother’s wing. My partner shot me a warning glare and I toned down the charm.

“So, what can we help you with, Mrs Boyd?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

Best not to scare the client, at least not before she paid. Jinx reminded me of that often enough, and she kept the books. If she said we were in the red, then we were hemorrhaging our last pennies. Magic weapons and protective spells don’t come cheap, and Jinx complains when we run out of food. So, I rested my gloved hands on the desk where my client could see them, adopted a relaxed pose, and tried not to let the woman’s cat comment stir up painful memories of my childhood pet. Fluffy was dead and there was no sense living in the past. Surviving in the present was hard enough.

“Please, call me Maggie,” she said, taking a seat.

Mrs Boyd, Maggie, cast a nervous glance toward Jinx. I sighed, but nodded for Jinx to stick around. It looked like we’d be working this case together.

The fingers on my right hand reflexively went to my forearm, checking and double-checking the comforting presence of the silver-tipped iron blade hidden beneath my leather jacket. Something had our client spooked and Jinx was the people person in our little business venture, but having my partner leave the office set my teeth on edge. She was organized, great at keeping me on track,

and sweet as cherry pie to our clients, but my partner had a knack for personal injury. We didn't call her Jinx for nothing.

"Okay, Maggie," I said. "How can we help?"

I held my breath, trying not to fidget in my chair. Maybe this would be an easy case, something completely mundane. Not every case was fraught with danger. Jinx might finally make it through a case without bumps and bruises.

So why were my insides being torn up by a pack of rabid vampire bats?

"It's my house," she said, waving her hands. Her cheeks flushed and her over-bright eyes darted between Jinx and me. "It's haunted."

That was doubtful. There are a lot of weird things that exist in Harborsmouth. I knew that more than most. But I'd never seen a ghost.

I put on my best poker face, leaned forward, and made a show of picking up a pen and flipping open my notepad.

"Can you describe this ghost?" I asked.

"Oh, the place is quite haunted," she said. "There's more than one ghost. I'm sure of it."

"And what makes you say that?" I asked.

"Furniture moving, moaning, groaning... that sort of thing," she said, blinking rapidly.

Jinx mouthed "pooka orgy?" from over Maggie's shoulder, and I had to stifle a giggle. My lip twitched, but I'd learned the hard way not to act like a crazy person in front of the clients, not until the check cleared.

"Have you noticed anything missing?" I asked, pen tapping a blank sheet of paper. "Spoons? Candleholders? Jewelry?"

"Nothing like that," she said, shaking her head.

Well, that ruled out Jinx's pooka orgy theory. I'd worked a few pooka infestations, and the supernatural rodents were notorious for stealing anything shiny that wasn't nailed down with iron. The only thing the bacchanalian critters liked more than an orgy was thievery.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"No, the only thing I've lost is weight," she said. "Which is strange since I'm hungry all the time. Not that I'm complaining. I was carrying around more than a few extra pounds before moving here last month."

That was hard to believe. The woman was gaunt to the point of emaciation. I narrowed my eyes and turned my head, trying to see through any lingering glamour. Most of the time, my gift works on its own, whether I want it to or not, but sometimes it needs a nudge.

"You moved here recently?" I asked, making a show of taking notes.

Sneaking up on the truth works in tricky cases, but all I saw in my peripheral vision was a frail woman in need of a sandwich. Something strange was going on here, and I had a bad feeling that I'd have to use my psychic gift before this case was solved.

You see, I'm twice cursed. Not only do I have the gift of second sight, a gift I'd happily return, but I also get visions when my skin touches certain objects. During a vision, I slip into a memory and experience events through the eyes of whoever left a psychic impression behind. The trouble is, it takes strong emotions to leave behind a psychic impression, and most things that make a person feel that deeply are painful or terrifying. Experiencing that much fear isn't healthy, and there was a very real risk of losing my sense of self, becoming trapped in someone else's nightmare, but sometimes it was the only way to solve a case.

Psychometry was a dangerous gift, but it paid the bills.

"Were there any belongings left behind by the previous owners?" I asked, chest tightening. "Or any rooms that weren't fully renovated before you moved in?"

"Oh, yes," Maggie said. "I've barely touched a thing. I had big plans for the place, but I haven't felt up to a big DIY project yet. I just haven't had the energy. And there are the ghosts to think of. Will you look into the matter? I know it's a strange thing to investigate, but when I asked around, everyone said that you're the one to handle weird... unusual cases."

I gritted my teeth, but nodded. I'd always been an outcast, a weirdo. Screaming about monsters and slipping into unwanted visions had led to a lonely childhood until I'd met Jinx.

"I'll take the case, but I need to investigate your house, go through some of the previous owner's old things," I said.

"Of course," she said, clutching her handbag to her chest. "Is today too soon? It's just... I haven't been sleeping. At least, I don't remember the last time I slept."

"No problem," I said. "Jinx has the address?"

She nodded, and I pushed away from the desk and stood. We had an active case and I didn't want to waste time, but it would be foolish to run off without a plan. My eyes flicked to the wall clock.

"Expect us around two o'clock," I said. "You're welcome to go out while we investigate. Just leave the door unlocked."

That gave us over an hour to come up with a plan and stuff my pockets with weapons and protective charms. I'd like more time, but the woman was visibly shaken. Whatever had invaded her home was drawing her energy in some way. She was practically fading out of existence as we spoke.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," she said, already standing and scurrying toward the door. "And don't worry about me being home. I retired just before moving to Harborsmouth, and I hardly ever leave the house."

Maggie Boyd walked out onto the streets of the Old Port Quarter, and I frowned. She was so sickly and rail thin, I'd mistaken her for an elderly lady, but the woman was only recently retired and more likely in her sixties. So much for my keen observational skills.

"Buck up," Jinx said with a wink. "So what if we have a reputation for taking on whacked cases? I say bring it on, the stranger the better. Weird is the new cool."

That was easy for her to say. Jinx hadn't seen the creatures that roamed our city, stalking humans as prey and ensnaring them in a deceitful web of pestilential lies and poisonous bargains.

I shrugged and opened the desk drawer where I kept my stash of hardcore protection charms. We were once again heading into unknown territory with no clue of what we were up against. Jinx could go on thinking a weird case like this was cool, but I listened to my gut, and right now my insides were churning into painful knots as my stomach tried to climb out my ear.

I was good at finding the truth, but I had a nagging suspicion that Maggie's house wouldn't reveal its secrets without a fight.

* * *

Maggie Boyd's new digs were in a neighborhood to the north of the Old Port Quarter, wedged between the slums of Joysen Hill and the gentrification of the Quarter. There was a lower ratio of bars to homes here, but the streets weren't entirely residential. I would have missed the dead-end lane entirely if it wasn't for the kids using the sign for target practice. Their ammunition was broken chunks of pavement, but I gave them a smile with too many teeth, and they scattered.

We made it partway down the alley before the gang tags stopped and the brick buildings ended, replaced by a truck graveyard on one side of the street and a weed-strewn lot on the other. At the end of the lane, stood a simple house that had seen better days.

The house was a basic single-story Cape with faded clapboards that might have been red at one time, but now gave the appearance of flaking rust. A chain-link fence and the backside of a warehouse rose behind the structure, leaving the house in deep shadow. The alley was also dark, making the yard in front of the house the only sunny spot. Weeds, grass, and tangled vines thrived in the patch of sunlight.

"She has her own secret garden, cool," Jinx said with a grin.

"So did Miss Havisham," I muttered.

I eyed our exits before approaching the house. Maggie hadn't lived here long, but it was still surprising that the exterior and grounds were this rundown. If I didn't know better, I'd have guessed the place abandoned for decades.

I stepped gingerly over bits of debris, boots crunching on gravel as I made my way slowly down the footpath. The gate was gone, rotted away or scavenged for firewood, but my skin tingled as I passed beyond the dilapidated wooden fence and into Maggie's dooryard. A chill ran up my spine and I spun on my heel, but whatever I'd sensed, I was too late.

Jinx let out a startled cry, arms windmilling in an attempt to stay upright, but her platform sandals weren't helping. She reached out a hand, and I jerked away. It was a reflex born of years of negative visions, but I knew I'd screwed up.

As if Jinx's look of hurt and resignation wasn't bad enough, I over-corrected and landed on all fours. Warm wet grass slid inside the gap between my sleeve and glove, as if the ground was hungrily running its many tongues along my wrist, tasting my skin.

I shuddered, yanking my hand away and rapidly climbed to my feet. I'd had a run-in with Hunger Grass on a previous case and it hadn't gone well. In fact, the case had gone to Hell in a handbasket of woven rusty razorblades.

I rubbed gloved hands against my pants, and shuddered. Backpedaling, I glanced left and right, but nobody was trying to eat our faces off. It was just Jinx and me.

"What the heck just happened?" Jinx asked, frowning. "You get a vision?"

"Not a vision," I said, voice shaking. I swallowed hard, attention shifting to the house as I stepped back onto the path. "Our client ever mention an unexplained hunger or neighborhood pets going rabid?"

"No," she said, brow wrinkling.

"You sure?" I asked.

"I'd have remembered pets foaming at the freaking mouth," she said. "What gives?"

The correct question was, what takes? Hunger Grass was nasty stuff. Most people who step on a patch of the stuff end up changed and not for the better. First you lose your sense of right and wrong. Then you lose everything and everyone you ever loved.

I was immune to the stuff, but I had no idea why and even less interest in finding out. I'd hoped to never encounter that kind of magic again. No such luck.

"Our client has a patch of Hunger Grass in her front yard," I said, glancing at Jinx. "You know what that means."

She did. Jinx went pale, eyes widening.

"Oh shit," she said.

Oh shit was right. Hunger Grass was extremely dangerous. Most faerie magic is. But it takes more than just magic to create the slaving circle of weeds.

Something bad happened here, really bad. Like famine or a hard Maine winter driving a family to cannibalism bad.

"You think there are actually ghosts in there?" she said. I had to hand it to my partner. Her face was ashen, but she didn't run away. "The ghosts of eaten people."

"I don't know," I said, squaring my shoulders. "But we're going to find out."

The crunch of gravel beneath my boots punctuated my words and I tried not to think about trudging over bones picked clean of flesh. I barely twitched when Jinx rapped on the door, announcing our arrival.

We didn't have to wait long. The door swung open and Maggie stood there, eyes appearing sunken in the dim light. Had she touched the Hunger Grass? Was she infected with its magic?

"Please, come in," she said. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything. Don't leave without coming back for tea. The kettle's almost ready."

I stepped inside the house, a polite refusal on my lips, but gasped. The shabby living room fell away, revealing a horror so great I was at a loss for words.

This is not at all what I expected.

"What do you see?" Jinx asked, sidling up to me as our host passed through what I assumed was the kitchen door. "Looks normal enough."

"You don't want to know," I said, swallowing bile.

The walls were slabs of pulsating meat and the floor was sticky beneath my combat boots. I winced at the moist fetid air that hung heavy with the distinctive stench of a slaughterhouse. Fear and blood permeated every fleshy crevice, but over the underlying terror loomed a hunger that threatened to devour us whole.

"Jinx, go outside," I said, voice hard.

"Outside with the creepastic Hunger Grass?" she asked.

She had a point.

"Fine, but keep close to me," I said, lowering my voice. "Stay away from the walls and don't touch anything. Assume that nothing in this house is what it seems."

"That's not very reassuring," she muttered.

"Good," I said, palming my knife. "If you're scared, we might just get out of this alive."

"What about Maggie?" Jinx asked.

A tapping came from the kitchen, and I stilled. Tap, tap-tap, tap. There was an agonizing pause before the tapping began anew. As much as I'd love to run screaming from this bizarre charnel house, we had a case to solve and a client to rescue.

"We're going to accept that cup of tea and find out what the hell is going on in this house," I said.

"And if it's a trap?" she whispered.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I said.

I just hoped that if we did encounter a bridge, it wasn't made of oozing muscle tissue.

On my signal, Jinx pushed open the kitchen door. At least, she swore it was a wooden door. If we made it out of here alive, I'd need a gallon of brain bleach to scrub that orifice from memory.

I gasped, staggering forward, but abruptly froze as my eyes darted back and forth from Maggie to the corpse wearing her clothes. Corpse might be too kind a word. The body was missing parts and had been gnawed on by more than rats.

That wasn't the scariest thing in the room, not by a long shot.

I'd located the source of the tapping. Two children huddled on the floor, their knobby knees and the jut of their collar bones painful to witness. They leaned into each other in a one-armed embrace, teeth chattering against a cold I couldn't feel.

"You can see them, can't you?" Maggie asked, voice hopeful and eyes pleading.

"She doesn't mean the bones on the floor, does she?" Jinx whispered from where she stood at my back.

"No, Jinx," I said. "But those bones are important. I'd put money on it."

In fact, the corpse huddled around the children's tiny forms, giving them comfort, even in death.

"Can you help them?" Maggie asked.

I glanced from Maggie to the body on the floor, and took a deep breath. I lifted my eyes to the children, turning my head to use the full strength of my second sight. The children flickered, but I caught a glimpse of rows of needle-like teeth, too many teeth for their gaunt faces.

Tap, tap-tap, tap. The chattering continued, and I winced.

"What... what did you do?" I asked.

"What any good mother would do, or so I thought," she said. "I eased their suffering. I kept them alive. I didn't know what would happen to them."

I was going to ask what she meant, but my mind finally caught up with what my eyes were seeing. They didn't have mouths ringed red and sticky from berry preserves and the youngest wasn't holding a doll to her chest. The little girl stroked a clump of her mother's hair.

"You were starving," I said.

Maggie nodded, eyes never leaving her children.

"They were excited for the snow, at first," she said. "It came late that year, but it more than made up for its tardiness. The winter was never-ending. And for them, it never will end. Not without your help."

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Tell them that they are good children," she said. "They did what they were told. They mustn't suffer for my evil act."

I frowned, but stepped forward and crouched down, careful not to touch the body at my feet. Being cannibalized was one vision I sure as hell didn't want to get sucked into.

"Ivy, what are you doing?" Jinx hissed.

What was I doing? I looked at the children, using my second sight to see every detail. Their teeth wasn't the only unnatural anomaly. Vein-like tendrils connected the children to the fleshy cabinets and gelatinous floor.

"Maggie's children are tethered here," I said, replying to Jinx.

I glanced up at Maggie, searching her face for clues. Her eyes were wide, but she leaned forward.

"Is that why they couldn't move on?" she asked. "Can you...?"

"I'm no expert," I said, cutting her off. "But from what I see, this house is feeding on the children's suffering. If I'm right, it might not like us removing its food supply."

"Is this a bad time to mention I'm not really dressed to battle a haunted house that feeds on the suffering of dead kids?" Jinx asked.

"Wishing you'd taken your chances with the Hunger Grass?" I asked.

"Hell, yes," she said. "But you're not leaving, are you?"

"Hell, no," I said.

"Fine, but, for the record, I'm totally cool with you losing your weirdo street cred," she said.

"What happened to 'the stranger the better'?" I asked.

"Our client is dead, the house is alive, and there's grass in the yard with the ability to create ravenous wendigos," she said. "That's what happened."

I'd been watching the children while Jinx rambled. They didn't respond to Maggie or Jinx, but I could have sworn their eyes slid to me more than once. Maybe my second sight allowed some creatures to see me more clearly.

"My name is Ivy Granger," I said. "What's yours?"

They didn't reply, but both children turned their heads my way, unblinking. A low growling rose from their stomachs, and they stared at me with a feral gleam in their eyes. At least I had their attention.

Fear slithered along my spine and my glance darted around the room. Did Maggie invite us here to bring her children peace or dinner? I had to try to rescue the kids no matter my client's motives.

"I'm a friend of your mom's," I said.

Walls spasmed and red tears ran in rivulets down the children's cheeks.

"Ivy, did you feel that?" Jinx asked.

"Stay there and don't move unless I say so," I said.

Predators chase their prey. And these two stopped being innocent children long ago.

"Your mom is here and she loves you very much," I said. "You've been very good, but she needs you to do one more very hard thing."

"B-b-bad," the boy said.

"No, you're not," I said.

"H-h-hungry," the little girl moaned.

"You don't have to ever be hungry again," I said. "You can move on and be with your mom again."

I had no idea if what I said was true, but words have a magic of their own and there were strong energies in this house.

I tapped into my own sense of emptiness at losing a parent, a hole in the pit of my stomach and an ache in my chest that would never go away. I channeled a child's yearning for their parents and told the ghost children what they needed to hear.

They were good. They were loved. They were going home.

The more I talked the more convinced I was that I could save them. And just like that, a door opened and the children turned to face my client.

"Mommy?"

"Take my hand," Maggie said, reaching for her children. "We're going home."

The room shuddered, and Jinx lost her balance, but I kept my eyes on the children and the veins that tethered them to the house.

"We were bad," the girl said.

"No, my beautiful precious boy and girl," Maggie said. "You did exactly what your foolish mother asked of you. Can you forgive me?"

They ran to her, and as they reached the end of their fleshy chains, I sliced the veins with my blade. The knife was silver-tipped iron and sprinkled with holy water. I had no idea what the house was, but the veins blackened and withered, retracting with lightning speed.

Maggie mouthed "thank you" over the children's heads and stepped through the glowing door.

I heard her voice through the light, calling out in a cheerful voice.

"Come on, Fluffy," she said. "Time to go home."

Something brushed my leg and purring filled my ears. Then it moved away and the door snapped shut.

My ears popped and Jinx frowned.

"Was that a cat?" she asked.

I blinked away tears.

"I don't know, but I don't think we'll be getting paid for this job," I said.

Jinx looked around the dusty kitchen and groaned. The house was once again a mundane structure, the only oddities were the three bodies resting in each other's arms.

“We’re never going to see a dime,” Jinx said, staggering to the door.

The light was painfully bright, but I tilted my head to the sky and shrugged.

It’s hard to pay the bills when you’re dead. But if you die in a city filled with random faerie magic and have Ivy Granger on the case, you sure as Hell can settle your debts.

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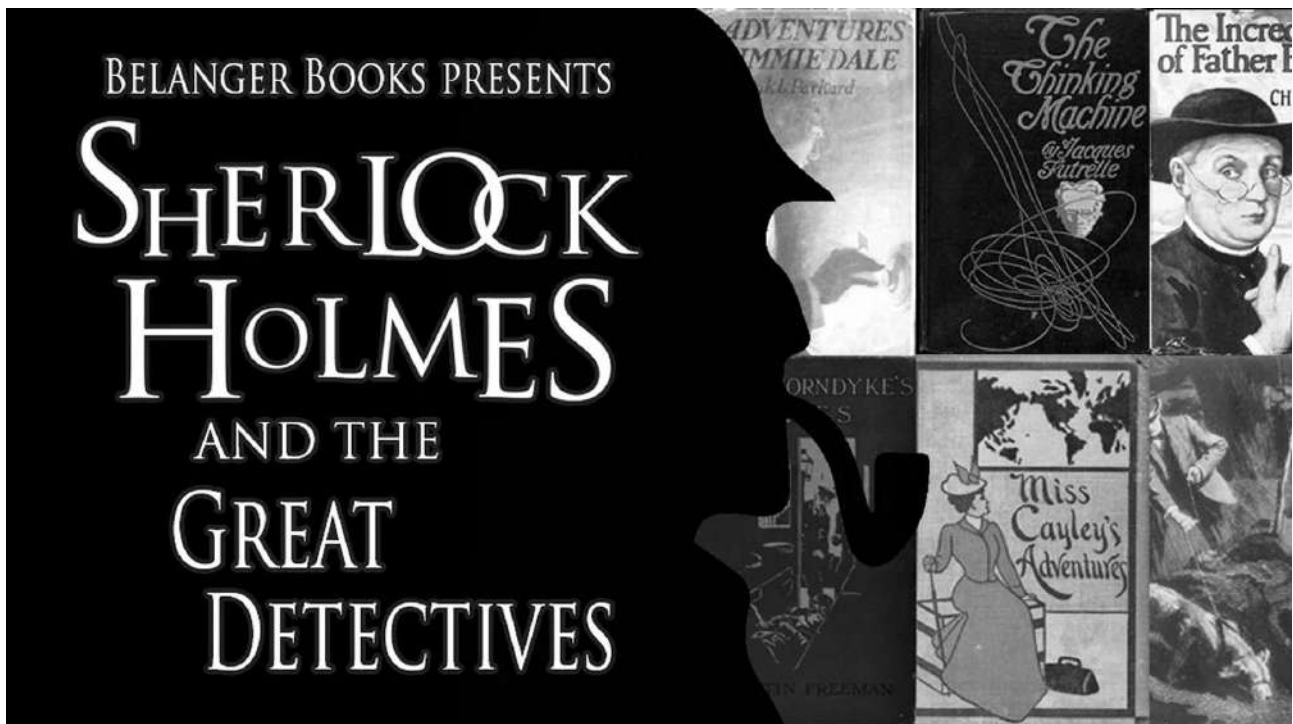
**E.J. STEVENS** is the bestselling, award-winning author of the *Ivy Granger*, *Psychic Detective* urban fantasy series, the *Spirit Guide* young adult paranormal mystery series, the *Hunters’ Guild* urban fantasy series, and the *Whitechapel Paranormal Society* Victorian occult detective series. Her books are available worldwide in multiple languages.

BTS Red Carpet Award winner for Best Novel, Imadjinn Award winner for Best Short Story, Raven Award winner for Best Urban Fantasy Novel, Independent Audiobook Award winner for Best Short Story, SYAE finalist for Best Paranormal Series, Best Novella, and Best Horror, winner of the PRG Reviewer’s Choice Award for Best Paranormal Fantasy Novel, Best Young Adult Paranormal Series, Best Urban Fantasy Novel, and finalist for Best Young Adult Paranormal Novel and Best Urban Fantasy Series.

When E.J. isn’t at her writing desk, she enjoys dancing along seaside cliffs, singing in graveyards, and sleeping in faerie circles. E.J. currently resides in a magical forest on the coast of Maine where she finds daily inspiration for her writing.

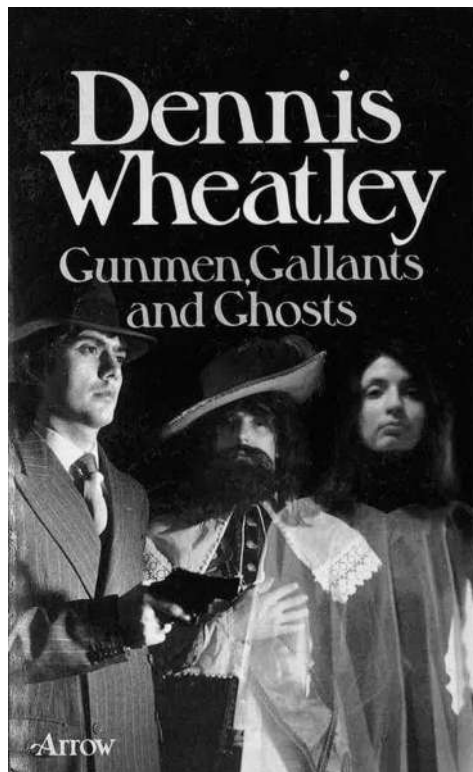
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# THE CASE OF THE INCOMPLEAT GHOST HUNTER— NEILS ORSEN

*G.W. Thomas*



The 1930s was the last great period of Spiritualism in Britain and America. Houdini and other defrauders were busy debunking the phonies and relegating the spiritualists to the sideshows of the carnivals. World War II and an increasing love of technology would soon spawn the hardcore ranks of scientists and engineers. There were still writers who dwelt in that world of Blavatsky and Ouspensky and believed in the spirit world, bringing that conviction to their work. Algernon Blackwood was perhaps the most famous. Dennis Wheatley, who would gain fame as a writer of spy thrillers, was another – like Agatha Christie – who only dabbled at the art of the occult investigator.

Wheatley's entry into the world of the occult detective is Neils Orsen, who resembles Chesterton's Father Brown physically: "... Neils Orsen was small and lightly built, with transparently pale skin and large, luminous blue eyes. His domed head with a high intelligent brow and mass of soft fair hair appeared too large for his diminutive body." Orsen is also described as "frail", "gnome-like" and to have "... enormous pale-blue eyes like those of a Siamese cat..." He has long, slender fingers and is a teetotaler. Though physically small, Orsen says in the face of evil: "... while if it really is an entity from the 'Outer Circle' I'm far more capable of dealing with such things than the toughest policeman in New York." This power may come from his being the seventh son of a

seventh son. And like Van Helsing and Jules DeGrandin, he occasionally makes errors in his English, being a foreigner. Orsen's English is almost accentless but he occasionally mixes up a popular expression.

Following in Holmes' shoes, Orsen has his Watson, Bruce Hemmingway, "... six-feet-two, with thick black hair and a strong handsome face... an astute hard-headed, international lawyer, whose firm had offices in London, Paris and New York..." An idealized version of Wheatley himself, Bruce is "... a normal practical person..." Of his companion's mysterious nature, this latter-day Watson admits "... Neils himself gives me the creeps at times." Orsen's other ally is a Siamese cat named Päst, who like John Silence's cat, is used to detect the presence of other-worldly forces.

Neils Orsen appears in only four short stories, though the author had originally planned on twelve in a separate volume. The Ghost Hunter stories were collected in *Gunmen, Gallants and Ghosts*, in 1942, a hodge-podge book that was published with the aim of keeping Wheatley's name before the public while he served his country in the Ministry of Information. According to Wheatley's introduction and story prefaces, Orsen is based on a real person: "For the purpose of the stories I called him Neils Orsen but his real name was Henry Dewhirst and any charm both of appearance and character which I may have succeeded in giving to Neils Orsen is derived from my memories of his wise and greatly gifted original."

Wheatley tells of his experiences with Dewhirst in his youth:

"I visited Dewhirst some five or six times between 1928 and 1932 and I think the professional procedure of this great occultist is worthy of record. He always told his visitors that, if they wished to send their friends to see him, such friends should ring up and ask for an appointment without mentioning their own names or that of their introducer. In this way he covered himself from any suggestion that he had found out by normal means about the prospective client before his first visit."

Unlike Orsen, Dewhirst did not investigate 'haunted houses' or use the gadgets of the occult detective. Wheatley explains Dewhirst's methods:

"... for his work he used neither crystal, cards, tea-leaves nor any other aids to focusing the subconscious which are normally necessary to less gifted practitioners of the secret arts. When I arrived he sat me down in an armchair on one side of the fireplace... and taking the chair opposite began to talk in a swift, rambling monologue; having told me that I was not to reply to any questions he might put to me. Such questions as he did ask he answered himself immediately afterwards..."

Wheatley describes himself as "While no means a seeker-out of 'fortune' tellers I have, like most people, consulted quite a number in my time... but I have never found another who could foretell the future except in, possibly lucky, generalisations... I believe seers such as Dewhirst to be very rare beings..." So, it becomes obvious that while Wheatley was not an active investigator himself, like Algernon Blackwood and Sax Rohmer, he was a believer in psychic phenomenon, and it is from this grounding that he created Neils Orsen.

By comparison, Orsen is much more the offspring of William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki, with his vague hints at the "Great Depths", the "Outer Circle", "Ab-human Forces" and "Saati manifestations", his being "equipped with talismans of proved power against the evils that affect the spirit." These include such Stokerian items as garlic and the Holy Cross. But like his predecessors, Orsen uses strange equipment, built by himself especially for the work. The cameras

with the string trigger "... but their process, Orsen's invention, was a mystery to him. Neils explained them only by saying that their plates were abnormally sensitive. He said the same thing of his sound-recorder, an instrument like a miniature dictaphone."

Armed with these tools and his cat, Päst, Neils Orsen and Bruce Hemmingway tackle four cases. Wheatley, like Hodgson, does not make all the specters real. In his introduction he offers: "With the idea of giving variety to this series I decided that some of Neils' cases should prove to be genuine hauntings and that the others should turn out to be fakes arranged by people who had some axe to grind and therefore be capable of a natural explanation ascertainable by normal detection methods... When you have read enough of each case to be as fully informed of the situation as Neils, it may give you additional amusement to lay aside the book for a moment and see if you can guess if he is up against a fake or a real haunting, before reading the denouement." This Ellery Queenian gimmick places Wheatley into the camp of the Mystery writers.

The first of these is *'The Case of the Thing That Whimpered'*. Bruce meets Orsen for the first time while traveling to America on a ship. While on board the two become friends and Bruce invites Neils to stay at his father's estate. We get a small glimpse of Bruce's love of information when he reads a newspaper that features a kidnapped girl. The senior Hemmingway asks the detective to solve a mysterious affair in a new warehouse he has rented. Three men have been mysteriously and brutally assaulted while on night watch duty. The only clue is a supernatural whining cry. Orsen and his young friend stay a night in the warehouse, discovering a trapdoor and the source of the sound, the kidnapped girl. Orsen's first case proves to be "some form of trickery produced for a specific purpose".

*'The Case of the Long-Dead Lord'* is a re-write. Originally a story without Orsen, Wheatley admits in his introduction, "the yarn owes much more to my wife than to myself. It was she who originally gave me the plot and put into the story all the nice touches of local colour..." Mrs Wheatley based some of the story on her own creepy bicycling experiences near Castle Stuart where she "... pedalled with the fury of near-panic to escape the almost tangible and sinister influence which emanates from that ancient ruin."

Bruce and Neils go to Scotland, where Arkon Clyde and his daughter Fiona, friends of the Hemmingways, have rented an old Scottish manor. Arkon is a distracted scholar and notices nothing unusual. It is Fiona who is haunted by something in her room. Orsen sleeps there but neither he, nor Päst the cat sense anything. Fiona continues to fall deeper and deeper into a gloomy state, a fey existence that leads her to an open pit in the manor's ruins. Orsen discovers the history of the castle in the nick of time. It is haunted by the paramour of a past mistress of the castle, Fiona, brutally murdered by the lord. Bruce runs to the ruins, fighting spirit forces, to pull Fiona from the brink of the pit.

*'The Case of the Red-Headed Woman'* is in the author's opinion, the best of the Orsen saga and he is probably right. In this story he combined the fake with the fantastic. Based on an actual apartment in South Kensington "... that remained tenantless for several years because such a succession of suicides occurred...", Wheatley creates an intriguing explanation for the deaths. He admits in real life that "No such explanation was ever forthcoming to my knowledge..."

Bruce brings Neils in after his firm rents an apartment to two newly-wedded friends, Peter and Pauline Wembley. The apartment is the scene of three suicides and several frightened tenants. Orsen places his cameras while the newlyweds are on their honeymoon, only to find they have been called back on the night of the haunting. Bruce and Neils barge in on the couple, keeping Peter up well past his bedtime. When he is ready to evict the duo there is a scream from the bathroom. Pauline has been attacked by the haunter.



Next day, Neils explains after an examination of the bathroom and its secret staircase to the apartment above and the photographic plates of his cameras. The first victim, the red-headed French woman, Victorine Daubert, was murdered by her lover, Arnold Robertson, who lived in the apartment above. Later, after taking her apartment in remorse, Robertson killed himself. The first two deaths were not supernatural. But after his death, Robertson haunted the bathroom, especially attacking women with red hair, like the final victim, Mrs Matheson.

'*The Case of the Haunted Chateau*' is interesting in that it is the only story firmly planted in time by its historical references. The tale is set in 1940, when America is still neutral in the Second World War. Bruce and Neils go to the Front to help a friend of Orsen's, General Hayes. A French chateau where the British have set up a radio station is haunted by something that attacks the soldiers' hands and feet. One man is killed in the bathroom of the creepy place.

The two ghost hunters stay the night. Orsen draws a pentagram on the bathroom floor to protect them from any Saati manifestations. It is while they are inside the circle that Bruce's hand is attacked. Neils believes he has trapped the demon inside the pentagram with them. They flee, but return the next day with the soldiers. Orsen has solved the case. In the icehouse near the chateau they find a dead German spy, who Orsen has electrocuted with his own devilish equipment, electric stubs used to shock people, making them believe they have been attacked by ghosts.

'*The Haunted Chateau*' seems the least interesting of the four stories. The current anti-Nazi sentiments seem uneven compared with the rest of the tales. Gentle, understanding Orsen stoops to killing a man just because he is German. The use of the pentagram is interesting, for it is the only typical occult device Orsen uses in the stories, though he does nothing with it that Hodgson hadn't with Carnacki.

So, ends the career of Neils Orsen, after only four cases, half of which prove to be real and the other half fakes. What Wheatley would have done next he does not say. He never returns to the character after the War. Like many writers of the '30s and '40s, the occult detective may have seemed old fashioned, a creature of an age that had closed with the defeat of Hitler.

With the passing of the pulps in the mid-1950s, the ghost-breakers were left without a home. Jules DeGrandin and Doc Savage (whose adventures often strayed close to the area of supernatural investigations) were both Depression era favorites, but in the period of post-war rationality, the supernatural detective was seen as something passé, cheap and amateurish. Science fiction and clean cut action heroes dominated the markets for entertainment reading. The ghost-breakers were but a pulp-era memory.

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G.W. THOMAS writes the Book Collector series of Mythos Occult Detective stories. His website is www.gwthomas.org

Check out G. W. Thomas' blog at <http://darkworldsquarterly.gwthomas.org/>

VINNIE DE SOTH AND THE VAMPIRE DEFINITION

I.A. Watson

Investigative journalist Annette Anson glared across the counter at Alto Tumour. “Don’t you care about being offensive to women?” she asked.

The proprietor of the occult bookshop looked down his paunch at his grubby T-shirt that said *Honk if you want to be honked*. “What’s wrong with that?” he asked.

Annette’s stare was icy. “I didn’t mean the T-shirt,” she said. “I was referring to you generally.”

While Alto was dealing with this, the reporter picked up a dog-eared flyer for Vedric Chakra Debugging. She wondered again what she was really doing in a seedy backstreet bookshop in London’s narrow-alleyed Soho area. She remembered that she was a reporter who never gave up on a story, even in the face of grubby overweight shopkeepers of cluttered damp-smelling new age second-hand stores.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

By now the proprietor of Alto Tumour’s Occult Books was used to a succession of intimidating visitors calling upon his lodger. “Vinnie’s through there,” he said, pointing to a shabby bead curtain.

Annette marched into the backroom. She found a flustered-looking young man trying to coax the lid off a jar of coffee using a sacred Maori dagger. When he saw he had a guest he accidentally cut his finger, stifled a yelp and quickly dropped jar and weapon into a drawer and tried to look professional.

“Mr De Soth,” Annette began.

Vinnie flinched. “Are you another process server?” he asked. “If so you could just leave it on the pile there.”

The reporter noted a thick stack of legal documents threatening to fall out of Vinnie’s in-tray. “That’s a lot of summonses,” she noted. “What did you do?”

“Ah,” winced Vinnie. “It turns out that when you shut down a website that puts you in e-mail correspondence with spirits claiming to be your dead loved ones, you should really check whether the domain is registered to a prominent dead lawyer first. Otherwise you tend to get some really serious post-mortem litigation.”

Annette Anson frowned, unsure whether this strange young man was trying to make a fool of her.

“I’d have referred this to my own lawyers, except when they say they charge an arm and a leg they’re not always kidding.” The floppy-haired young man hastily heaved a stack of dog-eared case files off a rickety office chair so that Annette had somewhere to sit. Then, thinking more, he wedged a folders under one of the legs. “Now you can hit me,” he told her. “Preferably with the summons, not literally.”

“I’m not here about that. I’ve never even heard of... whatever it is you were babbling about. I’m here because I need an expert.” She eyed the worried-looking consultant with mounting doubt.

“Ah. Well, you’re not catching me at my best,” Vinnie told her. “Well, maybe you are, but I really am an expert in, er, some things. Not filing, obviously. Or chair repair. Or, you know, making a good impression.”

Annette pushed on. "I encountered something that bothers me. Something weird. So I asked around and found you were on a list put out by a government special advisor called Sir Giles Dendene."

Vinnie's brows rose. "Really? That's pretty decent of the Thaumaturgist Royal."

"It was a list of people to shun at all costs," she clarified. What was a Thaumaturgist Royal anyhow? "Sir Giles managed to patronise me into deciding you were a better alternative."

"Ah, well, that's Sir Giles for you. Did he, er, mention ectoplasm stains on the walls of the National Gallery at all?" checked Vinnie anxiously. "Never mind. What's the problem?"

* * *

Mrs Blythely wasn't sure about the young specialist Miss Anson had brought into the Williams case. "Are we quite certain that this consultant has had the appropriate police checks?" she checked. "I'm not actually certain that..." she examined the rectangles in her hand, "that a Bean & Donut Diner loyalty card and a Central London Underground Pass constitute appropriate authority."

"Vinnie, this is Mrs Blythely of Finchley Social Services. She's looking into the safety and well-being of young Beyoncé Williams, the girl who claims that she's becoming a vampire."

"We're not at home to Mr Superstition," insisted the harassed social worker, "while of course absolutely respecting the ethnic and cultural traditions of a modern multi-faith polyglot society and the individual belief systems and life choices of contemporary civilisation."

Vinnie looked over Mrs Blythely's shoulder at the moody sallow-faced teenager sitting in the window seat. The girl had a black choker round her neck and black nail polish on her fingers. "Perhaps while you're showing Mr Superstition the door I could have a word with Miss Williams – I mean Ms Williams. I'll try not to disrespect her individual belief systems and... whatever else it was you just said."

"I suggest you let Vinnie talk to her," Annette encouraged the care worker. "He might be able to help."

Vinnie bypassed Mrs Blythely and approached Beyoncé. He suspected that possibly she was really Jane or Jill or something, but since he was actually called Vincent Arcanus Greymalkin de Soth he wasn't going to argue with anyone's self-naming choices. "Hello," he said.

Beyoncé gave him a look of disinterested contempt.

"How are you becoming a vampire?" Vinnie asked her curiously.

Beyoncé frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there's a wide range of options. Demonic pact, divine curse for misdeeds in life, conversion from lycanthropy, burial custom error, latent genetics, or was it just the usual fluid exchanges with a practicing undead?" the young occultist clarified.

"Ripper," the girl clarified. "Ripper drinks my blood."

"And Ripper's a vampire?"

"Well duh!"

"And... how do you know he's a vampire?" Vinnie checked. After all, in a city where Beeping Reg kept pulling the old alien abduction pickup on unsuspecting college girls anything was possible.

"Because he doesn't reflect in mirrors. And 'cause he drinks my blood."

"Good tells," admitted the occultist. "So how often does this... drinking happen?"

"None of your business."

"Well technically, since I'm charging Ms Anson's paper an hourly fee – subject to her editor's approval – it probably is my business. So explain – slowly as you like."

Annette wasn't happy with Vinnie's ticking meter. "We're trying to help you, Beyoncé. Work with us."

"If you don't let Ripper come and get me he'll slaughter you all," the goth-girl warned.

"Now, Beyoncé, that's no way to talk," Mrs Blythely chided. "We're not at home to Mr Threats."

"And if we were, we shouldn't invite Mr Threats in across the threshold," Vinnie added for clarification.

"Who is this Ripper person?" Annette demanded. "Did you meet him online?"

"Ripper's eternal," Beyoncé declared. "Ripper will make me eternal."

"Well, the theology on that varies," Vinnie admitted. "He could certainly make something that looks a lot like you eternal."

"This Ripper person might well be a sex offender," Mrs Blithely worried. "I should call in Counselling."

"I think you need it," Annette admitted.

Vinnie focussed on the main problem. "Okay, Beyoncé. Next diagnostic question. This vampire of yours. Does he tend towards being moody and sparkling at all?"

"No," the girl answered, puzzled.

"Shame. Because then all I'd have had to do was give his name to the other undead and they'd have taken him to a back alley and sorted him out."

"Using intervention therapy?" suggested Mrs Blythely.

"Using a chair leg and kerosene. And possibly a good deal of sarcasm."

Annette stirred. "So to be clear, Mr De Soth, you're claiming that not only are there actual vampires but that they have professional standards?"

Vinnie shrugged. "It's a PR thing. Um, I'm not about to become a three column exposé in some newspaper, am I?"

"Perhaps later. I'm still putting together my shocking piece on the lapses of the Finchley Social Services system."

"What?" gasped Mrs Blythely. "But you said..."

"I am totally at home to Mr Tell The World How Crap Your Department Is," Annette promised her. "First, let's try and help this poor girl who's caught in your system. Beyoncé, there are some people out there who claim to be vampires. Real-life blood-drinkers. It's a lifestyle choice, I suppose. But when it involves underage girls it's a crime."

The troubled teen shook her head violently. "Ripper's real. He is of the night. He rules the darkness and all mortals are his lawful prey." She sighed. "He is so friggin' *cool!*"

Vinnie returned to the point. "Beyoncé, listen. This is very important. How many times have you drunk Ripper's blood?"

Beyoncé blushed.

"I need to know," the young occultist persisted.

Beyoncé looked away. "I'll get the hang of it. It just tastes so icky that I always spit it out. But tonight..."

"Don't be ashamed. It's great that you're sanguine-intolerant. That's what keeps saving your life," Vinnie comforted her.

Annette had caught something else though. "Wait. Did you say tonight? This Ripper's coming here, to... drink you or whatever, and he's going to do it *tonight?*"

Beyoncé nodded. "And if you try to stop him he'll kill you."

Mrs Blythely made a note on her PDA. "That would certainly be against our code of customer/staff conduct," she warned.

* * *

At midnight, the vampire let himself into the youth hostel where Beyoncé was lodged. He used a key from his own time there.

"Hi," Vinnie greeted him. "You must be Ripper."

Beyoncé waved apologetically from the overstuffed sofa where she sat with Annette and Mrs Blythely. "I told them to leave me alone, Ripper, really I did. But they wouldn't."

Ripper smiled a fanged smile. "They'll wish they had," he promised.

The vampire wore black leathers and a Metallica t-shirt. Vinnie winced. "How long have you been undead, Ripper?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter, meat," the vampire snarled. "You're between me and my babe."

"Bride. They're called brides," Vinnie clarified. "You ready to be his lawfully deaded wife, Beyoncé?"

The girl looked disconcerted for the first time. "Married? I'm only fifteen."

"I never said married," Ripper insisted. "I only want her blood. And, y'know, sex."

"I'm afraid that's not allowed," insisted Mrs Blythely. "I have a pamphlet about it somewhere here."

"And who's going to stop me?" Ripper leered. "Who can stop me from tearing all of you to bits?"

Vinnie help up his hand. "Um, I'm a de Soth. I might."

"Who?"

"A de Soth? Of the ancient line of de Soths? One of the Eight Families? We get three whole chapters in the *Codex Pandemoniac*? I have my own footnote on page 1,807 in the latest edition?"

Ripper looked blank.

Vinnie tried harder. "Big nasty wizards? Necromancers-R-Us? Soul-binding demon-raising nightmare sorcerers from the dawn of time? Except me. I'm the white sheep of the family. But seriously, you've not heard of us? Wow, you *are* new!"

"I have every sympathy for the needs of young offenders, Mr Ripper," Mrs Blythely assured the vampire, "recognising the tragic cultural forces at work on their traumatic lives, but if you drink any of Beyoncé's blood I shall have to report you to your probation officer."

Annette reached into her purse and prepared her taser. She wasn't sure if it would take down a vampire, but it was comforting to know it would certainly floor Mrs Blythely.

"Now I'm going to kill you all," Ripper promised. "I am darkness, and blood, and horror, and death. I am power. I am the night. I am vampire!"

Vinnie stuck his hands into his pockets. "Do you know who Don Calmet is, then?"

Ripper delayed his lunge, confused. "I don't know any guys named Don."

Vinnie sighed. "Don Augustin Calmet, 1672-1757. Wrote a twenty volume bible commentary. But he also wrote *Dissertations sur les Apparitions des Anges, des Démons et des Esprits, et sur les Revenants et Vampires*."

Ripper and Beyoncé looked at him blankly.

"Dissertations on the Apparitions of Angels, Demons, and Ghosts, and on the Revenants and Vampires," Vinnie translated. "Sold out in 1746 and was republished and expanded in 1749 and 1751. It gathered together vast amounts of lore from all kinds of obscure sources. Even had certified accounts of vampire autopsies. *Major* best-seller, a century and a half before Bram Stoker hit it big."

"Who?" puzzled the vampire.

"Author of *Dracula*?" Annette prompted, appalled by the modern educational system.

"The book of the film?" Beyoncé ventured. "That film *Bram Stoker's Dracula!*"

Vinnie sighed. "Lord protect us from undead and would-be undead who get all their vampire factoids from the internet and *True Blood*. Look, any serious vampire who knows anything has heard of Don Calmet, just like any newbie who's hardly found his fangs yet can't spell Nosferatu." The young occultist pointed to Ripper. "That'd be you."

"I'm going to kill you now," Ripper told him.

"Can you even turn into bats or rats?" Vinnie challenged. "Even one bat or rat? Or a wolf? Or mist? Can you crawl up walls like a spider? Control vermin and the lower animals? Command disease? Summon storms?"

"What?" Ripper shrugged. "Why?"

"Vampires today!" Vinnie scorned. "And how many attempts has it taken you to change Beyoncé here into your bride? What is it, performance anxiety?"

"He never said bride," Beyoncé clarified urgently.

"I bet you don't do the coffin thing, right? Or the graveyard soil?"

Ripper shook his head. If he'd had blood circulation he'd have flushed with anger by now.

"If you don't stick to the old forms you never grow in power and you'll never be able to shapeshift or charm or do any of the good stuff," Vinnie warned him. "Really Mrs Blythely needs to get them to do a pamphlet for new vampires. Maybe with a helpline."

"I could mention it in my next evaluation," the social worker offered. "Although with budget cuts as they are I don't know if we'd be able to translate it into the Eastern European languages properly."

Annette interrupted. "Vinnie, aren't we supposed to be saving Beyoncé from her corpse boyfriend, not offering him handy tips and tricks?"

"Sorry. It's just when I think how many hours a day I had to study Don Calmet, and Montague Summers, and the *Lesser Key of Solomon*, and *De Vermis Mysteriis* and all that stuff, it really makes me cross when undead can't be bothered to do their homework!"

Beyoncé looked even more disconcerted. "There's homework?" She looked at Ripper accusingly. "You never said there'd be assignments."

"There isn't, babe. He's just messing with us. Messing with our heads. I'll just kill him and..."

"Make very sure you kill me properly and don't turn me into an undead," Vinnie warned him.

Ripper sneered. "Why?"

"Because I would be *very good* at it," Vinnie warned. "You know what I'd do?"

"What?" demanded Ripper reluctantly.

"Well, you know that vampires can grow massively more powerful by drinking the blood or eating the ashes of older vampires?" the occultist began.

"No," Ripper said; but he sounded interested.

"Right. Well they can. Gives them all kinds of extra options, like... like levelling up on *Grand Theft Auto*. With a cheat code. So if I was an undead, that's what I'd do. Find some old vamp's ashes, scoff them down, become powerful. Repeat as necessary. Rule the world."

"Um, Vinnie..." Annette said warningly.

"That's what I'm gonna do!" Ripper decided. "You're gonna find me those ashes, dude – I mean mortal. Take me to vamp dust – *now* – or I'll tear these chicks' throats out."

"Not a chick," Annette told him severely. "I'm not going to be objectified by someone who doesn't know who Bram Stoker is."

"And I'm not giving you what you want," Vinnie warned him. "Last thing we need is an ultra-powerful teenage street-punk with the power to do anything to anyone."

Ripper chuckled. "That's too bad... because I didn't come here alone."

There was movement at the doorstep. The rest of the vampire gang tramped in. There were around thirty of them, young thugs and goth girls. Ripper had been busy.

"This is going to have to go in my report," warned Mrs Blythely.

* * *

Annette Anson shone a torch around the old brick tunnel. "Where are we now?"

"We're beneath Brompton Road underground station," Vinnie told her. "Deep under it."

"There is no tube station on Brompton Road," the reporter objected.

"Well, not now," Vinnie answered. "But there was up to 1934. In World War Two they used the platforms as a base for co-ordinating anti-aircraft operations. Now it's all sealed off above, but the older routes under Knightsbridge link up via the Templar passages and the ghoul tunnels."

"Ghoul tunnels?" Annette fretted.

"Not likely to be a problem while we've got a swarm of teen vampires with us. This old stairwell should take us down below the station into the plague-pit workings and from there to Sir Knyvett's sepulchre."

"Who?"

"The knight of Knightsbridge. Some people claim the location got its name from him. He was attacked by thieves as he crossed the River Westbourne and he slew them all – at least according to some sources. The burial chamber off the deep sewers might well be much older than the legend. Nobody seems to know."

Ripper and his gang were not interested in lectures on history. "You better get us to where we're going fast, man," he warned. "We're getting hungry."

"I'm not marrying you, Ripper," Beyoncé warned.

"We're not at home to Mr Paedophilia," explained Mrs Blythely. "In fact Mr Paedophilia is required to be properly registered and stay a statutory 200 meters away at the very least."

Each of the humans was dragged along by a pair of vampires. Vinnie steered his pair under an old arch to a tunnel of even older construction. He pointed to the sealed entrance. "You need to bust through that bricked-up doorway," he told Ripper. "Shouldn't be a problem for a full-strength vampire."

Ripper gestured for some of his boys to kick the barrier down. They struggled.

"What is that place?" Annette questioned Vinnie. "The tomb of that Sir Whoever?"

"Maybe once. But it was repurposed in Napoleonic times, back when there were still a few people who knew how to lock away supernatural things – the Thaumaturgist Royal of the time, for one." He turned to the straining vampires. "Come on, lads. Put your backs into it!"

"You heard him!" Ripper demanded of his crew. "Break down that punk-ass wall!"

"Screw you, man!" a youth with the unfortunate street-name of Scab shouted back. "This thing was built to last. I don't see *you* kicking it down with us, Ripper!" The undead continued their efforts.

"How many undead have you made?" Vinnie asked Ripper confidentially. "You do know that every time you create one it weakens you a little bit? And the undead you spawn are successively wimpier as well?"

"We aren't wimpy!" shouted Scab, from the archway.

Vinnie shrugged. "You also know that your control over them gets thinner the more minions you have? And that if one of them breaks control and drinks you, they get to be boss?"

"Shut up!" Ripper warned the jobbing occultist. "Just shut your mouth about that!"

Vinnie looked around. "Perhaps you should stand over there," he advised Ripper. "With your back to the wall."

"We are plenty powerful," Ripper told him. "Dark lords of the night and... stuff."

"Can I quote you?" asked Annette sarcastically. "Beyoncé, I'm begging you, woman to woman, please... Ditch the loser!"

Beyoncé looked over at Ripper and thought about it.

"Perhaps if you kick a bit harder?" Vinnie advised the undead.

"Perhaps if we drink the chicks?" the vampire hacking at the brickwork snarled.

"Not without Ripper's permission," Vinnie told him. "You're the slave. He's the master. That's how it goes."

"I ain't his slave!" Scab objected.

"You're in my gang. You do what I say!" commanded Ripper.

"Right against that wall there," Vinnie advised Ripper on safe spots. "Maybe holding a stake."

Cracks appeared in the stonework. The blockage began to clear.

"You've warned your spawn of the things that can harm them, haven't you?" Vinnie checked with Ripper. "Garlic, crosses, holy water, all of that."

"Hey, we seen the movies," the belligerent not-slave insisted.

Vinnie shook his head. "Being undead, it's more than wearing leather coats and hair care product. There's plenty to watch out for. Sacred rice, running water, holy wafers, church bells, whitethorn, pickles, mayonnaise, anything yellow..."

"You're making that up!" Ripper objected.

"Really? Well, the yellow prohibition might be for Green Lantern power rings. But you *don't* know, do you? You don't even know how to transform into an animal. Or a weather phenomenon. Or a big truck."

"That's it. I'm gonna..."

The archway bricks collapsed. Behind was a deep chamber, carved with sigils.

"What the hell is in there?" wondered Annette.

"*This* became the tomb of Sir Marmaduke Runnagate Bannerworth, better known in the Victorian Penny Dreadfuls as Varney the Vampire.¹ Well, here's what was left of him after a close encounter with Mount Vesuvius.² People were especially keen to keep his dust pretty much dusty. The carvings on the wall basically say, 'And don't come back'."

"This is a real tomb!" one of the vampire girls said enthusiastically. "With a real stone coffin."

"Sarcophagus," Annette corrected her; she couldn't stop herself.

"This may well be breaking and entering," Mrs Blythely warned.

Vinnie pointed to the casket. "There'll be Varney-dust in the bottom there. Whichever one of you wants the power should..."

"Hold on," the arch-kicking Scab interrupted. "What d'you mean, *whichever* one? We all get the boost!"

Vinnie shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. You can't all be the master-vampire. Haven't you people ever seen *Britain's Got Talent*? *One* of you spills his blood on the ashes – and it had better be vamp blood not human blood because otherwise you've got a very pissed elder vampire reforming instead and you *do not* want that to happen. You mix your ichor with the dust, lap it up

¹ One of the earliest fictional vampire stories, *Varney the Vampire, or The Feast of Blood*, appeared as a serial of 667,000 words from 1845-47, chronicling the torments of the Bannerworth family at the hands of Sir Francis Varney, who is strongly hinted to have been an ancestor depicted in an old family portrait and variously described as Sir Marmaduke Bannerworth and Sir Runnagate Bannerworth at different points in the text.

² *Varney the Vampire* ends with the villain's remorseful suicide into Mount Vesuvius, which is assumed will end his torment.

again, and suddenly you know everything old Varney knew about undeading and you get the total upgrade package. And then you let us mortals go, like you promised.”

“Vinnie, you didn’t actually believe that part, did you?” Annette whispered.

“Hold on,” objected Beyoncé. “Ripper, Scab’s trying to bleed in the coffin!”

Vinnie winced. “Ah. We’ll just cower over in this corner until the vampire fights have finished, shall we?”

* * *

Ripper staggered to his feet, covered in the blood of his gang, torn, battered, but victorious. He dropped Scab’s torn-off head on the gore-spattered floor. “You were right, dweeb,” he told Vinnie. “Drinking vampire blood does boost me!”

“I don’t think that’s a proper diet for a person,” Mrs Blythely warned. “Not that I’m judging about anybody’s dietary choices but...”

“Vinnie, I thought you knew what you were doing,” Annette cut in. “So far you seem to have got rid of a pack of fairly useless undead and created one big nasty one.”

“He’s not big and nasty yet,” Vinnie warned her. “He hasn’t mixed his ichor with Varney’s ashes.”

“But now I shall,” the triumphant vampire proclaimed.

“Ripper...” Beyoncé called uncertainly. The gore and violence had left the girl shocked and sobered. She backed behind Vinnie.

Ripper ignored her. The blood-covered street punk hefted the stone lid easily now and tossed it across the room. One red gash later he had the sticky paste he desired.

“He’s done it,” Annette realised. “We’re dead now.”

“I... I don’t think this is a healthy environment for social work,” Mrs Blythely warned.

“I don’t think I want to date him any more,” Beyoncé admitted.

“Good,” approved Vinnie. “That was pretty much the whole reason for letting things go this far. Taking out the vampire wouldn’t have stopped you wanting to be undead. Or dead. So we had to go the long route.”

“By creating an ultra-powerful uber-vampire?” Annette critiqued.

Ripper swallowed down the gory mash. He seemed to grow and darken.

“You’ve just become a very serious undead,” Vinnie congratulated him. “Right up there. By now you probably know all about Don Calmet, and Summers, and Nosferos, and Vrykoulakos, and Graf Hertzog and all the rest, right back to the sinking of Mu. You’ve got all the powers of a major undead. You can probably read what it says on these walls.”

Ripper looked around, focussing on the signs, suddenly cringing. “Holy...!” he hissed.

“Yeah. Kind of like dogs can hear high-frequency sounds we miss, now you’re so powerful you can pick up on the wardings you just weren’t undead enough to notice before.”

Ripper shielded his eyes. “Kill you...”

“You might want to read the small print,” Vinnie pointed out. “The wardings that prevent a vampire from harming anyone in here? They’re right below the bit about you not being able to leave the room.”

Ripper leaped at Vinnie – and was hurled away with bone-shattering force. His body boiled where it hit the wall.

Annette took Beyoncé and Mrs Blythely and firmly led them out of the chamber. The vampire lunged after them, and was jerked back like a dog on a chain.



Ripper snarled at Vinnie. “You did this to me!” “Yes I did,” agreed the jobbing occultist. “And do you know what? I was being *kind*.” He turned back to the steaming vampire and fixed him with a stare. “I could have led you to Vrykolakas the elder vampire, or to the Shrine of King Lud, or to the ghoulish tunnels under St Paul’s Cathedral. I could have taken you to the Laundry of Doom, or shown you what lies under St Guy’s Hospital. I could have brought you to the Tower of London and let the ravens shred you. I could have dropped you in the lair of the many-angled Sleeper Beyond Sanity! Or I could have *got nasty!* Because I Do – Not – Like amateurs preying on little girls, or bullies who think their power lets them do whatever they want.”

Ripper took a step back.

Vinnie took a breath. “So here you are. Trapped by your own power. All the strength and abilities of a vampire lord – and all of his limitations.” He turned to go, then added another piece of information. “You remember I said a proper vampire has to sleep in a coffin scattered with his graveyard soil? If he doesn’t return to that coffin by daybreak he’s destroyed. Nothing to do with sunlight, that’s just for newbies. With great power comes a whole new rule-book. You have to learn to manage your condition. Frankly I think you’d flunk the exam.”

“Wait...” Ripper gasped.

Vinnie checked his watch. “About three hours to sun-up. I’m guessing you didn’t stuff your pockets with your native earth? Ouch. Rookie mistake.”

Ripper lunged at him again. He really wasn’t a fast learner.

Vinnie ignored him. He returned to Annette, Mrs Blythely, and Beyoncé, and headed back to the surface.

“I really don’t know where on the forms I’m going to put all of this,” the social worker fretted.

“Just tick the box at the bottom that says refer to the Thaumaturgist Royal,” Annette advised her. “Vinnie’s on his list.”

“How are you going to write this up for your paper?” Vinnie wondered nervously.

“Like my editor would believe this. Don’t worry. I’ll just do another story about delinquent youth, drink, and drugs. That’s always good for a few column inches.”

“I still get paid though, right? I’m pretty sure I’ll need to buy a clean pair of pants.”

They emerged through a grating on the Thames Embankment. Surprised rats scurried into the darkness.

“Sooo...” Beyoncé said to Vinnie, “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Yes, “ Vinnie told her quickly. “Probably. Almost definitely. Sorry. I’m, um, needed elsewhere. Urgently. A call from, er, from the Vinnie-cave. I must go!”

He hastened back to the security of his occult world of pacts and demons, where he was safe from fifteen-year old ingénues.

~~~~~

**I.A. WATSON** is the collective name for an indentured group of spirit mediums forced to channel the ghosts of certain dead members of the Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft Fan Clubs who are condemned to write short horror fiction until the chime of doomsday. In defiance of their curse, these damned spectres and their screaming meat-puppets have also written a series of novels such as *Vinnie de Soth*, *Jobbing Occultist*, *Sir Mumphrey Wilton and the Lost City of Mystery*, *The Transdimensional Transport Company*, *The Labours of Hercules*, *The Death of Persephone*, and the forthcoming *Vinnie De Soth and the Exorcist's Union*.

I.A. Watson tales have previously graced the pages of *Occult Detective Quarterly* #5 and *Occult Detective Magazine* #6. A new Vinnie de Soth tale will appear in *Occult Detective Magazine* #8.

A full bibliography of their misdeeds is available at <http://www.chillwater.org.uk/writing/iawatsonhome.htm>, along with samples of some of their seventy-plus publications. Or possibly I.A. Watson is a relatively boring author who has had to write way too many "About the Author" paragraphs. You decide.

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# SHADOWS IN THE RAFTERS

*Paul Finch*

*Bingham's Gazeteer of Medical Science (winter edition)...*

9(i) *Phonutria envenoming affects the human body in classic neuro-toxic fashion, meaning that the main object of its attack is the central nervous system. This will result in immediate and severe pain, both locally and centrally, a feverish condition, heavy, prolonged sweating, paralysis of limbs and eventual neurogenic shock, which in children and younger adults may lead to death.*

It was pay night, so *The Old Dog* beer-house was filled to its outer doors.

Pipe smoke hung heavy, drinking men shouted and jostled each other. The colliers were there in force with their sooty clothes and coal-grained faces, alongside millworkers decked in clots of cotton, and foundrymen fresh from shift, their faces bearing the ruddy blotches of spark and flash-burn. There was a clatter of hobnailed boots on floorboards, an endless *clink* as wages changed hands. Roars of laughter rose to the brown-stained ceiling. On one hand English miners called shame on Big Alex McDonald for siding with the Tory peer Elcho, while the Scots and Irish defended their leader's drive for safety in the pits. By normal standards it was good-natured, though as always there was pushing and shoving. Here and there, a woman appeared, shawled and nervous, peeping around shyly for the husband she hadn't been able to waylay on the door; the resulting fracas when she found him only added to the general fray.

At roughly nine o'clock, a man caped in black, wearing a tall black helmet, came soundlessly in. He was broad and pink-faced, with a great set of whiskers and a graven aspect that brooked no foolery. Bit by bit, the conversation died, the ribald singing ceased. The sergeant of police smiled thinly. There were many in here whose heads he'd broken, whose wrists he'd clapped in iron; others who might yet expect it. Nothing killed the spirit of revelry like a guilty conscience.

They watched as he strolled among them, the only sound the scrape of his soles, the creak of his weight on timber. But on this occasion, nothing so mundane as defaulting on fine or hammering on wife was of concern to Sergeant Pdraig Rafferty. His was a more deadly business, and soon he came to the crux of it. A tall fellow in a heavy coat and slouch-brimmed bowler stood alone in a corner, his back turned, both hands jammed into his pockets. A brimming tankard sat on a shelf beside him, untouched. The sergeant trod closer, an alleyway clearing before him.

"Thomas Childs," Rafferty said in his low Munster brogue. "Come on now, Thomas lad... let's be going quietly."

Even as he spoke, he saw the suspect's shoulders tense.

"Easy, Thomas. I'm unarmed... and that's the way it should be, isn't it?"

In fact, Rafferty *wasn't* unarmed. He'd already drawn his thick blackthorn staff, and held it behind his back; invisible to Childs, but not to those friends of his scattered about the room. All at once, things happened.

“Bugger’s lying, Tom!” someone shouted. Hands were laid on Rafferty, and Childs tore loose from his corner, barging across the interior like a tiger, sending men and boys flying. In a second, he’d vaulted the counter and was out through the storeroom.

Rafferty shook free, pulled his whistle from its chain and blew a single blast. But more hands grabbed at him as he fought his way through, hampering his pursuit.

Out in the tavern’s rear yard, Childs halted, hot breath billowing white in the autumn air. A glance down the entry revealed another constable, a rotund figure, huffing and puffing his way forward, entirely blocking the passage. Meanwhile, a furious shouting sounded from inside. Childs opted for the rear wall, stacking some crates, scaling them, swinging his lanky body over and dropping several feet into the rubble-filled alley behind. He was not a young man, and the impact of his weight on the slippery cobbles sent spasms through his ankles. Gasping, he fell to one side – and only then did he realise that someone else was standing close by.

Glancing up, Childs saw a trim figure in a topper and greatcoat. It was too dark to see any detail, but there was something about the figure’s casual pose that gave it away.

“You’ll not be taking me in, Major!” Childs snarled, dragging out his flintlock.

Before he’d primed it, a stick came smartly down and struck it from his grasp.

“Damn you!” he swore, thrusting stung fingers into his mouth.

He leapt to his feet, only for a gloved fist to catch him on the jaw. Childs’s world swam. There was a shrill swish of air, and the stick came down again, cracking him on the crown. With a sigh, he crumpled into unconsciousness.

A handful of constables melted out of the shadows, panting. One held up a lantern, his face red and sweaty. “Reckon... reckon you got him, sir.”

Major Craddock nudged the fallen man with his boot. “Bring him along. When he comes round, tell him he’s arrested for highway robbery.”

\* \* \*

Major Craddock watched the prisoner for a minute without saying anything. The interview room was dank and cold, condensation glistening on its white-tiled walls. Despite the chill, the police chief had stripped down to his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, and was sitting idly at the table, smoking a fat cigar. The prisoner shifted uncomfortably, but the manacles holding his wrists and ankles gave him little room. His eyes followed the cigar closely, his lips moistening. Craddock noted this, blowing out extravagant plumes of fragrant smoke.

“How long have you been out of the colours?” he eventually asked.

“Nine years,” came the surly response.

“Were you in the Crimea?”

Childs nodded. “I was demobbed in 1858.”

Craddock sat back. Though he too was a war veteran, albeit it from an earlier age, they couldn’t have been more different in appearance. Craddock was trim for fifty-six, and still reasonably fit. His white hair and white moustache were elegant rather than aged, his lush side-locks razored sharp. Childs, on the other hand, had gone to seed. Though younger by ten years, his jaw was unshaved, his hair a scraggy mess. His pallor was the sickly milk-grey of the long serving coalfacers, while his physique, though once strong, had visibly wasted. He gazed at his captor through bloodshot eyes ringed in black grit. On top of his cranium, a sticky patch of crimson hair revealed where he’d been struck. It was not Major Craddock’s custom to let wounds go untreated, even minor ones like this, but occasionally the situation required harsher methods.

He blew out another stream of smoke. “So... you’ve known discipline in your life?”

Childs snorted. "Care to strip my back and look at the evidence?"

"The evidence of today is all to the contrary."

"I've already told you... since the strike it's been hard to make ends meet. I had to put bread on the table somehow?"

"And you thought the best way to do that was to rob a coach?"

"Aye."

"Even though you don't own a horse?"

"It's a steep road, Farm Lane," Childs said. "I knew any vehicle passing would be going at a crawl."

Craddock sniffed. "Which company were you with in your army days?"

"What does that matter? I'm no deserter, if that's what you mean!"

"Which company?"

"11<sup>th</sup> Hussars."

"I see. Light-horse. You therefore have some understanding of backcountry warfare... stealth, ambush, so to speak?"

Childs stared at him, bewildered. "What former cavalryman doesn't?"

"Quite. So... do you take me for a complete idiot?"

"I don't understand you, Major."

Craddock leaned forward. "You step onto the Queen's highway with flintlock pistol in hand... a relic of a bygone age if ever I've seen one, and expect to mount a successful raid on the next vehicle happening by? Surely knowing that any coachman worth his salt would ride you down! Surely aware that the best you could probably hope to stop was an ox-cart carrying lettuces!"

"Reverend Pettigrew's carriage stopped," Childs argued.

Craddock nodded. "Which was very fortunate, was it not? And very odd."

"Perhaps he was taken by surprise?"

"I don't doubt it. And shall I tell you why... because a man he knew very well was attempting to hold him up, without making any effort to cover his face."

"Desperate times breed desperate measures, Major."

"But not utter foolishness. Not for a former Hussar who knows the ways of stealth and ambush."

"I told you, the strike hit us bad. The children cry because they're hungry."

"Then why not rob a house? Or wait on some quiet road for a pedestrian?"

Childs grinned. "You trying to put ideas in my head, Major?"

"I'm trying to fathom out why you're lying to me."

"I've confessed to the crime, what more do you want?"

"Oh... the truth, Childs. Why did you really stop Reverend Pettigrew's chaise?"

"Robbery."

"Without an escape plan? With no concern as to what might happen when the victim later identified you?"

Childs shrugged.

"Do you know what I think?" Craddock said. "I think robbery was the last thing on your mind when you went up Farm Lane. You know why? Because it leads only to Top Lock. There's scarcely enough traffic on weekdays, but on a Sunday afternoon..."

"I'm a bad thief, what can I say?"

Craddock ignored that. "This suggests to me that you weren't there just to stop any old vehicle, but were after something specific. And the fact you didn't wear a scarf over your face suggests

something else... namely that you wanted the person who'd be driving this specific vehicle to know it was *you*."

"And why would I do that?"

Craddock stubbed his cigar on the table, and rose to his feet. "It could be you had business with him, and there was no point pretending you were someone else. On the other hand, it could be you had it in mind that this gentleman would never have any business with anyone else ever again."

"I've said all I'm saying." Childs shook his head. "You can beat me if you want, but you won't get nothing else."

Craddock opened the heavy steel door. "I don't intend to beat you, Childs. But I'll leave you with this thought. As a thief, you'll go to prison. But Home Secretary Grey is not endlessly merciful. If it comes out you went up Farm Lane not to steal but to murder, there's no guarantee you won't get the rope."

The door clanged shut behind him.

\* \* \*

(ii) *Lycosa is often mistaken as a benign genus, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. While Lycosa envenoming may not wreak the same catastrophic effects upon the human body as Phoneutria or Latrodectus, unsightly ulceration of the flesh is common, alongside a localised stinging and prickling sensation, which will grow steadily in intensity until virtually unbearable.*

Darkness was falling as Major Craddock made his way upstairs, casting deep shadows in the dingy passages of the police barracks. His private office was on the top floor, a tall, narrow room made narrower still by bookshelves laden with leather-bound tomes. Since his appointment as Chief Officer of Police fifteen years earlier, Craddock had made it his business to study every aspect of the convoluted and often self-contradictory English legal system. This had been job enough on his appointment back in 1850, especially in a teeming industrial borough like Wigan, where every social problem of the age could be found a dozen times over in each sooty backstreet, but now – in the wake of the reform movement, with its various factory acts and poor laws – there was a wealth of new material to be assimilated. He kept on top of it as much as his busy schedule would allow, though at times like this the more pressing business of criminal investigation occupied him most.

He lit another cigar as he backed into his office, greatcoat folded over one arm. Inspector Jack Munro, formerly Captain John Munro of the 14<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons, and Craddock's direct underling for nearly three decades, was already in there. He sat by the cluttered desk, leafing through a sheaf of documents.

"The Reverend Pettigrew?" Munro said. "Isn't he that missionary chap who moved into the old vicarage up at Top Lock?"

Craddock hung his topper and greatcoat on the rack, and slid around the desk. "I believe he was a missionary. Though good God, I wouldn't like him to try to save *my* soul. I've heard one of his sermons. The only thing missing was a backdrop of hellfire."

Munro nodded, and read on through the crime report. Craddock opened a secret compartment in the lower section of his desk, taking out a bottle of malt whisky and two glasses. He checked the chalk-marked level and then poured two generous tots, pushing one over to Munro, who nodded his thanks.

"This bodyguard... the one who chased Childs off. Who is he?"



Craddock puffed on his cigar. "Fellow named Krueger. He's a Boer, apparently. Don't like the look of him at all... nasty, sneering sort."

"First time I've ever come across a man of the cloth who needed a bodyguard."

Craddock took a sip of malt. "He isn't a bodyguard as such... more a manservant. Brutal-looking bugger for all that."

"So... what do we think?"

"Not sure. Tomorrow morning I'm off to Top Lock."

Munro glanced up. "Is that wise?"

Craddock shrugged. It had been four years now, but both of them still had painfully fresh memories of the strike and the violent disturbances on the brow of No. 9 colliery, Top Lock. The masters were callously casual when it came to announcing planned pit-closures because seams were worked-out ... especially when everyone knew that the seams weren't actually worked-out at all, but that with the new laws on ventilation and lighting, deeper delving was now a costly enterprise. Sympathetic as the borough police might have been to the redundant workers – and they *were* sympathetic, for many of the constables had friends and relatives in the mining trade – it was still their duty to contain any demonstration, and angry confrontations had occurred at Top Lock with several injured on both sides.

"There can't be any place in this borough where folk mustn't go," Craddock said. "And broken fences need to get mended."

"You rather than me," Munro replied.

"*You'll* have other things to do... rounding up the market pickpockets, for example."

Munro nodded. "Four of the morning shift are coming on early and in plain dress. We'll be ready."

"Remember Jack, this time we want evidence for full convictions. Thrashing the little blighters doesn't seem to have made a jot of difference."

\* \* \*

At Top Lock, five rows of back-to-back terraces occupied a barren, clinker-strewn patch of spoil-land. Conditions up here had always been hard. Latrines shared by seven or more families, communal yards in which all manner of scabby, scrawny animals were kept, water pumps which drew on wells contaminated by leakages from adjacent septic-tanks – all of this made for appalling sanitation. The houses themselves were of the poorest stock: narrow, airless, damp from floor to roof, with weak foundations connected to underground ventilation shafts, and thus allowing access for all manner of vermin. This had been the case when the pit – five minutes walk over the brow – had been a hive of bustling activity, when the Top Lock slum had been occupied by employees of Messrs. Byrtle & Son, the masters and excavators of No. 9 Colliery, who also happened to own and, according to contract at least, had promised to maintain the properties there. However, since Messrs. Byrtle & Son had moved on, abandoning Top Lock altogether, the crumbling houses had gone totally to rack and ruin, and the company shop, which although expensive, had once provided for all needs in the small community, had been closed and left derelict.

Not that the shop, even in these dire days, was ever empty, Craddock thought, as he walked his horse towards the miserable end-terrace where it was located. Those strong enough to trudge several miles both to and from their ten hours at forge, furnace or coalface, would be absent at this hour, mid-morning on a dank, foggy October day, which left only the old, infirm and destitute. They might sleep free-of-charge in the rotted shells of their former homes, with only rats for company, but the bulk of the daylight hours were usually spent in the waiting area of the company

shop, where at least there was space enough to huddle together and a large chimney grate wherein a single bag of hand-picked coal could blaze away all day and provide warmth for everyone.

As Craddock approached, a tall, ragged man with a mop of white hair but a face and vest blackened by coal dust, stood in the doorway, sorting through a sack. Craddock recognised him immediately. He was William Childs, elder brother of the prisoner Thomas. William now worked at the Makerfield collieries, but was a night-man, and here calling at the company shop to settle his aged mother for the day. On seeing the police chief, his face cracked into a menacing frown.

"Come to see how we're coping, Major?" he asked. "After you and your men helped Byrtle & Son break our backs for us?"

Craddock dismounted. "What's this struggle between yourselves and Reverend Pettigrew?"

The miner seemed shaken by the directness of the question. But instead of replying, he hawked and spat on the floor, then hauled his sack into the shop. Craddock tethered his horse to a broken drainpipe, and followed. Inside, tattered wrecks of people occupied every cramped space: the aged, the twitching, the lame. Wooden slats had been nailed ineffectually across the broken window, but there was a foul odour of mildew; Craddock wasn't sure if it came from the decayed rafters above, or the people sheltering under them. William Childs now knelt by a cast-iron skillet, which he filled with coal from the sack.

"Well?" the major asked him.

"There's no bloody struggle," Childs replied irritably.

"I see." Craddock walked over and took hold of the sack. "And, just out of interest, where have you got this from?"

Childs rose slowly to his feet. Even under the pit dirt, he'd paled a little. "You wouldn't take a man for picking coal, Major? Not when the masters themselves don't want it?"

Craddock didn't relinquish his grip. "A few years ago, men were transported for less."

They exchanged glares, the surly old miner probably realising that Jim Craddock, for all his army manners and gruff exterior, was one of the more enlightened authorities in the town, but knowing full well that he could be flint-hard when the need arose.

"Of course," Craddock added, "if it was the case that I was too busy in conversation with someone like yourself, say... discussing an issue of great interest to me, I might not notice your pilfering." He released the sack, and pointedly beat his gloved hands together.

Grudgingly, Childs nodded at the doorway. Together, they left the building.

"Like I say," Childs said when they were outside, "there isn't no strife between us and Pettigrew... 'cept he considers all union men heathens damned to Hell."

"If it's any consolation, he feels the same about me," Craddock replied.

"Well he's frightened of you, like as not. And so he should be."

"Why?"

Childs hesitated to answer. "It's... all talk, that's it... just talk."

"And talk is cheap. So out with it."

"If you must know..." Childs indicated the distant edifice of the pithead, "it's the old mine. Folk reckon there's something odd happening over there. Something ghostly, like."

Craddock didn't flinch. "Go on."

"There's been disturbances... you know, noises."

"Noises?"

"Screams, like."

"Screams?"

Childs looked increasingly uncomfortable under the major's intense gaze. "Aye, at night... now and then."

"And you've never reported it to the police?"

"What, so you lot can come and laugh at us, and maybe rough us up a bit more?"

"But if someone was being attacked?"

"Behave!" Childs interrupted. "It's folk stories, isn't it? With all the lads we have killed and maimed underground, every pit-brow has its boggart."

"Has anyone *seen* anything, been hurt?"

Childs became thoughtful. The tone of his voice lowered. "Well that's just it. Not really. Least, not 'til recent. My nephew Fred, Tom's lad. He went missing."

"When?"

"Three days back."

"And how old is he?"

"Twelve next June."

"For all your principles, William Childs, you really *should* have reported this."

Childs shrugged. "We've always made do without your lot. Besides, there's lads younger'n him take themselves off to find work and board. Since the pit was closed, every man on the Lock has to slog three miles or more to earn a day's pay. Some of 'em only come home Sundays."

"You think this is what young Fred's done?"

"I don't know. But he's old enough to know his own mind. Lord 'elp us, I was cutting coal myself at five years old."

"And what's this got to do with Reverend Pettigrew?"

"It's not so much him as this fella of his. This Krueger bloke. He hangs around the pit for no good reason, always keeping watch like, seeing folk off if they stray too near."

"And your brother thinks Krueger has something to do with the boy's disappearance?"

"Well put it this way, Tom didn't reckon it would do any harm to ask."

Craddock pondered. He only knew the man Krueger because he'd seen him in the town centre with Martha Pettigrew, the reverend's wife, buying supplies. He was a burly, menacing sort, with a jet-black beard and eyes like chips of tar. The smart suits and big watch-chain he always sported did nothing to soften the hard outline of his physique, or dilute his brooding aura. Krueger was a relative newcomer to the district. The Pettigrews had only been back from Africa three years or so, and Krueger had returned with them. By all accounts, he'd proved an indispensable guide and protector out in the wilds of Bechuanaland, and had signed on to serve the family for the remainder of his life. He was the only servant they kept, though he apparently spent more time prowling on the pit-brow than working in the tall, gloomy vicarage on the far side of it.

"Your brother should still have come to me first," Craddock said.

"That isn't Tom's way. And you, better'n anyone, ought to understand that, Major."

Craddock did understand. He and the majority of his small police force, nearly all former Dragoons, had served together in northern India, at times in the face of the entire Sikh nation. It had been an unremitting tale of heat, dust, battle and siege. Returning to civilian life had been a daunting and difficult experience, especially as this new uniformed service required tolerance and understanding as well as firmness and authority. Thomas Childs would have had similar difficulty readjusting after the bloodbath of the Crimea, though he of course would have had to deal with it alone.

Craddock untethered his horse. "I'll have notices posted for the boy. Has he any distinctive features?"

“Carrot-red hair, freckles, nasty harelip. But Major, I can feel it in my bones... you’ll play hell getting him found.”

Craddock climbed into his saddle. “Only if I have to.”

\* \* \*

*(iii) Loxosceles symptoms are among the most horrible. Creeping blisters will initially appear around the point of entry, causing open and running sores, which may take several days to heal. Clinical manifestations include agonising pain, which victims have likened to branding or exposure to hot coals, and systemic viscerocutaneous disease, which is characterized by jaundice, extreme bouts of fever, a browning or bloodying of the urine and eventual renal collapse. Death is not certain, but highly likely.*

An ashen track led into the colliery ruins. Everything along it was rusted, broken, fallen into pieces. The wooden sheds on the railways sidings were charcoal skeletons, their roofs hanging in, their bellies filled with thorns and bracken.

It was still an awesome place, Craddock thought, as he strolled through it.

In the narrow cindery ways between the buildings, the bones of old machinery lay as jagged hunks of metal. The cobbled forecourt at the front of the winding house was riddled with cracks and thickly mossed over. The great monument of the pithead itself towered overhead, its massive flywheels corroded into place. The doors to the pithead offices had once been fastened with padlocks, but were now broken open, the empty spaces inside stuffed with rubbish. The once-teeming workshops were gaunt, gutted, silent, their floors awash with dirty rainwater.

As Craddock stood alone on the forecourt, a faint, cold breeze ruffled his hair.

Even he, raised with a silver spoon in his mouth compared to the Wigan colliers, was a born and bred Lancashire man, and could not fail to be affected by the air of desolation in this place. He set off down another alley. It was true, he and his men had been greeted here with rocks and grenades made from staves and nails twisted together, though perhaps it had been understandable. At the end of the day, jobs were jobs – and memories died hard in the industrial heartlands of Britain. It was less than fifty years since the Manchester Yeomanry had charged a peaceful mass-meeting of cotton folk at Peter’s Field in Manchester, killing eleven; it was less than thirty since redcoats had opened fire on Welsh ironworkers during the Newport protests, dropping dozens of them. And weren’t Major Craddock and his men redcoats as such, in a different uniform?

The atmosphere was almost too melancholy to be frightening. But not completely so.

As he wandered among the shambling buildings, it struck him as perfectly natural that something evil might be lurking here. The dereliction was so total it was ghostly. There were many recesses, many dark places. There was an awful silence too, as though the birds wouldn’t sing, as though the ground itself was desecrated. Beyond the central complex, Craddock found more rusted railway lines, these leading off to a covered area full of shadows so inky they simply forbade entry. Above his head, clouds were racing. Yet there was no real wind.

He set off determinedly. He’d left his horse at the gates, and was now ready to get back to it. At times, even the company of a dumb brute was preferable to no company at all. Yet as the major walked, the pitter-patter of tiny feet sounded from somewhere close by, as if someone was stalking him, or perhaps *something*, because, now that he listened to the noise it seemed crazier, more hurried; not the steady progress of a two-footed creature. He glanced round, expecting an animal, and saw nothing save empty passageways and broken windows. He continued on, briskly. The thought was ridiculous of course. Aside from the odd stray dog, the raped landscapes of these pit-

brows were no place for any kind of beast. For all that, he was more than relieved to finally re-emerge onto the forecourt and set off down the main drive towards the gates. But even then it was a walk of several hundred yards, and all the way he was aware of the grim waste encircling him. He wondered what he'd see if he looked round again.

Was that still the sound of pitter-pattering feet?

Weaving a drunken path right up to his exposed back?

Craddock kept a measured pace. It was the old thing: policemen were only human, and suffered the same fears as everyone else. The fact that they weren't supposed to didn't matter a damn. The one thing they had to avoid though, was *showing* those fears. That was why he strode on, why he refused to stop and turn – even though he could now *hear* the creaking of the pithead machinery, could *hear* the distant whistle of a steam engine pulling over the clinker on rails that were rusted and broken.

He was almost at the gate, and counting the yards he had left. Thirty, perhaps forty. As a combat soldier, he'd developed a crucial ability to sense when something was happening behind him. It was working overtime at present. He imagined the whole pit coming down in pursuit, half expected a gargantuan shadow to fall across him.

Ten yards remained. The urge to run was overwhelming, but peelers did not run.

Not from their imagination.

His horse watched idly over the gate, showing no trace of alarm. That was a good sign. Though Lord-God, it was suddenly cold. And that damn pitter-patter, this time to the side of him – a thrashing in the undergrowth along the drive.

*And what a thrashing!*

Craddock looked sharply round, but the foliage was still.

He reached the gate. It was made of heavy planks and bound with chains. At first he wrestled with the padlock, then, marking himself for an idiot, he strode to the railings at the side where a gap had first admitted him. He ducked back through and untied his horse from the post. Only now did he deign to glance at the colliery.

As he'd expected, all was still; no spectral locomotive pumped steam in the sidings, the flywheels were not mysteriously turning. It was a dead, decrepit sprawl. But he'd felt an inexplicable dread in those last few minutes, and, before climbing into the saddle, he surveyed again the black apertures in its many buildings, and imagined some nebulous thing lurking in the shadows behind them.

"Damn nonsense," he muttered.

A shoe scraped the ground behind.

Craddock swung around fast, and found himself chin-to-chin with a brutish, near-Neanderthal visage. Dark jewels for eyes regarded him; a thick black beard tufted around a wide, apelike mouth.

The major managed to resist stepping back. He tapped his boot with his riding crop. "Mr. Krueger, I presume?"

"Here to show you off this property, sir," the burly henchman said in his strong Voortrekker accent.

"You are? I see." Craddock mounted up. "I wasn't aware you possessed ownership rights."

Krueger took hold of the horse's bridle. He looked strong enough to wrestle the animal to the ground. "They're my master's. He charges me to see off intruders."

"Then I'll take it up with him." Craddock snatched the bridle back with a force that surprised the Boer. "Lead the way, if you please."

The Reverend Pettigrew had taken up residence in the old vicarage on the eastern edge of Top Lock, a rambling but dilapidated house set in a grey wilderness of slag. Close behind it lay the

Leeds-Liverpool Canal, and beyond that more mountainous heaps of colourless rubble; fall-out from the pits at Aspull and Hindley.

The Anglican Church had done poorly in the turbulent years of industrialisation. Agitators had decried its bishops as princes without portfolio, as men of pomp and privilege who dined well, slept well, defended the abusive rights of the masters and threw all manner of calumny down on the heads of the starved, grovelling populace. In 1831, the Reform Bill had been rejected in the House of Lords after twenty-one bishops voted against it. In such circumstances, the Marxists' accusation that religion was an opiate of the masses seemed alarmingly accurate. In any case, life as it already stood was more Hell than Earth; surely nothing after death could be worse than this? The result might not have been empty chapels – folk still attended services through entrenched personal conviction – but dissent was rife, and the more posturing the churchman, the greater the dislike for him. It was perhaps understandable that the Reverend Pettigrew had yet to find himself a loving flock.

The closer Major Craddock drew to the old vicarage, the more it seemed to suit the person who dwelled there. 'Darkness' and 'disintegration' were two words that sprang to mind. The structure had distorted through underground subsidence, so its lintels were lopsided, the bricks below its bay windows had bellied outward, and many of its stained-glass panes had cracked or fallen loose. A massive growth of ivy up the building's gable-wall looked repulsive rather than pretty. Casements were blocked by it, gutters infested; it hung from the eaves in lank green tendrils.

Before knocking on the heavy front door, Craddock glanced back along the stone-flagged path. His horse was tied at the gatepost, and beside it stood Krueger, watching intently. The fellow apparently had no desire to come inside.

Only after Craddock had swung the knocker several times did anyone answer. It was a woman, small and thin, with a pinched white face and wearing a black muslin dress, which did nothing for her slight figure. Recognising her as Martha Pettigrew, he took off his topper and introduced himself. She stood there for several seconds, never once speaking, but finally admitted him to the house, leading him into a maze of dank, musty passages. Everywhere, the lamps were turned low, the windows curtained. What little light there was revealed sparse, shabby furniture, and a carpet worn to threads. Mrs. Pettigrew meanwhile glided like a shadow, her footfalls scarcely making a sound. After showing him into a chilly reading room, she withdrew just as quietly, just as unobtrusively.

The reverend gentleman was present at a lectern, leafing through what appeared to be a book of psalms. Beside him, the grate was filled with cold ashes; there was only one chair in there: a canvas-covered armchair, which looked damp. Pettigrew was a tall, lean man, with a ravaged face and a powerful gaze. Grey hanks of side-whiskers hung from either cheek.

"Major Craddock," he said in his bass gravel-voice. "I trust you're here to inform me that the hooligan Childs has been apprehended and now faces the full hand of the law?"

"That's one of the things I've come to speak to you about, sir, yes. Perhaps you could just remind me of the circumstances surrounding the incident?"

Pettigrew affected a look of bewilderment. "Your inspector took full notes, did he not? Well, the facts are simple. That scoundrel Childs stepped out into the road and called my carriage to halt. Whereupon, he produced a firearm."

"At which point, as I understand," Craddock said, "your Mr. Krueger also produced a firearm?"

Pettigrew's eyes widened further. "Would you have had me shot?"

"Of course not, sir. But neither would I have had you supervise the shooting of somebody else."

"I'm afraid I don't understand ..."

"I keep a register in my office of every gentleman in the borough who owns a firearm, or uses one in his day-to-day business. Most of them, as you probably imagine, are on the farms or on the estates as keepers. Unfortunately, and rather worryingly, your Mr. Krueger is not on that list."

Pettigrew's face reddened. "Mr. Krueger is a native of the Transvaal. It's his habit to go armed."

"Then it's a habit he must break."

"Are you giving me instructions, sir?"

"Yes," Craddock replied, "which I trust you will relay to your man."

"How dare you!"

"I dare because I am Chief Officer of Police in this town... and I will not have anyone threatening the peace here, no matter how God-fearing he or his master might be."

Pettigrew slammed his psalm book closed. "I shall write to your superiors!"

"Do as you wish. In the meantime, disarm your man... or I will do it for you." Craddock replaced his hat. "Good day."

He turned and strode out into the passage, but Pettigrew followed, his tall frame filling the doorway.

"I suspect you are a man who has very little knowledge of the wider world, Major," he scoffed. "Being, as you say, Chief Officer of Police in this petty, polluted backwater."

Craddock looked back at him.

"In my ten years in the African bush, I came face to face with the rawest and most brutal of human emotions," the reverend said, his face fixed in a hard, aggressive smile. "In a barbarous land, I stood tall against barbarous men. What that I buried a son... a child no less? It didn't distract me from my duty."

"Reverend Pettigrew," Craddock replied, "in my *thirty* years on the plains and mountains of the North West frontier, during which time I was forced to endure the horrors of battle at Ramnagar, Chillianwalla and Goojerat, I too faced the worst of human emotions. What that I had to bury my wife... and over four thousand of my men? It didn't distract me from *my* duty." He nodded curtly. "Neither will it distract me now."

\* \* \*

*(iv) Pamphobeteus and Grammostola will lead initially to hypersensitive itching of the skin, followed by nasal blockage, dyspnea, acute bronchospasms and fits of violent and unstoppable coughing. Eyes may run and ache, and there will be a general tenderising of orifices. Intense bleeding is not uncommon. Occasionally, victims have been known to choke themselves to death; this outcome is by no means certain, but it is distinctly possible.*

When Major Craddock returned to the police barracks later that day, he found the custody area in uproar. Five or six constables, most in plain clothes, were wrestling with nearly twenty juveniles, all ragged and thin but swearing volubly and shouting their rights. These were the market pickpockets, as villainous a bunch of urchins as the town could supply, a stinking, unwashed rabble, who, between them, accounted for perhaps fifty per cent of the average day's thieving. Even now, as they were vigorously searched, a variety of wallets, watches and handkerchiefs were laid on the charge table.

The bulk of the children were boys, though there was one girl present, and she stood out clearly, being taller than most, with long straggles of dirty blonde hair. She was perhaps twelve years old and might have been pretty had her attire not consisted of a grubby, torn petticoat, a flea-infested shawl and mud-caked boots that were several sizes too large.

"Laura McKye," Craddock said. "Still selling yourself for a farthing?"

The girl struck a lewd pose. "A bargain, I calls it."

Craddock shook his head. "I don't know what I call it. You never heard of clap, Laura? Syphilis?"  
"There are worse things."

"Well *you'd* know, if anyone would." He turned to Sergeant Rafferty, who was seated behind the table, attempting to list the prisoners' names and particulars. "What exactly have we got?"

"Nineteen in all, sir. Every one caught red-handed."

Craddock nodded. "Usual faces, I see. Well... this time it's the beak for them." He then noted two boys who seemed different from the others. They stood against the wall and clung nervously together, the older one trying to calm the younger. Both had had their hair shorn to bristles and wore parish smocks and clogs. Craddock pointed them out. "Who are those two?"

"New to the game, I reckon, sir," Rafferty said. "Workhouse runaways. Say they don't enjoy it there one bit."

"Well, that's something you don't hear every day." With weary familiarity, Craddock noted the boys' pipe-stick limbs and emaciated ribs. "Sergeant Repton?"

Sergeant Repton, still in plain dress from the morning's raid, ambled forward.

"Those two," Craddock said quietly. "Separate them from the rest. Leather them, then let them go."

The sergeant nodded. "Back to the workhouse, sir?"

"I'm afraid so."

"They'll have another leathering once they get there."

Craddock glanced at him. "Well in that case, you must take them to your house. They can live with you."

"How's that, sir?"

"Just take them back where they came from, Repton!"

"Sir." The sergeant moved away.

"And Repton..."

He glanced back.

"The leathering... go easy."

Repton nodded.

Inspector Munro appeared from the adjoining office. "Good morning's work, sir," he said. "So you got back from Top Lock alive?"

Craddock related what he'd learned from William Childs. Behind him, meanwhile, the shouts and arguments had reached a new pitch of intensity. Suddenly, there were shrieks and cries. Craddock and Munro glanced around, and saw the workhouse runaways clinging together all the harder, refusing to be led off by Repton.

"We in't goin', we're not!" the older one shouted. "We're staying wi' t'others..."

"God's sake, lad, you're being let off!" the sergeant said.

Now Laura McKye intervened, throwing her arms round the two children in sisterly fashion, trying to calm them. "It in't them as is doing it, I told you," she advised them.

"Who else then?" asked the younger runaway.

"We'll tell the beak what you're about, we will," the older one said, pointing at Repton.

Craddock strode forward. "What's the problem here?"

The rest of the young prisoners had fallen silent. Worried glances passed between them. The major looked at Repton, who shrugged. It was Laura McKye who spoke up.

"They won't listen to me, Major Craddock. They reckon it's you peelers as is doing away wi' us."

"Doing away with you? What are you talking about?"



She turned to the runaways. "Told you... he doesn't even know."

"He's making that up," the elder one hissed back.

"Laura McKye!" Craddock snapped. "Step away from those two. In fact..." he indicated the door behind the charge table, "through there, now!"

The girl hesitated to go. For the first time, a look of bewilderment crossed her smudged features.

"It's just an office," Craddock said, and to prove the point, he led the way.

Once in there, seeing that he'd spoken the truth, she relaxed a little. Craddock bade her sit in the armchair by the fire, then beckoned Munro in and told him to close the door.

"Now," Craddock said, "what's this nonsense?"

She sniffed, began twining her fingers in the ribbons at the front of her petticoat. "Some of us... in't round no more."

The officers glanced at each other.

"You mean they're dead?" Craddock asked.

She shrugged. "Disappeared, like."

"Arrested?" Munro said. "Moved on?"

She gave a pitying cackle. "Moved on?... Lord 'elp us! The likes of us? With winter coming?"

"How many of you have disappeared?" Craddock asked.

She tried to think. "Well... Charlie Atkins, Ned Turley, Godfrey Simple... how many's that? Three. More 'n' that, though. Ten, eleven perhaps..."

"Eleven?" Craddock said slowly.

It was appalling to him that as many as eleven children could disappear and nobody notice their absence, yet it was quite easy to believe. This was the way society had gone in the glorious age of Empire.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Munro asked in a low voice.

Craddock nodded. "Fred Childs."

"Sir, these urchins... a lot of them sleep under the canal bridges at night. And the canal tow-path's probably the quickest way to and from Top Lock."

"Then there's that shadow," Laura added.

Craddock glanced at her. "What shadow?"

"That shadow what comes scuttling after us of a night. Fair frightens us to death, it does."

"*Scuttling?*" Munro said.

"Yeah. Never seen it proper, but you hear it quite a lot. Of a night, like I say."

At first, neither officer could speak. Munro was thoroughly confused, but Craddock could only think of one thing: that crazy pitter-patter he'd heard in the ruins at Top Lock – like something walking on more than two feet.

"*Sergeant Rafferty!*" he shouted.

The door swung open and Rafferty stood there. "Sir?"

"Take this young lady to the mess, and give her something to eat and drink. While you're at it, take a full statement from her." He turned to the girl. "Laura... you will tell Sergeant Rafferty everything you've told me, and more. Give him the names of all your friends who've disappeared."

Rafferty was puzzled. "What about the other pickpockets, sir?"

"Holding-cells, for the time being. I've a horrible feeling we've bigger fish to fry."

Rafferty stuck his pencil into his pocket, and led Laura from the room.

"There's also the matter of Tom Childs," Munro said. "He's been in custody a day and a night now, without charge."

Craddock sat down to think. "If I charge him with highway robbery, Jack, you know as well as I do, he'll get fifteen years hard labour. At his age, that's a death sentence."

"We can't hang onto him indefinitely."

"I don't intend to hang onto him indefinitely. But I'm certainly not releasing him *yet*."

Twenty minutes later, Craddock and Munro were in the doorway to the mess hall, watching Laura McKye wolf down some bread and butter, and drink noisily from a jug of milk. Rafferty sat on the bench beside her, scribbling details in his pocketbook.

"Do you think..." Craddock said quietly, "do you think the loss of a man's child could unhinge him to such a degree...?"

Munro glanced round. "You suspect the Reverend Pettigrew?"

"Tom Childs does. At least... he suspects Krueger."

"That doesn't necessarily implicate the master."

"You haven't been up there. The servant was too frightened to enter the house, the wife goes about like a wraith... she won't even speak." Reaching a sudden decision, he stepped forward. "Laura McKye!"

The girl glanced up.

"Laura McKye... I have a proposition for you, which might just mean that this morning's arrests can be put behind us..."

\* \* \*

Craddock pulled the drape aside on the carriage window. She'd only been gone a short while, but Laura already made a solitary figure as she trudged up the slope of broken slag to the distant ruins of the Top Lock colliery. Overhead, the dark clouds of late afternoon were stacking up. There was no rain yet, but a damp chill had set in.

The very thought of going alone to the derelict site had terrified the girl, and it had taken the major some time to persuade her that help would never be more than a shout away. So fearsome was Top Lock's reputation among the street children that the promise she and her fellow pickpockets would be released without charge – on *this* occasion – had been of restricted bargaining value. Only when Craddock had solemnly informed her that this might be their only chance to find out where the missing youngsters had vanished to, had she finally, warily consented. It was quite humbling to note that her concern for her friends was stronger than her concern for herself.

"She's a brave one," he said under his breath.

Munro was less comfortable. "Sir... with all respect, this is a high-risk policy."

"What choice do we have, Jack?"

"But if either one of those men should attack the girl?"

"We arrest them. And that's the object. As things are, we've nothing to hold them with, no grounds to search... we must try to lure them out."

Munro nodded curtly, as if he knew this already but was still unhappy with it. He opened the carriage door. "Let's make sure we don't lose sight of her, eh?"

Together, they clambered out. Sergeant Rafferty was on the driver's bench. Behind him, on the roof, perched constables Coogan and Butterfield.

"Sergeant Rafferty," Craddock said, "you will stay here. Bring the carriage up should I signal. You two... go south to Kirkless Hall, and work your way north along the canal. Comb the entire eastern edge of the Lock, and stay alert. Is that understood?"

Coogan and Butterfield jumped down and trooped away.

Craddock turned to Munro. "Shall we go?"

Munro was still unsure. "Do you think we've brought enough men?"

Craddock struck off up the slope, stick in hand. "We can't neglect the rest of the township on a hunch, Jack. Come, we mustn't dally."

They walked over increasingly rough and rugged terrain. Most of the colliery tip was a blasted, semi-volcanic wilderness, largely comprised of soft clinker, which here and there gave though to deep sink-holes. There were also crevices from which sulphurous fumes emerged. Occasionally, the brow fell away entirely into perilous gullies dense with rank vegetation, or down towards the flashes: silent, yellow lagoons, infamously toxic and reputedly bottomless. Way ahead meanwhile, the girl was a distant ghost on the outskirts of the colliery buildings.

Craddock glanced back. Down on the muddy track, the black box of the police-carriage waited. The hefty shape of Rafferty was visible beside it, puffing on his pipe.

"Is he close enough, should we need him?" Munro wondered.

"Three's a crowd," Craddock said after some consideration.

Munro was about to reply when he spotted something and fell instantly to a crouch. Craddock copied him, and saw that perhaps two hundred yards to the west, a figure had emerged from a patch of scrub-thorn. By the hulking physique and tight, black suit, it was Krueger. They watched him tensely. He hadn't seen them, and, likely as not, wouldn't, because his attention was focussed on the slight form of Laura. He checked furtively around and began to follow her at a stroll.

"He looks like a man who can't believe his luck," Munro whispered.

"His luck's about to run out," Craddock said.

Hurriedly, but keeping low, they pursued him. But it wasn't easy. When Laura vanished into the colliery complex, Krueger started to run – at a lurching, predatory gait, his shoulders hunched forward, his big arms pistoning. He covered the ground with powerful strides, and in less than a moment had gained half the distance on her.

"I think we should've come armed," Munro said.

"Too late now," Craddock replied. "Quickly!"

They too ran. Krueger also vanished from view, and in that same second there was a series of dreadful shrieks: the high-pitched tones of a young female.

"Holy Mother of God!" Craddock gasped. He'd expected something to happen, but not so quickly. "Call Rafferty!"

Munro stopped and turned. Placing his whistle to his lips, he blew a single shrill blast. It was ear-piercing, and although the big sergeant was maybe half a mile away, he would easily hear it. Hopefully Krueger would too, and be warned off – but an instant later the girl's screams were abruptly silenced.

"If he's harmed that child, I'll crack his skull!" Craddock said.

"All respect, sir," Munro panted, "that skull will take some cracking."

But by the time they reached the first ruined outbuildings, there was no sign either of Krueger or the girl. On all sides, broken doorways gaped, window-shutters hung on blank emptiness; the silence was suddenly shattering. Directly ahead lay the rusting rails of a former mineral line. Eastward, it led to the Top Lock junction and the abandoned railway shelter, while westward, it wound past the pithead and through the screens and washery. There was no indication which way the miscreant might have run.

Craddock pointed west. "That way, Jack. Go."

The major himself took the eastward route, but nowhere in the overgrowth of thorns and weeds was there any sign that a person had recently passed. Of course, a veteran bush ranger like Krueger was probably well-versed in covering his tracks, especially if the police whistle had warned

him that pursuit was close. Craddock cursed under his breath. He stopped to take new bearings. The brick shells of the maintenance shops stood to the left, and a few yards beyond those lay the ink-black shadows under the railway shelter. That very morning, he'd balked at entering there. Its tar-paper canopies looked solid enough. Doubtless a network of steel joists supported them, but all manner of rubble cluttered its floorway: rotted planking, loose bricks, not to mention the dislodged sections of rail and sleeper, all thick with rust or slimy with mildew. The darkness in its furthest recesses was opaque.

Craddock felt a creeping sensation as he gazed in. Was that a rustle of movement he'd just heard? A vague, child-like whimpering? He suddenly realised that he was breathing very deeply, that the sweat on his neck was the clammy sweat of fear.

Gripping his stick tightly, he took a cautious step forward – then there was a wild clattering of rubble, a furious crashing and banging, and a snorting and pawing of the ground. Craddock spun around violently, a shout of panic trapped in his throat.

Rafferty could only apologise as he jumped down from the driver's bench. He'd pulled the team up directly behind the major.

"Sorry about that, sir," he said. "Got here as quick as I could."

"Bring a lantern," Craddock replied, pressing forward again.

\* \* \*

Inspector Munro was on the path to the pithead when the attack began.

As if from nowhere, heavy feet came slogging across the cinders behind him, and, though he turned and grabbed the truncheon under his greatcoat, a forearm smashed into his teeth and nose, knocking him flat on his back. The world cavorted, and blood flowed into his mouth. For several seconds, the only thing he saw that made sense was the bear-like form of Krueger towering over him, drawing out from under his coat a shiny, six-chambered Smith and Wesson. Still dazed, Munro tried to regain his feet.

The Boer lurched at him, kicking his belly hard, then slamming down with the revolver's hilt. It caught Munro between the shoulder blades, and a rib cracked. He gasped and twisted in agony, but had enough strength left to reach behind, snatch Krueger by the leg and yank him from his feet. The Boer landed heavily, the wind driven out of him. Munro seized the advantage. As an officer and gentleman, he'd long ago learned to box, but as a combat veteran he also knew there was a time and place for everything, and that this was no time for the Marquess of Queensbury. He swayed to his feet and swung his boot into the Boer's groin, before launching a right hook that might have knocked a normal man cold. Unfortunately, Krueger was far from normal.

Spitting blood and teeth, he jumped back up and took aim with the pistol. Munro kicked at it. The pistol flew free, but Krueger followed through with an enormous punch. It caught Munro square in the right eye, blotting out half his vision. He tottered backward, fists drawn up but legs wobbling. The Boer now struck with his fists clutched together. The first blow caught Munro in his already-broken ribs; the second crashed on the point of his chin. Munro fell into a senseless heap. A foot hooked beneath him and turned him over. Through a haze of blood, he saw that Krueger had retrieved his gun and was again taking aim. A broad grin split the brutal, bearded face. The hammer clicked back.

"*Wait!*" came a booming voice.

The tall shape of Reverend Pettigrew was approaching, his face a picture of wrath. Krueger lowered his gun, and Munro imagined that he'd been saved, only to notice – to his incredulity – that the clergyman was also armed. He carried a huge blunderbuss, one shot from which would

have felled a charging elephant. He took position beside his man-servant, who grinned all the more and spat out another fragment of tooth.

Munro glanced from one to the other. For all his befuddlement, he knew death when he was staring it in the face. "You... you call yourself a man of the cloth, Pettigrew!" he stammered. "Yet you defend this murderer!"

"Murderer?" the reverend retorted. "I see no murderer!"

"Then you're as bad as him... maybe worse."

"Ernst Krueger is my associate and friend. I won't hear him slandered."

"He's a killer!"

"He's a guardian! Or hasn't that occurred to you? A protector?"

Munro shook his head. "This... this is madness."

"All through the Cubango forest, he protected us," Pettigrew said, "my family and I. All along the River Cuito, where the mosquitoes fly so thick only a fog-lamp will enable you to pass. Into the malarial depths of the Okavango, where the swamps steam, where every virus thrives, where with my own eyes I saw crocodiles so large they were virtually dinosaurs. When my young son went missing, Ernst Krueger went to search for him. For three whole days, entirely alone, he tracked the boy, never sleeping, never eating... until at last he found him lodged in a deep crevice in the very heart of that primeval jungle."

Pettigrew inclined his head towards his servant. "You should salute this man for his bravery, for he clambered down there... in the face of a ravening multitude against which no blade or gun was proof, in a place so cursed only Satan himself could have put it on Earth!"

\* \* \*

Major Craddock and Sergeant Rafferty gazed in disbelief at the thing that hung in front of them. It had once been a human, but was now dried-out, crinkled, withered to a papery husk, as if every drop of juice had been forcibly drained. What was more, it was bound and suspended as though on a gibbet, though no gibbet Craddock recalled had ever been set up in the depths of a railway shed. The ropes binding the skeletal thing were ancient and frayed but ran tautly up into the high, black rafters, from which it was now plain other atrocities dangled. Rafferty held the lamp aloft in order to see better. Some of them were high, some of them low, but in every case it was the same story: withered skin, exposed bones, shreds of old clothing.

"Christ loves a Christian," the sergeant breathed. "What evil are we seeing here?"

Even in his gloves, Major Craddock reached only gingerly to touch the shrivelled face in front of them. Strands of carrot-red hair hung down over empty eye sockets. Though all the features were creased and leathery, it was easy to see that the mouth was disfigured by a gruesome harelip.

"This... this is Fred Childs," he said. "Good God, this boy can only have been dead a few days."

Rafferty shook his head. "That's impossible!"

"Something's drunk him dry."

Again Rafferty held his lantern up. The other corpses were plainly older; little more than carrion, filthy with dust, coming apart at the seams. However, his vision was now adjusting in the darkness, and he was able to see better into the unlit spaces above.

He whispered a profanity. "What in the name of Jesus..."

Craddock looked up too, and felt a unique thrill of horror. The bonds in which the corpses were hanged formed part of a more complex structure: a vast, multi-levelled network of ropes and knotted ligatures, which spread out between the joists and rafters. But only now, as the darkness leached away, was the full size of it visible. It appeared to stretch from one side of the crumbling

building to the other, encompassing every stanchion, every low-hung beam. In some places, guy-ropes were strung down to ground level, anchored in place by huge slabs of stone; in others, they had been knocked into the walls and jammed into place with broken bricks. To all parts of the roofing it ranged, no far corner too dark and dismal to be out of reach. But more shocking than the vast size of the rigging, was the visible nature of it – for though it was crude and made from rotted old hemp rather than fine-spun silk, it had been woven together in such a way as to form a series of concentric circles, which radiated out from a central point in a symmetrical and clearly discernible pattern.

“It’s like...” Rafferty seemed lost for words. “It’s like a bloody great spider’s web!”

\* \* \*

(v) *Latrodectus is by far the deadliest genus in the pantheon of tropical arachnids. Death is inevitable, but only after excruciating pain – both local and abdominal – extreme muscular contractions and repeating tetanic seizures, which may in themselves be of sufficient intensity to result in fatal shock. Though, as Latrodectus venom is essentially a neuro-toxin, the most likely cause of death will be total respiratory failure. This, however, is only an eventuality after hours and hours of fever, malaise and slow, tortured madness.*

Reverend Pettigrew spoke on, but his eyes had glazed over as if he was hypnotised.

“My boy was down there in the midst of them. For three whole days he’d been there, starved, wounded, delirious from a hundred bites or more, yet paralysed with terror. Unable even to move let alone climb out from that hellish place. On every leaf, every stem, every piece of stone, they clustered. From every crack in the rock they watched him with their myriad baleful eyes...”

“You said he died!” Munro interrupted.

“Are you not listening to me?” Pettigrew roared. “Of course he died... in his mind! Who wouldn’t, plunged defenceless into such a den of madness? A cruel trick of fate had created it, a fatal flaw in Africa’s ancient geography. Confined down there by landslide or earthquake, trapped in their own nightmare world, the equator’s deadliest hunters had had no option but to hunt each other... continually, voraciously, until only the fittest and most savage remained.” Pettigrew’s face twisted into a lupine grin. “You served in India, Inspector Munro. Doubtless, every moment you were there you were haunted by the memory of Calcutta’s Black Hole. But in all honesty, wouldn’t you prefer a dozen nights in that dreadful prison to just one in the place where my son was stranded?”

“Is your son here now?” Munro asked. “On the brow?”

Pettigrew clapped Krueger’s broad shoulder. “Why else should his saviour patrol this wretched place, if not to chase trespassers away? You called this man a murderer, but that’s far from the truth. It is ghastly murder that he is charged to prevent.”

\* \* \*

Major Craddock and Sergeant Rafferty were doing their best to untangle the body of Fred Childs, when they heard the whimpering again; it came from somewhere high above. Craddock glanced up. He’d fancied he’d *imagined* it before. Now he knew differently.

“Rafferty... the lamp!”

Both men strained their eyes, scanning the vast web. At first, there was no motion up there... and then they both spotted something. Twenty feet up, among the other trussed corpses, in the

very midst of that ghoulish larder – for that was surely what it was – they spied weak movement, a feeble kicking and struggling.

One of the corpses was not a corpse at all – at least, not yet.

The two policemen glanced at each other, thinking the same thing: that they were both now in middle age, and it was many years since either had done any serious exercise. Of the two, of course, Rafferty was the heavier and more ungainly; it was highly unlikely that he'd be able to climb so high.

Craddock took off his gloves, topper and greatcoat. "Go and find the others," he said. "As quick as you can. Just leave me the lantern."

Rafferty nodded and lumbered away. The major gazed up again. The last time he'd climbed anything of this nature, it had been a rope-ladder on the outer wall of the maharaja's palace at Miani, and that had been nearly two decades ago. He tested the rope that had previously bound Fred Childs. It creaked loudly, but seemed sturdy enough.

"Listen... whoever you are!" he shouted. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I'm coming up to get you. Keep perfectly still and try not to panic."

Hooking the lantern onto his belt, thrusting his stick into the back of his waistcoat, he began to climb, steadily, hand over hand, clasping the rope with his feet and pushing himself from the ankles. It was slow, fatiguing work, and he was soon moist with sweat. The rope creaked again, turning and twisting. Dust trickled down onto him; the palms of his hands were burning. He'd worked hard in his youth to maintain a strong, robust physique, and much of that remained now, but this would have been a test for any man. Muscles he hadn't used in years were stretching and tearing, his breath came hard and heavy, his heart throbbed in his chest.

When he reached halfway, he dared to glance down – and almost went dizzy. The floor couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away, but it already looked a perilous drop. Mopping sweat with his shirt sleeve, Craddock continued. Soon, he was close enough to see the corpses clearly. As he and Rafferty had surmised, they were little more than rotted shells. Bare ribs showed through rope harnesses; heads that were basically skulls wrapped in parchment lolled sideways. But the one that was still alive was also clearly visible, and from this position – its bare feet dangling only a yard above the major's head – it was obviously female. She was still moving, albeit weakly. Her whimpering was almost too faint to hear.

"Laura," he gasped, "I'm... I'm almost with you."

She heard him, but was in no position to respond, for she was lashed like a chicken, her hands tight at her sides, a length of rope pulled taut across her clamped-open mouth, serving as a gag.

The major climbed on until he was in touching distance. He swore when he saw the condition she was in. Not only had many of her clothes been torn, but her lean body had been raked as if by an animal's claws. Blood trickled down her legs and dripped from her toes. The sight gave him fresh strength, and with grunts of effort, he was able to make the remaining distance, then clamber off the rope into the rigging beside her. It swayed, but it held him. He glanced around. Several of the other victims were also in touching distance. They grinned at him through their bonds, their hollow bones clicking as they swung. The vast network from which they dangled was indeed like a web; on every side it stretched away through the forest of rafters like a suspended ceiling. It must have taken hours and hours to weave. Craddock shuddered.

He turned back to the girl, who was watching him with tearful eyes, desperate for him to hurry. But it wasn't that simple. The first problem was how to loosen her bonds and at the same time prevent her falling to her death. That was when the major heard something; an odd 'twanging' or 'thrumming', like the singing of rat-lines on a ship.

A cold thrill passed through him – *the web was vibrating*.

He turned slowly, holding up the lantern. The skin on his neck began to crawl. On the far side of the shed, perhaps forty feet away, a large shadow was moving through the rigging.

\* \* \*

Rafferty blew his whistle for the second time as he wove through the ruins. He'd decided against bringing the carriage all the way in, as many of the paths and ginnels were too rough or narrow. However, there was no trace of his fellow officers. Coogan and Butterfield had been posted to the canal of course, and were likely out of earshot, even to the police whistle, but Inspector Munro ought to be close by. And he was.

Rafferty rounded a corner and found himself face to face with his senior officer. Munro was bloodied and bruised, his greatcoat ripped and spattered with mud. He stood rigid, both hands on his head. But when he saw the sergeant he flew into a panic.

"Rafferty... get out of it!"

Rafferty sensed someone behind him. He turned quickly, but was struck on the temple by a steel object. His helmet fell off as he slumped to the ground. A boot caught him under the chin, and for the next minute nothing made sense.

When he finally came round, he'd been dragged through the dirt and deposited beside Munro, who made an effort to help him to his feet. It was no surprise to Rafferty to now see two men levelling guns on them: Reverend Pettigrew and his baleful bodyguard.

"Why should Britannia tremble?" Pettigrew said scornfully.

"You've gone too far this time," Munro snapped. "You can't assault police officers, hold them prisoner at gunpoint..."

"On the contrary, my friend, I can do anything I want."

"You think we won't be missed? You think another hour will pass before this brow is alive with people looking for us?"

Pettigrew shrugged. "Let them look. They won't find anything... unless they're prepared to scour the miles and miles of galleries below ground, because that's where your last resting place will be. You... and the rest of them."

Munro shook his head. "You're a raving lunatic. I thought, when I heard your story, there might be some chance for you, some excuse you could give the judge... but no. I can now see they're going to have to hang you. Very, very high."

Pettigrew chuckled. "You can't hang a man for murder when there're no bodies to be found. Even I know that." He turned to Rafferty. "You... where is Craddock?"

Rafferty was still probing the gash on his brow. He made no reply.

Pettigrew grinned. "Loyal to the last. How touching. Well... if he's gone where I think he's gone, he'll soon wish he hadn't. In fact..." and he thumbed the hammer back on his blunderbuss, and raised it to his shoulder, "your death will be infinitely preferable..."

A flying coal-shovel then made contact with the back of Pettigrew's skull.

It clanged like a church bell, and he dropped in a heap, his eyes rolling white. Krueger turned wildly, to find William Childs standing there, shovel clasped like a battle-axe. The Boer raised his pistol to fire, but Munro had already launched himself forward, and brought his opponent down with a head-on tackle. For savage moments they rolled on the slag, locked together, butting, biting, and then came a loud, ringing report: a pistol-shot.

\* \* \*



Major Craddock heard the distant gunshot, but it made no impression on him. For all the insanity he'd thus far witnessed, he'd never considered that the creator of this enormous web might also be its denizen. Even now, as he stared into the shadowy recesses to see where the thing had vanished to, he didn't quite believe it.

He glanced back at the girl. She too had seen it; in the flickering lamplight, she'd gone white with terror. Craddock realised he had to work fast. Placing the lantern on an overhead joist, he took the stick from his waistcoat, twisted its silver handle and, clicking it loose, drew out a long slim bayonet; the dim light glittered on its wicked edge. He leaned over to Laura and spoke quickly and quietly.

"Listen to me. I can't just cut you loose... you'll drop like a sandbag. I'll have to work slowly and carefully, but you must help. Hang onto anything you can, anything."

She nodded sluggishly; the pain and anxiety were overwhelming her. The last thing Craddock wanted now was for her to faint on him.

"I'll try and free your hands first," he said, sawing at the ligature on her left wrist.

Again, the web began to *thrum*.

Craddock glanced over his shoulder. At first he saw nothing, only the webwork shuddering, probably due as much to his own exertions as anything else. But then he spotted *it*... that horrible, misshapen shadow. It was still thirty feet away, but higher up among the rafters, and moving with effortless ease. A second later, it had melted into blackness again. Was it circling him?

Craddock was now bathed in sweat. Where the devil were Rafferty and the others? He slapped at his waist, trying to find his whistle – only to remember that it sat in his greatcoat some twenty feet below. He dabbed his sleeve at his brow, and turned back to Laura. Her eyes had lidded. There was a bluish tinge to her cheek.

"Just hold on there," he said. "Hold on."

He reached with the blade again, only for the web to vibrate even more, *far more*. Craddock had to cling on to avoid falling; a disgusting stench of sweat and filth assailed him. He gagged and coughed, wafted at the air – and then sucked his breath in sharply, holding it with a mixture of shock and numbing terror. The ghastly inhabitant of the web had suddenly overcome its shyness.

Craddock could only goggle as a figure of lunacy came creeping along the ropes until it was only a few feet away.

The 'scuttling shadow', as the street urchins called it, almost *was* a shadow, so black was it with dirt and grime, though at this close range the obscene detail of its anatomy was only too visible. Perhaps it once had been human, for under the filth its flesh was pallid and it only had four limbs – two arms, two legs – though those limbs had grown to inordinate length and were now spindly and tapering yet taut with wiry sinew, stretched and distorted through the endless clambering and clawing in this demented world of its own creation. Its torso was also elongated, honed down to the very basics, tight-rigged with super-tensile muscle. Its most awful feature was surely its head, though that was an irony in itself, as its head was probably the only part of it not malformed. Completely human in shape, it looked too large for the narrow shoulders and slim body, and was hung with a matted tangle of white and greasy hair, from beneath which two milky bulbs for eyes observed the major with unblinking intensity. Drool ran from its unnaturally wide mouth, which was filled with broken, jagged teeth.

Laura gave a muffled squeal, and began wrestling with her bonds. She yanked loose the hand that was almost free, and plucked at the remaining knots. Craddock could hardly move. The apparition transfixed him with its blank stare. Its musty animal stink was as dense as fog and utterly repulsive.

Shouting, the major came abruptly to his senses.

He made a swipe with his bayonet, only for the monstrosity to evade him easily, leaping into the ropes above and lashing down with a hand, the fingernails of which had grown into talons. They ripped across Craddock's scalp, leaving three stinging gashes and dripping hot blood over his brow. He gasped, but the thing struck at him again, the lethal claws tearing through his shirt and waistcoat. He thrust up with the bayonet. There was such force in the blow that it might have disembowelled a normal human, but again the thing showed inhuman agility. It leaped down behind him, and in his efforts to turn and face it, he nearly overbalanced and fell through the web. Laura gave another muffled scream, the rope-gag chaffing her mouth so that blood dribbled down her chin. Craddock slashed out a third time, yet the horror swung around him with the grace of an acrobat. Another raking claw took its toll, this time across the copper's face, down his neck and under his collar, whereupon it snatched hold and yanked him sideways, attempting to dislodge him. Craddock clutched at the rigging. The thing swiped again, gouging his back. He tried to climb out of the way, but then remembered the lantern on the joist. Reaching up quickly, he grabbed hold of it and turned to face his foe front-on.

Somewhere in the retarded mass of its brain, it recognised the danger that fire might pose, and briefly held its position, perched only two or three feet away. Craddock hefted the lamp as if to throw it. Slowly, the creature tensed.

"I see I have your attention," Craddock panted. "So whoever you are, *whatever* you are... if you understand a word I say, you're well advised to take heed. Now back off... do you hear me! Back off!"

But the brute wouldn't back off. The grey orbs of its eyes peered through the gloom. The crinkled flesh of its lips drew back on brown-yellow fangs.

"You think I'm joking? You think I'm playing a game? ...well try this for size!"

Craddock drew his arm back as if to launch the missile, but only dummied with it.

The creature sprang out of the way, but instead of finding another perch and presenting itself as an easier target, it pitched down through the webbing and swung up again from beneath. Aiming the lantern directly downward was difficult, though Craddock tried anyway – only to see the burning globe sail past the monstrosity and hit the ground, where it exploded in glass and flame.

Like a coiled spring, the brute flung itself upward again, reaching through the webbing to tear at Craddock's feet. He struck down with the bayonet, hacking, chopping, but it was blind, frenetic rage, and he didn't notice when his fourth blow connected with the rope on which he himself perched, and sheared it.

The next thing Craddock knew he was falling – but so was the monstrosity, for the line on which he had rested was also the line from which it hung. Craddock grabbed at the rope, and they swung across the shed together like men on a trapeze. The major dropped the bayonet in his efforts to save himself, but even as he swept back and forth through the darkness, still a good sixteen feet from the floor, the deranged beast clawed up and rent at his ankles. It was agonising; Craddock's legs and feet were being cut to the bone; the taut rope was torture on his wrists and palms. He knew that he was going to fall, but he was determined not to fall alone. In a sudden mad moment, he released his grip and plummeted.

Of all the things he could have done, this alone seemed to catch the creature by surprise. He hit it in the back with both his knees, and hooked an arm over its shoulder to break his fall. Incredibly, the creature held on, thrashing madly.

"Damn you!" Craddock spat through gritted teeth.

Proximity to the thing no longer held revulsion for him; fear of falling was no longer of consequence. He wanted only to kill this hybrid, this merciless shadow of the night. But it was resilient; it refused to be dragged loose, clinging to the rope all the harder – even trying to ascend.

“You’re coming with me!” Craddock snarled. But for all his anger, his middle-aged frame was weakening. The effort to hang on was too much. “No,” he gasped. “Noooo...”

*CRAAAASH!*

The explosive roar was like a cannon shot, but in the enclosed space of the railway shelter, three times as deafening.

Neither Craddock nor the thing he fought even saw the cloud of nails and filings sweep up in a blizzard of steel, and sever the rope. Neither saw the mud-spattered shape of Jack Munro as he stood in the doorway below, aiming up with the blunderbuss. They saw only the rugged ground as it sped towards them, as it spun around them. It was pure fluke that they wheeled as they fell, that when they struck the earth in a flailing mass of arms and legs, the man was on top and the monster underneath.

\* \* \*

Craddock lay stunned, at first too torn and bruised even to move. He didn’t know where he was, though he was fairly certain that he’d broken his right shoulder and possibly his collarbone as well. It was painful just to breathe, but it didn’t take long for the memories to flood back. He sat up as sharply as he was able, preparing to duck another blow – only to see the monstrosity lying beside him, its neck hinged at a grotesque angle over the rusting edge of a railway girder.

Craddock glanced round. Munro was standing in the entrance, the smoking blunderbuss limp in his grasp. Sergeant Rafferty was also present, along with constables Coogan and Butterfield. A fifth man, the taller, rangier shape of William Childs, completed the group; they peered in disbelief at the thing that had come down from the rafters.

Craddock climbed painfully to his feet. “Where’s Krueger?”

Munro looked at him askance, as if unsure how to reply. “He’s er... I’m afraid he’s dead, sir. His gun, it went off... a complete accident...”

“So where’s Pettigrew?”

“On the pithead forecourt,” Rafferty replied. “He’s...”

The major pushed past them. “Coogan, Butterfield... get up to that web and get that girl down! Sharp!”

Bewildered, their attention still fixed on the broken corpse, the two constables shuffled forward. Munro followed the major. Though he was lamed by wounds, his shoulders see-sawing with pain, Craddock moved swiftly across the brow and through the gutted buildings until he reached the pithead forecourt, where Krueger lay sprawled, his chest shattered by a single pistol-ball. Of Pettigrew there was no trace.

“I don’t understand it,” Munro said. “He was here... he was out cold.”

Craddock set off walking again. “We’ll try his house. Whatever that abomination was, Pettigrew knew about it. And he’s not getting away from us.”

“He more than knew about it,” Munro replied, hurrying to catch up. “*He sired it.*”

Craddock shot him an astonished glance; they stopped rigid. In a faltering, breathless tone, Munro explained what he’d been told about the reverend’s ill-fated mission to Bechuanaland, about the loss of his son, about Krueger’s hair-raising discovery of the child. Craddock listened intently, his face too bloodied and drawn to show the true horror he felt. In standard police fashion, he fought to suppress the more lurid detail, to put aside the disturbing actuality. All the

same, when they set off walking again it was with urgent haste, and by the time they breasted a low spoil-heap and saw the squat, red-brick outline of the reverend's vicarage, they were practically running. The sight of flames in the ground-floor windows and churning black smoke from the roof and chimney alarmed them more, but when they reached the front gate it was clear that they were too late.

Martha Pettigrew, besmirched all over and coughing throatily, was staggering back and forth at the front of the building, screaming for help, her eyes red with tears. An inferno already roared behind the shattered windows. The brickwork was visibly fissuring; joists snapped like gunshots. The woman shrieked that her husband was still inside; that he'd come rushing in, raging with anger; that he'd started the fire himself, heaping his hymnals and books of psalms into his study grate; that he'd refused to come outside when the blaze spread to the curtains and furniture.

It was all Munro could do to restrain her from dashing back in through the open front door, and even then she fought him every inch of the way. Craddock got as close as he could, but before he reached the steps the heat and sparks beat him back. He had to shield his eyes just to look inside – and was amazed to see the tall figure of Pettigrew come forward through the conflagration. The reverend's dark suit of office was already smouldering, his face twisted and blackened with char. Still, however, he grinned from ear to ear, a light of insane triumph in his bright but streaming eyes. Then he turned, and as casually as any man could, strode away into the depths of the fire, which folded behind him like the closing curtains of Hell.

*ADDENDUM. The danger to humans from poisonous spiders is still relatively slight. Last year, in the whole of British East Africa there were only 26 fatalities attributable directly to spider bites. In the same period of time, in the Metropolitan Police area alone, there were three times as many murders and seven times as many life-threatening attacks by one person upon another. As always, the fiercest killers in Nature are but Mankind's apprentices.*

~~~~~

PAUL FINCH is a former cop and journalist now turned best-selling crime and thriller writer.

Paul has his foot in several camps. He first cut his literary teeth penning episodes of the British TV crime drama, *The Bill*, and has written extensively in horror, fantasy and science-fiction, including for *Doctor Who*.

He is probably best known to date for his crime/thriller novels with HarperCollins, specifically the Mark Heckenburg police-actioners, of which there are seven to date, for the Lucy Clayburn procedurals, of which there are three, and for his stand-alone thrillers with Orion. None of these titles tick the supernatural box, but all are known for comprising fiction of the darkest variety, and are regularly referred to in reviews as horror stories. (The first three books in the Heck line achieved official best-seller status, the second being the fastest pre-ordered title in HarperCollins history, while the first Lucy Clayburn novel made the Sunday Times Top 10 list).

Paul has also written horror screenplays as well – *The Devil's Rock*, a wartime chiller – hit the cinemas in 2011, and for being a prolific short story writer. In this latter capacity, he has won the British Fantasy Award twice, in 2002 and 2007, and the International Horror Guild Award once, also in 2007.

Among his many short stories, there are numerous tales and novellas featuring two occult detectives in particular: DS Nick Brooker a contemporary police detective working for the secretive department of UnCrime, and the better known Major Craddock, a Victorian ex-soldier-turned-

copper who encounters many mysterious and chilling adversaries, and whose escapades to date have been collected in a single e-volume, *Major Craddock Investigates*.

Paul Finch has yet to appear in a regular issue of *Occult Detective Magazine*, but this will hopefully be rectified soon.

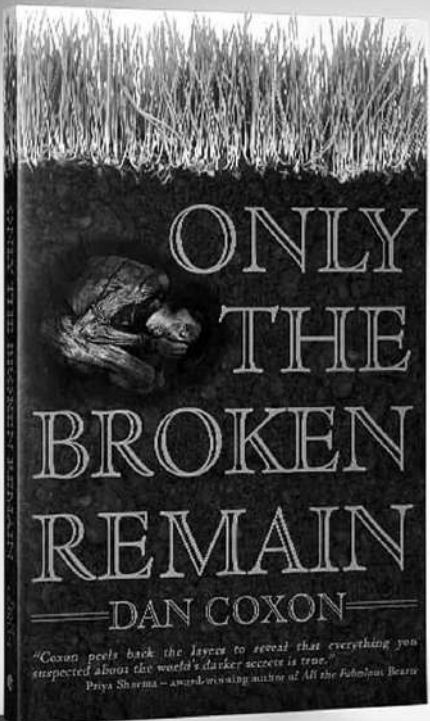
Paul is a native of Wigan, Lancashire, where he still lives with his wife and business partner, Cathy.

Paul Finch, blog – <https://paulfinch-writer.blogspot.com/>

Paul Finch, Twitter – [@paulfinchauthor](https://twitter.com/paulfinchauthor)

Paul Finch author page on Amazon – https://www.amazon.co.uk/Paul-Finch/e/B0034PPAH6?ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1&qid=1614780075&sr=1-1

Paul Finch, website – <https://www.paulfinchauthor.com/>



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—Storgy

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JOAN

Rosemary Pardoe

*Here am I
Little Jumping Joan
When no one is with me
I am all alone.
(Old Nursery Rhyme)*

In the Spring of 1978, my work as a restorer of ecclesiastical furnishings took me to Norton Hills, a quiet village in southern Essex, where there were still a surprising number of such places, despite their proximity to the Basildon conurbation. My task was to restore a rather beautiful late nineteenth-century reredos; a painted triptych in Pre-Raphaelite style, which was one of the treasures of St Peter's church. The rector of Norton, the Reverend Jonathan Pride, was a High Church man – unlike his predecessor – and since he had only taken over the living a year previously, the villagers still treated him with extreme wariness. For this reason, I think, he was especially pleased to welcome me to the Rectory. I was someone with whom he could relax and talk easily for the first time in months, and we hit it off from the start.

Jonathan was in his early thirties, only a few years my senior, and we found many interests in common. During the first evening of my stay, our conversation ranged over subjects too numerous to list, from the Beatles to books (at length) to Edward Burne Jones (whom I love but Jonathan confessed to finding insipid).

The topic of architecture soon came up, and prompted a guided tour of the Rectory: a splendid red-brick Jacobean edifice, with highly-decorated chimneys as its most distinctive external feature; and some fine strapwork plaster moulding in several of its rooms. Although not overwhelmingly large, it boasted four bedrooms, a comfortable library-cum-study and a pretty dining room. Since the rector was single and had no living-in help, much of the space was unused, but by no means neglected. As we walked around, the approval which I expressed was never less than sincere.

Further conversation followed and we completely lost track of time, until I suddenly realised that it was getting late and I was starting to yawn. After saying our good-nights, and as I headed towards the guest bedroom, a look of concern suddenly clouded Jonathan's face. "Promise me, Jane," he said, "that if you hear any noises in the night you won't leave your room."

I must have assumed he was joking, or perhaps I was so tired that it didn't sink in fully, but whatever the reason, I'm rather surprised now that I promised so willingly and without question.

As is so often the case when one is over-tired, I simply could not get to sleep: an hour later I was still tossing and turning. Thus, when I heard pattering footsteps outside my door, in the corridor which led to the stairs, I knew at once that I was not dreaming. The steps seemed to belong to a small child who was skipping and running along in an erratic fashion. They could not be the feet of the rector, and he did not own any pets whose nocturnal wanderings could produce such sounds. "I promised I wouldn't leave my room," I thought to myself, "but I can still open the door and look out. I hope it's not rats."

Unfortunately, by the time I reached the door, the footsteps had started down the stairs, and although the corridor was well lit by the bright moon, shining in through the landing window, I saw nothing unexpected. Then a soft crying began in the hallway below me. I think I would have gone to investigate but, at that moment, Jonathan came out of his bedroom, halfway between me and the staircase.

“You heard it, did you?” he said. “I wondered if you would.”

“What is it?” I asked predictably. “Shouldn’t we go down and see?”

“No!” he almost shouted. “There’s no need. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, but please go back to sleep now. The crying will stop in a few minutes.” Feeling slightly disgruntled, I climbed back into bed, and listened to the child-like wailing as it rose in a mournful and heart-rending crescendo before fading away to nothing, as Jonathan had assured me it would.

Next morning, I came down early, having slept well for the remaining few hours of the night. Jonathan was already eating breakfast, and as he helped me to some cereal, I waited expectantly for his explanation.

“I’m sorry I didn’t prepare you for it yesterday,” he began. “But I honestly hoped you wouldn’t be affected. This house is haunted. Of course, you don’t need me to tell you that.”

I agreed, spluttering through a mouthful of cornflakes that it was not the first ghost I had encountered.

“The reason I didn’t want you to see it last night – as you would have done if you’d gone downstairs – was that I saw it once myself, and it isn’t something I’d wish on anyone else.” He paused to butter some toast before resuming. “Ever since moving in, I’ve heard the ghost regularly each evening, although the timing varies – it’s always an hour or two after I’ve gone to bed. Naturally I tried to get to the bottom of things and, if I remember rightly, it was during my second night here that I followed the noises down to the hallway.

“The culprit was standing near the front door: a tiny figure in a loose white garment of some sort. She seemed very solid, but she was – to put it bluntly – no more than a cadaver. I could see the bones of her arms through the dried-up skin, and her head was a stark white skull.” Jonathan shuddered. “I’m ashamed to say that my faith failed me then. I turned tail, and spent the rest of the night cowering under the bedclothes!” An understandable reaction, I assured him.

“Afterwards, I briefly considered exorcism, but didn’t feel that it would be right. Despite her appearance, she is not an evil ghost; I’m convinced of that. If she wishes to haunt my house, I must allow her to do so – she was here first, after all. She has never harmed me, and I find I’m starting to get used to her.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said. “Although I don’t envy you having to live with it. Why, by the way, do you call the spectre, ‘she’? Judging from your description it might be of either sex.”

“Ah...” my friend smiled slightly. “After a good deal of effort I finally managed to extract a little information about her from one of the more garrulous villagers. Apparently, she has been known for hundreds of years, and her name, traditionally, is Joan. That aside, her identity is a mystery to the parishioners, although there are vague tales of her being the victim of a hideous murder. Some say a former rector was the killer.

“I treated these stories with a pinch of salt,” he added. “But a few months ago I had a spot of luck when sorting through the parish chest: I discovered a set of Overseers’ Poor Records, complete for the seventeenth century. Being keen to learn all I could about the history of my parish, I read them through... and I think I found our Joan.

“Look, why don’t you come over to the church and I’ll show you, before you start work this morning? There’s a graffito I’d like you to see as well.”

I agreed willingly and within ten minutes we were ensconced in the cramped vestry, with the Poor Records open before us. Jonathan pointed out the relevant passages, which I studied carefully. They related to one Ruth Lange and her six-year-old daughter Joan, who both received Parish Relief in 1653. The payments had ceased in October when Ruth had died by her own hand, carrying her daughter with her when she jumped into the River Crouch just outside Norton and drowned. Labourers on a nearby farm witnessed the event, but were too far away to prevent it. By the time they reached the scene, they could only pull the bodies from the water.

Because of the unusual nature of the case, the Overseers had included some useful background notes: the father of Joan Lange was a Royalist soldier who was killed while fighting in Colchester in the Civil War, when the child was hardly more than a babe in arms. Ruth Lange seems to have reacted to her early widowhood by becoming slightly deranged, but the rector took her in as an assistant housekeeper. This was in 1648. In 1653, the old rector died, and was replaced by a staunch Puritan who immediately turned the Langes out as Royalist sympathisers. It was then that they began receiving Poor Relief.

Reading between the lines I deduced that such help as they got from the Parish was begrudged by the now largely Puritan villagers, who were not too sorry to see them go. (Ironically, those same villagers were eager enough to pledge allegiance to Charles II at his Restoration seven years later. A large Royal Coat of Arms still in the church is dated ‘1660’ and festooned with such loyal inscriptions as, ‘Fear God, Honour the King, and Meddle Not With Them That Are Given To Change.’) When I had finished, Jonathan moved the Overseers’ Records to one side and opened up the Parish Registers for the relevant period. Under the deaths listed for 1653 were Joan and Ruth Lange, with a brief note in the margin to the effect that Ruth, being a suicide and a murderess, was buried outside the churchyard in unconsecrated ground, while little Joan was placed in an unmarked pauper’s grave somewhere near the church.

“A tragic story,” I commented finally. “The poor woman must have been quite desperate. And I can only think that little Joan haunts the Rectory because it was the Puritan rector who contributed so greatly to the tragedy. Not that there weren’t similar or worse cases of heartlessness among those loyal to the Crown... What about the graffito you mentioned? Is it connected in some way?”

“Oh yes,” said my friend, getting up and putting the records away. “I nearly forgot about it, but it really is very intriguing and quite relevant.”

I followed him out into the body of the church, where he knelt down and pointed to a spot hidden behind the pulpit. Some words were crudely incised into the plaster of the wall, and with difficulty I made them out:

*Joan Lange
All Alone
God Forgyve Me
T. Cotter*

I looked at Jonathan for elucidation. “Thomas Cotter was the name of the Puritan rector,” he said. “It seems that he came to regret his actions.”

* * *

That night I did not expect to sleep well, at least not until Joan Lange had completed her rounds; but I dropped off very quickly, and slept soundly. Just before waking I had a short vivid dream: I was standing in St Peter's churchyard, by the high stone wall which separated it from the Rectory garden. In front of me was an enchanting little girl; even though her face was puffy and stained with tears she was still one of the prettiest creatures I have ever seen. She was jumping up repeatedly and trying to reach for someone or something on the other side of the wall, but each time she fell back, crying sadly to herself.

I heard a small voice saying, "Please try again; I will help you", and then, suddenly, I realised that I could see, or at least sense, what was behind the wall. It was a young woman, so haggard and worn that she was painful to look at. Her hysterical attempts to get a grip and clamber over the barrier were being continuously frustrated by what appeared to be slime or mud on her hands, making them slide over the stones and leaving rows of greenish-brown marks. This was all I saw before the vision ended.

My first thought on waking was: "We must pull down the wall". It was two or three minutes before I remembered that only a low privet hedge now separated the churchyard from the Rectory garden.

As I expected, Jonathan was sympathetic when told about my dream. "Perhaps we can bring the poor little soul and her mother back together again," he remarked. "It's strictly unorthodox, and I would have to make sure that the archdeacon didn't get to know about it, but I'd be quite willing to re-inter Ruth Lange's bones in consecrated ground if only we could find them."

"We could at least try," I said. "And I believe we ought to start searching at the spot where I saw the figure of the woman in my dream."

It was just after one o'clock on the following morning that we ventured forth with our spades, thankful that the Rectory garden was not overlooked, and that heavy clouds covered the moon.

The bones were exactly where we had hoped to find them, although it required several hours of hard work to reach down to them and remove them all from the earth. We took the remains to a secluded area of the churchyard, where we made a small grave for them, and Jonathan said a few words of blessing. I was touched by the impromptu ceremony, although, at any moment I expected to be set upon by irate villagers and accused of bodysnatching or desecration. Fortunately nothing of that sort occurred, and to our joy the Rectory ghost did not return in the ensuing days. It seems that we had accomplished what Joan Lange had been wanting for over three hundred years; to be reunited with the mother she still loved in spite of everything.

After some of the initial relief and pleasure had worn off, our single remaining worry was that someone would find out about our scandalous behaviour. We had disguised the disturbed ground as best we could, but when the old fellow who helped to tend the garden arrived a few days later, he soon noticed the change.

"Been busy gardening then, Parson?" he said.

Turning an embarrassed pink, Jonathan managed to stammer out a reply: "Er... well... yes. Actually I was making a start on building a rockery. I thought it would look nice down there by the hedge."

The old man took him at his word, and insisted on taking charge of the proceedings. When I revisited the village recently to have an informal dinner with my clerical friend, I'm pleased to say that the rockery was ablaze with colour in the summer sun, and a credit to all concerned.

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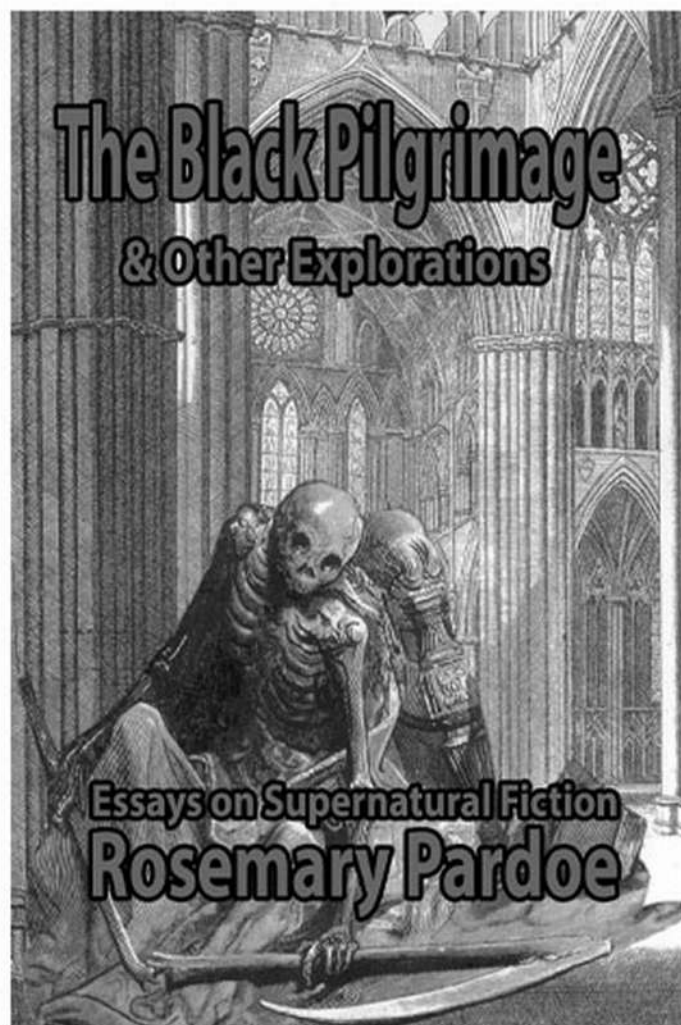
**ROSEMARY PARDOE** was the editor of *Ghosts & Scholars* magazine from 1979 to 2019, and although she has now handed over the editorship, she still writes a regular column, 'Lady Wardrop's Notes' (named after her role model from M.R. James's story 'Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance'). She co-edited with Richard Dalby the *Ghosts and Scholars* book in 1987. She has also edited five *Ghosts & Scholars Books of...* for Sarob Press, most recently *The Ghosts & Scholars Book of Mazes* (2020). Next will be *The Ghosts & Scholars Book of Follies and Grottoes*, currently soliciting stories.

A collection of her articles and essays, *The Black Pilgrimage and Other Explorations*, was published by Shadow Publishing (2018), and with S.T. Joshi she co-edited *Warnings to the Curious: A Sheaf of Criticism on M.R. James* for Hippocampus Press in 2007. Her 2000 anthology of twelve antiquarian ghost stories, *The Angry Dead* (the only fiction she has ever written and from which the original version of 'Joan' is taken), was originally published under the pseudonym, 'Mary Ann Allen'. It is soon to be reprinted, for the first time under her real name, in an extensively revised form by Cathaven Press.

The *Ghosts & Scholars* online archive can be found here. <http://www.pardoes.info/roanddarroll/GS.html>

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# THE NIGHTMARE FILES

*Adrian Cole*



**TOP SECRET**

For the personal attention of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (name deleted) Senior Director of Paranormal Operations

Classification: AA1

BURN AFTER READING

(Special Operational Directive – OFFicial)

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*This document has been produced in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.A.) and M.I.6 (United Kingdom).*

Signed:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Adrian Cole", is written over a horizontal line.

Senior Associate Agent

**Reference: WTF 666 HIGHLY CLASSIFIED MATERIAL**

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subject</b>        | Nicolas (Nick) Stone                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Alias(es)</b>      | Nick Nightmare                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Date of Birth</b>  | A comprehensive search of all available records has not identified this. However, it is reasonably believed to be sometime in 1975, probably in the summer months.                       |
| <b>Parents</b>        | Father was Robert Everett Stone, occupation warehouseman, deceased in 1978 (throat cancer)<br>Mother was Catherine Walker. Remarried and believed to be living abroad (possibly Canada). |
| <b>Occupation</b>     | Officially a registered private detective, with an office in Brooklyn (address withheld). Operates the service under the name <i>Private Eye, Public Fist</i> .                          |
| <b>Home address</b>   | Rented accommodation (address withheld).                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Marital status</b> | Single                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Licences</b>       | Driving Licence, various gun licences. Stone favours the Beretta, model 92FS, and generally carries 2.                                                                                   |
| <b>Other</b>          | US Passport (current)<br>Stone has an interest in rock music, particularly of the 1970s-1980s period.                                                                                    |

The attached brief dossier has been compiled by the Agency, with the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, on behalf of which Mr Stone has occasionally (informally) operated, the New York City Police Department which Mr Stone has regularly privately assisted in their duties (see separate file under Police Chief Richard "Rizzie" Carter) and from other institutions and agencies (see Appendix 2A). Otherwise Mr Stone allows the Agency access to his own personal files on such occasions as are required. Most of the information in this dossier has been taken from those files, and where appropriate, they have been quoted herein.

October, 2019

Not for Onward Transmission

**CLASSIFIED MATERIAL**

Nicholas (Nick) Stone aka Nick Nightmare.

There are no formal records available of the subject's education, but it is assumed that, as his father worked for a number of companies (mostly as a warehouseman and driver) in and around New York, the subject was transferred from school to school as his family moved. This also applied to his high school education, which at this time was at best sketchy.

The subject enlisted in the United States Army in 1993, aged 18, and joined the Marine Corps. He saw service in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo and Somalia, after which he left the Army. (Details of his service are attached as Appendix 1AA.) He served with distinction and it should be noted that he was particularly skilful with small arms and his records show that he was a dead shot.

In early 1996 he returned to New York, where he worked for several companies, mainly driving. In 1997, as an employee of Erik von Brazen he was involved in an accident in which a girl, Martha Barruna, with whom he was having a relationship, was killed. She also worked for the company and according to Stone's files, the 'accident' was in fact arranged by von Brazen, with the intention of both Stone and Ms Barruna being killed. Later that year, Stone was indicted for the murder of Jonas Felucci, a member of a rival company of von Brazen's and sentenced to serve a life sentence in Sing Sing prison.

During his stay in Sing Sing, the subject developed a friendship with one of the long-serving prisoners, Zeff Radwawski, who spent 3 years educating Stone. It is evident from Stone's studies under his mentor that he would have been excellent university material. Radwawski had access to a large personal fortune and arranged for a lawyer to investigate Stone's involvement in the murder case. After an appeal, Stone was cleared and released, and Radwawski arranged for him to have funds made available to him to set up in private business, as an investigator. (See later file for more details about Radwawski.)

Stone was released in 2000 and set up an office in Brooklyn. He had a number of relationships with women, but nothing lasting. For the next ten years, the details of his life are not well recorded, if at all. Little is known (or proffered by Stone), particularly relating to the connections he made with members of a private organisation known as 'Vengeance Unlimited' and others associated with it. **What is known is that Stone has access to what the Agency knows to be alternative realms, notably one that he refers to as the Pulpworld.** (The Agency has a restricted, Level One file on this subject: see **File 22**, sometimes known as the "Otherwhere File".)

Some of these realms are close to our own and their differences are so small as to be almost undetectable, but the most inaccessible (known) case is the Pulpworld, which our own Agents are only permitted to visit in the most extreme circumstances (hence our liaison with Stone). Stone's own description of the Pulpworld can be found in his file, **AT MIDNIGHT ALL THE AGENTS** (see below). The following is an extract from that file:

Whenever people ask me about the Pulpworld, I don't know for sure how to tell them what they want to know. Okay, there are a few clear facts, but most things about the place are obfuscated, even to me, and I've been there plenty of times. For a start, I don't have a free pass or my own key. Matter of fact, there's no fundamental door, portal or whatever. I know a few ways in, and the guys I need to see about that, like Montifellini, or Oil-Gun Eddy, who makes machines defy the normal laws of physics. I also know that FiFi Cherie, the bombshell nightclub singer, who is in reality Ariadne Carnadine, has the ability to *sing* a gate to the Pulpworld, but with her it's almost a subconscious thing and she sure wouldn't want to try to explain it.

I do know that there are an unspecified number of what I'd call alternative worlds, some of them complete, others more like splinter worlds or sub-worlds between worlds – the kind of place where the freakish Pumpkin King secreted himself and his Blind Gardeners. Creeps like him seem to be able to slide over into the Pulpworld, although my guess is they're given access by higher, much darker powers.

As for the Pulpworld, well, it has its own laws, but they're more than a mite twisted. There was a time, in my early days there, when I thought that I'd got a good handle on them. Characters from my world and its fictional realms are real people in Pulpworld. It's kind of odd meeting up with someone you've only read about in a pulp yarn. Especially when they tell *you* that they've read about you in a pulp yarn in the Pulpworld. At one time I thought that everyone in the Pulpworld was a distorted reflection of someone in our world, like the place was a Hall of Mirrors World. But it only seems to apply to certain characters: it beats me why. Some of the guys in the Pulpworld are more like variations on guys in my world or its fiction than duplicates of them. Others seem to be unique to the Pulpworld, that or they have *doppelgangers* in one of the other alternative worlds. You tell me, pal.

Same goes for places. That's where the Pulpworld really gets chewed up. I mean, you can be wandering around a kind of modern day pseudo-London one minute, then turn up an alleyway that leads to a Roman encampment, complete with Latin-speaking soldiers the next. And you can't rely on geography to help you out. In the Pulpworld, cities seem to get compressed, like you flip from New York to London as if you're only crossing the street. I've never seen a map in the Pulpworld: if there are any, they probably change overnight, like the weather. It ought to drive a guy nuts, but you kinda get used to it. I'd be inclined to say, familiarity breeds contempt, but the fact is, I kinda enjoy it. Apart from when its wacko elements are trying to rub me out, which, paradoxically, is most of the time. I'm probably more screwed up than I know.

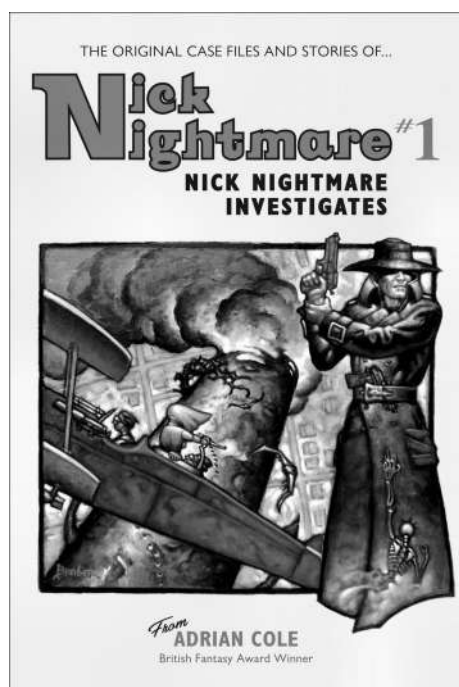
Secret discussions between the Agency and Stone in 2002 embedded protocols for Stone's work in these realms, not necessarily at the behest of the Agency, but by agreement, never in contravention of the Agency's own missions. Stone's compliance with the Agency has been exemplary, if occasionally his methods are erratic.

In 2015, Stone began working regularly for Ariadne Carnadine (see separate file) a mainstream city business woman, known to operate under several aliases. Stone's files indicate clearly that they have developed a relationship outside of work.

The subject's files are written in what might be described as a code, that is, in the form of short, fictitious episodes. Stone types these files on an old manual typewriter and occasionally presents them for publication in lurid book form that only a specific type of "fan" would appreciate.

Details of the files released to date are given below.

Primary folder contains the following:



#### **PLEASE ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF**

Stone describes himself as being over 35 years old, so the events in this file take place in 2010. Stone refers to his New York: "I live in New York, or at least, a version of it." Mentions various powerful **artefacts**, the use of which can be a positive force against evil, but which can have dangerous side effects.

#### **YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW**

Records what is thought to be his first formal meeting with the FBI. Stone is commissioned to find an immigrant from Europe, Stephan Zeitsheim, who is linked to the Massachusetts town of Innsmouth (see various references, especially the Lovecraft Squad file).

#### **THE VOGUE PRINCE**

Stone again refers to his use of cabbalistic and other "occult-related" material. Further use of an artefact of power.

#### **MAYHEM ON MAD GULL ISLAND**

Gives details of a visit to the Massachusetts town of Buddstown, north of Innsmouth, and the island known as Mad Gull Island, with an associate, Sharkbait Bill. There is a reference to Stone "calling" the Navy. Our records show that, after the events in this file, the Navy did carry out a

secret operation in this area, “removing” Mad Gull Island. Exact date unknown, but almost certainly in 2012.

### **KISS THE DAY GOODBYE**

Details Stone’s interest in comic books and pulp novels, and his relationship with *Kikbak Komix*, a shop specialising in these things, run by a “Captain Malevolent”, one of a number of associates of Stone linked to an organization known as *Vengeance Unlimited*. Very little is known about this group, other than the comic book stories of the same name.

### **WHAT DREAD HANDS AND WHAT DREAD FEET?**

First detailed comments about Stone’s connections with the Mob. Also Craggy MacFury’s Diner, an elusive establishment that appears to have limited access. MacFury is believed to be in some way associated with *Vengeance Unlimited*, as is Montifellini, the driver of the “Magic Bus.” Also mentions Oil-Gun Eddy, another member of the team. Origin of V.U. explained and more information on how Stone is able to move between worlds, using members of this team. (Note: V.U. operates privately and neither the Agency, nor the FBI has access to it.)

First mention of the highly dangerous artefact, The Dancers of Ruin. First reference to Dr Moribund (Pyotr Ivanovitch Moribundin – see separate file), a highly dangerous operative, occupying a top “rank” within the Dark Army.

### **FIRE ALL THE GUNS AT ONE TIME**

Gives details of Stone’s first meeting with Damian Paladin (see separate file) and their team-up to prevent a serious threat to national security by Wolfgang Rottwanger (see separate file). Rottwanger is an agent of the Nazi movement, capable of moving through both time and alternative worlds. This file describes events at Dunnsmouth in the Pulpworld, and its annihilation. At the time, it was believed that Rottwanger perished, but subsequent Stone files (see below) clearly indicate that he survived.

Stone’s deep fear of flying is recorded vividly in this file.

(Dunnsmouth was also the centre of hostile activity described in a separate file/’novel’, NIGHT OF THE HEROES, in which Stone took part in the action, but on a minor scale. The file is not one of his own personal records.)

### **HOT LITTLE NUMBER FROM HELL**

Stone records his first meeting with the night club singer, FiFi Cherie, an alias of the businesswoman, Ariadne Carnadine. They work together to free her brother from an organization based in the Pulpworld on Black Wake Island. Note: Miss Carnadine is capable of “singing” gateways into alternative worlds.

First mention of the artefact, the Chaos Blade, a powerful weapon from the early eons of history – an extremely dangerous piece of supernatural equipment.

Mention is made of the fact that Stone does not drive, although he is capable of doing so (and reluctantly demonstrates this).

Events in this file probably took place in 2014.

### **THIS ONE WILL KILL YOU**

Stone explains his relationship to a former boss, Erik von Brazen. First mention of Martha (Barruna) who was Stone’s partner until her death (1997) in a road accident in which Stone was the driver. Stone’s refusal to drive explained.



Von Brazen's escape from sanatorium and his "infestation" by Spiderhead. Stone's subsequent defeat of Spiderhead. Later files confirm that Spiderhead survived.

Some of the events in this file take place in the Pulpworld, where Stone meets Ned Killigan, a particularly hard-boiled private eye, hero of Stone's favourite pulps in Stone's home world.

First appearance of Fred the Ferryman.

### **THE CHAOS BLADE**

Stone has added this file, although it is a separate record from his own. Gives very detailed information about the genesis of the Chaos Blade and its powers. The human subject of the file is Luke Phillips. (see separate file)

Secondary folder (events herein take place in the years 2015 and 2016) contains the following:

### **WAIT FOR THE RICOCHET**

Initial mention of the *Malleus Tenebrarum*, the "ultimate book of power" – see extract below.

"There are keys to power, dark and light. Where the war is confined to earthly realms, these keys can be very potent. They can define success or failure on a significant scale. There is a book that names them all, their properties, how they can be used. And where they can be found. *The Malleus Tenebrarum*. Nothing on this earth is more sought after than this book, and no other work is so jealously protected."

Details of a confrontation between Stone and Lucien de Sangreville, a powerful black magician (see separate file) on Snake Island. Vivid description of a Black Mass.

### **GIVE ME THE DAGGERS**

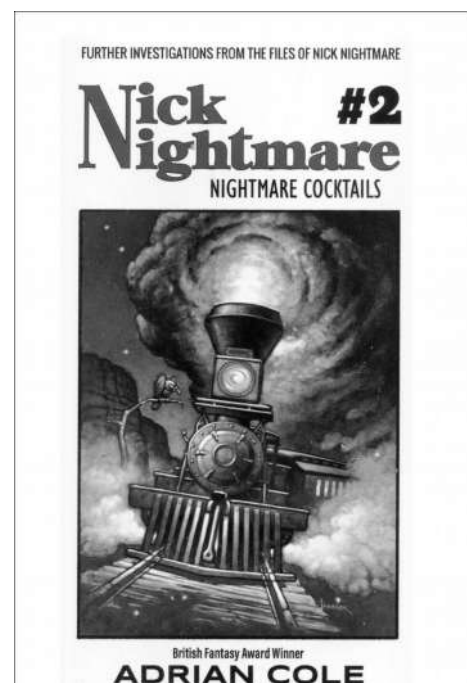
Stone's dealing with Dokta (sic) Dangerous and the Daggermen, an Eastern European circus act. First mention of Henry Maclean and his private submarine, *The Deep Green*. Conflict with secret organization known as The Angels of Malice.

### **YOU'LL LAUGH WHEN I TELL YOU**

A further meeting with Lucien de Sangreville. The illegal aspects of a chemical factory run by Doctor Vermeillen, associate of de Sangreville.

### **IN THE COURT OF THE PUMPKIN KING**

First appearance of the Pumpkin King and his servants, the Boneless Men and the Blind Gardeners, and their attempt at invasion. First meeting with Molly Maguire, also known as Scathach and the Lady of the Stones. She is the custodian of the Gae Bolg, a powerful instrument of power (see Celtic legends, Cuchulainn). Scathach's "familiar" is Caliban, a shape-changer, usually seen in the form of a large black cat.



## **TRAIN TO NOWHERE**

First mention of Artavian Wormdark, who conducts searches for rare books. Stone's first meeting with the artist known as "Japetus", real name Hal Drewster (see separate file). Stone's involvement with Carmella Cadenza at the "Dance of a Lifetime" and the use of the steam train, *Smokestack Lightning*, which is able to move between worlds.

## **THE PULLULATIONS OF THE TRIBE**

Stone assists Henry Maclean obtain a unique guitar. See note from the file below.

"If you play it one way, gently, it can open certain – doors. It's also a weapon. If you play the Entropic Chord, it can be very dangerous. Destructive. You can imagine what it would be like in the wrong hands. Like the forces of darkness."

Stone and Maclean enter an interstitial realm – conflict with Carmella Cadenza, Lucien de Sangreville and Spiderhead. Transition of Spiderhead to new host body.

## **AT MIDNIGHT ALL THE AGENTS...**

Detailed plans for the formation of a new *Vengeance Unlimited*. First reference to The Dark Army and its intentions. Initial file concerning the planned rescue of Alexander Cradoc (known as The Mire Beast – see file) from Cemetery City in the Pulpworld.

## **INTERLUDE IN TRASHVILLE**

Special additional file, told in Cradoc's own words. Origin of The Mire Beast and Cradoc's work for the secret military wing, **SECTION 5** (see separate file). Information about Trashville and the Maggot Men who run it.

## **...AND THE SUPERHUMAN CREW**

Conflict with elements of the Dark Army, including the Lord of the Crows and the Rat Master. First use of the *Deep Green* submarine as a flying machine.

Note: New *Vengeance Unlimited* indicated at this point to consist of: Stone, Ariadne Carnadine, Henry Maclean, Molly Maguire, with one other to be confirmed (initially Alexander Cradoc).

## **THE THIRD MOVEMENT**

Stone has added this file, although it is a separate record from his own. Gives details of Artavian Wormdark's custodianship of the *Malleus Tenebrarum*.

A Tertiary folder is currently being compiled.

## **CONFIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM**

### **Addendum to File WTF 666.**

From: Senior Associate Agent

To: Senior Director of Paranormal Operations

Subject: THE DARK ARMY

Information provided by Nick Stone in his files (specifically WTF 666) regarding the controversial organization known as The Dark Army underlines the real and present danger of that organization. Specifically it seeks to combine elements of a number of extremely dangerous groups, headed up by a powerful conclave of known criminals and enemies of the State, and on a wider, world scale.

A complete list of this core of subversive operators cannot be compiled at this time, but the known principal members of the Dark Army's control group are:

Lucien de Sangreville, Carmella Cadenza, Pyotr Moribundin (aka Doctor Moribund), Wolfgang Rottwanger, the Pumpkin King, the being known as Spiderhead (current human host not known) and Fung Chang (for more details, see separate file headed NIGHT OF THE HEROES). The subversive group known as The Angels of Malice are also a part of this organization.

It is clear from events described by Stone in the file AND THE SUPERHUMAN CREW that The Dark Army is becoming more active. Its association with certain ancient powers, particularly those known to be deep ocean dwellers, is especially disturbing, as is its allegiance to powers directly under the control of those using satanic forces. The Dark Army operates across a number of alternate worlds and, if Stone is correct, seeks control in as many of them as it can infest.

It is the Agency's belief, fully endorsed by the FBI, MI6 and other international counter-crime organisations, that it is in all our interests to support the work of the newly formed Vengeance Unlimited team. That team, headed by Nick Stone, has secretly pledged its services to our combined efforts, inclusive of the Lovecraft Squad, in this time of international peril.

~~~~~

ADRIAN COLE was born in Plymouth, Devon, UK in 1949 and has been a published author since the 1970s, when his first books, the *Dream Lord* trilogy, came out in the US from Zebra books. This was a sword and planet saga, influenced by ERB, HPL and DUNE among others, and was followed by a number of SF books for Robert Hale, two fantasy series, *The Omaran Saga* and the *Star Requiem* (Hyman in UK and Avon in US).

Adrian has written numerous short stories, varying from horror, sf, fantasy, pulp noir, and Mythos to young adult fantasy. Many have been collected and fused together to make series, such as the sword & sorcery *Voidal Saga*, new *Dream Lords* work and *Elak, King Of Atlantis* (new stories about Henry Kuttner's character from the original *Weird Tales*).

This is also true of Nick Nightmare, he being an occult detective of sorts, the first of whose bizarre adventures have been published in *Nick Nightmare Investigates* (winner of the British Fantasy Award for best collection in 2015) and *Nightmare Cocktails* (Pulp Hero Press, US), with a 3rd volume, *Nightmare Creatures* due out later this year. *Nightmare Cocktails* includes a revised version of 'At Midnight All the Agents', which first appeared in *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents*.

Nick Nightmare, Private Eye Public Fist, has been inspired by writers such as Mickey Spillane, Raymond Chandler and any number of comic books, to name but a few. In truth, NN is likely to bump into anything and anyone, from Lovecraft's Mythos, through the whole pulp environment, via rock music, TV crime (from the 60s to modern times). Although his earlier tales centred around the Mythos, he frequents a number of worlds that are very much linked to ours, in some cases hardly recognizable as not being our world, and at times in the Pulpworld he encounters characters from the fiction of our world. Added to the confusion is the fact that to them, he is from a work of fiction.

So, dazed and confused? Well, hell yeah, but it's Fun, and don't forget that.

Amazon Author page –

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Adrian-Cole/e/B001HOKNDM/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1

Pulp Hero Press website – <http://www.pulpheropress.com/>

MRS LILLCROP'S TRIP TO THE HIGHLANDS

Bev Allen

Somewhere, beyond the confines of the room, there was the steady *plink-plink* of water wheedling its way from somewhere it was supposed to be to somewhere it was not via a strategically placed bucket.

The man in the room ignored it.

Outside the window wind moaned, rain fell, and the castle was a dark silhouette against a backdrop of even darker pines. This should, of course, have been accompanied by the howls of wolves, the sound of racing horses and a careering coach, but this was Scotland and the kirk had firm views, so the only discernible noise was the dreary *plink-plink* and, if you listened carefully, the chattering of teeth.

The man in the room ignored this as well.

He also ignored his surroundings, being inured to the tartan carpet, the wall-mounted antlers – and a stuffed salmon with glass eyes, whose demeanour reminded the unwary of a rabid dog and put them off poached salmon for life, unless disguised *en croute*.

The gentleman's whole attention was on three blackboards arranged around the room. In the flickering light of the fire and the dim glow of a very dirty chandelier, cabalistic symbols, numbers and letters danced across their midnight surfaces. He should, perhaps, have been wearing a suitable robe, but he was kilted and one of his socks had fallen down; he had also taken to sucking the end of his chalk when thinking and had a white upper lip as a result.

He ignored this, like everything else and continued his intense survey of the boards.

The door opened and a throat was cleared.

It was cleared again.

A draught of more than usual savagery found its way to the gentleman's bare legs, and he finally tore his eyes from the blackboards.

The equally kilted man in the door said.

"The furnace has gone out... again, sir."

"Again?"

"Aye, sir. Your mother isnae happy."

The gentleman took this news on the chin.

"Neither is your wife and the other ladies."

Again, the gentleman rode the punch.

"And cook has given notice."

There was only so much any fighter could take.

"Oh God, no!"

"Aye. This coming after all that business with the sinks over-flowing and the back door being stuck open, she says she's had enough and is going to live with her sister in Inverness."

"What about Mary?" the gentleman asked, clinging to a melting ice flow.

"She's given notice as well. She says she can stand the cold, but she cannae take all the other things. All the books off the shelves in the library was the final straw."

He paused,

“Actually, finding the wee nest with all the little pink wrigglers was the final straw,” he said for the sake of truth.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” the gentleman wailed.

“You know what Lady McKechnie thinks.”

“I refuse to believe my wife’s theory about a ghost,” he replied, a shadow of a smile flitting across his face. “My mother wouldn’t allow one.”

The two of them exchanged a bonding look.

“Something isnae right, sir.”

But the gentleman’s eyes were already wandering back to his blackboards.

“Do what you can with the furnace,” he said, picking up a piece of chalk and making a change to one symbol.

The silence following this made him pause.

“I suppose I could talk to cook,” he said, but without conviction and then his whole attention was on his boards.

His henchman sighed, closed the door and went off to report to the other occupants of the castle.

The *plink-plink* was joined by a second one and together they duetted, but the gentleman remained oblivious until all three of his blackboards fell down. There was no controlled tumble as one toppled the other – they simply collapsed, face down with one collective whoosh.

There might have been an absence of wolves, but the gentleman’s howls of anguish were a fair approximation. By the time he’d got them all back up, a large proportion of the information on them had been successfully removed by the tartan carpet.

He picked up the telephone buried under a pile of papers on the desk and asked for a number.

Several hundred miles away, in an office high above Whitehall another telephone rang and was answered. There was, to the annoyance of the listening operator, a very brief conversation.

When it was over, the Whitehall telephone receiver was lifted again and the caller said.

“Tomorrow. Eleven o’clock, usual place.”

And a lady replied.

“Very well.”

* * *

The inside of Westminster Abbey was at least warmer than the October day outside. She entered through the West Door and allowing her eyes to adjust to the change of light, paused before the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, her face still and her eyes unreadable.

“It’s not him,” the same male voice as the caller said.

“I know,” she replied.

The gentleman was of a military bearing and older than she; he tucked his bowler hat under one arm and offered her the other.

Together they made their way left to the north aisle in silence.

“You did well over that business with the emerald ring,” he remarked, breaking the stillness.

“It was hardly a demanding problem,” she replied.

“True,” he agreed. “But one with some worrying implications.”

“You read my report?”

“I did. I think we’ll keep an eye on the butler.”

They made their way on to the Henry VII Chapel.

“It would be best if you handed the ring over to us for safe keeping,” he said.

Mrs Lillicrop's charming laugh sounded and a couple of visitors turned to see the source.
"We'd better move on," he said, hurriedly taking her arm. "It's dangerous. And powerful."
"Two very good reasons why you aren't going to have it," she replied.
"It could be of immense use..."

"No."

"But –"

"No."

They walked on, Mrs Lillicrop admiring the surroundings, he brooding.

"I need you to go to Scotland," he said, probably more abruptly than he intended.

"My dear, Charles! Scotland? At this time of year? I think not."

"Let's discuss the matter."

She gave him a smile, charming, but uncompromising.

"I really need you to go to Scotland," he said when they turned the corner.

"Why? Don't tell me there aren't any number of young men in your department only too eager to try their hand."

"Any number," he agreed, "but this needs careful handling. A subtle touch."

"Ah," she said. "Not something your department goes in for."

"Which is why I need you to go to Scotland."

"No," she said. "It explains why you can't deal with it, but nothing else."

He dropped his voice very low and murmured, "Possibly a haunting."

She raised her eyebrows.

"But not a straightforward one if it can't be handled by your people."

"From the initial report, no," he replied.

Mrs Lillicrop made no comment and they moved on to Poet's Corner.

"You've told me a little of the why and the what," she said. "But who is so important that you to want to rid them of their unwanted guest?"

"His name is Sir Alexander McKechnie. He's a bit of a maths wizard," Charles replied. "Almost a genius and a time may be coming when we'll need people like him, and when we do, we don't want him distracted."

"And he lives in Scotland?"

"Yes, some God forsaken place in the Highlands called Castle Craig."

"Alone?"

"There's a wife," he said. "And some other female relatives."

"Dear me," Mrs Lillicrop remarked. "How unfortunate."

She moved on from Poet's Corner and he swore softly under his breath.

"Damn... I mean dash it, ma'am, if you must know, I need a woman to deal with a gaggle of hysterical women!"

"Misogyny, my dear Charles?"

He ground his teeth and growled,

"Inexperience."

He watched her walk on, but he thought he saw a slight change in her expression and allowed himself a small smile.

"I've reserved a first class sleeping compartment for tomorrow night," he said when he caught up with her. "You'll be met at Fort William and driven to Craig Castle."

Mrs Lillicrop said nothing.

"I'll have a car collect you and take you to Euston."

She still said nothing.

"You can dine on the train, but I'll take you to tea before you depart."

Still she said nothing.

"At The Ritz," he said in the tones of a man pushed to his limits.

"I'll go home and pack," she replied, giving him her best smile.

"About the ring..."

"Don't push your luck, Charles."

* * *

The knitting had fallen unnoticed from Sylvia Laver-Thomas' cold numbed fingers; she'd lost the thread of the conversation around her a while ago and was now wandering in a delightful daydream of Brazil. The sun was hot, there was Latin music and parrots, she'd no idea if parrots were indigenous to Brazil, but she liked to think they were.

"Sylvia!"

The voice snapped her back into the reality of the chilly drawing room.

"Yes, mummy," she said.

"I've told you not to daydream. This is the third time I've spoken your name."

"Sorry, mummy."

It crossed Sylvia's mind that "*Sorry, mummy*" were probably the first words she'd uttered and she'd been saying them ever since. She'd hoped when she said "*I do*", to Antony she'd never have to say them again.

"Had you been paying attention you would've heard me telling Alexander how totally unnecessary it is for this woman to come here."

"Sorry, mummy."

Marjorie, Lady McKechnie was standing with her ample back to the fire. As her son Alexander was standing to one side filling his pipe, and her daughter-in-law Lavinia was perched on a pouffe on the other side, not a hint of heat escaped into the rest of the room.

If she'd the courage, Sylvia might have mentioned the series of incidents which were making an already magnificently uncomfortable house even more unbearable – the suddenly temperamental furnace, the unexpected descent of pictures, ornaments and books from walls and shelves, tiles whirling from the roof, windows opening by themselves, and carpets, miles from any water source, found soaking wet, but she just said, "Yes, mummy."

Alexander McKechnie was made of sterner stuff.

"I'm sorry you don't like it, mater, but something isn't right, and the Col... a gentleman I know says this Mrs Lillicrop can help."

"Is she a medium?" Lavinia asked, looking up from the fire, vague interest on her perfect porcelain face. "I'd like to know who's haunting us."

"We're *not* being haunted!" Marjorie snapped.

Lavinia looked puzzled. "I thought we must be as I can never find any of my things."

There was a snort of laughter from a heap of shawls and blankets in a chair.

"Be silent, Diana," Marjorie McKechnie commanded, but without much conviction as Lavinia's inability to find anything had nothing to do with any possible haunting.

The heap rearranged itself into human form.

"I think it would be fun if we were haunted," the girl who emerged said.

Marjorie inflated herself to deliver a suitable response, but was deflated by the door opening.

"I've brought the lady," the manservant announced. "No doubt you'll be wantin' your tea now she's here."

He stood to one side to admit a tall, elegant lady dressed in impeccably cut tweeds. She bestowed a charming smile on the assembled company and said, "Good afternoon."

Sir Alexander managed to move faster than his mother and came forward, hand outstretched.

"Mrs Lillicrop?" he asked.

She nodded and took his hand. There was the briefest of pauses as their eyes met and he said, very softly, "Thank God," then he turned to the servant, "Yes. Thank you, Niven. Tea would be most welcome."

"Aye, well, that's as maybe. Wait until you see it," the man replied and left.

Marjorie McKechnie's internal bellows were under strain, she'd inflated to admonish Niven, but was forced to deflate for introductions.

"My mother," Sir Alexander explained, leading Mrs Lillicrop forward.

"How do you do," Marjorie began, but was again degassed by her son quickly bringing forward his wife.

Lavinia McKechnie didn't rise from her pouffe (another enlarged mother-in-law moment), but lifted up her lovely face and one limp hand.

"We're haunted, you know," she said in her soft sweet voice. "I can feel it, I'm very sensitive."

"You're talking rubbish, my dear," Marjorie announced, still at full pressure.

"Oh, no," Lavinia replied, in her usual marshmallow tone. "He never came back from Solway Moss and now she walks the house bemoaning her loss and seeking revenge on the English."

Again there was a giggle from the shawl and blanket heap.

"And this is Lavy's sister, Diana Horell," Sir Alexander said, diverting his mother and putting dangerous pressure on her safety valve.

A teenage girl emerged from under her covers. It was possible that, with time and effort, the girl would be as slim as her sister, but for now she filled her woollen dress to capacity, and there wasn't time enough in the world to turn her eyes china blue or her hair the glossy dark luxury her sister boasted. It was as if the family fairy godmother had used all her gifts on one and made a quick exit into the vestry when the other was at the font.

"How do you do?" Mrs Lillicrop said extending a hand.

"How do you do," the girl replied, "It's cold. It's always cold here."

"I say, old girl," Sir Alexander protested, "it's not too bad when the furnace is working."

"When," the girl replied and returned to her heap.

Sylvia had been watching all this in silence; her mother had never encouraged a chorus and she had learnt long ago the wisdom of keeping her mouth shut when Marjorie was turning that particular shade of puce. Now that the London lady had turned to her, she held out her hand as her brother made the introduction, and looked up into Mrs Lillicrop's coffee brown eyes.

The room went still and silent – and in that still silence, Sylvia was aware of the baby growing inside her, of Antony so far away and, just for the briefest moment, the air seemed filled with the smell of rain and heat and green growing things.

"Here's yuir tea!"

The moment passed; Mrs Lillicrop had turned from her and was looking to Niven who had staggered in under the weight of a silver tea service and a Dundee cake of equal substantiality. By rights the lady of the house should have presided over the distribution of tea, but Lavinia seemed happy to allow her mother-in-law to usurp her place.

Mrs Lillicrop seated herself beside Sylvia and raised a delicate pair of gold *pince-nez* to her nose to better inspect what was on offer. Everything about Mrs Lillicrop was neat and elegant, except the chain from which the *pince-nez* hung; this was made of heavy gold links and each link was decorated with a tiny gemstone. It fascinated Sylvia, as each rippled when Mrs Lillicrop's gaze went

from her hostess to the others, and it seemed when that gaze came to rest on her mother, a chip of obsidian darkened on its link.

“Is it just shortbread again?” Diana demanded, rising to accept her cup of tea. “I’m starving.”

There was momentarily less air in the room as Marjorie sucked in about half the available oxygen.

“Whisky,” Sir Alexander said stepping into the vacuum. “Perhaps you would care for a little single malt with your tea, Mrs Lillicrop?”

Mrs Lillicrop expressed her delight in the prospect, but rejected the offer of shortbread. Diana helped herself to a couple of pieces of shortbread and a large slice of Dundee cake before she could be stopped.

Marjorie had returned to her place in front of the fire, causing the slight rise in temperature to once again plummet; the sight of Mrs Lillicrop calmly sipping a glass of whisky diverted her attention from the girl.

“I think it only proper to tell you, Mrs Lillicrop,” she said in magisterial tones “That I consider everything that has happened in this house to have a logical explanation.”

“I feel sure you are right,” Mrs Lillicrop replied.

“Then, perhaps, you’ll be good enough...”

“Mummy.”

“I have told you times without number not to interrupt me, Sylvia.”

“I’m sorry, mummy, but –”

“Please be silent.”

“Sorry, mummy, but you’re on fire.”

Marjorie McKechnie turned to see the edge of her skirt smouldering and wisps of smoke eddying about her knees. Diana gasped with laughter, Sylvia wrung her hands, Lavinia looked puzzled and Sir Alexander attacked his mother with a cushion, beating her legs as hard as he could.

Under cover of all this Mrs Lillicrop made her excuses, took her whisky and went to find her room, ostensibly to unpack.

* * *

Sylvia Laver-Thomas heard the dinner gong and winced. She would’ve liked a bowl of soup in her room, but her mother and the cold made this impossible. Although it wasn’t really a formal dinner, despite their visitor, she decided to risk her mother’s disapproval and wear the short mink evening jacket Antony had given her as a wedding present.

She brushed away a tear; she never knew how her mother had convinced him she couldn’t go with him to Brazil because she was pregnant. She might have sat down for a proper cry, but was diverted by the radiator in her bedroom – it gurgled at her. One hand confirmed it was warm. Marvellously cheered by this she made her way out onto the landing and met Mrs Lillicrop, who was wearing a long grey evening gown.

“The furnace is working,” she said, joyfully.

Mrs Lillicrop gave her a warm smile.

“Good evening, my dear,” she said. “What a charming jacket.”

And Sylvia, no longer lachrymose, felt she could face the meal ahead.

The dining room at Castle Craig had been designed for substantially more persons than were present. No-one had thought, in view of the diminished numbers, that removing some of the leaves from the table might have been a good idea, nor had they thought the tartan carpet, the large pictures of dead or dying game and the assorted antique weapons could comfortably be

removed. Candles burning in tarnished silver candelabra and the light from a very dirty crystal chandelier did nothing to enhance the ambience.

Despite what convention may have decreed, Marjorie McKechnie took the chair at the bottom of the table opposite her son, while Lavinia drifted into a seat near him. Conversation was desultory; the subject of the hot water now glugging its way through hidden pipes and farting rhythmically into voluminous radiators was not mentioned until Diana burst into the room followed by Niven bearing an enormous soup tureen.

"The furnace is working!"

Diana's astonishment and volume cut across the dinner table.

"You're late," Marjorie replied in arctic tones.

Diana shrugged her indifference and sat herself down next to Sylvia.

"Who got it started?"

"I imagine Niven," Marjorie said, "An apology for your tardiness would be appreciated."

"It wasnae me," Niven announced. "It just started. Here's yuir soup."

The serving of soup and the presence of a servant held Marjorie McKechnie for a while, but once Niven had left the room she turned to her son.

"Alexander, I think you had better speak to your sister-in-law about her manners. What might have been acceptable in Africa is not acceptable here."

Sir Alexander, who had been mentally tussling with a recalcitrant formula nearly choked on his soup.

"Um... yes... right-ho," he said. "Er... shouldn't turn up late for meals, Di."

This wasn't enough for his mother.

"When your dear mama sent you to us, she intended you be weened from your colonial attitudes," she announced. "No doubt if your father could leave his post and give his attention to your upbringing he would, but he knows where his duty lies, therefore it is up to me... us... to try and make you fit to be presented."

"I was supposed to go to school," Diana snapped.

"And as I've told you again and again, education is unnecessary for girls of your class. All you need is to learn good manners and how to dance, so you can be presented and find a suitable husband."

"I don't want to be presented," Diana said.

At this her sister intervened.

"Of course you do, Di, she said. "It's marvellous fun, you get lots of pretty dresses and go to the nicest parties."

She beamed fatuously at Sir Alexander.

"And you get to meet the most super young men."

He smiled back equally fatuously and his mother looked at them with a basilisk stare. Far away in the direction of the kitchen there was a shriek.

The door opened and Niven came in.

"The gigot will be a few minutes," he said. "And cook would be obliged if you went easy shares on the tatties."

Mrs Lillicrop poured herself a glass of water, and the basilisk stare turned her way.

"Have you found a ghost yet, Mrs Lillicrop?" Marjorie asked in tones like a honey covered razor.

"Every house or place of antiquity has its ghosts," Mrs Lillicrop replied. "They're echoes of events and emotions which seep into the surroundings. Many people have some sense of them, a feeling, but there are others who are aware."

"I'm one of those," Lavinia announced. "I'm very sensitive."

"Those Solway Moss fancies again?" Marjorie said. "You're quite mistaken, my dear. The current house wasn't even built in 1542, so it's extremely unlikely we've a ghost from that time."

"Maybe it's a fleeing Jacobite," Lavinia mused, quite unabashed at her favourite theory being shot down. "Some Highland lord escaping from Culloden and coming here to seek refuge only to die of his wounds."

"Any Jacobite coming here would've been given a very poor welcome; the laird of the time knew where his bread was buttered."

"I expect he was a Jacobite at heart," she replied with a dreamy smile.

A draught of icy cold air lifted the curtains and made all the candles flicker; wax began to stream away and dribble down. Everyone looked at the candles and then at Mrs Lillicrop.

She touched her lips with her napkin, picked up the pepper from her cruet and shook some onto the palm of her hand, then blew it into the guttering candles. The draught died, the candles went back to burning normally and Mrs Lillicrop returned to her soup.

No-one said a word, not when Niven returned bearing the roast mutton, not when Sir Alexander nearly impaled himself trying to carve, nor when Diana snaffled most of the roast potatoes. It wasn't until a crème caramel had been placed on the table that anyone opened their mouth to do other than eat.

"You appear to have a vocation as an excluder of draughts," Marjorie McKechnie said. She'd been rehearsing the line. "I've a particularly fierce one in my bedroom; perhaps you could see your way to dealing with it."

Her daughter gasped at the remark, her son frowned, her daughter-in-law didn't notice and Diana giggled.

"I think you will find a small piece of cardboard wedged under the frame will cure it, Lady McKechnie" Mrs Lillicrop replied.

Marjorie inflated like the Hindenburg and rose to her feet, but when she found her voice she said "We will take our coffee in the drawing room," and made towards the door.

"I've not finished my pud," Diana said, spooning up the tiniest bit of crème caramel from the miniscule amount remaining in her bowl.

Ignoring this, the Hindenburg took wing and as she went, a pair of claymores took the opportunity to leave the wall they were attached to and land on the credenza beneath, breaking a china rendition of a dead stag.

The silence in the drawing room was nearly as heavy as the Dundee cake had been. Sir Alexander took fright, declined coffee and fled to his blackboards; Diana went back to her seat and a book, although she rarely, if ever turned a page. Sylvia took up her knitting and Lavinia, watched in disgust by her mother-in-law, cast rune stones on the side table.

Mrs Lillicrop watched them all, a small smile playing on her lips. She raised her *pince-nez*, ostensibly to look at the mantel piece clock, but as she raised it, the tiny gemstones adorning the chain caught the light and danced around the room.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "But it has been a long day and I find I'm quite fatigued, so I will retire to bed."

* * *

Mrs Lillicrop made careful preparations before she retired – she wasn't expecting a night of uninterrupted repose. A long and careful inspection of the room found nothing to concern her, so she picked *The Bride of Lammermoor* from a selection of books by the bed, and read until she heard the others come upstairs.

Once the sounds of recriminations and door banging died down, she closed her book, put her electric torch and *pince-nez* under her pillow, extinguished her lamp and lay down to await developments.

She was dozing when some instinct brought her fully awake. The room was in total darkness; there was no moon, and the sky was so overcast not a glimmer of starlight showed under the curtains. She reached out a hand to turn on the bedside light and wasn't the least surprised to find it no longer working. At first there was total silence. Even the normal sounds of an old house creaking in its bones were hushed; then, softly, as if carried by some breeze came the sound of distant pipes. Somewhere, far away, a lone piper was playing a lament, wailing of loss and tragedy and heartbreak.

Mrs Lillicrop sighed, turned on her torch and put her *pince-nez* on her nose; the tiny gems on the chain glimmered and the gold looked almost liquid in the soft light.

"I think we can dispense with the musical accompaniment," she said. There was a sparkle from a lively little topaz near the bottom of the chain and the pipe music stopped, but the temperature in the room took a dramatic turn. Far from getting colder, it began to rise; the air became thick with streaming humidity and the smell of rotting vegetation, and the darkness in one corner grew deeper and darker and densely black. Slowly but surely it billowed and blossomed as it began to tumble across the floor and out to the walls, steadily filling the room. Inexorably it approached the bed, leaving Mrs Lillicrop perched on an island of eiderdown in a sea of darkness. Small eddies began to curl over the edge of the bed, seeking a foothold among the folds, always moving nearer and nearer to her.

"Yes, thank you," Mrs Lillicrop said and flicked her *pince-nez* in the direction of the blackness. "That will be quite enough."

The blackness gathered itself into a great hovering mass, paused for a moment and then rushed back to the corner. Somewhere in the house there was a sound between pain and rage.

Mrs Lillicrop turned over and went to sleep.

* * *

When Mrs Lillicrop entered the breakfast room only Sir Alexander was present; he was eating toast, dripping marmalade onto a notebook beside his plate, and didn't notice her until she cleared her throat.

"Good morning."

He spluttered buttery crumbs, tried to rise and knocked over a cup of tea.

"My wife is having breakfast in bed," he explained while mopping up. "I think there was a bit of a row last night."

"How distressing," Mrs Lillicrop remarked, helping herself to porridge. She checked to make sure cream and sugar had been provided; in her opinion, despite local prejudices, salt had no place on porridge. "Will the other ladies be joining us?"

"Sylvia isn't very well in the mornings at the moment, and my mother is still in her room. Diana will probably be along soon."

On cue the door opened to admit Diana followed by Niven bearing a chafing dish.

"Eggs and bacon," he announced. "Cook's lying down."

"Why?" Sir Alexander exclaimed in anguish.

"Something about the little bitty thing she uses for making the wee butter pats," Niven replied as if this was all the information required. "I've done yuir eggs and bacon."

"Lavy will have to speak to her," Sir Alexander said with a sigh. "Or perhaps mother..."

"I couldn't find the old mistress," Niven announced. "She's not in her room."

"There's no need for you to trouble your wife," Mrs Lillicrop said, inspecting the eggs and bacon and rejecting them in favour of toast. "I'll speak to cook and reassure her the trouble is over."

He stared at her.

"Is it?"

"It will be very shortly," Mrs Lillicrop replied. "All of it. Now, I'm sure you've a great deal to do on your blackboards and there's no need for you to remain just to entertain me, Diana will be delighted to be your deputy."

"She will?" he said gazing at his sister-in-law as if he'd never seen her before.

"Certainly," Mrs Lillicrop said.

He rose and left the room, clutching his dripping notebook. Niven watched him go, shook his head and cleared his plate before leaving the room; as he went, Mrs Lillicrop rose and locked the door behind him.

"What are you doing?" Diana demanded.

"Making sure we're not interrupted," Mrs Lillicrop replied.

She surveyed the girl – her hair needed brushing, her clothes needed ironing and her lisle stockings needed darning; time might do something about the spots, but nothing could hide the intelligence or the malevolence in her eyes.

"How old are you?" Mrs Lillicrop asked.

"Mind your own business," Diana replied.

The *pince-nez* came up to Mrs Lillicrop elegant straight nose and she regarded the girl with her coffee brown eyes magnified in the lenses. Slowly the colour drained from Diana's face and her expression changed from insolence to fear, and from fear to panic. In her head a voice said,

"*Would you like to breathe?*"

Diana nodded vigorously, terror filling her face.

The *pince-nez* fell and the girl gasped in air, the colour slowly returning to her face.

"It's a mistake to think good manners are a sign of weakness," Mrs Lillicrop remarked. "Shall we begin again. You're about sixteen, am I correct?"

Diana nodded, sucking air into her abused lungs

"Too young for the sort of power you've been given without supervision. Please give me the fetish."

"What fetish?"

The *pince-nez* came up and Diana's hand went to her throat; after the briefest moment she took a gasp of air and Mrs Lillicrop said

"I won't allow you to be rude and I won't allow you to be tedious. Please give me the fetish you brought from Africa."

Diana glared at her with undisguised loathing, but the *pince-nez* was posed, so reluctantly the girl reached into the pocket of her cardigan and handed over a small wooden carving of a woman's head tied with a braided black cord and the claw of some animal. Mrs Lillicrop examined it, and a diamond on her *pince-nez* chain flashed and sent prisms of rainbow light around the room.

"Padauk wood," she said. "Interesting. You know how powerful this is?"

There was a slight hesitation,

"Of course, I do."

"No, you don't, I think you believe it's nothing more than a help to make mischief," Mrs Lillicrop replied. "You've barely got control over it. Remember last night?"

"I did nothing..."

"Lying is another form of bad manners," Mrs Lillicrop warned.

"I could've stopped it any time," Diana replied sullenly.

"Really? Are you sure?"

A vein throbbed in Diana's throat.

"Do you remember what happened when I sent it back to you?"

The colour drained from Diana's face.

Mrs Lillicrop looked again at the carving, at the deep red wood, the claw and the tight braid which seemed to cut into the surface.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"I made it," Diana said triumphantly.

"Alone?"

"No, I had help from someone, someone who cared about me." Her tone changed and became full of pain. "If you must know, I was sent home because I was getting too friendly with the natives. According to Mummy that's not good form."

Mrs Lillicrop gave her a speculative look, seeing the tears of frustrated hurt and rage.

"You are not totally undeserving, so I'm going to save you."

"From what?"

"From dancing and deportment classes; from being bundled into a white dress and feathers so you can make an indifferent curtsy to an uninterested king, followed by three months of being a wallflower at some extremely dull parties."

"Lavy loved it."

"You won't!"

The girl's face clouded. "I know."

"There's an alternative."

"What?"

"You could learn to use the talent you have," Mrs Lillicrop said. "There's a little girl I know of who's going to need some firm guidance if she's not going to be a menace to society. She's too young to begin yet, but you aren't – I can teach you."

Diana turned this over in her mind and hope brightened her eyes, but there was suspicion too.

"Why would you help me?"

"Several reasons," Mrs Lillicrop replied. "Firstly, there are troubling times ahead of us, which means there'll be work for persons with our special talents – and secondly, I've taken a particular dislike to your sister's mother-in-law."

A real smile lifted Diana's face and she giggled; then her face grew dark and sullen again.

"They wouldn't let me," she snarled.

"Yes, they will," Mrs Lillicrop replied. "I know someone with far more influence over Sir Alexander than any of them and he'll do a great deal to oblige me."

"I'm not sure..." Diana began, torn between escaping from her present situation and wariness for what might await her.

"Choose!" the voice in her head commanded.

Her eyes starting from her head, and beads of sweat beginning to form on her brow, Diana gasped, "I'll come."

"Excellent." Mrs Lillicrop said. "You can go and pack."

They parted after some small arguments typical of the teenage mind which Mrs Lillicrop had no difficulty in suppressing. The wooden fetish in her pocket, she went in search of her host.

He was astounded to find she wanted a ride to the station in order to be in Edinburgh in time for the sleeper train to London and that she was taking Diana with her.

"But you can't," he said.

"Why not?"

He floundered for a second.

"The problem," he said. "Her parents... Lavy..." He swallowed hard, "My mother."

"I'll deal with Mr and Mrs Horrel," Mrs Lillicrop assured him. "And nothing more will go bump in the night."

"You're sure?"

She nodded, "However, if I were you, I'd buy my wife a couple of puppies and my sister a ticket to South America."

"Why?"

"One needs something to think about, and the other needs to be with her husband."

"And my mother?"

"Ah, yes," Mrs Lillicrop said, the corners of her mouth turning up. "Your mother... what *can* have become of her?"

News came while Mrs Lillicrop was packing, apparently Marjorie McKechnie had been found stark naked in the local kirk, an empty bottle of whisky beside her and singing selections from the repertoire of Sir Harry Lauder. The minster had taken deep exception to her rendition of "*Roamin in the Gloamin.*"

"Oh, my God!" Sir Alexander had wailed on being told. "Oh, my God, she'll never live this down."

"The South of France is charming," Mrs Lillicrop told him. "And just far enough away."

* * *

Niven was silent on the journey to Fort William, but as he handed Mrs Lillicrop and Diana onto the train he said, "Will you tell the Colonel I'll continue to keep an eye on things, ma'am?"

"I will."

And Mrs Lillicrop and her new pupil began their long journey home.

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"**BEV ALLEN** is married and mother of two adult children..."

Or, Bev is a crazy old woman who writes weird short stories about things like a bloke having sex with his garden pond and, when she has remembered her medication, sci-fic/fantasy adventures liberally laced with soldiers. She has a fondness for soldiers which should not be taken to mean she stands on street corners in garrison towns.

The sex with a pond story can be found in Bev's excellent weird fiction collection, *A Solemn Curfew and Other Dark Tales*, which is currently available in Kindle format, but a brand new paperback (and ebook) edition is due in the near future from Cathaven press.

The first adventure of her occult detective – Mrs Lillicrop, can be found in the pages of *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents*, and we are promised more to come.

Cathaven Press will eventually be reissuing all of her work, in the hope that we can survive the curse that seems to cause any publisher she works with to almost immediately go out of business.

Bev, and her husband, Dan are also active members of the Victorian Military Society.

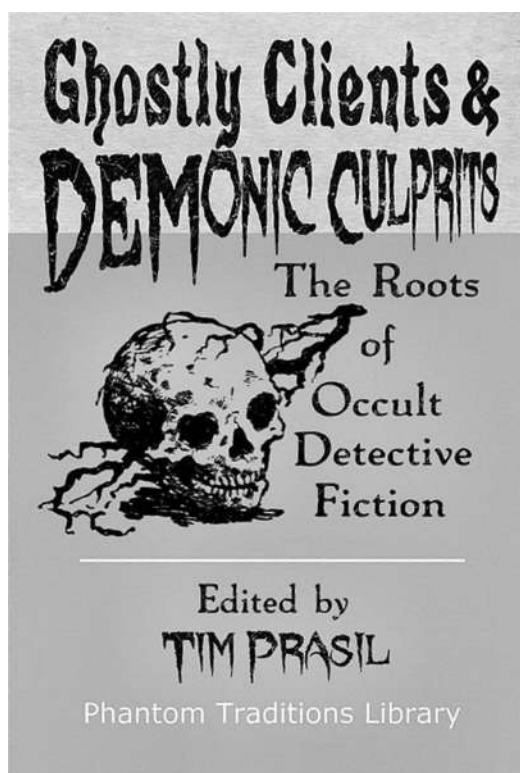
Bev's blog – <https://kentishmaid.wordpress.com/>

The Victorian Military Society – <https://www.victorianmilitary.org/>

[This is a slightly revised version of Tim Prasil's Introduction to his anthology titled *Ghostly Clients & Demonic Culprits: The Roots of Occult Detective Fiction*, published by Brom Bones Books.]

## THE TWIN ROOTS OF OCCULT DETECTIVE FICTION

*Tim Prasil*



Sometimes, ghosts have a very difficult time explaining why they've returned to the land of the living. Take, for instance, the case of Dorrien, a college tutor who died – with unfinished business – back in 1746. His spirit returned to campus, and after several sightings were reported, one intrigued professor named Oeder mustered the courage to investigate. Upon witnessing the ghost himself, the professor was convinced that the visitation was authentic. However, further probing failed to divulge the reason for Dorrien's return, and Oeder decided that the ghost would have to *come to him* if seeking assistance. Sure enough, the materializations began to occur in Oeder's bedroom. The professor knew that the tutor had been a conscientious man while living, so he asked Dorrien if he had died with an unpaid debt. Unable to speak, the specter responded by moving a pipe across his mouth. Was he signaling that he owed money to a tobacconist? No, this proved to not be the solution. When Dorrien appeared later, he presented a different clue: he held up a picture with a hole in it, through which he slipped his head. With some help, Oeder eventually deduced that Dorrien had borrowed – but never returned – several slides for use with a magic lantern. Once those plates were returned to their proper owner, the tutor's spirit was put at rest.

The tale of Dorrien's unreturned magic lantern slides certainly lacks a compelling motive for finding one's way back from the Great Beyond. However, Oeder is really the star of the story, since



he's the one who exhibits bravery, frustration, tenacity, and finally intelligence enough to solve the mystery of why Dorrien bothered to return. In other words, Oeder assumes the role of the 'occult detective' while Dorrien acts as his 'ghostly client'. These paired figures have a long history. Stories of a troubled ghost and a living person who resolves the supernatural mystery go back at least as far as an anecdote told in Pliny the Younger's first-century letter to Sura. There, it's Athenodorus whose curiosity, courage, and calmness lets him discover and correct an ignominious burial that had resulted in a house being haunted. Oddly, the backstory explaining why the ghost's body had been buried in chains and without ceremony is never addressed. Instead, as with the Dorrien narrative, the hero is the one who confronts the dimensional breach and pieces together the puzzle.

According to legend and folklore, there are a range of reasons why ghostly clients engage occult detectives. In *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead & Cultural Transformation*, R.C. Finucane surveys the millennia of beliefs about ghosts in Western Civilization, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the twentieth century. He discusses records of specters seeking proper burial and settling financial legacies, phantoms craving due punishment for their murderers or begging for forgiveness for their own crimes, and ghosts with other goals. "There are often mixed motives in a ghostly visitation, in all times," writes Finucane. Frequently, these spirits are wise in selecting their flesh-and-blood agent – say, a friend or family member – and matters are swiftly resolved. Sometimes, though, even when specters are able to clearly communicate their *final* final wishes, their choice of proxy proves unwise. Finucane recounts the case from the mid-1600s that concerns Anna Walker. After being murdered by a man, one hired by a relative who had impregnated her, Walker materialized in ghostly form before a local miller, a seemingly random choice. Walker gave the miller full details on who murdered her, why she was murdered, how she was murdered, and even where her body could be found. Nonetheless, the fainthearted miller took no action, so Walker had to return to the miller again and again, finally *terrifying* him into conveying to the magistrate what she had told him. Only then were the crime investigated and the guilty punished. Of course, such well-spoken ghosts and quivering agents are hardly the stuff of occult detective fiction.

Instead, characters such as Professor Oeder and Athenodorus – who exhibit sharp minds and stalwart hearts when confronted by baffling ghosts – led to this cross-genre of mystery and supernatural fiction. Despite this long legacy, ghostly clients seem a bit rare among occult detectives as we have come to know them since the twentieth century. Thomas Carnacki, John Silence, Carl Kolchak, Agents Mulder and Scully, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Harry Dresden, and their many colleagues focus less on serving supernatural sufferers and more on ousting otherworldly ogres. Vampires, werewolves, zombies, and their ilk are what I call 'demonic culprits'. They join the ghostly clients to complete a triangle that mirrors the detective, client, and criminal triad found in more secular mystery fiction.

Ghostly clients and demonic culprits form master plots that have become the twin roots of occult detective fiction, and they both appear to have emerged and evolved alongside one another. About 50 years after Pliny the Younger related the tale of Athenodorus, Lucian of Samosata had a character named Arignotus tell a suspiciously similar one about his own ghost hunt. It was in his *The Lover of Lies* (c. 150), where the ghost is depicted as a monstrous, shapeshifting entity that seems to relish horrifying unwary mortals. Instead of following it, Arignotus must repel the ghost with esoteric incantations, and in this version, digging up the skeleton (there are no chains now!) feels more like uncovering a monster's lair than a tragic past.

Around sixteen centuries later, two Cornish legends emerged that illustrate how each figure continued to haunt the living. The first is a ghostly client tale recorded in '*A Remarkable Passage of*

*an Apparition*’, a transcription of uncertain authorship published in 1720. It involves Parson Ruddle, who guides a sad spirit named Dorothy Dingley towards final peace. About the same time, in the same region, a demonic culprit tale was told about Parson Dodge, who banished a devilish manifestation. Thomas Q. Couch titled the legend ‘*The Spectral Coach*’, and his transcription was first published in 1865. Close to that year, Bayard Taylor relied on standard fiction – not legend – to relate a story that is particularly worth noting in terms of dividing ghostly clients from demonic culprits. In ‘*The Haunted Shanty*’ (1861), the narrator decides that whatever is wreaking havoc in the title home arises from “the malice of some infernal power rather than the righteous justice of God.” However, after doing some basic detective work, this narrator learns that the demonic damage is a result of incurable heartbreak, not inherent evil. In other words, this is a sympathetic monster, more like the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* than the vampire in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Even so, fiction generally maintains the clear divide between ghostly client and demonic culprit that had been established in folklore.

My digging up these twin roots of occult detective fiction has led to some interesting finds. For example, I now doubt that there is a single, clear-cut starting point for the tradition. When I first started exploring this body of fiction, there was a fairly solid consensus among critics that occult detective fiction began after Sherlock Holmes had become a full-fledged sensation in the 1890s. Granted, one saw prototypes in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Dr Hesselius (1869), Bram Stoker’s Dr Abraham Van Helsing (1897), and maybe as far back as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s anonymous narrator in ‘*The Haunted and the Haunters*’ (1859). But ‘true’ occult detectives, according to these critics, didn’t come on stage until 1897, when L.T. Meade and Robert Eustace’s John Bell debuted in *Cassell’s Family Magazine* or certainly by 1898, when the adventures of E. and H. Heron’s Flaxman Low began in *Pearson’s*. This search for starting points raises questions about who passes the Occult Detective Qualifying Exam. For instance, John Bell and Flaxman Low are both series characters – is this a requirement? Is there a useful distinction between an occult detective and an occult investigator? Are occult detectives limited to those characters who do such work as professionals or, at least, experienced experts in occult study? In other words, can occult detectives be amateurs in the way that characters such as Miss Marple or the Hardy Boys are in conventional mystery fiction?

This last question is easy to answer: yes, the earliest occult detectives almost certainly are amateurs and, therefore, they aren’t called in on cases so much as stumble upon them. While nineteenth-century mystery fiction reflects the fact that, in the real life, criminal detective work developed into a profession, supernatural detecting did not. It’s interesting, then, to see who the early authors cast in the role: the frontiersman whose survival skills assist him in reading visual clues in Henry William Herbert’s ‘*The Haunted Homestead*’ (1840), a doctor with a special interest in topics that stretch the limits of science in the anonymous ‘*A Needle in a Bottle*’ (1874), or an office clerk eager to find more rewarding work in Charlotte Riddle’s ‘*The Open Door*’ (1885). To understand how occult detective fiction interweaves with its more secular sibling, it is useful to remember that an actual full-time occult detective probably would have seemed absurd in the nineteenth-century – and would do so even in a kind of fiction that depends on *some* realism to be scary.

Another challenge to the premise that there’s an easily identified start to occult detective fiction is the trend to be more inclusive when charting the history of mystery fiction. There has been a movement lately to replace the view that one author alone initiates or invents a literary genre – a monogenic approach – with the premise that several, diverse authors contribute to the birth of a generic tradition. The latter is referred to as a polygenic approach, a distinction Lucy Sussex uses to challenge the idea that Edgar Allan Poe stands in isolation as the creator of

detective fiction. She is particularly interested in illuminating the role that women authors had in developing mystery fiction, first tracking the generic roots through several non-fictional, fictional, and theatrical works. Along the way, Sussex points out, “There is actually more mystery in Ann Radcliffe’s novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* than in William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, hailed as the first novel to feature a detective,” and Radcliffe’s novel beat Godwin’s to publication by several weeks. Sussex goes on to say that Catherine Crowe’s *Susan Hopley; or, Circumstantial Evidence* (1841) is a murder mystery with three female detectives published four months before Poe introduced readers to C. Auguste Dupin with ‘*The Murders of the Rue Morgue*’. The polygenic approach to the birth of mystery fiction also validates and finds a place for the other works that have been cited as pre-Poe mystery fiction, including Voltaire’s *Zadig, or The Book of Fate* (1748), E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Mademoiselle de Scudéri* (1819), the anonymous *Richmond; Or, Scenes in the Life of a Bow Street Officer, Drawn Up from His Private Memoranda* (1827), and William Leggett’s ‘*The Rifle*’ (1827).

We must add to this list two works that are particularly relevant to Poe: William Evans Burton’s ‘*The Secret Cell*’ (1837) and Herbert’s ‘*The Haunted Homestead*’ (1840). Both of these stories spotlight a smart, sharp-eyed, determined crime-solver. Both were written by writers working in the US with whom Poe was familiar, and both stories appeared in print a few years before Poe’s first Dupin tale. Though Poe certainly refined and redirected this kind of story, the three authors show that crime mystery was in the air. Herbert’s tale is especially interesting in that it features a distinctly American detective whose Holmesian eye for clues was honed by living in the wilderness. Perhaps more relevant to the subject at hand, it features perhaps the least communicative of ghostly clients – that is, if the manifestations that prod the detective character aren’t signs from a darker power freed by the disruption of justice! Either way, occult detectives were clearly present when detective fiction itself was crystalizing, not over a half century later.

This is not as bold a statement as it might seem. Like Sussex, Maurizio Acari has revised and broadened the critical history of detective fiction, doing so by charting “those hybrid zones where [the genre’s] conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences.” He opens by reviewing the centuries-long tradition of narratives about divine justice, be they about dreams that guide a murder investigation, e.g., Chaucer’s ‘*The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*’ (c. 1395), or about ghosts returning to avenge their murder, e.g., Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (c. 1600). Zeroing in on the Victorian period, Acari then states that “precisely when the detective was acquiring growing importance as hero, other writers were ‘rediscovering’ the link between detection and the supernatural.” Regarding Victorian detectives spurred by dreams, Acari cites Wilkie Collins’ ‘*The Diary of Anne Rodway*’ (1856), often cited as a key work in the development of the mystery genre, one featuring a “prototypical woman detective.” Ghosts still sought justice in the 1800s, too. Acari illustrates this with W.G. Simms’ ‘*Grayling; or Murder Will Out*’ (1842). This latter work offers an especially straightforward example of what I’m calling the ‘ghostly client’ figure, though its mystery-solver lacks in terms of detective skills.

Curiously, when Acari arrives at the late Victorian period, he falls back on the traditional critical narrative of ‘psychic detection’, listing Hesselius, Van Helsing, and the narrator of ‘*The Haunted and the Haunters*’ as antecedents. Proper occult detectives, Acari agrees, begin with Flaxman Low. This version of history reinforces the mistaken notion that writers were mingling detective fiction with the supernatural – not since the genre’s earliest glimmers – but only after it had clearly established some of its conventions. An attempt to cement those conventions by regulating detective fiction and segregating its supernatural strain is seen in Julian Hawthorne’s 1907 introduction to the multi-volume *Library of the World’s Best Mystery and Detective Stories*.

He deems it unfair “to propose a conundrum on a basis of ostensible materialism, and then, when no other key would fit, to palm off a disembodied spirit on us. Tell me beforehand that your scenario is to include both worlds, and I have no objection to make; I simply attune my mind to the more extensive scope. But I rebel at an unheralded ghostland, and declare frankly that your tale is incredible. And I must confess that I would as lief have ghosts kept out altogether; their stories make a very good library in themselves, and have no need to tag themselves on to what is really another department of fiction.” By the 1920s, S.S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox each wrote a list of rules regarding writing detective fiction – and both outright forbid the use of supernatural elements. Some mystery fans still see crossing mystery and supernatural genres as breaking the rules – a ‘cheat’ – rather than as a time-honored method of, as Hawthorne suggests, expanding readers’ imaginations.

Instead of seeing occult detective fiction as a violation of rules or as a latecomer to the mystery tradition, the works discussed here suggest that supernatural sleuths have been around as long as the broader tradition – and, in fact, contributed to its formation. Still, it helps to envision occult detectives as emerging in fluid stages – a seed opening into a sprout, growing roots one way and a shoot the other, eventually leading to blossoms and then fruit.

Many of the works named above are presented in a single volume in *Ghostly Clients & Demonic Culprits: The Roots of Occult Detective Fiction*, edited by myself and published by Brom Bones Books. I chose each tale there to provide fans and scholars of the history of supernatural, mystery, and/or occult detective fiction a handy source of illustrative and rarely collected works. I strove to select tales seldom, if ever, found in collections of Victorian detective fiction or ghost stories. And I’m sure I’ve left some of the roots of occult detective fiction still buried. A gardener will say that, in order to weed effectively, you need to pull up the entire root. Let’s hope, though, that exposing these two roots will do the opposite. May this essay and the anthology it introduces help occult detective fiction flourish by unearthing its deep history.



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Those interested in his books are invited to visit <https://brombonesbooks.com/>. This is also where you’ll find the extensive Chronological Bibliography of Early Occult Detectives, which reveals that these characters have been around far longer than some scholars have suggested. Tim earned a Ph.D. in English and has taught university-level classes in literature and writing for a good thirty years. His name rhymes with “grim fossil,” a fact that brings him both sorrow and amusement.

# THE MERE

*Josh Reynolds*

"I can smell it, sometimes," Upney said. "Just as I'm about to drift off, you know? In that half-moment between awake and asleep." He ran pale fingers through limp hair, and his face made a game attempt at a smile.

"And what does it smell like?" St Cyprian asked, gently. As he spoke, he studied his host. Patrick Upney was a tall, sallow sort. The kind of man who only looks comfortable in tweed hiking trousers, preferably standing somewhere windswept and wet. In contrast, Charles St Cyprian looked as if he'd stepped off of a Leyendecker canvas. Dark and slim, in a three-piece suit, he was a creature of clubs and cocktails.

Upney plucked at his shirt collar, as if it were strangling him. He swallowed thickly, and looked around the sitting room. He was nervous. St Cyprian waited patiently. Upney cleared his throat. "Like... wet moss. Damp stone. Just what you'd expect."

St Cyprian sat back and interlaced his fingers. "I see. When did you first notice it?" As he spoke, he looked around the sitting room. It was tidy enough, and had all the modern amenities. Upney only rarely visited the Fenlands cottage by his own admission, and it showed. He had a local woman look after the place when he wasn't around, keeping the larder stocked and the dust mites at bay.

Even so, there was something about the place. The shadows seemed too deep, the corridors too long. St Cyprian could feel it, pricking at the underside of his perceptions – as if he were being observed, by someone just out of sight.

Upney leaned forward, wringing his hands together. "Recently, I think. That's how it started. Just a smell. Faint. Like rising damp. And then – then the rest of it." He fell silent, staring into the fireplace. The light was warm, and the logs cherry-red. St Cyprian retrieved a silver cigarette case from the table beside his chair and flipped it open. Wordlessly, he offered one to Upney, who took it with an air of bewildered gratitude.

For a time, they sat in silence, smoking. St Cyprian thought about the letter Upney had sent, requesting a consultation with the Royal Occultist. The office had a fine pedigree, stretching back to Doctor Dee and the rule of Good Queen Bess, and terminating in the current owner of No. 427 Cheyne Walk, Kensington – one Charles St Cyprian. Among his responsibilities was the psychical well-being of His Majesty's subjects. Phenomena of the sort described by Upney fell well within that purview.

Too, Upney was the third cousin of someone known by everyone, which meant that even if St Cyprian hadn't been intrigued by the matter, he would have been obliged to investigate. And to show an inordinate amount of patience in the process.

Finally, Upney cleared his throat. "Thanks awfully, old man. I needed a moment to – to gather my thoughts."

"This sort of thing can be trying for even the hardest soul," St Cyprian said. "Always best to let a fellow speak in his own time, when it comes to these matters. Forcing the issue never did anyone any good."

"It's just... how to explain it? My God. It's not as if it's even anything. Just a – a sense of something awful, just out of sight. I don't know how to describe it."

St Cyprian smiled encouragingly. "You're doing a fine job. A bit more information wouldn't go amiss, however."

Upney nodded. "You're right. I'll try. I just – God! – I just can't bear to think of it. Even now." He glanced over his shoulder, towards the rear of the cottage.

A sudden sound from the kitchen caused him to start. Ash drifted from his cigarette tip to the floor. St Cyprian stretched out a foot and extinguished the sparks. He sighed. "Worse than a field mouse, I swear." He turned and leaned over the back of his chair. "Do stop rooting around in our host's pantry, Miss Gallowglass."

"I'm hungry." Ebe Gallowglass stepped out of the kitchen. His assistant was short, dark and slim. She dressed like a Parisian apache by way of the East End, and wouldn't have looked out of place in a betting shop or a Cheapside dive. Both of which she frequented with appalling regularity. Her virtues more than made up for her vices, however.

"She's welcome to whatever provender's in my icebox," Upney said, hesitantly. He stared at Gallowglass the way a man stares at a strange cat he's suddenly found in his flat.

"That's what I like to hear," she said, turning back to the kitchen.

"Oh no you don't. Have a cigarette and sit down." St Cyprian tossed her the silver case. "Upney was telling us about this picture of his. Go on, Upney."

Upney looked away. "I don't know why I bought it."

"The picture?"

Upney laughed. It was a brittle sound. "No, the cottage." He looked around. "Not my sort of place at all. I like the out of doors as much as the next chap, but I get enough of that on the weekends. And it's nice to come home to a place with civilised amenities, if you get me." He shook his head. "But I did. And there it was."

"It came with the cottage?"

"They all did. Former owner was a bohemian sort of chap, I'm given to understand. Fellow by the name of Martyn. Callum – no; Callen... something like that."

"Calmet Martyn," St Cyprian said. As he spoke the name, the joists creaked. It was as if the cottage were sighing. Upney showed no sign that he noticed. He nodded.

"He turned the place into a private gallery. The paintings were all a bit Grimshaw for my taste – you know the type, moonlit lanes and such."

"I do." St Cyprian kept his voice even. He knew more than that. Calmet Martyn had been a name to conjure with, as they say. The darling of the London scene, at least for a few glorious weeks in the summer of '25. Following a very public humiliation which was still the talk of the West End, Martyn had all but vanished from the face of the earth. "What did you do with them?"

Upney shrugged. "Bunged the lot into the coal shed at the first opportunity. Didn't want them cluttering up the place, what?"

"Of course." St Cyprian was careful to keep his reply free of any hint of disapproval. "You removed them all, then?"

"All but that one, yes." Again, he looked towards his room. It was as if he were listening for something. Gallowglass' expression said she'd noticed as well.

"And why keep that one?"

Upney paused. He seemed at a loss for words. St Cyprian did not wait for him to gather himself, this time. "You don't know why, do you?"

Upney blinked slowly, like a man on the edge of sleep. "I don't... know?" He rubbed his face and yawned. "Forgive me. I'm a bit out of sorts. Haven't had a decent kip since I bought the place, feels like."

"No, I expect you haven't." St Cyprian flicked his cigarette into the fireplace and stood. "Let's see it, then."

Upney looked at him, a startled expression on his face. "What?"

"The painting. Let's see it. That's why you wrote to me, after all. Asked me to quit Kensington for a long weekend, and enjoy the amenities of rural Lincolnshire and the Fens. I'd hate to have come all this way and not get a look in."

Upney hesitated, but only for a moment. "Very well." He led them into the back of the cottage, where the bedrooms were located. There were three – two large, one small. The smaller one was shut up. "The studio," Upney said, as he passed the stout wooden door.

"Have you been in there since you bought the place?"

"Only to remove the paintings. I thought I might turn it into a billiards room or something. It's a bit small, really, but I'd like to make some good use of the space. I just can't seem to find the time to get around to it."

There was more to it than that. St Cyprian could hear it in Upney's voice. The hesitation of one who thinks they are telling the truth, but isn't quite sure. He let it pass. Whatever it was, it would eventually reveal itself.

"Here she is," Upney said, opening up his room. He stepped back, as if afraid to go in first. St Cyprian wrinkled his nose as he caught a whiff of damp.

"Should open a window," Gallowglass murmured.

"It's autumn," Upney said, defensively. "And it's the Fens. Damp is a fact of life."

St Cyprian ignored them and stepped into the room. It was lit only by moonlight, streaming through the window. The air was wet, and there were faint stains visible on the walls. Upney's bedclothes were a tangled knot on the mattress and besides the bed, and a side-table with an old-fashioned oil lamp, the room was largely barren.

Well, barren but for the painting.

It hung in the centre of the far wall, above the room's small fireplace. The painting had been done on oil canvas, layered and lathered with a steady hand and a careful eye. St Cyprian knew enough about art to recognise that sand and other sediments had been mixed with the paint, to give it texture. Upney was correct – there was a bit of Grimshaw in the work. It had that same sort of Pre-Raphaelite realism. Less a painting than a photograph.

But rather than a fairly innocuous landscape or city street, the painting was of a mossy bank, next to a moonlit stream or lake. Trees clustered at the edges of the canvas, their branches stretching inwards like cracks in the paint. Alders, he thought. Almost hidden among the greenery was a square structure of some sort. And on the lake was what he thought must be a skiff, being poled along by an indistinct shape. A fisherman perhaps.

St Cyprian leaned close, trying to make out more details, but the painting defied him. The room was too dark. He turned. "Light that lamp, will you?"

"No!" Upney said. St Cyprian looked at him, and the other man shrank back. "I just – it's late." He feigned a yawn. "I'd like to go to sleep."

St Cyprian studied him for a moment, and then nodded. "Very well. Tomorrow, then." He paused. He'd caught a whiff of something – not quite damp, but something sharper. Like rotting vegetation. But it was gone. "Before we say good night, however – do you happen to know what this particular scene is?"

"It's the mere," Upney said, yawning again. A real one, this time. "A shallow lake near here. Ugly sort of place. Locals avoid it like the plague."

"And why is that?"

Upney shook his head. "Not a clue. Never thought to inquire."

"Have you ever been there?"

Upney looked shocked at the thought. "Why would I?"

"Curiosity," St Cyprian said.

Upney gave a shaky laugh. "Never been the curious sort, I must say."

St Cyprian studied him for a moment, and then nodded. "Probably wise. Prying killed the moggy and all that." He turned his attentions back to the painting. In the moonlight, the waters seemed to move. "Even so, I think I would like to see the place. Maybe tomorrow. I'd like to take a look at this structure here, whatever it is."

"There's nothing there," Upney said.

"Thought you said you'd never been," Gallowglass said, pointedly.

Upney looked at her. "I haven't, but I'd have heard about that sort of thing, I think."

"You did say you weren't the curious sort, Upney. But never mind. We'll see what there is to see – or not see – tomorrow." St Cyprian paused. "You'll sleep in the guest room tonight, I think. I'll take this room."

Upney nodded jerkily. He glanced at Gallowglass. "And your... companion?"

She grinned wickedly and made to reply, but St Cyprian interjected. "She'll take the couch and like it. Won't you, Miss Gallowglass?"

She shrugged. "S'pose so."

Upney nodded. "Very well." He yawned. "If you're certain..."

"Indubitably. Come along, old chap. Let's put you to bed." He followed a tottering Upney to the guest room, and watched as the other man collapsed across the bed, fully clothed. St Cyprian closed the door. Then he lit a match, blew it out, and scratched a sigil onto the door with the blackened match-head.

It was one of several symbols he knew of that provided some degree of protection to a dreaming mind. Placing it on a door was supposed to ensure that those who slept within would remain undisturbed. While it wasn't a long-term solution, it would do for the moment.

When he'd finished, he returned to the main bedroom. Gallowglass was peering at the painting. "Smells funny," she said.

"Yes. Rather like standing water and rotting vegetation."

"Not just that," she said. She turned. "Smells like something dead."

"Does it?" He took the oil lamp from the bedside table and turned it on. In the flickering light, the painting again gave the impression of movement. Was it merely a trick of the light – or something else?

"Well?" Gallowglass asked, expectantly.

"Well what?"

"Is it one for us?" She stretched, all arms and legs. Her coat opened, revealing the ivory grip of a Webley-Fosbery revolver, holstered beneath her arm. She was never without the weapon – at least in St Cyprian's experience. She even slept with it.

"If it wasn't, we wouldn't be here."

She snorted. "You've said that before."

St Cyprian frowned and gestured. "Put a blanket over that thing. Then go out to the coal shed and bring in those paintings. I want to see them for myself."

"It can't wait until morning?"



St Cyprian shook his head. "We might not have that long."

She pushed herself to her feet with a sigh. "And what'll you be doing while I'm lugging in the paintings?"

"Taking a nosey wander. Hop to it."

Gallowglass tossed off a lazy salute and headed for the front door. When she'd departed, St Cyprian took the oil-lamp and gave himself the tour. It didn't take long. The cottage was small, as such places went. The sort of place that estate agents described as quaint.

He carried the oil-lamp from one room to the next, pausing in the hall. For a moment, he'd thought that he'd heard something. Like the creak of a door, or the rasping of stone. But he didn't hear it again, if he'd heard it at all.

He went to the door to what had once been the studio, and gave the handle a jiggle. The door was unlocked, but wedged shut. He gave it an encouraging thump with his shoulder, and the swollen wood surrendered. The door creaked open and he went inside.

The room had been emptied of its contents months ago. Squares of grime on the walls marked the positions of absent pictures. Scuff marks and splotches of paint on the tiles revealed where an easel had once stood.

There were other marks as well. Curious scratches – as if some animal had been pawing at the floor. And there was a smell. A vague, mouldering, odour that he could not put a name to. Whatever it was, it sent an uneasy shiver along his spine.

He set the lamp down and began to check the room over. He knocked gently on the walls, and felt around the edges of the door frame. He went to his hands and knees to get a closer look at the floor tiles. He wasn't certain what he was looking for, exactly. Only that he would know it when he saw it.

He found it under a loose tile. It came up easily, revealing a hollowed out space beneath. The space was the same diameter as the tile, and shallow. Inside it was a wadded up painter's rag, wrapped around something. Carefully, he unwrapped the bundle. Inside were a set of brushes. They were old, and well-used by the look of them. But there was something odd about the feel of them – the weight.

He held them up to the light. "Bone," he said, softly. That wasn't unusual, in and of itself. But here and now, in this context, it aroused suspicion. Why had they been hidden? He paused. A shadow had passed across the window. As if someone had been watching him, and then moved rapidly away.

From behind him came the scrape of a step. He turned and saw Upney standing in the doorway, staring at him. The man's face was slack, but as his empty gaze fell upon the brushes in St Cyprian's hands, his expression became one of monstrous fury. "Give them to me," he said. But it wasn't Upney's voice.

"No, I think not," St Cyprian said. He rose slowly, keeping the brushes out of reach.

"They're mine. Give them to me."

"I wasn't aware you were an artist, Upney."

Upney paused. Fury abated, replaced by a sly look. "I just want to look at them."

St Cyprian took a step back, as Upney advanced. "I'm curious – if they're yours, why hide them?"

"They're valuable. Give them to me." Upney lunged. St Cyprian sidestepped him.

"I said no."

Upney spun, teeth bared, eyes wide and staring. Again, St Cyprian caught a whiff of wet stone and rotting vegetation. The smell of a mere, perhaps. St Cyprian froze as the thing that inhabited

Upney glared at him. For an instant he felt the awful power in that gaze – felt the crushing pressure of centuried stones and the rough slap of water.

The connection broke as Upney leapt. St Cyprian, acting on instinct, drove a fist into the other man's belly. Upney gave a grunt and folded up. He sank down, wheezing. St Cyprian, still out of sorts, shook his head. He felt as if he'd been doused in cold water. Too, there was a sour smell on the air.

"Did I miss all the excitement?"

He looked up. Gallowglass leaned against the door frame. "Stay back," he said. "Upney is having a funny turn."

Upney rose. St Cyprian hit him again, knocking him prone this time. "Go find something to tie him up. Bed linens or something."

As Gallowglass hurried to obey, St Cyprian sank down beside Upney and checked his pulse. It was erratic – as if he'd had a great shock. His eyes twitched beneath half-shuttered lids and he began to thrash. He wasn't unconscious. It was as if he were trapped in a waking dream. Or a nightmare. It was dangerous, waking a man from a nightmare, but whatever Upney was facing in his dreams was worse.

"Upney – Patrick! Wake up!"

Upney moaned and his thrashing grew worse. St Cyprian slapped him, lightly at first and then with more gusto. Upney jolted awake with a gasp. "What – what...?" he murmured. St Cyprian helped him sit up.

"You were dreaming, I think."

"What – why am I in here?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

Upney looked around. "I heard – I heard the stones moving, and the drip of water. God, will I never escape it?" He hunched forward, on the verge of panic. After a moment's hesitation, St Cyprian patted him awkwardly on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, Upney," he said. "There's no need to fear. Whatever it is, it's hold is not unbreakable. Else I fancy it would have taken more than one good belt in the brisket to free you from its clutches."

Upney rubbed his midsection. "Is that why my stomach hurts?"

"My apologies. Couldn't be avoided, old man." St Cyprian helped him to his feet. "Can you tell me what you remember, if anything?"

"I was... I was asleep but... I wasn't. I was heading to my room, I think."

"Somnambulism isn't uncommon in these situations," St Cyprian said. "Why did you come to this room instead?"

"Something – something stopped me. All at once it was like I couldn't breathe. Like some weight was on my chest – *in* my chest. And my head..." He cradled his head. "It feels like a satchel, stretched to bursting."

"When did this happen, exactly?"

"I think – I heard something like stone being moved. And a voice. *Your* voice. Saying something about bones?" He frowned. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It does, actually. I rather wish it didn't." St Cyprian rewrapped the brushes and slid them into his coat pocket. "Come on. A spot of tea is in order, I think."

"We're not tying him up?" Gallowglass asked. She had an armful of linens and a disappointed expression on her face.

St Cyprian took her arm and guided her into the hallway, out of Upney's immediate earshot. "Not just yet. Keep the linens handy though."

She nodded and dropped them against the wall in an untidy heap. "I noticed something when I was getting them," she said, softly. "Might want to see it."

"What is it?"

"You tell me." She led him back to Upney's room. The first thing he noticed was the smell – damp, as before. But there was something else. A dank foetor, as if from a newly opened tomb – something that was entirely too familiar to his senses. He gagged and pulled out his handkerchief.

The air in the room was cold and wet. The walls and window ran with condensation. Near the fireplace, the wallpaper had begun to brown and peel away from the plaster, as if exposed to months of damp. Gallowglass pointed. "Look at that."

"What do you make of it?" he asked, running his hands over the curdled wallpaper. It felt spongy to the touch. He shuddered and wiped his hands on his trousers.

"It's a door," Gallowglass said.

He stepped back, and saw that she was right. The damp patches had indeed made the rough outline of a door. He carefully peeled away a strip of wallpaper. Condensation coated the plaster beneath, and it had begun to crack and bulge.

"Almost as if something were pressing against it from the other side, innit?" Gallowglass murmured. She eyed the broken plaster warily.

"It doesn't just look like a door," St Cyprian said. He knocked on the plaster. "There's something back there. Behind the wall."

Gallowglass leaned close. "Plaster's discoloured, and not just from the damp." She produced a butterfly knife from her pocket and flipped the blade out. She stabbed it into the plaster and drew it down along the outline. It came away easily, in great handfuls, and soon the floor was covered in lumps and dust.

After a few minutes' labour, a wooden, four panel door was revealed. It had no latch, and no knob, these likely having been removed before it was plastered over and hidden. "Closet?" Gallowglass asked.

"At a guess. But why plaster over it?"

"To hide something," she said.

St Cyprian tapped the side of his nose. "Got it in one, apprentice-mine."

"Assistant," she corrected, absently. She knocked on the door. "Sounds like a closet."

"And how does a closet sound?"

She knocked again. "Like this." She frowned. "Should we open it?"

"If we don't, we'll never know if you're correct about it being a closet." As his fingers touched the spot where the latch had been, the door swung open. The hinges made no sound, despite being covered in plaster.

A musty smell billowed out. A wet smell, like rising damp and years' worth of mildew. St Cyprian waved a hand in front of his face, trying to disperse the miasma. The space might once have been a closet; now it was – or had been – a bookcase. A dozen narrow shelves, loaded down with a miniature library.

"Get the lamp," he said. She brought it to him and he examined the books in the light.

"Most of these are alchemical texts of one form or another," he said. "Various translations of Hermes Trismegistus, the *Teutonic Sword*, the *Theatrum Chemicum*, ... even a rather badly transcribed copy of *Concordances of the Red Serpent*." He handled each book gently, as if they were works of art. Which, in a sense, they were.

"What about this one?" Gallowglass asked. She handed him a slim, leather volume. It was old, and badly printed. But the text was unmistakable.

"The *Book of Soyga*," St Cyprian said, softly. He ran his fingers across the crackling pages. "Dee wrote this. The last copy was thought lost when Cromwell burned Prince Rupert's library." He set the book aside. "We're commandeering the lot, I think."

"Not like Upney would have any use for them."

St Cyprian paused. "Maybe." He glanced at the fireplace, and the shrouded painting. The blanket stirred, as if caught in a breeze. Some part of him told him to burn the painting. To break it and set it alight now, before it was too late. But another, larger, part wanted to know why. Wanted to know what they had stumbled into – and what would happen if they let it run its course.

Almost without thinking, he twitched aside the blanket. At first glance, the image had not changed. But on closer inspection, he saw that the skiff was closer to shore, and the light within the structure was brighter now than it had been. As if the source of the illumination were drawing closer – or perhaps the unseen door was opening wider.

Inviting him in.

He coughed. He tasted brackish water, felt damp stone against his skin. A chill ran through him. He shuddered and came back to himself. He shook his head and backed away. "Cover it back up," he said. "Quickly!"

Gallowglass did. When she'd finished, she looked at him in concern. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Something..." He shook his head again. "There's something here... or there. Maybe both." He rubbed his face. His stomach was in knots, and he felt rubber-legged. He sat down on the bed, and ran his hands through his hair. "Whatever it is, it's not picky. I thought it was fixed on Upney, but it seems to be grabbing at whoever comes close."

"Hungry?" Gallowglass asked.

St Cyprian shook his head. "Desperate." He patted the brushes in his pocket. "Let's get out of here. I find myself in need of a bit of liquid fortification."

They collected Upney, who was still somewhat out of sorts, and retreated to the small kitchen. Upney didn't ask what they'd been up to, for which St Cyprian was thankful. The man's utter lack of curiosity seemed to be the only thing that had saved him thus far.

St Cyprian plunked the disorientated Upney down at the square, rough hewn table, and sat opposite him, with his back to the stove. "What about the paintings? Did you bring them in?" he asked, as Gallowglass filled the kettle.

"The paintings?" Upney said, blinking.

"They were covered in mould," Gallowglass replied.

Upney shook his head. "Surely not? They've only been outside for a few weeks!"

Gallowglass shrugged. "Maybe it's been wet."

"Not especially."

St Cyprian waved the matter aside. "Never mind. I expected it would be something of the sort. He's covering his tracks."

"Who?" Upney asked.

"Calmet Martyn," St Cyprian said.

"He's dead!"

Gallowglass snorted. "So?"

Upney looked back and forth between them, his expression incredulous. "He is, isn't he? Did he – did he fake his death? You hear about that sort of thing, but you never put much credence in it. Is he the one behind all of this?"

St Cyprian lit a cigarette. "So I believe. Though I can only guess as to his purpose."

Upney leaned forward. "Dash it man, don't hold back now. Spill the beans!"

"I think you've walked into the middle of something rather awful, Upney. And it's only by sheerest chance that you haven't succumbed."

Upney stared at him, unable to process such a statement. He jumped, as the kettle whistled piercingly. "So what happened to this Martyn?" Gallowglass asked, as she made the tea. "He snuff himself?"

"No. Or, rather, not that anyone knows. He vanished a few years ago, after a disastrous private show in London. I heard about it after the fact from a friend – she was there, apparently. Or maybe she heard about it after the fact. It doesn't matter. According to her, it was quite the event."

"Couldn't have been. I never heard about it," Upney said.

Gallowglass set a cup of tea on the table in front of him. "So what happened?"

"Something was off about the works themselves." St Cyprian pulled out the brushes and set them down beside his cup. "Apparently they sent a few of the more sensitive attendees into fits. Anyway, Martyn vanished after that, solicitors on his heels." He looked around. "I suppose he came here."

Upney shook his head. "To paint?"

"To paint a very special painting." St Cyprian tapped the brushes.

"What kind of special?"

"Our kind of special," St Cyprian said. "He painted himself a place to hide."

"Easier ways to hide."

"Depends on who's after you." St Cyprian lifted one of the brushes. "Martyn was talented. Too talented. According to those in the know, he went from sketching caricatures to painting masterpieces in a week. Given what we've seen here, I suspect he sought out a... tutor of sorts. One who wanted more than money." He set the brush down. "But when the debt came due, Martyn was nowhere to be found."

"What sort of debt, if not money?"

"That is the question," St Cyprian said.

Upney studied the brushes. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "I say, are those made of bone?"

"They are indeed."

"Animal?"

"No."

"Ah." Upney took a convulsive swallow of tea. "Perhaps I should sell this dratted place. Might be best for all concerned." He looked at the brushes again, brows knitted. He made as if to speak, and then fell into a nervous silence.

St Cyprian followed his gaze. "Have you ever seen these before?"

Upney paled. "They – no. No, they can't be."

"What can't they be?"

"I – I saw – I think I saw them in my dream. He was using them."

"He who?"

Upney shook his head. "I don't... it's hard to remember. It was the first time I'd ever seen him. The first time the dream..." He reached for them, but St Cyprian caught his hand.

"It's probably not a good idea for you to touch them," he said, gently. Upney jerked his hand back as if he'd been scorched. St Cyprian leaned towards him. "Tell me about this new dream. How was it different?"

Upney swallowed and looked down into his tea, as if seeking answers. "It – it started the same as always. But then I was somewhere else... no. Not somewhere else. Just... closer than I had been, if that makes sense?"

"Yes. Go on."

"I was in a – a room. A chamber of wet stone. I could hear water dripping and a soft, insistent sound. A brush crossing canvas, back and forth. I looked and... there he was. Just sitting on a stool."

"Who was he?"

"Well how should I know?" Upney asked, irritably.

"I meant, did you recognise him? Had you seen him before?"

"No. No." He paused. "But he was familiar even so. He was – he was painting me. Only it wasn't me. It didn't look like me, but it was me. I was in a – a box. No. It was like one of those Egyptian caskets in the British Museum..."

"A sarcophagus," St Cyprian said.

"Yes, that's it!" Upney swallowed. "And then... I was in the box. Me, not just my picture. I was in the box and he was – was looking down at me. Looking down and smiling." He covered his eyes and shuddered. "God, that smile – *that smile*. I don't ever want to see it again. I won't." Panicked, he rose to his feet. "I have to get out of here. I have to leave. I can't stay here another night. I – I don't want him to close the box, you see." He caught at St Cyprian's arm. "If I go back to sleep, he'll close the box!"

St Cyprian gently forced Upney back into his seat. "Don't worry. You're not going to sleep. I have a trick – it might keep you awake until we figure out what to do. Are you willing to let me try?"

Upney nodded jerkily. "Yes, God yes. Anything."

St Cyprian set his fingers against Upney's temples. "It's something I learned from a lama of my acquaintance. Sterling chap, though a bit obsessed with the colour green. Anyway, just relax..."

In moments, Upney's head began to droop. His eyelids fluttered and his breathing became even and shallow. Gallowglass leaned over him. "Is he asleep, then?"

"No. He is in a state beyond sleep."

"Looks like he's asleep to me." Gallowglass poked Upney in the shoulder. He swayed on his chair. St Cyprian steadied him.

"Stop poking him, it's rude."

"Why'd you put him to sleep?"

St Cyprian sighed. "It seemed the thing to do." He stood, and stepped back. "We shouldn't have long to wait."

"How can you tell?"

Upney stood, his chair toppling over. Blank-faced, he wheeled about and stumbled towards his room. "Because whatever has hold of him is quite impatient." St Cyprian gestured. "*Après vous*," he said.

"So we're just going to follow the poor bugger, then?" Gallowglass asked, as they hurried after Upney. "Bit dangerous, innit?"

"It's trying to lead him somewhere. The best course of action is to let it do so."

Upney staggered against the walls, as if drunk, weaving towards his room with blind surety. When he reached it, the door opened smoothly and silently at his merest touch. Something was waiting for him within. St Cyprian heard the burble of water and a strong stink filled the corridor. The floorboards creaked, as if warped by damp.

St Cyprian stopped at the threshold. One glance was enough to alert him to the fact that Upney's room was no longer a room at all. Gone was the mouldy plaster and the bed. In its place, thick shrouds of fen grass and crooked alders that rose like lonely towers. A profusion of butterworts flourished where the floor-tiles had once been. A chill fog rose from the ground, lapping at their legs. It moved with what he fancied was almost predatory intent.

"Infect her beauty, you fen-sucked fogs drawn by the powerful sun, to fall and blister," St Cyprian murmured, turning to watch it creep over the doorway, obscuring their route of escape with malign efficiency. In moments, the door was gone.

"*Hamlet?*" Gallowglass whispered.

"*King Lear,*" he said.

"Close enough." Gallowglass drew her revolver. "Everybody dies in that one too." She cocked the pistol, and the sound echoed with startling volume.

"No one is dying here tonight." He spied Upney ahead of them. "Come on. After the poor blighter." The fog thickened about them and the temperature fell like a stone as they pursued their quarry across the fens. There was no sound, save the squelch of their steps and the rustling of the grasses.

"Where are we?" Gallowglass looked around. "This can't be what it looks like."

"It is," St Cyprian said, flatly. He pointed. "There, that grove of alders – just like in the painting. That's where Upney is going."

"And what do we do when he gets there?"

He forced a smile. "We'll play it by ear, shall we?" He hoped he appeared more confident than he felt. There was something malign in the air – it pressed down on them. He knew Gallowglass could feel it as well, from the way her finger tapped at the Webley-Fosbery's trigger. This place was not what it seemed.

Gallowglass grimaced. "Is it me, or does everything taste of paint?"

"I wouldn't know, never having tasted paint," St Cyprian said. But her words struck a chord. He touched a tree and his fingers came away smeared with an oily residue – like drying paint. "It's a trap," he said, softly. "A cunning, alchemical trick."

"What?"

"The painting. It's a trap. I wasn't sure before, but I am now." He looked up, and saw that the black sky bore no stars. But if he squinted, he could almost make out vast brush strokes. Shuddering, he looked away. "Hurry, we have to catch up to Upney."

When they reached the copse of alders, Upney was nowhere to be seen. The only sound was the wind through the branches and the cries of unmoving birds, forever at an indeterminate distance, like black scratches on the horizon.

"Getting hard to breathe," Gallowglass muttered.

"Paint fumes," St Cyprian said. "This way." He led her into the stiff, jagged trees. The stone structure stood exactly as it had in the painting. It had been well made, but neglected. Archaic funerary decorations marked its sides and above the doorway – stone skulls and enigmatic angels, resting atop crossed femurs or lounging among garlands of carved flowers. A mausoleum. And its doors were open.

"It's a cemetery," Gallowglass said, kicking at a grey blotch that might once have been a headstone. "Old, too."

"Where else would a dead man hide?" St Cyprian could see a light, gleaming from within the mausoleum. "This way. Keep your pistol ready."

"Usually, you don't want me to shoot things."

"This time, I believe it's called for." He peered around the edge of the entrance. The chamber within was small. An oblong shape that could only be the sarcophagus Upney had dreamt of rested atop a bier. And beside it, a painter's easel had been set up.

Upney swayed before the bier, and at the easel an artist worked. The man was short and blonde – a cherub, but for the wicked gleam in his eye as he dragged his brush across the canvas. "You'll do, I suppose," he said, and gave a low laugh.

“Calmet Martyn, I presume,” St Cyprian said, as he stepped inside.

The painter stiffened in shock, and looked up from his work. “You?” His angelic features took on a devilish cast as he rose hurriedly from his stool. “What are you doing here? This wasn’t for you!”

St Cyprian circled towards the easel, keeping between Martyn and Gallowglass. He didn’t want the painter to notice her until the moment was right. “I’m afraid Upney won’t be taking your place in that sarcophagus anytime soon.”

“Get out of here! You’ll ruin everything!” Martyn snarled. He cast aside his brush and palette and snatched up a palette knife. He took a threatening step towards St Cyprian. A moment later, the boom of a Webley echoed through the mausoleum, and the knife skittered from his now-bloody grip. Martyn reeled with a yell, clutching at his injured hand.

He fell against the bier and slid down, whimpering. St Cyprian kicked the fallen knife aside and circled the easel. As he’d feared, the painting was almost complete. Others sat stacked against the walls – Upney buying the cottage; Upney emptying the studio; Upney’s first nightmare. The whole sorry affair, captured in oils and acrylics. St Cyprian turned to the injured painter. “What is all this about?”

“I had no choice,” Martyn whined. He stared at his wounded hand. “The – the debt was coming due. But there was a – a mistake. I was supposed to be famous!”

“You are, after a fashion.” St Cyprian sank to his haunches before the wounded man. He picked up a fallen brush – it was identical to the ones he’d found. Bone. “Whose bones are these?”

“An artist,” Martyn said. His eyes flicked to Gallowglass, and the smoking revolver in her hand. He looked away. “One who – who died without achieving fame. His talent was to be mine.” He clenched his hand to his chest and made to rise. Gallowglass gave her pistol a warning twitch. He froze.

“And what did you give in return?”

Martyn bared his teeth. “What do you think?”

St Cyprian peered into the sarcophagus. There was a body there. It was Martyn. But somehow not. It reminded him of an unfinished sketch. St Cyprian looked down at the painter. “Only you never intended to pay your debt, did you?”

“Only a fool honours that sort of bargain.” He cast a resentful glance at Upney. “But you’ve ruined it, now. Ruined everything. And he’s coming – listen!”

From outside came the slow rush of something gliding through the water. St Cyprian went to the entrance and peered out over the mere. The dark waters were just visible through the trees. Something dark – a vessel of some sort – was making its way across the mere. A tall figure stood in it, a ferryman’s pole in its hands. St Cyprian felt a chill crawl through him as he observed the strange figure.

Martyn had begun to babble. “I’ll give you anything you want – I know many secrets – treasures buried in the Fens, the secret of eternal youth – I’ll give them to you if you just let me finish!” As he spoke, he lunged for St Cyprian, clawing for the brush in his hand. “Give it to me! I must finish – *I must!*”

Gallowglass fired, and Martyn wailed like a broken-backed cat. But he didn’t fall, despite the red stain spreading across his chest. He grabbed St Cyprian with demonic strength, slamming him back against the wall. “Get Upney out of here,” St Cyprian shouted, as he fought to keep the brush from Martyn’s clutches.

Gallowglass knew better than to argue. She caught Upney by the arm and spun him towards the entrance. St Cyprian could hear the slosh of the boat getting louder. Martyn’s creditor was close to hand. They reeled against the bier, and St Cyprian saw that the shape within the



sarcophagus had become formless. It no longer resembled anyone in particular, and he felt a flash of fear as he realised what that meant.

“You’ll do,” Martyn was snarling. “You’ll do, by the devil!”

Unable to free his wrists from Martyn’s grip, St Cyprian did the only thing he could think of. He headbutted the painter and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch – and a less satisfying ache in his own skull. Martyn released him and fell back. St Cyprian, still in possession of the brush, staggered towards the entrance.

Martyn howled and made to follow, but froze. The miasmatic air took on an icy quality and St Cyprian turned. Something stood in the doorway. He looked away before he could get more than a glimpse of tattered, leprous rags and eyes that flashed and sparked. There were some things a man ought not to see. Not if he wanted to sleep well.

In any event, the newcomer had no interest in him. It strode towards its quarry, one withered hand gripping its ferryman’s pole. Its rags swirled about it and the shadows thickened with every step it took.

Martyn retreated, babbling for mercy. St Cyprian didn’t stick around to see what came of it. He was out and splashing through the butterworts a moment later, the brush in his hand. He heard a scream from behind him, but did not turn. It echoed long after he’d left the alders and the mere behind.

As it faded, so too did the Fens. They bled away, losing colour and cohesion. Around him, grass gave way to plaster and tile. The fog thinned, revealing the bed and the room around it. He felt a lurch and then he was standing in Upney’s bedroom, his back to the fireplace. Gallowglass was waiting for him, her pistol levelled. “Is that you, then?” she asked.

“It’s me.”

“Prove it.”

“You’ve been nicking my cigarettes.”

Gallowglass lowered her weapon. “Martyn?”

St Cyprian turned to the fireplace, and the picture above it.

It was much the same as it had been. Only this time, there was no light in the mausoleum. And on the water, something lean and tall poled away into the fog. But this time, it wasn’t alone aboard its vessel. Something – or someone – hunched in the bow.

\* \* \*

In the morning, he discovered that the brushes were gone. As if they had never been. After breakfast, he prevailed upon Upney to take them out to the mere – the real one. Before they left, Gallowglass retrieved a jerry can from the boot of their motor car.

The mausoleum wasn’t hard to find. It sat back up among the alders, overlooking the placid waters. Upney refused to go in, and St Cyprian didn’t blame him. He sent Gallowglass in, with the jerry can and a book of matches. She knew what to do, and did it with a minimum of fuss. Her face was pale when she re-joined them. He didn’t ask her what she’d seen.

As smoke began to billow above the tops of the alders, Upney said, “I still don’t understand.” It was the first thing he’d said all morning. “Who was he? Why me?”

“It could have been anyone,” St Cyprian said. “Whoever bought the cottage would have suffered the fate he had planned for you.”

“What fate? What was he doing?”

“He was doing what all unrepentant debtors do – avoiding his creditor. But to do that, he needed a hiding place, and something to throw them off the scent.”

“Me,” Upney said.

“You. A soul was owed. He intended to replace you – not in body, but in spirit. Calmet Martyn was dead. And your soul would have been painted into his corpse. Then, he’d have been free to collect his awful brushes, his library, and... well, live happily ever after, I suppose.”

Upney watched the smoke boil from the mausoleum. “And now?”

“His debt has been paid, and his creditor has reclaimed his property – with interest.” St Cyprian lit a cigarette and offered the case to Upney. “I’ll take the books off your hands, of course. And the painting. As a reminder of this affair.”

“You can have the blasted cottage if you like,” Upney said.

St Cyprian turned away from the smoke. He looked up at the sky, and fancied for a moment that the clouds were nothing more than brushstrokes. He shook his head.

“I think, on the whole, I’d rather not.”

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JOSH REYNOLDS has been a professional author since 2007. He has over thirty novels to his name, as well as numerous short stories, novellas and audio scripts. Much of his work has been for Games Workshop’s Black Library, as well as Asmodee’s Aconyte Books. Born and raised in South Carolina, he now resides in Sheffield with his wife and daughter, as well as a highly excitable dog and something he hopes is a cat.

His occult detective, Charles St. Cyprian and his assistant, Ebe Gallowglass were featured in *Occult Detective Quarterly* #1, #2 and #4 and will certainly be back in future issues of *Occult Detective Magazine*.

A full list of his work, as well as his thoughts on monster movies, occult detectives and sundry other objects of interest can be found at his site, <https://joshuamreynolds.co.uk/>. For more about the Royal Occultist, be sure to check out the Royal Occultist Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/RoyalOccultist>.

GOOD EVENING, PRINCESS

Mike Chinn

It was too damned cold for July. A mist rolled inland from the bay, bleaching all the color from the early evening. She was glad she'd thought to grab an old raincoat and hat before she'd fled.

She reached the old billboard as the sun was dropping toward the horizon. *Just about in time*, she thought. The sign was no longer lit, and this far outside New York City wasn't overburdened with street-lights. In the dark, she'd never be able to find the place.

She glanced around, uneasy. Ever since she'd spotted the goon lurking rather too obviously a couple of doors down from the women's mission, she couldn't shake the feeling of being tailed. That she'd been found didn't surprise her: nobody quit – not of their free will, not breathing. But the speed of it had. Either her stepfather's hoods were smarter than she'd credited them, or she wasn't being too smart herself. Maybe hiding at St Oswin's hadn't been such a good idea; it was just the place a woman arriving at the city on her own would head for. And the cheap peroxide job she'd given her hair was already showing signs of growing out.

So much for the dream: to scam with what she still thought of as her inheritance, set herself up in some big-city business, and vanish among the metropolitan thousands.

What the hell: it was Friday and she hadn't been looking forward to another plate of tasteless, poached fish anyhow. Time to move on; fly south. With luck she'd get there in time for winter.

The billboard was pretty unreadable. 'THE F LEIGH TRU KIN CO. IMPOR ERS' it stuttered with peeling letters. Her smile was bleak: the only thing Farleigh Trucking had ever imported was liquor across the Canadian border. Until last year, anyhow. Once Prohibition was repealed, the company, like so many other covers for bootlegging operations, ceased to exist. But it had seemed apt: burying the box underneath a fading monument to her past. Like a grave, with the sign as a headstone.

Looking around, she spotted what appeared to be a deserted airfield. Small, jaded airplanes stood around in the open. All were in pretty poor shape: forgotten relics of a busted barnstorming company, she figured. More than a couple looked like they hadn't flown since the war. Whatever, it seemed a decent place to hole up until sunset, then check if she really was being shadowed, dig up her inheritance when she judged it dark enough, and take a powder.

She crossed the street, clambering through the rickety fence alongside the airfield. There was some kind of ragged shack at the far end; she made for it, walking around the handful of sorry-looking biplanes. One was smashed up: a mess of ripped canvas and shattered spars. Crashed on landing, she guessed. It wasn't until she was within ten feet of the wreck that she heard the tick of cooling metal and smelled hot castor oil.

The crash hadn't been so long ago, after all.

Brilliant light flooded the area. Blinded, cursing up a storm in fluent French and Russian, she squashed palms against her eyes, not daring to open them for several seconds.

Kliegs hung from the roof of the shack, throwing acidic white light across the airfield, turning the motley collection of planes into stark, two-dimensional cut-outs. She turned around slowly, still blinking away the last cavorting dots.

A figure was standing outlined by the light. It was a man: tall, with an uncombed shock of black hair standing up from an angular face. He hadn't shaven for days, and his clothes looked no less slept in. An old-style, calf-length leather flying coat was belted over a colorless turtle-neck sweater. A dirty pair of riding pants and scuffed brown boots completed the odd picture.

He was a bum, she decided. Another left-over from the war who'd made a living from barnstorming until the Bureau of Air Commerce and Depression had stolen his wings. This must have been his place, and now he'd nowhere else to go. It was a familiar story.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you." His voice was deep and almost accentless. Maybe even refined. But the way he was staring at her was spooky.

"See something green?" she snapped, aware of just how young it made her sound: like a sulky kid. But the aggression was too ingrained.

He shook his head. "You just look like somebody I knew," he said.

She acted without thinking, dipping her hand into a pocket and whipping out a small automatic; the kind referred to as a dame's gun. It was still powerful enough to cause serious damage at this range. He raised his hands.

"Whoa, princess. I didn't mean anything by it! What say I back off and you let me go, huh?"

"So you can slug me the moment my back's turned?"

"You got me all wrong, kid. You're the one who wandered in here uninvited. And the last thing I want is more trouble."

"Cops?" she asked.

"Worse."

"G-men?" That she couldn't believe; he didn't look a big enough shot to interest Hoover's boys.

"Now ain't this sweet?"

The voice was familiar. The speaker was somewhere behind the bum, probably sneaked around the shack while they were jawing. She shifted her position to see. As far as she could judge, through the faint smudges still floating in her eyeballs, there were three of them, sneaking out of the glare. Two she didn't know, though one could have been her tail from outside of St Oswin's; but the one in the middle, the tallest, dressed in dark overcoat and hat, was Sal. Catching light off the Kliegs, flashing as he moved it, a Colt automatic nestled in his hand.

"Hello precious," he smiled. Even in shadow, she imagined the expression on his pale face. "Nice to see you again. Daddy misses you."

"Guess there's a first time for everything." Despite the bravado, she was trembling deep inside. If they'd sent a moll-buzzer like Sal, chances were she wasn't expected back in one piece.

"Is that any way to talk?" It was the bum, the fly-boy. Sal didn't even spare him a glance: just continued to smile as he walked around them both.

"Shut that up, will you?"

One of the hoods flanking Sal raised what he'd been hiding up to now: a Tommy-gun. She shut her eyes; this she didn't need to see.

A moment later, there was an eruption of sound. It lasted less than two seconds; then everything went very quiet.

She opened her eyes, prepared for Sal's gloating smile. But he wasn't facing her any longer. Along with the nameless hoods, he was lying very dead on the ground.

The down-and-out aviator stepped into her line of sight. He kicked at each of the corpses; none of them so much as blinked. A Mauser automatic was oh-so carelessly aimed at the bodies.

"What are you? My guardian angel?" Her voice sounded much shakier than she liked.

"Maybe," he said. "I hate it when somebody's not polite to a lady." He dropped his gun back into one of his coat's pockets. "You're not from around here. Chicago?"

"New Jersey," she replied, not that it was any of his beeswax.

"Well, New Jersey, I think we could both stand a cup of coffee." He stepped back and waved toward the shack. For the first time she realized he was limping, and favoring his left arm. "After you."

For no good reason she could think of, she walked toward the half-collapsed building.

* * *

Inside the shack, he reheated coffee on a Dutch stove which was straining against the unseasonal chill. He cut slices off an apple pecan pie and offered them to her on a plate. It occurred to her she hadn't eaten for a whole day, so she accepted the tacit invitation. The first wedge vanished like a dream.

"How's the pie, New Jersey?" he asked when she was halfway through a second slice. He placed a chipped mug of coffee on the floor, at her feet.

"Good." She found herself smiling. God alone knew why: there seemed damned little to smile about. "Make it yourself?"

"Friend down in Brooklyn. Franco. The best hash-slinger I know. He should be working in some ritzy Manhattan joint, not shaving meatloaf in a grease trough."

Her smile broadened; he sounded so earnest. "And you're the expert."

"I know what I know." He poured himself a cup. "I think it's time we got introduced, New Jersey. My name's Damian Paladin. What's yours?"

She thought fast, one of many talents fostered over the years. She didn't even have time to laugh at his own, goofy handle. Images of the mission and decaying billboard thrust themselves into her head, and the words were out before she could stop them.

"Leigh Oswin."

What kind of name was that, for God's sake! she thought, too late. *It sounds as phony as Damian Paladin.*

He made no comment. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Oswin. And now maybe you'd like to tell me who I just killed?"

She finished her coffee. "Just some two-bit hoods. Local cops won't pin a medal on you; but they're not going to cry into their beer, either." She glanced around the shack. It was bare, except for what looked like a kiddie's sandpit covering half the floor. "I don't suppose you've any cigarettes here?"

"I don't use them." He stared at her. "But what about the man they work for? How heartbroken is he going to be? I don't want to wake up one morning with a slug through my brain and bits of me rammed into my mouth."

"Relax. Who's going to know?" She hesitated; God she needed a cigarette! "Okay, they were hired by a big shot. But the only person he's going to connect with their deaths is me. Satisfied?"

"Not entirely. Why were they after—?"

"Tell me, Mr Damian Paladin, your gun: the Mauser," she interrupted. She wasn't about to go down that road. Not yet. "I've never known one to fire that fast."

He pulled a wry face. Was her reluctance so obvious? "You sound like you'd know."

"I've seen stuff."

"It's a recent modification called a *Schnellfeuerer*. On one setting, it can empty a twenty-round clip in around a second and a half. Can't aim it worth a damn; but if a bunch of guys are dumb enough to walk shoulder to shoulder, it doesn't matter much."

"And the wrecked plane outside? That yours?"

"The LUSAC? Cracked up landing it: ran out of gas. Hurt myself some, but nothing I can't survive. Ship's a goner, though."

Leigh kept silent a while longer. Finally, she let go a sigh that felt more than halfway to a sob. Or a giggle. "I guess I should thank you for saving my life, Mr Paladin."

"That? If I was going to do anything so noble, I'd tell you to get the hell out of here. And don't look back."

She stared hard at him, trying to see past the bum. And there was something there, she could tell. Piercing disguises was something she'd gotten real good at. "Somebody after you, too?"

Paladin grunted. "Think we've something in common, huh? Like whatever you buried under the billboard back there?"

Shock made Leigh's heart lurch. "How'd you know—?"

"Something about that sign kept you distracted a while. And I'm betting it wasn't the quality of literature."

She laughed: brief and bitter. "You'll never know. And it's mine, too!" She was defensive. "Or my mother's anyhow," she added.

"I take it your mother's dead?"

"For six years."

"I'm sorry."

The hell of it was, he sounded like he meant it. Like they'd been old friends.

"Yeah. Well." Leigh rubbed at her face. "I guess she's better off where she is."

Paladin walked to the stove and topped up his cup. "Anyhow, princess, if you'll take my advice, grab your bundle from under the sign and clear out. This is no place for you."

"Maybe I can help." She produced her small automatic again.

Paladin smiled. "Thanks for the thought. But that toy won't be any good."

She grew angry again. "But I suppose that big Mauser will?" Always she was the little girl: the one to be protected, cosseted.

He was shaking his head. "I doubt it. About as much use as throwing sticks at fog."

Mentioning the fog made her glance out of the shack's grimy, single window. Night had fallen while they'd been talking, but the fog had come in with a vengeance. The light from the Kliegs was reflecting off the dense mist; outside was nothing but a meaningless, glowing blanket.

Paladin saw where she was looking. His face hardened. "I mean it, princess. If you don't scam soon, it'll be too late!"

"What is this, Custer's last stand?"

His laughter was bleak. "Now there's an unfortunate choice of phrase."

Leigh stood up. Paladin was at the window now, peering out into the blank exterior. She doubted he could see further than his own shadow.

"Listen, Mr. Paladin, you're in a jam, that's obvious. I owe you. I can help, believe me. I've been around mugs like Sal most of my life; I can handle myself..."

He looked at her, dark eyes assessing her with a frankness she'd never seen before. He reached into another pocket and pulled out a second automatic: a Browning 9mm.

He handed it over. "Think you can handle this?"

She unclipped the magazine, checked it was full, slid it back into the grip, thumbed off the safety and pulled back the slide in one practiced flow. He raised an eyebrow.

"Impressive."

"Now you've got two sticks to throw at the fog."

He smiled again; this time some of the bitterness was gone. "You're good for me, New Jersey. An hour ago I thought it was going to be quits; now..."

"Now you're going to fight," she finished for him. "And call me Leigh."

"I'm going to try... Leigh." He reached out and took her free hand, shaking it. "So you might as well call me Damian."

She squeezed his hand back, and began to laugh.

* * *

Leigh watched as Paladin filled in the details with carefully applied trickles of color. Over three-quarters of the shack's floor was now covered with sand: the ordinary yellow stuff, then patterns built up from black, white, red and green. There was a red gargoyle face in the center, ringed by three primitive stick figures and a circle of fire. The sun, she figured.

"Navajo sand-paintings," Paladin explained. "Only the medicine-man should see it, but we don't have a lot of choice."

"Not for the white-eyes, huh?"

"Not anybody."

"You're not a medicine man." She still couldn't decide whether Paladin was sane or not. He hadn't told her who he was expecting, or why they were so dangerous. Nor why he had to be down on all fours making Red Indian pictures out of sand.

"That's right," he admitted with a lop-sided grin, "I'm not, am I?"

She glanced outside for about the hundredth time. The fog looked thicker, if anything; and the temperature was still dropping.

"It must be around thirty degrees out there," she muttered. What a way to be spending a Friday night! Stuck in an old shack with a crazy man, while outside the weather was more suited to deep winter. Still, it beat a long ride with Sal.

"Still not too late if you want to make a run for it," Paladin said from where he was finishing off the sand-picture.

"I'm no quitter!" she said to his back.

He stood, stretching his back with a groan. "If you knew what I was up against—" He spoke quietly, looking at her with a kind of imploring. Was he begging her to go? "I almost caved in myself."

"Then maybe you ought to tell me. I'm a big girl—"

"You're barely eighteen."

Her mouth opened, but her brain wasn't ready to send any words out. How did he know that?

"Lucky guess," he answered before she could ask.

"You read minds too?"

"When they're written all over your face, sure."

Something wasn't right here. Leigh couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it felt wrong. She didn't doubt Damian Paladin was on the square, but there was something he wasn't saying. Something big.

While you're being so free with the answers, her conscience sneered. "Give it to me straight," she said aloud, trying to drown that inner voice. "I'm still old enough to know my own mind."

"I guess. Well, for the past six months I've been working down on the Colorado river, where they're erecting that new dam."

"The Boulder Dam? I heard they'd been having trouble of some sort—" She broke off. "You sure there aren't any cigarettes round here?"

"Positive."

"Guess I'll live. Go on."

"There was trouble, sure. Minor league stuff: equipment disappearing; workers having stupid accidents, that kind of thing. Nothing you wouldn't expect at any worksite in the country, except the guys at the top seemed to think there was too much of it. Too much to be coincidental. You see, up to twelve months ago, the work was going so well that it looked as though the dam was going to be finished on time and under budget. Then suddenly: wham! It's a three-ring circus down there."

"So what was it? Graft?"

He hesitated for so long, she thought he wasn't going to answer. Eventually, he said: "Do you believe in spirits?"

"Like in ghosts? Why, no." She began to laugh. "Are you telling me the Boulder Dam is haunted? Come on...!"

His voice was formal; cold. "Disbelief is a dangerous thing, princess. Blind faith, or lack of it, has killed more people than I remember."

She was shaken. Ghosts, indeed! But there was no doubting Paladin believed it. Her opinion of him swerved again; now she was half-convinced he was some kind of Old Testament religious nut.

"We live in cynical times," she said. "Proof's always a good thing."

"Stick around, kid, you'll have all the proof you want." He looked out the window again.

She waved her hands. "Okay, okay! So what kind of haunting was the dam getting, then? Convince me."

He leaned back against the window. "The Indians have always believed in spirits which occupy places: mountains, plains, valleys, rivers. The *Genius loci*. Modern man doesn't. Which is a pity, because the Boulder Dam is apparently constructed over the ancestral lodge of one rather vengeful river-spirit."

"Named Pocahontas, I suppose."

"I never learned its name," Paladin replied in all seriousness. "A shame: knowing somebody's real name gives you power over them."

Something in the way he said that gave Leigh gooseflesh. Maybe it was just as well she'd lied about her name.

"But this is New York," she pointed out. "A long way from the Colorado river."

"Like I said: it's vengeful. I was making for the Manhattan skyport, get the LUSAC refueled and head out over the ocean. But I miscalculated somewhere. The kite ran dry a couple of miles short."

"It must be pretty chapped to follow you all the way from Arizona." It was difficult not to make light of what he was saying.

"I removed something. It was the only way to stop the trouble at the dam: lure it away. But I couldn't just bury it under a billboard."

Leigh felt herself coloring up at that.

"I figured the best thing I could do was drop it in the ocean," he finished.

"So why fly all this way? The west coast's much closer."

"The Colorado empties into the Pacific. If salmon can go both ways on a river— I couldn't take the chance. Had to hop across country, refueling as I went."

She had to hand it to him: it made a kind of sense. A crazy, upside-down sense. "Why don't you just scoot out with one of the other planes?"

"Thought of that. But there's no gas to be had in a dozen miles of here. I'm grounded, princess."

Then, just to show she was going as squirrely as Paladin, Leigh suggested: "Sal must have had a limo. Won't its gas do?"

For the second time that evening, she saw the clouds lift off his face. "Why didn't I meet you six months ago, New Jersey!" He rummaged through the shack, coming up with a hollow-sounding fuel can.

"Think you can find the auto in this fog?"

"You want me to go?" She didn't mean to sound so shocked, but such an out of place gesture of trust wasn't what she was used to.

"I got things to do." He looked at her, solemn-faced. "Why? Think it's beyond you?"

"Watch my dust, mister!" She made for the door, and swung it open. Outside, it was bitter. The shiver she clenched her teeth against wasn't entirely due to the cold.

"And make it fast, will you?" Paladin called as she drew the door closed behind her. "Or there may not be any point."

* * *

Once the girl was out of the way, Paladin steeled himself. He'd have a use for the bodies outside yet. Leigh Oswin was good with the hard-boiled act, but he didn't want her to see everything.

He slid a battered sack out from behind the stove. Reaching in, he pulled out a colorful doll: around a foot tall, made from wood and slivers of bone. Its grotesque face was the color of oxblood, its arms hidden under thin slices of wood, notched to represent feathers.

It looked like a *kachina* doll: a representative of one of the many spirits that filled the Indian world. But it was far older than any other existing *kachina*, Paladin could feel the age creeping out of it, like cold. As ancient as the vanished Anasazi, who had carved their tribal cities in sandstone cliffs across the south-west centuries ago. Maybe even older.

Clutching the doll, he stepped out into the bitter fog. The river spirit was bringing the cold of the Colorado with it, a river which, in its deepest stretches, ran just above freezing point. It was no wonder the July air was condensing all around him.

Even in the fog he found the three bodies: they hadn't moved, after all. The one in the overcoat must have been the one Leigh called Sal.

"Hope you don't mind, chum," Paladin addressed the corpse as he put the doll down to strip off the expensive coat. He brushed at the blood staining half of the back.

Quickly, he swapped coats with the dead Sal. The corpse wasn't so much bigger than himself and the flying coat fit with the minimum of persuasion. Once he'd wrapped himself in Sal's own coat, he dragged the body up and across his shoulders. There was a two-seater parked only twenty feet away: a Curtis *Jenny*. It was an old favorite of Paladin's – they'd been through a lot together, and he was sentimental about the old girl – but tonight was no time for emotion.

He dumped Sal's body in the rear cockpit, cinching it upright with the flying harness. The remaining two corpses he tied unceremoniously to the bottom wing-roots, one on either side of the fuselage. Then he placed the *kachina* on the floor of the cockpit.

Moments later he heard the distant growl of an automobile; faint headlights glowed in the fog. He drew his Mauser, not certain who to expect. The headlights grew more intense, a car thickened from the fog. It was a Cunningham Phaeton, with Leigh at the wheel.

She braked the limo almost at his feet and leapt out, tossing the empty fuel can to the ground.

"It's gassed up!" she called. "I thought a full car would be more use than a couple of gallons!"

"Smart girl." He waved back toward the shack, only visible by the Kliegs on the roof. "There's a stirrup pump back there. Fetch it, would you."

"Yessir." She vanished into the fog, a smile belying her grouchy tone. Paladin busied himself guiding the Cunningham up as close to the *Jenny* as he could. By the time Leigh had re-emerged, he'd unscrewed the tops off both vehicle's gas tanks.

Leigh pushed the rubber hose into the auto's tank while Paladin reached the second hose into the *Jenny*. Then he began pumping, as fast as he could. He didn't want to lose one drop of the precious gas, yet he was also only too aware of how short time was.

Eventually, he was just sucking air. Flinging the pump aside, he capped the *Jenny's* tank and made for the leading cockpit. "You know how to prop one of these?" he called back over his shoulder.

"Sure. I saw *Hell's Angels* twice!"

"Fine." He vaulted into the cockpit and strapped himself in. Leigh was already standing by the propeller, hands on one of the blades. She couldn't have failed to spot his bizarre cargo, but for whatever reason, made no comment. She didn't even glance in the bodies' direction.

He snapped off the magneto. "Turn it!" he called. She pulled the blade down; giving the prop a full turn, sucking gas into the engine.

"Okay. When I say, swing on the prop as hard as you can, but keep well clear. Understand?"

She gave him a thumbs-up.

Flicking the magneto back on, he crossed both fingers. "Contact!"

Leigh yanked down on the propeller blade. It stuttered, jerked to a halt, and then blurred to invisibility as the engine howled into life.

"Princess, you're a natural!" he yelled, though he doubted she heard a word of it over the roar. Instead, he returned her thumbs-up. One hand clamped tight to her hat, she waved back.

Now we wait, he thought, motioning for Leigh to back off a little. When the time came, he wanted to be able to open up and fly out of there without hindrance. And that included waiting for his makeshift ground crew to get out of the way.

Now he had nothing else to occupy him, he couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting to the girl calling herself Leigh Oswin. She'd turned up, out of the mist, after all these years. Maybe last time she'd been just a kid, but he still recognized her. Lousy bleached hair and all.

Another man might have thought it was some kind of coincidence; but Paladin knew there wasn't any such thing. He couldn't pretend there wasn't some significance.

Help always comes when you need it, he'd once been told. He'd laughed at the time, and would have done so as he'd limped from the wrecked LUSAC this afternoon. But it had been true back then; maybe it was true this time.

It erupted out of the fog without warning. A vast billowing shape, distinct from the fog but no denser, boiled across the airfield. The Klieg lights grazed its sides, giving it a luminous solidity for a moment, before it smashed into the shack. Paladin heard the roof as it was torn free, and the splinter of the old wooden sides. As he'd guessed – and, yes, hoped to God – it had been drawn to the painting first. A fresher, more potent image had called out to it, a siren cry more alluring than the old doll. But it wouldn't be fooled long: the painting was only sand, after all.

Paladin opened the throttle. The plane surged forward. He caught sight of Leigh for a moment, almost hidden in the fog; then she was swallowed up. He aimed for where he remembered the sea had been, praying he could clear what was left of the fence.

Once the biplane felt as though it was skipping over the uneven ground, he yanked back on the stick. Every wire screaming in defiance, the *Jenny* rose into the air. Paladin kept the stick jammed hard against his gut, as though he was dragging the plane into the air himself.

Then he was up. The fog was thinner; he could see the distant lights of New York off to his left. Adjusting the heading a degree or two to the south, he allowed the nose to drop a little, diving for all the speed he could push out of the old kite.

The plane shuddered for a moment, feeling as though the starboard wings had passed through something denser than air. He compensated and glanced over his shoulder: it seemed to him like the fog was billowing up to catch the biplane.

He yanked the stick back a little, although climbing lost him precious speed. At sea level, the *Jenny* could manage seventy-five, fast enough to outpace the displaced spirit. But he didn't want to drop back into the fog where he was blind and the thing was far from helpless.

"Just a few more miles," he muttered, not sure who he was talking to. He kept glancing down. Finally he saw the ocean. The thin lights of the distant city picked out tiny ripples: waves viewed from on high. He smiled.

He dropped the *Jenny*, easing back on the throttle. No need to try and escape now. Levelling off at a hundred feet or so above the waves, he constantly checked behind him, like some wartime pilot looking out for enemy aircraft.

A huge cloudy leech bubbled out of the shrouded coastline. Paladin slowed as much as he dared, until the *Jenny* was hanging in the air with all the grace of a winged elephant. He banked, beginning to circle. If the spirit was anything more than a rudimentary elemental, it might wonder why he was no longer trying to escape. That would be tough.

He needn't have worried. Like a stooping hawk, the spirit sensed its prey and came straight for him. In moments, the *Jenny* was enveloped in icy mist, buffeted by angry, invisible limbs.

Paladin unbuckled his straps, reaching under his seat for a Very pistol. He felt the airplane lurch. He twisted in his seat. Behind him, Sal's body was being dragged out of its harness.

Swearing the air incandescent, Paladin pocketed the flare gun and reached back, careless of how far out from cockpit he was. He tore frantically at the receding corpse. Sal's arms were yanked up, as though he was surrendering. Paladin could feel the angry power of the spirit, but his weight was enough, combined with the straps. Sal wasn't going anywhere.

Then, with a violent wrench, the corpse's arms were ripped free of the torso, along with the sleeves of Paladin's leather flying coat. The biplane dropped a dozen feet in a second. Paladin pulled himself further out of the cockpit: almost sitting on its rim.

He slipped his coat off Sal's corpse. It had served its purpose: bait to misdirect the angry spirit. He wasn't going to lose any more of it. Squirming himself out of Sal's overcoat, he tossed it overboard.

The *Jenny* shuddered again. Paladin saw the tail crumple like a sheet of paper, then the rear fuselage start to tear and snap. Glancing down he saw the Atlantic rushing up at him. He took one last look at the fog wrapping itself around his plane like a massive squid, and judged the time had come.

He pointed the Very pistol under the instrument panel, at the doll sliding about between his feet, and squeezed the trigger. Grabbing the upper wing's trailing edge, he launched himself into space. He was barely clear when the plane became an inferno.

* * *

Once the biplane had vanished into the fog, Leigh stood watching for several minutes. She couldn't bring herself to admit what she'd seen: the shack torn apart by something in the fog, and that same something twisting in the air and chasing after the fleeing airplane. It was like a living, boiling cloud – No, that wasn't it. More like a wave: a huge, California breaker made from smoke and mist.

The fog evaporated soon after and the temperature soared, leaving a mild, clear evening. Harbor lights winked, a distant ship hooted, in the sky, something flared...

Eventually, since she had nothing else to do, Leigh walked back to the billboard. Using the butt of the discarded Tommy-gun, she began scraping away at the ground. Loose-packed though the dirt was, it was still almost a half-hour before the box was exposed. Dragging it clear, she brushed at the damp earth still clinging to it. A plain square box, no more than a foot across in any direction, but worth hundreds of thousands. Maybe a million.

She unlocked it with a small key, and flipped back the lid. Even in the dark the contents glistened. Jewels, pearls, tiny precious metal eggs engraved and inlaid: all her own. All that was left of her mother, her history.

Her inheritance.

For a few, bright minutes she'd seen her future. She knew about money laundering: bankrolling legit business with cash gotten from more dubious sources. With the 18th Amendment gone, people wanted to enjoy themselves again. And she'd seen it up in lights: *Damian Paladin, Ghost-Hunter*. If that didn't bring the customers in, she didn't know what would. She could buy a run-down gin mill, and set the whole deal up: a nightclub where this Paladin guy could regale the audience with tales of his derring-do. Maybe work in a couple of illusions. Bring in his pal Franco as a chef and have a decent restaurant. While she kept out of sight, just counting the profits.

Then it had gone sour in the worst possible way. Paladin wasn't crazy, or a stage-magician. What she'd seen was real; as real as it gets. And Paladin was gone. Probably dead.

She wandered back toward what was left of the shack. Several hundred grand, and no idea what to do with any of it. The story of her life.

Except, when she reached the ruins, Paladin was sitting on the overturned stove, dripping puddles of Atlantic onto the still-hot surface, staring at his sleeveless flying coat. He glanced toward her and raised it up, pointing at the damage with his free hand.

"Look at this! The only coat I've got! Ruined!"

Leigh didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "What about the... thing?" It never occurred to ask how he'd survived, or managed to swim back so fast.

"Chasing dolls at the bottom of the ocean. Along with some friends to keep it company. Let's hope nobody ever fishes it out again."

She didn't pretend to know what he was talking about. Her head felt dreamy and light, like she was spifflicated.

"I'll get you another coat," she heard herself saying. She wondered what he'd say when she showed him the contents of her box. "I'll get you a hundred coats! We'll take Manhattan by storm."

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**MIKE CHINN** lives in Birmingham UK with his wife Caroline and their guinea pigs. The first collection of the 1930s set adventures of his occult investigator Damian Paladin, *The Paladin Mandates* (The Alchemy Press, 1998), was short-listed for the British Fantasy Award in 1999; and a second Paladin collection, *Walkers In Shadow*, was published by Pro Se Productions in 2017. A revised and expanded (by 10,000 words) edition of *Paladin Mandates* was published by Pro Se in 2020. In the second issue of *Occult Detective Quarterly* 'The Black Tarot' teamed Paladin and Leigh Oswin with the eponymous investigator – the newest addition to an expanding fictional universe. In 2009 'Parlour Games' introduced the world to the mysterious Demyan Andreivich Pravdinski in the chapbook, *Tales From the Smoking Room*. The same character reappeared in 2020 in the second volume of *Sherlock Holmes and the Occult Detectives* (Belanger Books), starring alongside

the Great Detective in 'The Direction of Sunbeams'. A forthcoming *Weirdbook Annual* introduces Mattan, a partly westernised Navajo warrior, caught up in zombie shenanigans in post Civil War New Orleans in 'O Mary Don't You Mourn'.

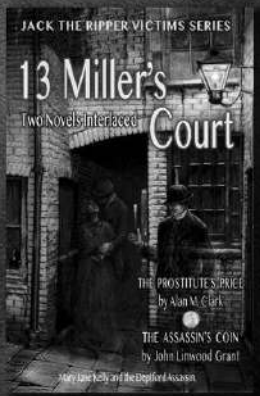
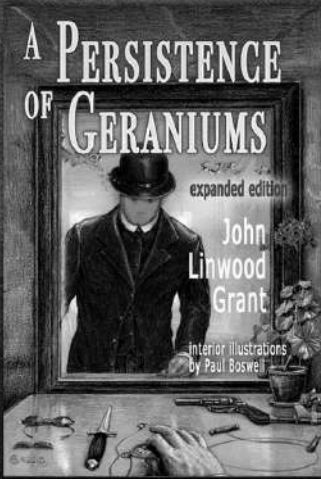
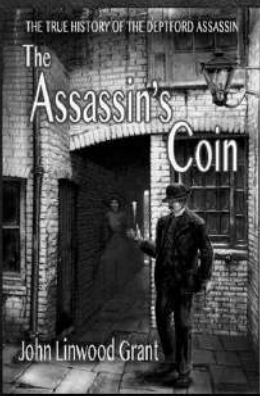
Aside from his various excursions into occult detective fiction, Mike has published some sixty short stories, a few of which have found their way into two collections: *Give Me These Moments Back* (The Alchemy Press, 2015) and *Radix Omnium Malum* (Parallel Universe Publications, 2017). He has edited three volumes of *The Alchemy Press Book of Pulp Heroes* (2012, 2013 and 2014) and *Swords Against the Millennium* (2000) for The Alchemy Press. He sent Sherlock Holmes to the Moon in *Vallis Timoris* (Fringeworks, 2015), and in 2018 Pro Se published his first Western novel: *Revenge is a Cold Pistol*.

Mike Chinn has an Amazon author page at: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/~e/B001IZTG92>, and he occasionally blogs here: <http://saladoth.blogspot.com/>

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# COLD CASES

## SÂR DUBNOTAL

*Dave Brzeski*

**Title: Sâr Dubnotal vs. Jack the Ripper**

Adapted by: Brian Stableford

Publisher: Black Coat Press

Format: Paperback/Kindle

I rarely resort to quoting from a book directly in my reviews, but to describe this book would necessitate simply paraphrasing what Brian Stableford writes in his introduction, and that would not only be pointless, but it wouldn't be written half so well. So here's the first few paragraphs of Stableford's introduction...

*This collection comprises five linked novellas taken from a popular part-work series published in Paris in 1909-10 by A. Eichler, featuring the 'occult detective' Sâr Dubnotal. The series eventually ran to 20 issues, most of which were independent stories, but the sequence that ran from No. 7 to No. 11 recovered a villain briefly featured in No. 1, Le Manoir hanté de Crec'h-ar-Vran ('The Haunted Manor of Crec'h-ar-Vran'), and described a series of phases in an ongoing battle between that villain, identified in the title of No. 7 as Tserpchikopf, le sanglant hypnotiseur ('Tserpchikopf, the Bloody Hypnotist'), and the multitalented hero.*

*The present collection omits No. 8, La Piste astrale ('The Astral Trail'), of which no copy could be located, but the substance of that episode is summarized in the following one, L'Écartelée de Montmartre ('The Quartered Woman of Montmartre') and the omission makes little difference to the overall story line, which reaches its climax in Jack l'éventreur ('Jack the Ripper'), and then proceeds to a curious epilogue in Haine Postume ('Posthumous Hatred'). All of the original items*



are now very rare; these translations have been made from photocopies supplied by the periodicals section of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

*The original publications were unsigned and their authorship is unknown; the suggestion that they might have been the work of the prolific Norbert Sevestre, although widely quoted, is unsupported by any documentary evidence. It is perhaps understandable why no one was eager to claim them, as they were obviously dictated in a hurry by someone who does not appear to have had sufficient imaginative stamina to sustain his competence through the requisite wordage of each episode, never planned his plots in advance and never did second drafts. This is by no means an ideal method for the production of mystery stories, which require tight plotting if they are to be fully effective, but it was a standard method of literary production at the time, when cheap fiction for semi-literate readers was pumped out in vast quantities in a highly competitive market. Although it was not an environment conducive to literary quality, that feverish market was a selective regime that encouraged various kinds of innovative mutation, and it is that aspect of the fiction produced in that era which remains interesting today.*

*This particular series of novellas is historically interesting because of the contribution it made to the evolution of 'superheroes' in early French pulp fiction.*

This fascinating and scholarly introduction goes on to cover the history of occult theory and its impact on contemporary literature, examining why even such badly-written hack-work as the Sâr Dubnotal stories are of serious importance to enthusiasts of French pulp and occult detective stories in general.

The observant reader will have noted that instead of 'Author', or 'Editor' in the credits above, we have 'Adapted by Brian Stableford'. Several years ago, I had the pleasure of reading another such Stableford adaptation. *John Devil*, also published by Black Coat Press, was a long-running serial which not only suffered from a certain lack of quality in the prose, but also the story itself could change as it went on, due to editorial insistence – if a character that had been killed off in one episode proved popular with the readers, for example, that character's death was simply forgotten later on. Another character might wander off and never reappear. It would have been somewhat absurd to faithfully translate the original text, along with all the errors and lapses in logic. Stableford put an awful lot of work into making the book readable, above and beyond its historical value. It was still pretty hard going, but I enjoyed it.

In the case of the Sâr Dubnotal novellas, Stableford ends his introduction with...

*What follows is what the unknown author of the novella series actually wrote, rendered into English that reads as smoothly as I can contrive without being manifestly inaccurate. Perhaps the unknown author should have done things differently, or not written the series at all, but he did write it, and he was at least trying to do something new, and different. His attempt to achieve that goal is not without its own intrinsic fascination as a literary and historical artefact.*

Having read Stableford's informative introduction, which tells us why we shouldn't expect too much from them as regards quality, I was pleased to find 'The Haunted Manor of Crec'h-ar-Vran' to

be rather more readable than I expected. Having said that, it is far from good. As Stableford suggested, Sâr Dubnotal is a virtual superman, so powerful he's never in the slightest danger. If he has any weakness, it's that he's not all that bright. Frankly, Lestrade would have put this case to bed in short order, without any need to consult the Great Detective, and the haunting that brought it to the attention of Dubnotal might never have occurred. It also involves a method of murder that I would give maybe a five per cent chance of working as planned – not to mention requiring a staggering level of incompetence from the local medical examiner – if I'm being generous! Still, it's an interesting Introduction to Dubnotal and his crew, and their methods, at the same time being the first part of a series that gives no hint as to where it's going in future episodes.

It's not unusual for Stableford to slip in the occasional crossover reference when translating/adapting old French pulp, hence I was amused to note that Dubnotal had copies of *The Necronomicon* and the *Saaamaaa Manuscript* on his bookshelves.

Part two: '*Tserpchikopf, the Bloody Hypnotist*' seemed rather better than the first. Dubnotal's trusted aide, the giant Hindu, Naimi, was entrusted in delivering Azilis, the villain of the previous story to a place where she could repent her crimes and better herself... because our hero is, as I previously stated, not very bright. Of course she escapes, and Dubnotal, having had recourse to supernatural means to discover Naimi's fate, has to rush to Marseilles to prevent an autopsy being performed... because Naimi is not actually dead!

A proper pulp adventure ensues, in which a train is derailed in an attempt on Dubnotal's life, and his two pet detectives – Fréjus and Frank – have to employ all their prodigious skills to solve a crime that wouldn't have taxed the cognitive abilities of the average eight-year-old. Dubnotal and his aides survive the train-crash, Naimi is rescued, Dubnotal praises his detective friends for their uncanny ability to penetrate the most obvious of criminal plots, and the villains (we now know that the main foe is the Russian, Tserpchikopf) escape—

At this point, Stableford suggests in a footnote that the original author may have been replaced. He has good reason for this. The action shifts to London, where Tserpchikopf and Azilis are putting on a magic show – he's disguised as a Yogi and demonstrates various mystical powers. Why they should be doing this is not explained – boredom perhaps? In any case, Sâr Dubnotal is in the audience, also in disguise. He exposes the fake magician and sets the police to arrest the villains. Unfortunately, the crowd, somewhat irritated at being duped, riots and Tserpchikopf escapes once again. I apologise if anyone thinks I'm giving away too many spoilers here, but it's not as if we don't know the bad guy has to be still at large to appear in the next part. Azilis is again sent off to wherever it was she was supposed to repent her sins.

It's at this point that the series is forced to jump ahead. The next part should be *La Piste astrale* ('*The Astral Trail*'), but as noted in the introduction, no copy could be found at the time to translate/adapt. The substance of the events of that story are summarised in *L'Ecartelée de Montmartre* ('*The Quartered Woman of Montmartre*'), and we don't really miss much of importance. Basically, Dubnotal again clashes with Tserpchikopf, they arrest another of his lieutenants, but the master criminal escapes capture once again.

This novella opens with a truly horrific murder that, as far as the police are concerned at least, has no connection to the hunt for Tserpchikopf. We, of course, know better. It's so blatantly



obvious that it's connected that even Dubnotal works it out very quickly. The very nasty aspect of the murder gives the first hint that there's some connection with the Ripper murders, other than the title of the collection. It's again not a bad tale – this time it actually involves a rather dangerous ghost, albeit Dubnotal basically just tells it to go away. I defy anyone reading this one, when they get to the very last line of the second part, not to hear the classic dramatic chords, “DA-DA-DAAAA!” in their head. The murder is solved. Dubnotal drops the ball spectacularly at the end, and Tserpchikopf escapes yet again!

... Only to resurface in London in the penultimate novella in the series – *Jack l'éventreur* ('*Jack the Ripper*') At the start of this collection, one couldn't help but wonder how the anonymous author would eventually tie this series of novellas to the Ripper murders, and one might well be left still wondering after reading this entertaining, if somewhat absurd, episode. When the editor/adaptor has a footnote which begins with the words, “This makes no sense,” you know you're in trouble! It is, however, great fun. I especially loved the 'oops!' moment where Annunciata, the most powerful medium in the world, who is one of Dubnotal's aides, 'accidentally' drops her wand and kills the villain. Dubnotal never questions her on it, so who are we to deny that it wasn't intentional? Personally, having read her say, “Yes, Master,” and little else throughout this series, I quite like to think she took things into her own hands – after all, Dubnotal had let him escape so many times already it must have become tiresome. I suspect that the address Dubnotal and his aides were staying in for this adventure being located in Cheyne Walk may well have been another of Stableford's 'adaptations'.

Of course, despite Annunciata's best efforts, we all know that a little thing like death isn't going to stop Tserpchikopf. Indeed, the very title of the final part – '*Posthumous Hatred*' – does rather give that away. Being, as it is, the most classic occult detective style story in the series – in that it involves Dubnotal and his aides battling an actual supernatural threat – it is, for me at least, the best story in the collection. I really enjoyed it, albeit it's still a little marred by Dubnotal's uncanny ability to allow the patently obvious to slip by him unnoticed.

In conclusion: This is a fun, entertaining series, albeit pretty badly thought out and lacking in internal logic in places. The correlation with the Ripper murders (that of the villain committing them as a sort of blind, to throw the authorities off the scent of his real crimes) is quite absurd, of course. I suspect anyone who picks this collection up because of the '*vs. Jack the Ripper*' portion of the title is going to be rather disappointed. Honestly, Stableford does an excellent job with the material at hand, but even he admits that it may be of more historical interest than anything else.

**Title: *Sâr Dubnotal and the Astral Trail***

Edited by: Jean-Marc and Randy Loficier

Publisher: Black Coat Press

Format: Paperback / Kindle

I didn't have a copy of this book to hand when I wrote the above, which is regrettable, as it includes *La Piste Astrale* ('*The Astral Trail*') – the story that was left out of *Sâr Dubnotal vs. Jack the Ripper*.



As before, it's translated/adapted by Brian Stableford. It's actually one of the better ones, except for the standard portrayal of Dubnotal as being such an all-powerful superhuman that he's never in any actual danger. How can I best describe it... imagine a villain has mind controlled three of Superman's friends to assassinate him. Superman somehow fails to notice he's being followed. The three attack. He stops two of them easily, breaking their mind control, but the third gets through and shoots him... with a pistol... no kryptonite bullet! You get the idea? Despite that, it's very readable, even though it ends with Tserpchikopf escaping capture yet again.

It's the rest of the contents list that makes this book a much more interesting prospect, as several modern authors show what they can do with the Great Psychagogue. Black Coat Press, when not translating/reprinting old French pulp material are probably best known for crossovers. Indeed, the

rest of the stories in this volume, mostly reprints from their *Tales of the Shadowmen* series, with some original to this volume are all of that nature, teaming up Sâr Dubnotal with assorted other heroes and villains from a dizzying variety of sources. I'm pleased to say that, for the most part, they work well enough even if one isn't familiar with some of the source material. Where I have considered a particular story of significant interest that it might reward reading it first, I have mentioned it.

The introduction to Matthew Dennion's *'Clash of the Titans'* makes the claim that... *it's a sequel of sorts to John Peel's tale 'Twenty Thousand Years under the Sea'* <sup>3</sup> *in which Nemo comes across H.P. Lovecraft's mythical sunken city of R'lyeh and threatens to unleash Cthulhu upon the world...*

No one who knows me will be in the least bit surprised to discover that I couldn't resist reading that one again first. I'd read it before, but not for a good ten years. It's a very nicely written tale concerning an attempt made by an acolyte of Cthulhu to find the sunken city where the Great Old One lay dreaming, and raise him. It goes without saying that the attempt failed.

I particularly liked the skill Peel used in the way one man of science tried his best to describe non-Euclidean geometry to another man of science.

In the intervening years between the events of Peel's story and Dennion's *'Clash of the Titans'*, Captain Nemo has sought to further his understanding of the terrifying creature he and his crew encountered. This has brought him to Sâr Dubnotal, and so when Dubnotal learns that the ancient city of R'lyeh is soon to rise from the depths, bringing with it great Cthulhu and the end of human civilisation, he talks Nemo into taking him to the spot and helping him put into play his desperate plan. In simple terms he's going to set an angry Moby Dick on Cthulhu!

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<sup>3</sup> Previously published in *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 4: The Lords of Terror*

Honestly, this very short tale reads like a precis of a planned longer work. On its own it's not very engaging at all, and it ends just as the battle starts.

Travis Hiltz's *'The Treasure of the Ubasti'*<sup>4</sup> is much better. Along with a certain Henry Jones, Sr. and Captain Hood (who, along with a few other characters, is from Jules Verne's novel, *Steam House*), Dubnotal meets up with Mowgli, who guides them to an ancient lost city where the evil Cult of Ubasti (from the 1934 film, *The Return of Chandu*) are keeping a certain powerful treasure. These crossover guys are incorrigible! The 'treasure' turns out to be a golden helm, which DC Comics fans will have no trouble recognising. I loved it.

As is common in the works of Josh Reynolds, *'The Swine of Gerasene'* is rife with crossovers. The main protagonists, apart from Sâr Dubnotal, are two of the most famous occult detectives – Algernon Blackwood's Dr John Silence, and William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki, The Ghost Finder. I suspect most readers of this magazine will be familiar with them. Also related is Hodgson's short novel – *The House on the Borderland*. This is one of the great, seminal works of weird fiction. If you haven't read it, you should certainly endeavour to do so at your first opportunity. The villain of the piece is Count Magnus, from the story of the same name by the celebrated master of the ghost story, M.R. James.

I have to risk the ire of that master's many enthusiastic fans by admitting that I've never much liked *'Count Magnus'*. There's not much to it, to be honest, and I think you can safely not worry a great deal if you haven't read that one. Having said that, if you haven't read the Carnacki story, *'The Hog'*, in recent memory, it might be an idea, if not absolutely necessary, to do so.

*'The Swine of Gerasene'* opens with Dubnotal and Silence looking down at that infamous evil house from an overhanging bluff. Apparently, Thomas Carnacki has attempted to stop the dreaded Count Magnus on his own, and has been taken. If I didn't already have a copy of this story in its original publication<sup>5</sup>, this would have been worth the price of the book on its own. As well as the aforementioned crossovers, Reynolds manages to slip in tie-ins to a certain time-travelling alien, and various other characters.

As usual for this collection, Matthew Baugh's *'The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame'* involves several crossovers, two of which are worth reading first, albeit it's by no means vital.

*'The Maker of Gargoyles'*, by Clark Ashton Smith<sup>6</sup> is one of his Averroigne cycle of tales, and it covers the creation of a particularly nasty pair of monsters.

Most will know Seabury Quinn's long running series of adventures starring his occult detective, Jules de Grandin and his companion, Dr Trowbridge. *'The Mansion of Unholy Magic'*<sup>7</sup> is an adventure in which, as one would expect, the villain meets a nasty end... but there's another, far more dangerous sorcerer – Doktor von Meyer – behind the scenes, who de Grandin plans to "track

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<sup>4</sup> Previously published in *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 6: Grand Guignol*

<sup>5</sup> Previously published in *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 10: Esprit de Corps*

<sup>6</sup> Originally published in *Weird Tales v20#2* (August 1932)

<sup>7</sup> Originally published in *Weird Tales v22#4* (August 1934)

down and kill to death”, when he has nothing better to do. Evidently, he never found the time, as he’s the villain who is currently plaguing Sâr Dubnotal.

We are already aware that Annunciata Gianetti is a very powerful medium, but it’s rare we hear of her actually being hired for that purpose by members of the public. This is how ‘*The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame*’<sup>8</sup> opens, however. Also present is the crime-fighter Judex, who is disguised as the secretary of the villain he’s investigating. Judex is not a believer in the supernatural, and so he starts out convinced that Annunciata and Dubnotal are fakes.

The séance is interrupted by Doktor von Meyer, who issues Dubnotal with a psychic challenge. Judex follows him, hoping to discover what Dubnotal is up to.

It’s another strong story, which is the first part in a series, pitting Dubnotal against von Meyer.

‘*The Hounds of Saint-Augustin*’, by Travis Hiltz is one of the new stories in this collection. It’s also, in my opinion, the best one so far. In Paris in 1915, Inspector Maigret, having already called on Sâr Dubnotal for help on a particularly puzzling case, finds they also need someone else with special skills. Sadly, that particular person is not available, but he sends them his son in his place. John Paul Clayton IV, otherwise known as Korak, completes the trio of policeman, mystic and hunter as they investigate a case that requires all their combined abilities, a case of murders committed by savage dogs that apparently cannot be seen.

There are, as usual, many crossover references in Matthew Baugh’s follow-up to his previous story in this volume. The main one is, of course Philip Wylie’s novel, *Gladiator* (1930) in which we meet Hugo Danner, a character who is an acknowledged major influence on the creation of Superman. I confess to having never read that book, but I certainly intend to at some point.

The other referenced story that is of enough importance to be worth reading first, if you have a copy, is ‘*The Colossus of Ylourgne*’, by Clark Ashton Smith.<sup>9</sup>

In this tale, Nathaire of Vyones, a powerful necromancer performs a ritual to transfer his soul from the ugly, dwarfish body that was the cause of so much derision from the people of Ylourgne, into a gigantic new body forged from hundreds of corpses of the recently dead. It’s a classic Smith tale, and any excuse to read it should be eagerly grasped.

In ‘*What Rough Beast...*’<sup>10</sup>, Matthew Baugh brings Sâr Dubnotal and Judex together again in 1916, in the midst of the Great War. With Annunciata Gianetti’s help, they convince an initially very sceptical Hugo Danner to help them thwart another of the evil plans of Doktor von Meyer, which involves the recreation of a certain ritual found in the book of Nathaire (variant spelling) of Vyones. It’s another very enjoyable tale. Judex and Hugo Danner are interesting in the way they reflect the (chronologically) later Batman/Superman team, but this time with the Superman analogue being, shall we say, the less controlled of the two.

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<sup>8</sup> Previously published in *The Shadow of Judex*

<sup>9</sup> Originally published in *Weird Tales* v23#6 (June 1934)

<sup>10</sup> Previously published in *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 7: Femmes Fatales & The Shadow of Judex*

There are a dizzying number of crossover references in Micah Harris' *'Slouching Towards Camulodunum'* So many that it proved impossible to make it fit in what is known as *The Crossover Universe*<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, fans of that concept consider this one to be an alternate universe tale.

The main story that does reward some prior familiarity is *'The Great God Pan'*, by Arthur Machen. Even I am shocked that I'd never got around to reading this one before. It is a true classic, albeit some might find the period style of Machen a bit heavy going. I can't deny that there were a couple of paragraphs I had to read twice. It seems incomprehensible that this story has yet to see a film, or television adaptation.

A scientist experiments on a young woman in 1894 and opens her senses up to enable her to see the other (supernatural) world. It not only completely breaks her mind, but she apparently becomes pregnant at the hands of Pan himself. The rest of the story is concerned with the somewhat evil doings of her daughter, Helen.

While I did find reading *'The Great God Pan'* was indeed a useful aid in appreciating *'Slouching Towards Camulodunum'*<sup>12</sup>, I didn't take the time to read his novel – *The Eldritch New Adventures of Becky Sharp* (Minor Profit Press, 2020) – which features the character made famous by William Makepeace Thackeray. This didn't in any way detract from this story... if anything it simply piqued my curiosity enough to push that particular volume up my to-be-read list.

I can't deny that *'Slouching Towards Camulodunum'* did involve such a mess of crossover references that it initially slowed my reading down slightly, while I thought about where this character, or that character had previously appeared, but it certainly stands up as an individual story. It was nice to see a little more use made of Dubnotal's original aides than is usual in these newer tales.

Matthew Dennion's *'A Tale of Two Souls'* is original to this collection and involves R.L. Stevenson's Dr Jekyll, his alter-ego, Mr Hyde, plus Clive Barker's Cenobites and puzzle box, along with numerous other references. Dubnotal makes a deal with Pinhead to save the soul of Henry Jekyll, which leaves some interesting possibilities for future stories.

In *'The Evils Against Which We Strive'*<sup>13</sup>, Roman Leary brings together Sâr Dubnotal and another crime-fighter, whose abilities were forged amongst the ancient mysteries of India and Tibet. He isn't openly named as such, but it's The Shadow. This is a good story, and I can't help but wonder if the young boy, Nick, didn't also grow up to be a character of note. I have to say I wasn't quite so impressed with The Shadow – mainly because I thought the story would have worked perfectly well without his involvement.

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<sup>11</sup> Those readers who find themselves as fascinated by the idea of crossing over one author's fictional characters with another's as I am should not only check out those seminal works on the subject by Philip José Farmer – *Tarzan Alive* and *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life*, but also explore the wider crossover universe in *Crossovers 1* and *Crossovers 2* by Win Scott Eckert (also published by Black Coat Press); and *Crossovers Expanded 1* & *Crossovers Expanded 2* by Sean Lee Levin (published by Meteor House). Also check out *The Crossover Universe* Facebook group for additional discussion and updates. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/384354175784085/>

<sup>12</sup> Previously published in in two parts over *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 7* and *No. 8*, and complete in a Micah Harris collection – *Slouching Towards Camulodunum and other Stories* (Minor Profit Press. 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Previously published in *Tales of the Shadowmen No. 4: The Lords of Terror*

The third part of Matthew Baugh's series within a series, 'Ask Me A Riddle...', also original to this volume, teams Dubnotal up with one Gregory George Gordon Green, aka: 'Gees'. Gees is the star of a series of occult detective novels by E Charles Vivian, writing as 'Jack Mann', which ran between 1936 & 1940. In common with all of Vivian's work, they're out of print and not easy to find – a situation I really hope will be addressed at some point.

In 1938, an injured Sâr Dubnotal has tracked the evil Doktor von Meyer to London, and employs Gees to help track him down. Much reference is made to a previous adventure in which von Meyer faces off against the impressive alliance of Dubnotal, E. Hoffmann Price's Pierre d'Artois (spelled Atois here), Seabury Quinn's Jules de Grandin and Dennis Wheatley's Duc de Richleau (spelled Richlieu here) and wins on points. This is as yet an unwritten story, which is a shame, as I constantly felt I was missing a chapter of the saga. It's something of a compliment to Baugh that he managed to give the impression, at least, that this part of the story had actually been written.

I can't deny that I was somewhat disappointed with the final story in this collection. Stuart Shiffman's 'True Believers' is by no means awful, but it crams in so many crossover references that I felt it left the actual story short-changed. I liked the opening, in which Dubnotal, now retired to Shangri Las, is alerted of a danger to the granddaughter of his acolyte, Annunciata by Simon Ark, Edward D. Hoch's Coptic priest who intervenes in matters of possible occult peril. Dubnotal arrives in 1967 Chicago and enlists the help of lawyer, John J. Malone, the hero of a series of novels by Craig Rice (Georgiana Ann Randolph Craig). The entry for this story in Sean Lee Levin's *Crossovers Expanded 2* runs to a full two and a half pages of fairly small type! The heroes investigate, and find the villains in their lair, about to commit unspeakable atrocities. They are discovered, back-up arrives. End of story.

By and large, this is an enjoyable and worthwhile collection. I really like the characters of Sâr Dubnotal and his aides, and feel that it's a shame there aren't any new solo tales to add to the canon.

There are, of course, quite a lot of original Sâr Dubnotal tales that have yet to be translated/adapted. Black Coat Press informed me that they have no intention of doing so at this time. I, for one, enjoyed the stories, flawed as they are, and would certainly like to read the remainder, but one can't imagine that the first book sold all that well.

In other newer fiction, Dubnotal has appeared in a few other modern team-ups of classic pulp characters, such as *Harry Dickson and the Werewolf of Rutherford Grange* (also from Black Coat Press), in which he works with Harry Dickson: The American Sherlock Holmes.



**DAVE BRZESKI** is a lifelong fan of Fantasy, Science Fiction and horror, who decided to try his hand at reviewing for the British Fantasy Society in 2011. Since then his reviews have also appeared in *Occult Detective Quarterly/Magazine*, *Skelos* magazine and on John Linwood Grant's *GreyDogTales*

blog and the SF Crows Nest website. He recently agreed to do some reviewing for *Parsec*, an upcoming new magazine from PS Publishing.

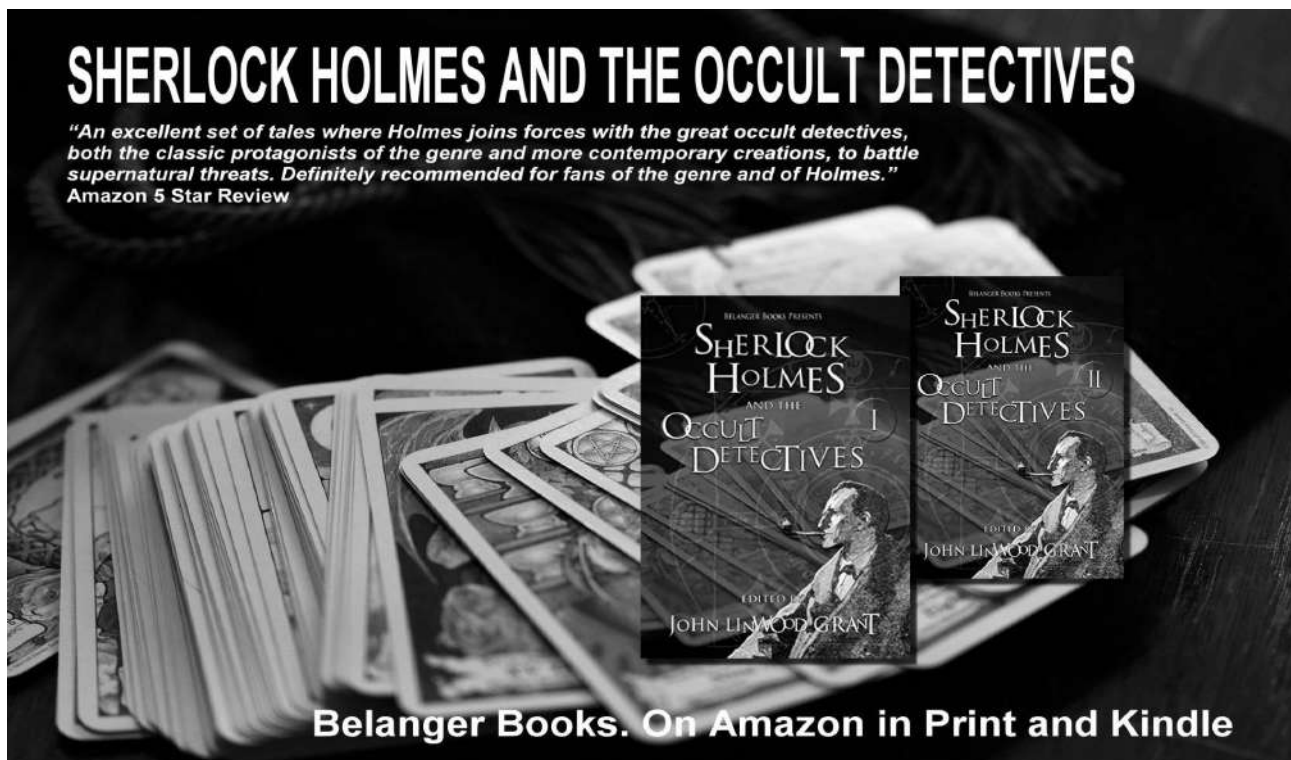
At some point he thought it was a good idea to get involved in editing, and has edited books for his partner, Jilly Paddock, Pro Se Press and others.

For Shadow Publishing he had the great pleasure of editing *The Spirit of the Place & Other Strange Tales: The Complete Short Stories of Elizabeth Walter* (2016), which is soon to get a special US edition from Centipede Press.

Of all the work he's done, he is probably most proud of *Shadmocks & Shivers: New Tales inspired by the stories of R. Chetwynd-Hayes*, which was also published by Shadow Publishing.

As a long-time fan of occult detective fiction, he offered to help out with *Occult Detective Quarterly*, which he somehow found himself co-editing. He is still not entirely sure how he came to be the publisher (with Jilly Paddock) of the retitled *Occult Detective Magazine*.

He is often to be found in dark corners muttering about wanting his life back.



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# THE URLking

*Jilly Paddock*

“Don’t you just hate locked-room murder mysteries?”

We’re standing outside an average house in an average street, the neat semi-detached kingdom of your average citizen. According to our records his name is Gene Merlane and he hasn’t set foot outside his front door in five years. The front door in question is painted purple, a bad sign. I read a study on that once, the links between personality and choice of colour used on the forward reality portal/interface; black for born leaders of men, red for extroverts, blue for conformists, yellow for the sunny and carefree, grey for habitual bores, green for sensitive souls who love nature, are kind to small, furry animals and enjoy romantic, candle-lit dinners, and purple for psychopaths. Okay, so it was the April 1st issue of the journal, but even a spoof theory can have some merit. My own front door, by the way, is green.

Me? I’m Jerome. I’m an exile from the Aegea Cluster, that part of the galaxy where decent folk don’t go, a place full of secrets, savages, barbarians and terrorists, according to popular myth. I’m a hand-span shy of seven feet tall, have skin the colour of burnt umber and long black hair, which today I’ve tried to tame in a plait. I’m the one given to flights of fancy, the mystic, the stranger in a strange land.

“They don’t exist outside of fiction,” Afton says. “And we don’t know for certain that Mr Merlane is dead.”

She’s like that, Afton – Detective-Inspector A. Afton Lamont – prosaic and down-to earth. Prosperity City’s smartest sleuth, hunched in the folds of her khaki trenchcoat, scowling at the inclement weather as we walk from the car. She’s a foot shorter than me and her cropped mouse-brown hair is jewelled with raindrops.

Officer Janine Benoit is waiting for us in the early-evening rain, and beside her is one of the police department’s constructs. They can build them in any shape you want, for a price, hardware brains in flesh-and-blood bodies. Ours are humanoid, huge, muscular giants taller than I am, with gentle, child-like faces, vacant eyes and hands that can crumple armour-plate. They scare the hell out of me.

We’ve been called here by Merlane’s friends – not the people who live on this street, who are accustomed to never seeing their reclusive neighbour, but the folk he communicates with on the Net. Over the past two days the station’s link-site has received more than three hundred items of e-mail from forty different worlds, all expressing concern over the safety of five people who live at this address. It seemed we might have a massacre or at very least, a mass kidnapping on our hands, until we discovered that all five names belong to Gene Merlane, all facets of his on-line personality.

“Inspector Lamont.” Benoit dips her head in greeting. She’s anxious, a symptom of her inexperience. She only joined the force eight months ago. “This house is like a fortress, ma’am; all the windows sealed, all the blinds down and the doors locked and bolted. I’ve leaned on the bell and thumped on both doors, but nobody answers.”

“Is there an alarm system?”

“Yes, and quite a sophisticated one. It told me, quite politely, to go away.”



"Jerome, can you handle it?"

"Once we're inside and find the controls, I can run an override and turn it off." I extract my magic box from my pocket, keying it for code search/shutdown mode. I call the tricky little device Pandora. It's no bigger than a phone and probably smarter than I am. "Good enough?"

Afton nods. "Break down the door."

Benoit touches the construct on the arm and looks up into its innocent, smiling face. "Sean, please open this door."

It stands still for a moment, scanning the problem, then slams the purple portal dead-centre with the heel of one enormous hand. There's a volley of sharp, tearing sounds as loud as gunshots as locks, hinges and bolts fracture, then the door falls slowly inwards, crashing to the floor of the hallway. The noise dies away into a forlorn silence, as if the alarm system can't quite believe what's happened, then the siren goes off and a measured, calm voice warns 'Security breach. Burglary in progress', the words repeating over and over. I find the control box in the hall and Pandora disables it within ten seconds. Told you she was smart.

"Sean, please wait here and let nobody in," Benoit says, from behind me. "Use minimal force."

Afton steps over the fallen door and enters the first room. A parlour, empty and dusty, it looks to have seen little use. We ignore the stairs for the moment and enter the room at the back of the house. This is obviously where Merlane spends most of his time. There's a couch and one armchair, a holo-projector, an audio-player and discs in a neat, alphabetical stack, and set in the window, a desk with a computer system sprawling over its entire surface and hanging over its edges. The brain is up and running, its screen filled with iridescent fractals in a constantly-shifting pattern. In front of it is a high-backed chair complete with an occupant. I can see the crown of a head covered with wavy red hair.

"Mr Merlane?" Afton says. "It's the police, Mr Merlane."

No reply. She walks up to the desk and horror dawns in her face, so I join her quickly and see why. The person in the chair is a woman, young, slim and rating between seven and eight on a ten-point scale of prettiness. She has long, unruly red hair, a turned-up nose and cute freckles. Her hands are resting on the keyboard, pale and frozen. She's dead, killed by whatever made the neat, round hole in the centre of her forehead. There's no sign of any weapon.

"Dear God!" Afton swallows hard. "Is this Gene Merlane?"

"The e-mail referred to Merlane by five different names, but it isn't uncommon to run multiple personae on the Net. Some people get a kick out of pretending to be something they're not. It also isn't uncommon to lie about yourself, subtracting age or switching sex."

"Officer Benoit, we need a forensic team. Call it in, please." Afton glances at me. "I'm going to need every last scrap of data we can wring out of that bloody computer. Can you make it talk to us, Jerome?"

"Not me. I may be a tek-wiz, but I'm best with small, dumb machines. That's not orthodox kit. I'd say that Genie here altered and modified it herself." I shrug. "It'll take an expert to handle the data-search on that beastie."

Afton sighs. "Okay, we'll get us an expert. Now, make yourself useful and take a holo of the crime scene."

I'm just about finished when Forensics arrive, but then I have an actress who never fluffs her lines or argues with her director. You can tell it's a quiet day down at the station; we get a team of six, headed by Ivory, the Chief Pathologist himself. His habitual irritation fades when he sees our corpse.



"Oh my, this is a pretty one!" He gains a rapt expression, the look of a man appreciating an exquisite porcelain tea-cup and saucer, or a pearlescent Art Deco glass bowl. "I'd have to say though, that in my professional opinion, this isn't a man."

"See, Jerome, you shouldn't believe the rumours," Afton says, perfectly straight-faced. "He *can* tell the difference."

\* \* \*

We reconvene the next day in Afton's basement office, affectionately known as the Pit. Ivory is still nursing a grudge and sends one of his minions to the meeting, Beka McGee. I appreciate the substitution. Beka's my best friend and she has a sense of humour.

"According to our birth-data, your victim's real name was Genevieve-Gabrielle Merlane," Beka says. "She was thirty-two years old and female."

"There's no doubt about that, is there?" Afton asks.

"Not a whisker. Genetically female – she'd even had a child. We estimate time of death at between midnight and three a.m. on the fifth." With a flourish, Beka produces a sealed evidence bag. "And this is what killed her."

It's a dark yellow-brown object as long as my little finger, smooth, hollow at one end and shaped like a bullet. Even in its plastic wrapping it feels cold, as if it's made of stone.

Afton poses the obvious question. "What is it?"

"A belemnite." Beka smiles at our blank faces. "An Earth fossil, from an extinct cephalopod, a squid-like creature that lived in the Mesozoic era. Once mistaken for neolithic arrowheads, they're also called thunderbolts or elf-arrows. We took this one out of Gene Merlane's skull. It had done almost as much damage as a bullet."

"How did it get in there?" I wonder.

"The usual excuse for misplaced foreign objects is that the victim fell on them." Afton's voice is devoid of humour, yet I see it in her eyes.

"In this case, I think we can rule that out." Beka admits. "It wasn't hammered in either – there was no blunt trauma to the forehead, and anyhow, the woman died suddenly, without a struggle. To penetrate that deeply into her brain it had to be moving at quite a velocity. Since there's no scoring on its surface to suggest that it was fired from a gun barrel, our best guess is that it was propelled from a non-metallic tube by gas pressure. There's also some evidence that it had a protective coat of ice to ease its passage along the tube."

"What sort of range would we be talking about for an eccentric pseudo-weapon like that?" Afton asks.

"Pretty short, I'd imagine." Beka purses her lips, deep in thought. "Hard to say without a few experiments. We'd have to mock it up..."

"Short is an accurate enough estimate. That puts the killer either just outside the window or inside the room."

I'm still holding the stone dart, ancient and cold. "You said this was an Earth fossil. Is it found anywhere else?"

Beka shakes her head. "There's nothing like it in this world's fossil record nor any of our close neighbours. We're running a search through the data-libraries of all the friendly worlds, but I'll have to get back to you in two or three days with the results of that baby. Did you dredge up anything talking to her neighbours?"

Benoit and I had done the canvass, squelching through the puddled streets as the evening grew darker. We'd spoken to a weary succession of genuine, helpful people who knew nothing. "No-one

had even seen Merlane. Groceries were delivered once a week and left in the storage cupboard, the windows were cleaned, the garden was tended and minor household repairs were carried out, all without anyone having face-to-face contact with our Genie. It's unbelievable that she could exist alone for that long."

"She was never alone – the world came to her through her computer screen." Beka rests her chin on her hands. "How did she earn enough to keep her lifestyle up and running?"

"Trust fund." Afton wears a sour expression; the bank gave her the runaround until she pulled a warrant out of the hat. "Her parents died ten years ago and left her well provided for."

"The number one motive for murder – money." I sigh. "People are so predictable. Who gets the cash?"

Beka's face lit up with understanding. "The child!"

"How old is it?" Afton asks. "Can we pull the records?"

I swing around and wake up my terminal. "Front door or back? Back's faster."

"And illegal. Knock at the front door and wait to be invited in, Jerome." Afton scolds. "We don't need to cut any corners. Saving time won't bring Merlane back to life."

It takes me twenty minutes to catch the data, a life sketched out in electrons, a fairy tale with a sad beginning and no happy ending. "Genie got pregnant when she was fourteen and had a little girl, Gayle-Galadriel. The name of the father is unlisted. Genie chose to withhold it for legal reasons, to protect the man from prosecution for under-age sex."

"So the child is an adult. Is she on-planet?"

"In a manner of speaking. She died in the same crash as her grandparents. Their ashes were scattered in the hills."

"Nice try." Beka acknowledges. "Any other greedy relatives in the frame?"

"Maybe a crazy old uncle who just happens to be a palaeontologist?" I shake my head. "The records state no living relatives."

"So where do we go from here?" Beka asks.

Afton's frowning again. "If there is an answer, we'll find it on Merlane's computer."

\* \* \*

Our pet tek-head meets us at Merlane's house, Afton's old friend, Spiro. What can I tell you about Spiro? Six-foot two, eyes of blue, waist-length blonde hair and more dangerous curves than a mountain road. She has everything on the thinking man's wants-list, and she has it in spades. If she were ice-cream, she'd be sex on a stick. Me, I'm double-choc chip with hot mocha sauce. Afton? Vinegar sorbet.

"Hullo, sweetcakes!" Spiro stands on tip-toe to plant a kiss on each of my cheeks. This close I'm caught in the hot cloud of her perfume, vanilla, raspberry and musk. "It's been way too long, Jerome-honey. Dinner, tonight, with all the trimmings – and I don't want to hear any argument!"

She always does this to me, Spiro. Considers me a challenge, I suppose. I hold her off at arm's length, grinning. "If you can wrap up this case before midnight, you have a date, and I'll pay."

"I'll hold you to that promise." She slithers out of my grasp and sashays after Afton into the house.

Genie's pet-brain is still patiently running its array of glittering fractals. Spiro sits down in the now-vacant leather chair and cracks her fingers. "What do you need to know?"

"Who hated Genevieve Merlane enough to kill her?"

"We know she had five separate identities on the Net," I add, counting off on my fingers. "Diabolo, Mumpsimus, Woodwise, Jack-in-the-Green and Merlin..."

Spiro's mouth drops open, a pretty cherry-pink O. "But I know all of those people! I sent mail to all of them, had lengthy dialogues with several of them – even some heated arguments. Are you telling me they were all the same man?"

"Woman."

Spiro shakes her head. "None of them came over as female, not even remotely so. Diabolo now, he's a prankster, on the nasty side, so quick-tempered he'd flame you for not saying 'please' and 'thank-you', while Mumpsimus is a tek-head, pompous and pedantic to the core. Jack-in-the-Green's a gamer, a cute little guy with a quirky sense of humour. Woodwose is one weird fruitcake – still believes in UFOs, evil green EBEs and the magical power of ley lines. Merlin, though, he's something else. All-knowing and all-seeing, a legend on the Net, a shadowy figure held in awe by all users. They couldn't all be the same person!"

"The records say that they are." Afton insists.

Spiro whistles through her teeth and cracks her knuckles again. "This sure is going to be one fascinating data-search!"

\* \* \*

It takes us all day to read a fortnight's worth of posts. I'd no idea that anyone could be so prolific. Genie had a real talent for holding dozens of meaningful and interesting conversations at the same time, on subjects as diverse as the art of tea-blending, the wisdom of keeping venomous serpents as pets, judging character by studying sock-colour preferences, the efficacy of rituals using tequila, chilli powder and limericks to subdue lesser household demons, and the occult and religious subtexts concealed in the plot-lines of *'Port Cinquecento'*, one of the most popular holo-soaps. It may be fascinating, but it's no help at all – there's nothing here to account for a murder.

There are two unscheduled pauses in our search. Around midday Afton takes a call from the station and her habitual frown takes a dive into the realm of scowl.

"Two people claiming to be next-of-kin have requested the release of Merlane's body." She explains. "Both give their surnames as Merlane – Gayle-Galadriel and Georgia-Grace."

"The dead daughter and the dead mother?"

"Both are alive and solid enough to be at the station's front desk." Afton picks up her raincoat. "You stay with Spiro. I'll go back and commune with the dead."

\* \* \*

She doesn't return until evening, bringing pint-pots of coffee, cherry doughnuts and Beka McGee. I'm not sure which I'm happiest to see.

"Take a break. I need to check some measurements." The med-tek instructs. "Have you moved anything?"

"Only the chair." Spiro swings around and climbs out of it, accepting the bribe of coffee.

"What did our ghosts have to say for themselves?" I ask.

"Georgia-Grace confessed to an insurance fraud – only her husband died in the crash." Afton's mood hasn't improved. "She says that she made a pact with her daughter to share the trust fund and Genevieve-Gabrielle fixed the computer records. Gayle-Galadriel, of course, denies all knowledge of the deception."

"Three scheming women indeed!" Spiro laughs. "It's a plausible story. Any one of Merlane's personae had the skills to doctor official data-banks. Hell, they could reprogram the damn sun to come up in the west!"

I watch Beka reposition the chair and use a laser-line to calculate a series of distances and angles. She sticks the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth when she's concentrating – cute. When she's done, she comes up to us, looking bemused.

"I don't understand this at all, detectives, but the missile that killed Gene Merlane had a really weird trajectory. We ran some simulations using the holo that Jerome took when the body was discovered and I've just re-checked the actual positions, but it keeps coming up with the same answer. From the angle of entry into her skull, the projectile must have gone right through her monitor, slap-bang in the centre of its display screen."

"That's impossible." Afton frowns. "Unless the killer replaced the wrecked unit with a new one."

"No." Spiro insists. "That's unorthodox hardware shipped in from Dhantechni, two or three years old, set up with all manner of quirky defaults and preferences – it has to be Merlane's original kit. I'll bet you she never turned it off."

"Could the shot have been fired in front of the screen?" I wonder.

"Unlikely," Beka shakes her head and ebony corkscrew curls dance. "That close and we would have found some evidence of the means of propulsion on her body. There was nothing."

Afton lets out a wordless grunt of disgust. "What are we missing here? It's a swivel chair!"

"So Genie turns around to face someone, who kills her, then puts her back, facing her computer?" Beka seems unimpressed. "Why bother? Anyhow, it was a very natural pose. It didn't look faked at all."

"If she let her killer into this house, she must have known them," I say. "Which puts Georgia-Grace and Gayle-Galadriel back at the top of the list."

"I'll go back and ask them some more pertinent questions." Afton decides, with a sigh. "If you're finished up here, Ms McGee, do you want to hitch a ride back to the station?"

Beka ignores the pleading in my eyes – she even smiles as she leaves me in the clutches of the man-eater. "I'm done. 'Bye, Jerome, and behave yourself!"

\* \* \*

Spiro and I get to the end of the mail around midnight.

"Nothing!" I shake my head. "A few disagreements, a handful of frayed tempers and a pinch or two of resentment – that's no recipe for murder."

Spiro massages her temples, combing her incredible hair back with her fingers. "Want to call it a night?"

"Not yet. Is there any way to find out what Genie was working on when she died?"

"Sure." She types faster than I can follow, segues between mouse and keyboard seamlessly, a true artist. "Looks like she was walking the Web in the guise of Woodwose. Want to play chase the missing link?"

We start out at a site called *Fundamental StarChild*. You never heard of them? Which rock have you been under? Even a musical philistine like me can hum the odd line of a StarChild song – not so much mega as giga-stars. This is a temple to their greatness, a glitzy chunk of graphics, bios and song-lyrics obviously put together by devoted fans.

"Didn't StarChild break up a couple of years ago?"

"Yep. Their pet diva threw a tantrum and ditched the group," Spiro says, most of her mind fixed on finding Genie's trail. "Pity that. I saw them once and they put on a great show. High theatre."

From there we slide to a home-page called *Witchery, Wisdom and Wu-wei*, a cynical mish-mash of new-age magic and dross posted by an ex-member of the group. According to his arcane

auguries, on the fifth the significant colour was heliotrope, the flower was love-in-idleness and the Tarot trump was the Devil. I'm taken by his thought for the day – 'You may buy your way into a woman's heart with jewellery, but only chocolate cheesecake clinches the deal.' A true sage indeed.

"Jeb Lucas," Spiro says, and there's a nasty glint in her eye. "The only person to get better grades than I did at college on Dhantechni, and he didn't even have to sweat in the sheets with any of our lecturers. Bastard!"

Third stop is the Moon-Phase Almanac. You need a full moon? This page will find you one, on any world you care to name. There were seventeen on the night Genie died.

Leap number four takes us to *The Absolute Truth – Concealed by a Malign Conspiracy for Centuries*, a shoddy, amateurish site with page upon page of half-insane rambling that insists that an ancient, alien monolith really had been uncovered on Earth's moon in 2001, that the truth had been suppressed by a nameless, faceless Them and that the work of fiction had been commissioned as a smokescreen to hide the fact. Even the colour-scheme is offensive, purple text on buttercream fake parchment.

"Some people should have their fingers broken." Spiro observes, wrinkling her nose.

"Don't you hold with free expression?"

"For me – yes, for you – perhaps, but for every mad fool in the galaxy? No way!"

The fifth site is much better, a semi-pro web-magazine about earthlights, anomalous energy discharges and ley lines. I'm deeply impressed by some lovely photographs of the acidic green aurorae that preceded the earthquakes on Soupcisson.

"I knew Woodwose would lead us on one wild trip!" Spiro grins, her flying fingers tracing the next link. It pitches us into the middle of a stuffy academic debate on the nature of pre-human technology. Never was any, of course, but that plain and simple truth had never troubled these poor guys.

"The Pyramids were built by giant, invisible dung-beetles from the fifth dimension?" I whistle. "They used to burn people alive for holding less unorthodox beliefs!"

The seventh step on the path is a gaming site, *Darker Diversions*, a place of wondrous transformations, where bored housewives, short-order cooks and cargo-handlers become proud queens, kings and warriors, haughty and dangerous, able to cast fearsome spells and fight with legendary weapons, yet cursed with the need to drink human blood.

"Hey, look at this!" Spiro peers into the screen. "A recipe for a 'true and trusty potion to abate the vampyric urge' – just what every modern woman needs! You'd have to be a sick puppy to waste your time with this nonsense."

"Some puppies have a lot of time to waste."

Eight is a site I recognise, run by a veritable saint as a vital service to mankind, *The Worst B-Holos of All Time*.

"Ah, Genie had taste." Spiro navigates us through the list, pausing on three entries. "We have *Full Moon*, a tacky werewolf flick, with abysmal dialogue and gratuitous nudity, *When Midnight Comes Around*, an espionage caper, with an absurd plot and gratuitous nudity, and some weird confection about elves and hobgoblins called *The Thirteenth Crystal*. Oh, did I mention that the nudity in that last offering is described as 'artistic'? Do you think we can glean any clues from this weed-patch?"

"I doubt it. Do they have anything at all in common?"

"I don't have a cast list for that rubbish about elves, but the other two share one name in common, right down there in the bit-parts. It's that actress who died recently, Amaranth Dusk. Is that a significant clue?"

“Didn’t she spend the last five years of her life in coma?” I dredge that little gem up from memory. “I’m not sure that would fit in with our profile of the murderer somehow.”

I make us some more coffee while she finds the next site. When I come back she’s in the thick of the ‘We still believe in UFOs’ support group. “With so much space traffic, how do they separate the sheep from the goats these days?”

“Maybe the guys in the flying saucers wear black hats?” She takes a cup from me and sips through the steam. “We never did find those short, grey wrinkly guys with the big eyes anywhere out here, did we?”

“Perhaps they only existed in here.” I tap my forehead.

Spiro skips to the tenth stop, a collection of Pre-Dark poetry. Genie chose only two, on an eerily-similar theme, William Allingham’s *‘The Fairies’* and *‘The Stolen Child’* by Yeats.

“They took her lightly back, between the night and morrow. They thought that she was fast asleep, but she was dead with sorrow,” Spiro quotes from the first poem. “Was that a premonition, do you think?”

“Where I come from, they believe that every man can foresee his own death.”

Her blue eyes are suddenly bright with curiosity. “You never talk about your past, Jerome. Where do you come from?”

“Nowhere good.” I touch the screen and read a line from the second poem. “‘For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.’ It seems that our Genie was in a maudlin mood on the night she died.”

“This isn’t much help, is it?” Spiro sends us to the next site.

The eleventh stepping stone in this wild-goose chase is a gallery of fantasy art, a series of paintings by a new artist on the scene, Lindy Tormentil; beautiful, complex, everyday scenes of country kitchens, lush, flower-stuffed gardens and shady woodland glades with shy, delicate fairies and wide-eyed mythical beasts peering out from the velvet shadows.

“Very pretty.” I lean closer, looking over her shoulder. “Such vivid colours and intricate brushwork. I could live with one of those on my wall.”

“There speaks a man who knows little about art, but knows what he likes!” Spiro laughs. “You old romantic, you!”

We zip to the twelfth stop, a database of folklore. My pet expert freezes, her hands suddenly still on the keyboard. “I don’t recognise this site. Given its size and complexity, it ought to be running on a university main-brain, but that location code means nothing to me. There’s only one more link in the chain after this. We’re nearly at the terminus.”

“What did Genie come this far to find?”

“A random, whimsical journey like this has no purpose.” Spiro shrugs and pulls up a fresh page. “This is the only thing she looked at, an entry on the Erlking. In German legend, a malevolent goblin who haunts forests and lures travellers, especially children, to destruction. It was used as the basis for a poem by Goethe. He had something to say about Gene Merlane too – ‘a useless life is an early death’. Shall we take a look at the last site?”

I nod and Spiro works her magic. I glimpse a pattern of green-speckled darkness taking shape, a swirl of midnight that spins into a vortex, like a whirlpool or a wormhole in space. It seems far too real for an image on a flat screen.

“What in hell...!”

I knock Spiro out of the way so hard that the swivel chair overturns. She squeals as I grab her, pinning her close to my chest. We hit the floor in a tangle, with me mostly underneath. The elf-bolt buzzes over our heads, burying itself in the far wall.



“It came out of the screen!” Spiro wails, her baby-blue eyes full of horror. Stripped of all poise and artifice, she’s just a scared little girl. “It came right out of the goddamn screen!”

I gently untangle her hands from around my neck, set the chair upright again and deposit her in it. She flows out of my grasp as if all her bones have turned to water. I’m still able to walk, even though my knees are shaky, and I use my trusty antique Swiss-army knife to dig the vicious little missile out of the plaster, folding it into an evidence bag. A stone arrowhead, sepia brown, another belemnite. It feels colder than the void of space.

When I turn back to Spiro, she’s tapping at the keyboard again, her hands trembling. “Where did that final link take us?”

“Didn’t look,” she says vaguely.

Things are flashing across the screen so fast that I can’t read them, which smacks of panic. “What are you doing?”

“Wiping the cache and deleting every goddamn step of that path we followed through the Web.”

“If you destroy all the evidence, how will we trace Genie’s murderer?”

She glances at the elf-shot in my hand and laughs tightly. “Do you really think something human sent that? Can you name any person or organisation who can kill someone like that, by sending a fossil arrow through voidspace? Get real, Jerome!”

When she’s done, she turns the computer off. The abrupt silence is unsettling, almost malignant. I take her home, neither of us speaking as we drive through the dead, pre-dawn streets. We can’t talk about it. The unreality of our experience evades words.

Sleep avoids me. I’m too strung out on coffee and fear. I trusted to this backwater haven of technology to protect me, yet my past is reaching out to haunt me again, barbarism and black sorcery, the terrible destiny that I fled. This isn’t my own nightmare, I know, just as it wasn’t Genie’s, until she strayed from the path and stumbled into terror.

Long ago, humankind lived in little nuclei of safety, hill-forts and walled villages linked by fragile threads of roads through the perilous forest; now whole worlds are our fortresses and we fly between them in magical ships through the unknown wastes of un-space. I always visualise the Web as part of that magic, as bright, shining threads across the void, linking the islands of human life. I never dreamt that anything lurked in that virtual darkness, until now.

\* \* \*

The next morning we gather in the Pit to tell our story. My head is packed full of the fuzzy vagueness that a night’s insomnia brings. Spiro looks pale and hides the shadows under her eyes beneath a pair of mirrored Jackie-O’s. Afton hears us out but doesn’t believe us, of course, not even when I show her the second belemnite. That hurts – she’s known me long enough to realise I wouldn’t lie. A lie would be easier to cope with; I don’t want to dwell on the truth.

“I swear it came right out of the goddamn screen!” Spiro repeats, as if the words are a mantra of protection. “And as for that spooky folklore database, I couldn’t find it again. Hit it with every search engine there is, even called in a whole bundle of favours at every university in the human sphere to buy some expert help. We turned up nothing, nada, natch, the big, fat zero! I swear to God the bloody thing doesn’t exist!”

“So what do I put in the report?” Afton asks, with an expression that could sour UHT. “That Gene Merlane was killed by some malevolent gnome out of Teutonic fairy-tale? Unless I miss my guess, Captain Vincenzo’s sure gonna love that one!”

“The man himself said it, Goethe, the one who wrote the poem about the Erlking – ‘What is hardest of all? That which seems most simple: to see with your eyes what is before your eyes.’ I saw it, Afton...”

Spiro shivers. “Now I want to believe that I saw something else, something natural...”

As she trails into silence, I finish it for her. “Something that didn’t feel so evil.”

“There are some mysteries that humankind shouldn’t meddle in?” Afton grimaces. “Shit, Jerome, give me a break!”

We never did catch Genie Merlane’s killer – that case is still open. Georgia-Grace hired herself the best lawyer on planet and was cleared of fraud, on the implausible grounds that criminal charges can’t be filed against the dead. We helped her wriggle off the hook; every computer file we pulled up insisted that she was no longer alive, even Censcomp, Earth’s impregnable and supposedly-tamperproof genetic database. Gayle-Galadriel continued the family tradition and got herself pregnant without passing through wedlock first. We’re running a sweepstake at the station on what she’ll name the baby, and hot rumour from our mole at the City’s hospital says that it will be a girl. I don’t think I’ll win – true to my habitual bad luck, I’ve drawn Gillian-Gretchen.

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JILLY PADDOCK writes SF and Fantasy. After retiring from a career as a Biomedical Scientist in NHS Microbiology labs, she self-published three e-books in 2012: *The Dragon, Fly*, a collection of short fiction, *No Earthly Shore*, a first contact novella, and *To Die A Stranger*, an SF/espionage thriller. *To Die A Stranger* was published in print and a new e-book edition by Pro Se Press in 2014. Three more books about Anna, who never meant to be a spy, and her computer partner, Zenni, have since appeared: *With Amber Tears* in 2015, *StarChild* in 2017 and *The Beauty Of Our Weapons* in 2019. The fifth instalment, currently titled *Blindfold In Shadows*, should follow soon.

Two more Afton and Jerome tales are also available from Pro Se Press – a novella, *The Spook and the Spirit in the Stone*, and the longer *Dead Men Rise Up Never*.

There’s also a space opera, *Warbird*, published by Cathaven Press in 2019.

All of these books are listed on her Amazon Author page https://www.amazon.co.uk/Jilly-Paddock/e/B006XQQD06/ref=dp_byline_cont_pop_ebooks_1

Jilly spent her childhood in South London close to a park filled with dinosaurs, which may explain why she writes SF! She now lives on the edge of the Fens in a small house stuffed with books and CDs. She collects tarot decks, pressed glass candlesticks and studio glass perfume bottles, and dabbles in lots of crafts including jewellery making, cross stitch and knitting picture shawls featuring mythological creatures.

THE WITCH OF PENDER

John Linwood Grant

Eastern Seaboard, USA. 1926

"A long night coming," said the Dark Man. He stood easy on the edge of a field, red earth between his toes as he sucked on a piece of sugarcane.

Mamma Lucy didn't hold much with visions. And as visions went, this wasn't greatly encouraging her. She didn't recognize the place her left eye was seeing. A great field spread across the valley bottom, and that field was sown with fingers, knuckle-end in the deep soil. Most were black fingers, waving without a breeze, though here and there a white one grew. Some had cracked, hard-worked nails, and some had none at all. Near to where she stood, one finger had died where it was planted; a crow was tearing strips of rancid flesh from the small, pale bones.

"How long?"

The Dark Man pushed back his straw hat.

"Long as a mule kicks; long as cane is sweet."

She reached across the floor of the lean-to shack and took up the largest candle, her grip marking the soft wax.

"Don't you game me now, boy," she said, a husky rattle in her throat. "This ain't New Orleans, and I ain't one of your mamaloi, Santería ladies, liftin' their skirts when you come callin'."

"Maybe I forget, sometimes. Long time since we talked."

She loosened her grip on the candle.

"True enough. Ain't been need to find you, is all. Lord knows, don't rightly 'member askin' for you this time."

"Pender County," he said. "They'll be needing you there, by and by."

She ran memories across the candle flame, through the scorch of hyssop burning in the bowl at her side. The name would come.

"Might've just said that."

"I might." He leaned on the sugarcane, now a bent stick with a silver head. His crumpled suit was brown, red, or maybe neither, and though he was taller than oaks, it fitted him well enough. "But I don't get to speaking with so many folk these days. It's all kerosene, steel and burned rubber at the crossroads. Every soul in a hurry, always in a hurry."

He tipped his red straw hat, and her milk-and-honey eye twitched in its socket.

The vision was gone, and she was where she'd been. Four plank walls and a broken roof. A place for the night, and straw to rest her bones on. She licked finger and thumb to snuff the candle, and then it came to her.

North Carolina. That was the place...

* * *

Mamma Lucy hadn't meant to go to Pender County. She hadn't meant to go to North Carolina at all, but between a vision she didn't want and an itch up her back, there was trouble on the dry wind. So she huffed and sighed, and turned her path thataway, because it was what she did.

She took what she could – a lift in the back of farm-truck, a short-cut with a travelling man, and finally, the bus from Wilmington to Burgaw.

It wasn't a new bus, or a clean one, but she found a few cents in her old carpet bag. Rows of seats at the front, sparsely dotted with white folk looking elsewhere, and a packed huddle of black faces at the back. She stood by the driver a moment, and smiled.

"Get along down," he said.

The old woman's horse-teeth clacked, but her smile stayed.

"Must be hard on you, lady." She glanced at the woman in the first row, a hard face under a blue bonnet.

"I'm sorry?" The woman scowled.

"Havin' to sit up front here. Dust and clatter from the doors, and all us good people pushin' past you, like you wasn't nothin', on our way to the comfy seats."

Mamma Lucy nodded, polite as Sunday, and made her way down the bus. Those at the back grinned as they shuffled to make room for her.

"Have my seat, ma'am." A young man in dungarees got to his feet.

"No need, young feller. Jest need to stand awhile, let the dogs stop barking."

Several looked down at her big, splay-toed bare feet, and noted the battered silver coins on a string around one ankle. They took in her milk-and-honey left eye, and someone muttered "Conjure-woman".

She slipped into the rumble of the journey. She could doze as easy on her feet as she could on goose-feathers. There'd be a time to be awake.

It came slow and light, like the breath of a man down her back, though she sure hadn't felt that for many a year. She jerked, and looked out of the bus window. Despite the grime, she could see flat woodland and a curl or two of smoke.

"What's yonder?" she asked the young man.

He peered out. "Bluegill Creek. A farm or three, scratching away. Share-croppers, mostly."

"Guess that's where I'm headin'."

She shuffled to the front of the bus.

"No stop hereabouts," said the driver.

"Better if there was one."

It was clear that he had a hard word coming for her, but it stuck in his throat. He turned it into a cough, and braked hard. His petty vengeance was to point at the tattered sign above the door. No refunds.

The land around was tobacco fields, spreading in the July sun. A broad trail led between two fields and towards the trees, so she took it, humming as she went. Carts had been this way, and a truck or so from the gouged earth. There'd be something at the end, sure enough.

One of the smoke curls came from a sprawl of a shack on the edge of the woods. A man maybe as old as Mamma Lucy sat outside, grey curls on mahogany skin.

"Howdy," he said, not looking up from the skillet he was holding over an open fire. She smelled fish, and remembered a hungry belly. A goose honked by the trees; a goat was tied up next to the shack.

"Fine place you got here." She put down her carpet bag and breathed in the smoke from the fire.

"Enough in this pan for two, iffen you hungry."

“Mighty kind.”

He dragged a low saw-horse forward, and bid her sit.

“Ethan Brown,” he said. A deft twist of the wrist turned the big fish over in the pan. “And this felluh here’s fresh-caught.”

She glanced at the bluegill, one side already crisp-skinned and ready.

“They call me Mamma Lucy.”

He nodded.

“Thought that might be the sortuh name you carried, when I saw you. Witchcraftin’s a close game, I’d guess.”

“Ain’t no witch,” she said, though without concern. She’d been called worse. “Mostly get known as a conjure-woman, where it suits.”

The old man split the fish, handing her a portion on broad tobacco leaves, fresh from the field.

“No disrespect. That’s what they mostly call it round here, ’specially the white folk.”

The fish was firm and sweet, the best thing she’d tasted for days. She gave him a flash of her big horse-teeth.

“You crop these parts, Mister Brown?”

“Ethan. This here’s mine, such as it is. Long as I keep to the edge, the big felluhs leave me alone. Do some tobaccuh, beans, goose or two, and the creek is lively with these boys.”

“Ain’t you I’m feelin’ on the air, then. I heared tell there was a need, hereabouts.”

He licked his fingers.

“Only trouble round here...” He paused and took in the sight of her, a tall, scrawny woman in a faded print dress, a broad nose over lips that barely covered those teeth. Something must have satisfied him. “Mebbe the Coopersons, down by Bluegill Creek. But you mayn’t be welcome.”

“Used to that.” She stood up. “Thank you kindly for that feed. I’d best go see what ails these Cooperson folk.”

Maple and birch swayed above her as she followed the trail. The dimes jangled on her ankle, but stayed bright. A mile or so along, past a stand of swamp bay, she saw it. Five stones on the road, laid between ruts. Others would have seen nothing; Mamma Lucy knew a five-spot. Conjure work.

She knelt down and dug under one of the four corner stones. It came up easy – a flannel wrap of black dust and roots. Whatever was fixed there, it hadn’t been done well or proper. The powder tasted sour, milk in a thunderstorm.

“Half a trick, too much guessin’,” she muttered.

She went on with more interest. Bluegill Creek was a deep flush of water, but easily forded where the trail crossed it. And there was the place she’d been looking for – a low timber house in a clearing. A family place, with chickens and a rough barn; a battered truck was rotting by the barn, rust on the grille.

There was welcome and there was welcome. Mamma Lucy spat and smoothed her frizzed grey hair. She reached into her carpet bag and took out a battered flask. A swill of whiskey for her throat, and then a few drops to feed the green felt mojo bag in her dress pocket. That would do.

“Mornin’ to all good folk,” she said, loud, and walked towards the farmhouse.

A woman came to the open door, flour on her hands. Thin-faced, white as the flour.

“Wonderin’ if you had any work, ma’am. Passin’ through, but I’m fair handy, in or out.”

Hesitation.

“Bake a mean pie, as well,” she added.

A weak sound came from inside, and the woman nodded.

“You’d best come in. What’s your name?”

"Mammy Lucy does me fine, ma'am."

"Esme Cooperson. Mrs Cooperson to you. Where you heading?"

"Travellin' to see some kin, yonder past Burgaw."

"Two days work, maybe three, if you do it fine and keep your place."

Mamma Lucy gave the sort of nod and shuffle that an old black woman in need of work and board might offer a white lady.

The door opened onto a big room with a table fit for eight or nine, a cast-iron range and a sink. The far wall was propped up by a stone chimney, but it was the cot in the corner that caught her eye.

"That there's Suzie." Mrs Cooperson didn't look that way.

Sixteen or seventeen, the girl was sprawled out, humming without sense, her long blonde hair lank and tangled.

"She sickenen', Mrs Cooperson?"

"Ever since her belly started filling." The woman didn't seem inclined to go further on that score. "You sleep in the barn, get a portion of supper, and all the milk you can wring from the cow out back. Got my hands full. No slack round here, so you earn that, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

There was work. Mamma Lucy fed the hens, cleared a row of early beans in the plot round back, and washed shirts and sheets in a shed. The firebox under the copper took some starting. There were menfolk somewhere, from the size and number of the patched cotton shirts. She was allowed inside the house, but not near the girl. Her neck hairs rose within a few paces of the cot. If there was need here, it had to do with the youngster, she was sure.

The wringer was stiff, and the load heavy, but she was a strong woman. She turned and hauled, singing to herself.

"Got on the train,
Didn't have no fare,
But I rode some,
I rode some..."

The shed door creaked, breaking her song, and a shadow covered the copper. She turned, seeing a plain-faced man with corn-coloured hair.

"What in hell you doing?" he said.

Mamma Lucy let her horse-teeth show proud.

"Keepin' busy, sir, keepin' busy. Lady of the house said she could do with a strong arm to this here wringer."

"Did she?" His expression was closed. "We'll see."

She watched him stalk off. No worse than many men she'd met, white or black. Back to the wringer.

It was supper-time when she got to measure the Coopersons. Jed Cooperson, the big man at the wash-house door, made it clear she would serve the meal and clear up afterwards if she wanted her board.

"Esme could do to set awhile," he said, and in that she saw a touch of tenderness. Seemed to her that the four menfolk could have helped, but she wasn't here for argument.

Jed was the master. His younger brother Daniel, leaner and close-mouthed, had the other end of the table, flanked by Jed's sons, Abe and Jim. Neither were above fifteen. Mamma Lucy laid out creamed corn, potatoes and fatty ham, settling herself back against the hearth when she'd done.

They talked of tobacco and crops, grudges and the price of seed. Ethan Brown wasn't a bad neighbour 'for a coloured'; someone called Nielsen was planning to take a portion of their land

away next year. And brother Daniel only came for his meals and washing – he had a shack of his own near the fields.

She watched Esme Cooperson feed creamed corn to her daughter, a spoon at a time. Suzie took it, swallowing in big gulps like a catfish. The girl's pale grey eyes had no focus, but the conjure-woman felt that this wasn't how she'd come out. This had been done to her, one way or another.

When the men stepped out for a smoke on the porch, Mrs Cooperson gave a weak smile.

"Help yourself to what's on the range. There's eggs in the barn, too."

Mamma Lucy stroked the mojo bag in her dress-pocket. She pitched her voice low, soothing.

"Seen my share o' sickness, Mrs Cooperson. Sure there ain't nothin' I can do for your girl?"

A sort of story came out, with the men gone. Suzie had started 'showing', and a few days later her wits had gone, it seemed to her mother. Less than two weeks back. They'd had a doctor out from town, not wanting others to know, but he'd been no use.

"Said she was weak-minded." Mrs Cooperson gritted her teeth. "My Suzie was never weak-minded. Had her schooling."

"But she ain't talkin' about no daddy?"

Almost a push too far.

"The boys think it's a coloured." She glanced at the conjure-woman. "Lige Nixon's son, Willie. Nixon's the seed-merchant, set up in Burgaw. Elder Clark at the church doesn't credit it, but Jed and Daniel are close to taking the boy, beating it out of him. Or worse..."

"They got reason?"

The woman shook her head.

"Won't be much doubt when it comes," Mamma Lucy said.

Mrs Cooperson blinked, as if puzzled at saying so much. "Best you see to those dishes soon."

The matter was closed.

In the barn, Mamma Lucy had hens and her thoughts to keep her busy. She wasn't rightly sure if she was here for Suzie Cooperson alone, or for Willie Nixon as well.

She settled down, said a psalm, and let the soft cluck of the hens soothe her to sleep.

* * *

Two or three days became four or five. The cow gave more milk when she went to it, easing the cracked teats; the chickens laid eggs like it was a race. The men were out on the fields for long days, and when they came back they talked more openly when she was around.

Only Daniel Cooperson kept himself close. She watched his thin face, and saw worse there than his older brother's blunt tongue. He was calling for something to be done about Lige Nixon's boy, close to saying his niece had been raped, and she knew the tone. Lynch-mobs started that way. There would be men in Burgaw who'd listen to that talk after a drink or two.

Mamma Lucy found a certain herb from her old bag, and let it steep in Esme Cooperson's coffee the next day. By the afternoon, the woman was yawning, hardly fit to stand.

"You go rest up, Mrs Cooperson. I'll shell peas, and keep an eye on things."

Little persuasion was needed. The sun stood halfway between noon and dusk, plenty of time for Mamma Lucy with Suzie before the others got back from the fields.

"Ain't rightly sure what's in there, girl," she said as she eased away a soiled sheet. The nightdress was stained with urine. Her mother changed her, but not often enough. The men treated her like an embarrassment, and chose not to see her – except Daniel. Mamma Lucy had seen him give a strange glance that way when his kin weren't looking.

There was certainly a curve to the girl's belly. An egg did for a cleansing, with a psalm, but as she rubbed the egg against Suzie's skin, Mamma Lucy saw the yolk inside growing dark and tainted, sure as if the shell had been crystal. It wasn't enough.

"Talk to me, Suzie. Tell Mamma Lucy what's ailin'."

The girl moaned, her eyes focussing on the broad, black face.

"Can't tell... mustn't tell."

"Willie Nixon said that? Or some other?"

The moment had passed. Mamma Lucy wrapped the girl in fresh linen, and took herself back up the trail, striding over the dust of a clear, hot day.

Ethan Brown was hoeing a patch by the trees.

"Got your feet under, then?" he said, smiling. "Must say I'm surprised."

"Folk take to me," said the conjure-woman. "Or they don't."

"Imagine so. You come to jaw, or passin' by?"

"Come to jaw."

They sat in a swing-seat at the back of Ethan's shack, and shared a plug of tobacco. Occasionally he spat at the goat.

"You lay a five-spot on that track yonder, Ethan Brown?" The conjure-woman spread her toes, watching ants trickle by.

The old man laughed. "Heard o' them. Wouldn't know how."

"And you don't know no 'witch' hereabouts?"

"Do now."

She laughed back, hoarse and strong.

"Tell me 'bout Lige Nixon."

He shrugged. "Tight-fisted felluh, but no real harm in him. Don't trust the weight o' seed he offers, and don't expect charity. But he don't beat his wife or gamble."

"And the boy?"

"Willie? Fell far enough from the tree, that one. Smart and kindly. I told him, 'Willie, you a clever boy. Go North, leave us tar-heels behind. Don't end up in tobaccuh, scratching the dirt.'"

Mamma Lucy put her hand in her dress-pocket and stroked her mojo bag, thinking.

"Coopersons think he may have laid up their Suzie."

Ethan spat harder, bringing a bleat from the goat.

"In Pender County?" He chuckled. "This ain't Nuh York. Never touched hand nor lip, Willie and Suzy."

"Someone got in there, stirred the pot."

He shrugged. "A jar of hard cider and a big moon. Places dotted all over round Bluegill Creek. I couldn't guess which boy you'd look for."

"Time to stop guessin', then."

She hurried back to the farm. Her rootwork would keep Esme Cooperson settled for a couple of hours, but no use taking risks.

Daniel Cooperson was in the house when she got there.

"Fetchin' eggs, Mr Daniel," she said, pulling a couple out of her dress. She liked to be prepared.

Thick brows knotted over dark eyes.

"Where's Esme?"

"Restin'. Takes a lot from a soul, keepin' house an' seein' your child like that."

She glanced at the girl, asleep again in the cot. He stepped between them, close to his niece.

"White don't go with black." His right hand stroked Suzie's brow. "Lessen black makes it happen."

She could tell him he was wrong, but he wouldn't listen. She could tell him that he was a fool, but then she'd be sent packing, and the long night would come. Had that been Willie Nixon's finger rotting in the field she'd seen, back when the Dark Man came bothering her?

Cooperson's eyes had crow about them, dark and beady. Or Jim Crow, staring back, waiting for an excuse to get the mob moving...

The conjure-woman looked away. "Should I fix you coffee, Mr Daniel?"

"Came back to change my shirt," he said, and was gone, leaving what she knew was a lie on the air.

Esme Cooperson was fast asleep in the small room she shared with her husband. There was one more bedroom, for the boys, which would have normally held Suzie as well. Mamma Lucy flat-footed through the house, seeing no hexes or tricks – not out in the open at least. That left Daniel and his shack. It came on her that she would dearly like to see what lay there.

She laid one big hand on Suzie's belly. It didn't feel right. Suzie Cooperson was sick, and near mute with something. If she had longer alone with the girl, she might know. Witchcraft, they called it in Pender County, but Mamma Lucy knew the difference. Good conjure-work, true hoodoo, was mostly a slow thing, needing respect and thought. Time to gather what you needed, time to lay a trick proper and keep it strong.

* * *

In the morning, the men-folk took the truck to town for supplies. She feared what gossip they might spread, and what might come. It felt like haste was prodding at her.

When she seen them nurse the ancient vehicle well along the trail, Mamma Lucy asked for leave to 'go see Ethan Brown', get news of kin who'd never been. Mrs Cooperson, though puzzled by sleeping through the previous afternoon, saw everything in order, her daughter clean and changed. Leave was freely given.

The track to Daniel Cooperson's shack ran close to the creek, stiff-leaved swamp bay on either side of it. The Cooperson's tobacco fields, along with some corn, were a half mile beyond that. Ethan Brown told her that the trees around there had been dynamited and the stumps pulled years ago.

"Before the war in Europe, that was," he said. "My pappy saw it. Thin soil now, but it grows good bright leaf, and that's the thing these days."

Cooperson's place was rough cut lumber and a tin pipe for a chimney. As she came close, she felt a pang for the days when she'd seen nothing but hills and pines, smelled the resin and been young. She turned to look at the woods, and knew she'd be better off there, in dappled shade. She'd head there, and forget the shack...

Mamma Lucy had a green felt mojo bag. She'd made it first in Georgia, long ago, and fed it good whiskey for so many years that it knew her better than the Good Lord Himself. It was the sort of green you might say was blue as well, and it served her for good intentions and a fair parcel of luck in most all of her dealings. It was likely it served her in that moment.

She'd fixed the silver dimes above her knee, to avoid the Coopersons noticing. Sweat or strain had loosened the string, and when they fell to her ankle, she heard the clink. She looked down. One of the dimes was smut-black.

" 'The ungodly, they is like the chaff that the wind driveth away,' " she recited, and stepped back, the woods no longer calling.

There it was in the dusty earth, almost covered. A line, hot-foot powder around the shack. She scooped up powder with a stick, and placed it in a thumb-sized bottle from her bag. That cleared the way to Cooperson's door as well.

The rusted padlock gave to a hair-pin. She left the dimes where they hung, though they didn't change colour this time.

"Half a witch, and a mean one," she said to herself, for there was no doubting the beady-eyed man in that moment. His bunk was strewn with pamphlets and powders bought cheap, the sort you saw at fairs. A shelf of roots told her by eye that he didn't know his ingredients – some were labelled wrong, others were dried bad and showing mould.

On the wall was a torn photograph of Suzie.

The conjure-woman had seen enough. What had been done, she didn't know. Who had done it, that was plain.

Mamma Lucy could move, when she had a need to. She took up anything that still held power and wrapped it all in a frayed blanket. That would go into Bluegill Creek as she passed, with a prayer behind it. She would need to see to the girl, before more ill came. And to make a call along the way.

* * *

The hens told her that something bad had been at the farm. The dirt was churned with tyre marks, and the laying birds came to her, not for food but reassurance.

"Hush there," she murmured. "Soon be done."

Esme Cooperson stood by her daughter, hair mussed and red-eyed.

"They've gone after Willie Nixon," said the woman. "They came back, yelling and cussing, then fetched a rope down from the barn."

"Weren't Willie Nixon, nor any other black boy." Mamma Lucy said that clear, final.

Mrs Cooperson gave her a woman's look, as if for a moment they were equal.

"I... I feared it wasn't."

"Who went out?"

"Jed and Daniel. They sent my boys to the fields, said there was man's work to do. I think... I think they were going to get a few more from town."

Mamma Lucy checked the girl. Suzie was pale and sweating, hands over her belly like she was trying to push something down.

"Did you know that it was kin, interferin' with your girl?"

"You mean..."

"Daniel, yes. Don't reckon that husband of yours saw it, but you?"

"They're close, Jed and Daniel. I... I worried, wondered. Suzie was kind of odd with him, smiles one day, shivers the next, and he'd never settled on a woman hereabouts..."

"Seems he did."

"Oh God." The woman was weeping, and her hands shook like a dry drunk. She sat down at the table, gripping it. It seemed to the conjure-woman that Esme Cooperson had been carrying a truth that she couldn't face or fathom for some time.

"You... you're sure?" The woman made a last stab, maybe hoping there could be doubt.

"On the Good Book. You want your girl well, and this trouble over? There'll be blood in Pender iffen you ain't with me. Shoes."

The woman stared at her. Mamma Lucy sighed.

"I need Jed and Daniel's shoes."

"Why?"

"So as I can be helpin' you out o' this."

Unsteady, Esme fetched out two pairs of worn boots. Mamma Lucy opened up her carpet bag and pulled out what she needed. She tipped a yellowish powder into both boots, and with a broken pencil she scratched out names on scraps of paper. She put them in the boots as well. When white folk had needs, it was always a rush.

"How long they been gone?"

"Less than twenty minutes. The truck's playing up – won't be halfway to town yet."

"Good." She unwrapped two used blacksmith's nails, borrowed from a horse out Fayette County way. "Needs be short and sharp."

"Jed..."

"Brings 'em back, not too comfy," she reassured the woman. "Ain't no real harm."

Not unless she fixed the trick and kept it playing, but she didn't say that. She used a claw-hammer to drive a nail into each left boot.

"Down to waitin'. They won't be reachin' Lige Nixon's boy, that's for sure. Help me move this cot. Had a thought."

They dragged the cot to one side, by the hearth. The claw-hammer brought up the boards beneath easy. It wasn't the first time someone had been there.

Another five-spot had been laid in the plain earth under the house. This one was set out right. Maybe the one on the trail had been a practice.

She could feel the ill-will buried there. Graveyard dust, sulfur, roots and scraps. A half-witch's attempt to do harm. Cooperson was no trained hoodoo-man.

"You seen it?" Mamma Lucy fixed the woman with her straight eye.

"Yes."

"He's closed your girl's mouth, so as she cain't name him, and I reckon he's aimin' to empty her belly afore his get comes out. Then the blame's on Willie Nixon, and no one the wiser."

Mamma Lucy took the woman's hands in hers.

"It's a hard thing, to blame kin. And you weren't knowin' enough to be sure. We're strong for Suzie, you feelin' me?"

Esme Cooperson nodded, wiped her face on her apron.

"How... how do you know this, Mamma Lucy? Are you a—"

"Ain't no witch, not like you thinkin'." She tolled the words off – she'd said them enough. "Ain't no voodoo lady, neither. The Good Lord's in my prayers, same as yours."

Trembling, Esme washed her girl's face, made her comfy. They heard the truck growl and shudder home a half hour later. The door slammed open, rattling plates, and Jed Cooperson was there, a red sweat on his face. He was limping, as was his brother behind him.

"What you women staring at?" he snapped. "Truck's near rottened out, and we're sick. Came on up the road, sudden."

"Something in the food," said his brother, scowling at the conjure-woman.

"Least o' your worries, boy." said Mamma Lucy.

She doubted a black woman had ever spoken to them so, from the look on their damp faces. Gangling in her worn print dress, she was near as tall as either of the men, and her tone wasn't deference.

"Seems you need a lesson on talking to your betters, old or not," said Daniel, and he reached for the hickory stick by the door.

"Best hear the lady out, I'd say."

Ethan Brown was behind them in the yard, a shotgun on his arm.

Jed looked shocked.

“Ethan, you and me got no quarrel.”

“Nope. We ain’t. That brother o’ yours, though...”

Mamma Lucy expected to face the Cooperson men down, but it was Esme who spoke up, a meat-knife in her hand. She looked at her husband.

“Tried to tell you, Jed, that Daniel was over-fond of our girl. You wouldn’t listen.”

“But...”

Mamma Lucy took a piece of paper from her dress, and handed it to Jed. It was the photograph of Suzie from the shack.

“Turn it over.”

He looked at the back.

“Recognise the writing?” She knew it easy, from the family Bible that she’d riffled through one morning.

It was in Daniel Cooperson’s broad, poor hand. One word: ‘MINE’.

Her milk-and-honey eye fixed on Jed, and the man’s expression must have been plain to his brother.

“Jed, I swear—” Then he saw the lifted boards, and stumbled back.

“Could use a borrow of that gun, Ethan Brown,” said Jed, low.

“I don’t rightly know if—”

“Neighbour.”

Ethan handed him the shotgun.

“You need to get out of this house, Dan.” Cooperson swung the muzzle lazily, pointing at his brother. “I’ll show you the way, and tomorrow we’ll talk. We’ll talk real long.”

When they’d left, Ethan turned to the conjure-woman.

“What now?”

She looked at the knife held white-knuckled in Esme Cooperson’s hand, the almost blank face of the daughter. “Cain’t see it ending well for all. I got me a handful o’ healin’ to do round here.”

There was no need to face Daniel Cooperson with the five-spot he’d made. Ethan made coffee on the range, talking goats to the silent mother – after he’d slid the knife from her hands. Mamma Lucy got down and bruised her knees, moving boards and scraping out what was down there.

“Cain’t reach the roof with half a ladder,” she muttered to herself. The fool man had tried to lay a trick for emptying the girl’s belly, but he’d brought a sickening into her instead. And that got her to thinking deeper than before. They’d all made one assumption, even her...

Jed came back inside, and sat with his wife, holding her hand. They took coffee from Ethan, but didn’t drink.

“How long your girl been sleepin’ here?”

Esme looked up. “Since her belly hurt, two weeks back. She said she hadn’t bled, neither. The boys played up at her moaning, so we moved her here.”

“Couple of days later, she stopped talking.” Her husband swore. “What did that bastard do?”

“That’s when he laid the trick – the jinx. Handy for him. Slipped in some time you two were out, had his powders ready.”

Mamma Lucy fingered the dust from under the centre stone.

“Your Suzie ever missed a month before?”

“Once or twice, I recall.” Esme Cooperson leaned forward. “But—”

“Hush a while.”

The conjure-woman went to the girl, slid her hand under the sheets. She felt the gently curved belly. It was tender, and the skin was too warm, slick with sweat.

"Ain't no child comin'," she said at last.

The three looked at her, confused.

"Oh, that brother of yours sowed his seed, but it didn't take. He thought it had. Suzie here been jinxed, to fix what didn't need fixin'. And to shut her mouth, iffen threats and promises didn't carry him past this."

"Her belly—" Esme started.

Mamma Lucy shook her head. "Man messes with conjure-work like that, anythin' can come – might ha' killed your girl."

Jed Cooperson seemed torn between anger and relief.

"No child."

"And no sniff of Lige Nixon's fine boy, neither," Mamma Lucy pointed out.

"Doesn't change what Daniel did." His wife's eyes were on the knife again. "Can you put it right? We'll pay."

"Whiskey does for me," said the conjure-woman. "If there's any payin', that man will do it. I reckon I can bring her back."

Ethan blew out his cheeks.

"How so?"

"My business, Ethan Brown. But most every jinx can be turned. Got me everythin' in this here mess of a five-spot."

"And... Dan?"

For a wonder, Mamma Lucy managed to fix the husband with both eyes at once.

"He'll sicken. He'll sicken as bad as he crossed your girl, prob'ly far worse."

"Good," said Esme Cooperson, and with such venom that her husband kept his own counsel.

They were out of words for her. She watched them walk from the house, Ethan off to his own place, the Coopersons down to Bluegill Creek. They had healing of their own to think on.

Mamma Lucy drew a half-white candle and a rusty nail from her carpet bag. She lit a fire, gathering up the roots, cloth and powders from the five-spot as the fire took. With the five-spot broken, Suzie already seemed more calm, less pale.

"Cain't say I like Pender County." Two names grew as she scratched at the candle – a man's on the black half, a girl's on the white. She held up the sheet with the remains of the failed jinx in it, and flung it on to the flames. "But it'll be no worse for me havin' called, that's for sure."

In a small shack by the tobacco fields, Daniel Cooperson felt the first pains start in his belly...

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**JOHN LINWOOD GRANT** is a professional writer/editor from Yorkshire in the UK, with some sixty short stories and novelettes published in a wide range of anthologies and magazines during the last four years, including *Lackington's Magazine*, *Vastarien*, *Weirdbook*, *Space & Time*, and others. He writes contemporary weird fiction and period supernatural tales, but occasionally wanders off into classic detective pastiches for fun. And queer fiction. And stories about slightly psychotic ponies...

His story '*His Heart Shall Speak No More*' was picked for *Best New Horror #29*, and '*The Jessamine Touch*' was in the Lambda award winning anthology *His Seed* (Lethe Press). His novel *The Assassin's Coin* (IFD) features the popular Edwardian assassin Mr Dry, from his collection, *A Persistence of Geraniums*; the related novel *13 Miller's Court* (with Alan M Clark) won the 2019

Ripperology Books award. Another anthology in which his work appears, *The Twisted Book of Shadows*, was a Shirley Jackson Award winner for 2019. A further collection of his weird fiction, *Where All is Night, and Starless*, will be out from Trepidatio in 2021.

He is also one of the editors of *Occult Detective Magazine*, and edits various anthologies, including *Hell's Empire: Tales of the Incursion* for Ulthar Press. For Belanger Books, he edits the *Sherlock Holmes & The Occult Detectives* series, and is currently working on the third volume. Also for Belanger Books, he is editing a new anthology of Carnacki, the Ghost Finder stories – *The Book of Carnacki*.

He is active on Facebook, and maintains an eclectic website <http://greydogtales.com/blog/>, featuring weird fiction and art. Linwood Grant is ageing, sarcastic, and has a beard.

# *DIRT IN THE BLOOD*

*S.L. Edwards*

Haley guided the boat from the rear, her rudder-staff dipping into the murky-brown water to influence the river currents beneath. Occasionally she turned to the staff, muttered a few words and ran her fingers across runes that would flicker and dance with fiery green light. The boat would pick up speed, or change direction and Haley would go back to sitting still and quiet.

She was shorter than her son, with long, curly brown hair that hung over her shoulders and ended in gunmetal flecks of gray. Joe had the same deep brown eyes as she did, ones that his father had always called 'fox eyes'. She'd been a force of nature in her youth, and moved with a latent power and dignity that aging would not deprive her of. In the long black coat that rested just above her ankles, Haley looked every bit like the witch she was.

Joe sat in in the front facing the breeze, where the water sprayed up, flaking his hair and beard. Blue sky poured light onto every surface, a shimmering canvas of blue, brown and green that made him remember all the fishing trips he had spent in that boat. He turned to the floor, finding the spot where a young boy took a pocket knife and scratched tally marks for every fish he caught.

They sped along, scaring turtles from their logs and disrupting schools of crappie that jumped the water's surface. The air turned salt-tinged brackish as the bayous encroached into the gulf, as the black-barked trees grew denser and denser to where the sun couldn't touch the pooling green moss that soaked around the trunks of drowning trees. Along the banks a few gators watched, gray and lumbering things with impassive, amused eyes and crooked smiles.

"The murders began three months ago."

It was the first thing she had said to him in two hours. They'd spent most of the day talking, and Joe had intended to do everything he could to reassure his mother that he was being careful. But as they arrived at the small river-house where Haley stored some artifacts she had collected over the years, Joe found himself telling her all of his stories; and as he told her about his brushes with death she became more ashen and silent, her eyes drifting farther and farther away from their conversation.

"It started with chickens, little things with their heads twisted backwards and killed without a drop of blood. Then it moved on to cats, then to dogs and two months ago the first man," Her accent was growing more prominent as they ventured farther into the swamps, southern and laced with the thick remnants of the Cajun French she spoke before she learned English.

"The animals were a lead up, a building sacrifice." Joe spoke knowingly, not asking a question but trying to move his mother along.

"Right," she nodded.

She looked into the cypress curtain. The veins and moss congealed together to form a floral veil and from within a choir medley of birds chirped and whooped. Her smile was growing bigger, eyes glistening with an old recognition made Joe miss a home he could never go back to.

"The people here keep to themselves; most of them have never even seen a paved street. Houma is a big city to these folks. They're wary, probably some of the most secretive people in the continental United States. The Cajuns and the Creoles, they don't talk to outsiders. They remember outsiders coming down here, burning crosses and Catholic chapels and hanging whoever they

could find. You've got to come from here to learn anything about it, and it's only because I'm from here that that Marie Comeau came to me."

The boat slowed as light-green moss covered black water. Large, dark frogs rested on bright lily pads. Haley sighed, her smile fading into a profound sadness.

"She's an old friend, Joebo. Back from before I left. And she lost her son, she lost her son Craig and she had no idea what to do. So, she got on a boat, into a cab and came to see me. Must've felt like a real journey to her..."

Joe had a hard time imagining his mother growing up in such a small, insular place where people never traveled far. His mother was known across the United States and Europe, having traveled all around the world first by herself and then with his father. The two of them met in London, during the bombings, where they abandoned any veneer of bravery and held each other tight in the fear that they might die at any moment.

They'd fought the war together, Haley and Josiah, and got married when Haley was three months pregnant. That'd been just a few months after Berlin fell...

"Were there any other casualties?" Joe asked to break himself away from memories of his father.

"Yes." Haley had turned away from Joe, her eyes resting sadly on the water's shimmering surface. "An old man, closest thing we had to a teacher down here back when I was growing up..." She drifted away again, "And a young woman. Twenty-three years old."

"Any link between them and Marie's son?"

Haley laughed. "Joebo, *everyone* is linked down here. Same water, same blood."

As if to illustrate the point, a raft turned around a bend, steered by a long-armed spindly man in a straw hat and overalls. His beard was gray and wild, and his shadowed face lit up with surprise when he saw Haley Blackwell steering their little boat.

He laughed, said something in a low, guttural half-French dialect.

Haley laughed back and gave him the bird. The man put a hand to his chest and waved her off with the other, eyeing Joe with suspicion.

"How about a pattern?"

"*That* is the right question." The soft happiness of her voice left her. "All of them were *torn* apart. Arms, legs. It took them a couple of days to find any trace of Craig. Something had taken a leg back with it into the swamp, damn near gnawed it clean. The teacher's head was found in a cypress, stuck clean on a branch like it was meant to be found. The only thing they found left of the young woman was just one ragged hand, floating away down river."

"Do the locals have any idea what it might be?"

"Yeah."

The boat turned a bend and the settlement came into view. There was a long, wooden dock that towered above the water. Behind it houses sprang to life beneath the trees, faded white and pink painted walls with tin roofs and open windows. Children were chasing each other somewhere, their wild screeches and laughter rising over the gentle strumming of a guitar.

Haley guided the boat towards the dock and Joe climbed up a metal ladder, tying the boat off and putting out a hand down to help his mother up. She seemed impossibly light, hardly the young woman who had once lifted him above her shoulders as if he weighed nothing at all.

He dusted off his pants, surveying the settlement from a distance before their investigation began in earnest.

"What are they saying it is, mom?"

Haley shook her head, though he wasn't sure if it was out of concern or bewilderment.

"Rougarou."



"Well," Joe sighed, "That really doesn't help us, does it?" Haley had told him stories about the rougarou when he was little, a catch-all Cajun boogeyman with all the makings of a swamp monster, werewolf and sasquatch all conveniently rolled into one.

Haley only laughed and walked ahead.

\* \* \*

Marie Comeau was a big, stout woman who gave big, spine-breaking hugs.

She looked Joe Bartred up and down and whistled, wiggling in exaggerated excitement as she reached up to pat his beard and giggle at his mother.

"Haley you've got an 'ansom boy, an 'ansom boy."

Haley Blackwell laughed, folding her arms and speaking from her diaphragm.

"He comes from good stock."

For his own part, Joe smiled, expressed condolences about her son's grim death and promising her that they would get to the bottom of it.

Her house had a thin wooden floor, neat furniture carved by her husband and a bed not too far from a fire-pit where a cast-iron Dutch oven stood over gray, cold ashes. The place seemed grayer, Marie said, after her boy had died.

"Craig didn't live 'ere no mo', but 'e was a good boy. Left a lil' wife behind, sweet girl."

"Is there any reason you could think of that someone would want to kill him?" Joe asked.

Marie was fighting her grief, eyes red and smile quivering as she shook her head.

"Why does *anybody* kill *anybody*? Not a damn lick of it makes sense, does it?"

Haley thanked Marie for her time and solemnly promised that she and her son would find the killer. Outside Marie's house, the village seemed to come more alive as the cloud cover vanished and light crept from the sky, pouring the sun across every emerald blade of grass and every gleaming yellow-white smile.

Joe found the Cajun dialect hard to follow, having learned the cosmopolitan, puritanical French of Parisian textbooks. Whether he spoke in English or French, the villagers looked at him with glances that quickly fell away in contempt or suspicion. They spat on the ground, grinding their teeth and moving their feet apart as if they were ready to throw a punch.

It was quite different for Haley; she moved freely, leaping from one conversation to the next. The older villagers' eyes lit up when they saw her, waving their arms in proclamations before they draped them over her shoulders and peppered her cheeks with kisses. Smiling, she strained to bring Joe into her conversations, pointing at him and making sure that everyone knew he was her son. Inevitably they regarded him a few cool seconds before turning their attention away from him and back to Haley. Joe would then tap his feet and shift his arms as he stood still and strained to catch what he could, impatient and irritated that they were treating him as such an outsider and with such open hostility.

When the subject of a rougarou came up, they shifted it away. They told Haley about suspicious people who lived on the outlying edges of the village instead, of people who walked with the devil and sold limbs from a cannibalistic butcher's cart. They talked about those who had supposedly adopted faiths older than Catholicism, and who tried to get village children to take skin-bound books that would scream at night.

Haley thanked them each, but after two hours of standing under the heat she shook her head and turned to Joe.

"They believe talking about a rougarou is bad luck. We're not going to get anything out of them. All they want is blame anybody they've got a grudge against."

"Then we'll need to use the gleaning blade." Joe added.

"Yeah." Haley sighed regretfully, "Yeah we will.

"Do you know how to use it?" She added.

"Yes."

"Have you used it?"

"No," Joe responded through gritting teeth.

"Then this'll be a lesson."

\* \* \*

The body of Craig Comeau had been found in a part of the swamp about a mile away from the village. Joe had water-resistant pants, boots, and waders that he had packed into the backpack slung over his shoulder. Haley walked in and the water drifted away from her, creating a bubble which she moved through lithely and quickly, never letting a drop touch her. The sigils and wards stitched into her clothes would keep her clean and protected.

The black pool was surrounded by tall, yellow grass sprouting out from the muddy ground; the cypresses hung low and solemn as they swayed with the wind like funeral shrouds. The water had grown stagnant, rank with flies and mosquitoes that burned to a crisp as they attempted to land on Haley's jacket.

Joe removed the stone blade from his pocket. The knife was crude, half the length of Joe's forearm and almost as jagged as a saw. Looking at the writing along the blade Joe remembered Magdalena's sharp, curved claws; the way they tore into Colonel Maduro, the way the gleaning blade carved apart the thing that she summoned, the latest in a long line of sacrifices.

"I've never seen one of those in person." Haley's voice was tinged with trepidation and awe.

"But you said this would be 'a lesson' for me." Joe added, irritation escaping his self-control.

"Not just for *you*, Joebo." Haley narrowed her eyes to squint at the thing. It hissed with steam when water touched it.

"The blade needs a reflective surface," Joe motioned to the water, "And a small sacrifice. A little pain. That's it.

"Assuming the murder was the last violent thing to happen here," he added as an afterthought, "Otherwise we'll need more than a *little* pain."

Joe closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. He brought the end of the knife to his palm, plunging into the flesh and bringing it down to make a long, burning gash. He held the blood over the knife and water, letting it pool in front of him. He watched the blood swirl, gently flowing and forming dark clouds.

*The body was strange, alien and horrifying.*

*They looked down at their hands, clawed, furry things with ten knuckles that scraped down in the water. Through the growling and coughing they heard their sobs escaping from a long, sharp mouth. Around them the world was swirling, a mess of heightened sight and sound that burned bright black-and-white.*

*Their crying sounded like a dog's whine, and this only scared them more.*

*In front of them Craig Comeau was still breathing. He stood shaking, clasping the gash across his fat belly to keep his guts inside him. He looked at the killer with knowing eyes, fearful and pleading. In the moonlight, his flesh was pale and slimy with sweat, he raised an open palm and begged for an end.*

*The killer stepped back and growled. There was a desperation, a longing so intense to simply run away, to leave Craig to the swamp and leave the whole thing behind. They turned around to see the silhouettes of two men standing in the dark, their faces obscured by the sheet-like tears of the killer's sight.*

*"Uh-uh, boy." One of them spat.*

*A rock collided with their head, landing with a loud 'thud' that sent them on all fours and into the dirty water. They whined, the blood running into their eyes and mingling with the salt of their tears. The world screeched and hummed as they brought their hands together, motioning for some sort of mercy, sliding their knees through the cool mud as they moved towards the two men.*

*"Nossir." Another voice answered, deeper and colder.*

*There was the click and glint of a pistol and they were overcome with fear.*

*"You know how it is, just a few more months and you're done. But today, you're gonna kill Craig. Then you'll get his stuck-up bitch of a wife."*

*"What?" With that, Craig's nails were digging into their back. They yowled in surprise, turning around quickly to rake their teeth across Comeau's neck. The blood was sweet and tangy, and the killer brought their long, sharp teeth together as the man's throat burst salty and sour into their jaws.*

*What followed was a red blur. Terror beating in their ears, the killer turned their claws on the corpse, tearing and rending it apart. For what seemed like furious hours mutilation was the outlet for their rage and terror. The howls became louder, roaring and pounding against the calls of the night birds that broke the impassive quiet of the black sky above them.*

*They were panting, a long tongue lolling from a wet jaw.*

*They turned to the men, white smiles glinting against black shadows.*

*They ran into the swamp. Behind them the two men cursed, throwing rocks and firing off bullets. The killer ran furiously across all fours, the mud pounding beneath their feet as they weaved between the cypresses until they could no longer hear the echo of their cries...*

Joe breathed in deeply and quickly.

The sun was hanging lower, the edges of the sky creeping with the pre-dusk yellow of the late afternoon. He was waist deep in the water, hands still shaking with fear. The sensation had been so intense, his muscles throbbing with aches, his mouth still wet with the ghostly taste of raw meat.

He looked into the swamp, the direction the killer had run. It was cavernous and dark, miles upon miles of places to hide. He turned back to Haley, who stood over him with the same expression of mortal terror she had worn the day he first mounted a bicycle.

"Mom," Joe began. "Mom, we need to get to Comeau's widow."

\* \* \*

Lisbeth Comeau stood at the threshold of her doorway. Behind her a baby cried, screaming into the dark of the hut and the purpling sky above. She wore a simple brown dress that hung loosely around her shoulders, tan skin only exposed on her arms and just above her ankles. A line of freckles held tight to each cheek, and when she spoke it was with the fluttering breath of perpetual exhaustion.

"You're friends of Craig's mama, eh?" She crossed her arms, ready to do her best to prevent strangers from entering her and her child's home. Her straight back and piercing eyes wouldn't be enough come nightfall. Joe and Haley needed to convince her of that much.

"I am, yes." Haley extended her thin hand to the widow Comeau, who eyed it until Haley pulled it back.

"We have reason to believe," Joe made his voice cold and urgent, "That whatever killed your husband is coming for you next."

She did not change her angry expression and did not offer a reply.

"You and your child are in danger." Joe gritted his teeth, tired of being treated so coldly by people he was trying to help. "You need to let us in to your home now."

She hissed and crossed her arms.

"I loved Craig but I ain't havin' nothing to do with witches, I know what 'is mama is and I ain't havin' *none of it* around my boy!"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

Haley pulled her shirt sleeve up and thrust an open palm to the woman's face. Lisbeth Comeau blinked momentarily, flinching away before she realized what she was looking at. Thick, black wooden beads with an iron cross that had intricate, rusted-over runes hung on Haley's wrist.

"Your God is more welcoming than you are, Miss Comeau." Haley pulled her sleeve back over her rosary and looked away from Lisbeth as she continued, "Now, are you going to let us in or are you willing to let your baby die tonight?"

Warding the Comeau household was hard work. Painting the symbols with mud was arduous, having to reach into dark corners and onto high ceilings to link them together in a primal, sweeping language which could keep away all danger. The symbols would last two days at most, and would fall away if there was no rain. And if there *was* rain, then the mud would run with the extra humidity.

By the end of it they were starved. Lisbeth Comeau served them thick, spicy gumbo from wooden bowls, and Joe took huge gulps of it. Haley drew her gumbo slowly, cooling off each small mouthful with sips and breaths. The widow Comeau held her child in her lap as they sat in wooden chairs around a charcoal pit, eyeing them out of the corner of her eyes and refusing to give either of them the time of day.

Finally, Haley sat down her bowl and clapped her hands together. She brought them to her mouth and closed her eyes, sighing for a moment before turning her eyes pointedly to Lisbeth.

"You know, it's awful foolish."

"Excuse me?" Lisbeth spat.

"Being so cold to people who are putting their lives on the line to help you."

Haley put on her lecturing voice, the one which had so thoroughly irritated Joe when he was a teenager.

"You love your boy?" She pointed to the baby sitting on Lisbeth's lap.

The other woman merely nodded yes, moving the child closer to her chest as if she expected Haley to reach up and grab him away from her.

"Well," Haley pointed to Joe. "That's *my* boy. And if you think you're scared for your baby now, wait till he grows up. Wait till you have all those memories, wait till you've put in all that time and work making sure that he could be happy. Wait till you watch him become a better person than you could *ever* be. Then, maybe, you'll understand how scared I am that he's out there risking his life for people who will never treat him right or tell him thank you."

Lisbeth was frightened, her face quivering and tears leaking from her eyes despite her best efforts to keep herself calm and composed.

She began to mouth "I'm sorry," but Haley stopped her.

"I don't need your apologies, and I don't need your thanks. I just need you to raise that boy to be better to his guests than his mama is," She stood, wiping her face and making sure to turn away

from Lisbeth as she left, "I'm going to stand outside and begin drawing this thing out. *You're* going to stay inside and answer my son's questions, because you want to protect your son's life and because you want to be a good host."

She left out the door and closed it behind her, leaving Joe and Lisbeth in an awful silence.

\* \* \*

Haley leaned against the wooden wall of the Comeau cottage, her arms crossed and face growling as she drew a dimly lit cigarette to her lips.

"They'll be death of you," Joe tried to break the ice.

Haley laughed, irritated and sad. "*You'll* be the death of me, Joebo."

They let the quiet pass between them. The cattails swayed with the wind, the frogs and cicadas singing a torrential song beneath a sky of shimmering stars and azure streaks of the Milky Way. The air was gentle, humid and warm, reminding Joe of summer nights on a long porch, singing fireflies on Haley's shoulders as he reached out for them with stubby arms and little fingers.

"I wish you would've done something else, kiddo." She sighed between her words, wistful and sad.

"I know."

"Losing your daddy was hard." She drew the cigarette back to her lips and breathed in, coughing before letting go and blowing the smoke out in three wide, perfect rings. "But it happened and we picked ourselves back up and moved forward. I thought I'd never hurt as much as I did then, thought if I was strong it'd be good for the both of us. For Allen too. But Joebo," she turned to him, her eyes wide and voice shaking, "I don't like the idea of losing *you*."

"You're not going to lose me."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

"Mom, I'm careful—"

"Your father was a careful man too."

The words twisted in his stomach, their truth made him feel small and weak. His mind raced for any reply when he heard the thudding of fast, heavy feet and the snarling of a wild animal.

"It's here," Haley said.

Joe reached for his pistol, holding it up into the dark and waiting to draw a bead.

The village had gone quiet. In the black-blue stillness Joe could hear the rising crescendo of animal breath, the ragged breathing of a thing of aching muscles and burning sinew. Its feet came down hard on dirt roads, snapping the limbs of fallen branches as it roared with a wet, wide throat.

Joe could see it from far away, a black outline against the long trees and shuttered houses. It ran like a gorilla, bringing its long arms forward for quick, four-footed strides. Its back jutted outward, hunched and bulging with uneven knots of muscle that shifted beneath sparse fur.

Joe waited until its glowing, green eyes were the size of dimes.

Then he fired.

The shot exploded into the monster's shoulder. It hissed, black blood pouring out and pooling on the ground beneath it. It hummed, a guttural saw blade against wet meat. A clawed hand reached up to cover the shoulder, and the thing moved forward on two short, imbalanced back legs.

Then it turned towards Haley.

"MOM!"

But it was dark, the rougarou was moving fast, and it was already a few feet in front of her by the sounds escaping its throat. It knocked her aside with a wide swipe of her arm, sending her careening from the ground and crashing into the cabin wall.

From inside her cabin, Lisbeth Comeau screamed.

The rougarou approached her slowly, taking its hand away from its bleeding wound and moving on all fours towards her. Joe called out, but his mother was barely conscious. He fired his pistol into the air, screaming at the thing to pay attention to *him*.

The thing didn't pay attention, moving instead closer to the easier kill.

Joe cursed and aimed his pistol at its head.

The shot went through cleanly. For a moment the monster wavered uncertainly, its arms dangling unsteadily at its side. Then it fell, its body collapsing on top of Haley.

Joe screamed, running forward in a blind panic. It took straining every muscle in his back to push the rougarou's wet, sweaty corpse off of his mother and when he found her eyes closed he stopped breathing.

"Mom?"

He was cursing at himself, roaring insults inside his mind. She seemed so calm, so confident in her abilities. But she wasn't the young woman she used to be, and he shouldn't project that person on the woman who could no longer carry the world on her shoulders.

"Mom!?"

His father would have been furious with him. He should have paid more attention to Haley than the rougarou, should have made sure she was ready.

His stomach churned as he remembered Haley sitting alone at a table, crying into her shirt sleeves and swearing into her hands. Then another flash, of his mother lifting him over her shoulders and laughing wildly and spontaneously. Another, of her showing him how to conjure fire between his fingers and telling him the name of stars.

But she was silent, and her head was bleeding.

Her eyes opened and Joe's panic broke into tearful relief.

He pulled his mother close and wept into her shoulder.

\* \* \*

They leaned Haley against the wall of the Comeau cabin. She held a bowl of water with one hand, a white-red towel to her head with another. During the first hour, she was dizzy and a little confused. By the second hour she was herself again, but embarrassed and sad.

"Joebo... it was fast."

"I know."

"I should have been faster." The way she said it was breaking his heart, as if it were an obvious and desperate fact, as if reality had been yanked away from her.

She took the bowl to her lips.

"You had to shoot him in the head, kill him before we could figure out who he was."

"I know who he was."

Lisbeth Comeau had a hate in her voice that dipped into every word, filling her syllables with the low growl of animal ready to kill in anger.

"They shouldn't 'av done that to 'im." She added, cradling her sleeping child along the dip of her sitting stomach.

"Tell us," Joe prompted.

“They live in a different part of the village,” Lisbeth ran her fingers along her child’s hair, “The Dugas boys. They’ve been bad since the day they was born. Evil as they come. They killed wild animals, pets, birds. Tore them apart and made little dolls with the parts, just like their momma taught them.

“Liddie Dugas was like Miss Comeau, a ‘good witch.’ But those boys, they learnt the wrong lessons. Got in fights, followed women home... the only reason they’re still alive is because they never crossed a line that would make somebody too mad.”

“Until now?” Joe asked.

Lisbeth nodded, “They was always full of hate. They hated their momma, hated this place and everyone in it. But they especially...” Her breath fluttered as she brought a hand to her mouth. She gasped for a breath, swallowing the air in the hopes of repressing the tears. “They especially hated their little brother. An’ he was a *good boy*, never did anything to anybody. Simple though, never quite understood what was happenin’ but always happy to be wherever he was, you know?”

“You knew the little brother?” Joe tried to make his town comforting.

“Everybody would pay Willie Dugas to do small chores. Paint somethin’, clean, pick their gardens. Liddie got sick an’ he was the only one lookin’ after his momma. She died a year ago an’ nobody saw him after that... we all thought his brothers killed ’im. But that body...”

Lisbeth had only got a glimpse of the corpse when she opened the door and let them in. The head was split open, an unrecognizable red mess that Joe hated himself for finding familiar. It had been covered in scars and burn marks, home-given tattoos and an inter-laced jumble of sigils.

“It was his?”

Lisbeth wept openly and loudly. Haley lifted herself gently, standing up so she could offer her arms to hold the baby. Lisbeth nodded through her sobs, handing the crying baby over to Haley, who moved her arms gently and walked around the house to lull it back to sleep.

\* \* \*

“Are you ready?” Joe asked his mother.

Haley didn’t reply, her face hardening in metallic rage.

The Dugas family home had rotted with neglect. The wood was splintering, the tin roof blood-colored with rust. Broken glass wafted a vague, horrific scent from the house’s innards, but they could not hear anything beyond.

Joe brought his boot down on the door handle.

The door crashed open to reveal a miasmic cloud of festering wounds and spoiling dairy. Sparsely populated with stained furniture, the living room floor was littered with bottles and pornographic magazines. A man with a wiry mustache and long hair jolted awake from a mildewed couch. He reached for a gun but recoiled in pain as the heat of the handle scorched his fingers with black, steaming blisters.

Haley threw her arm back and snapped it forward to unleash a stream of green flame from her palm. The fire wrapped around the man’s neck, filling the room with a sweet smell and panicking screams.

“This is just the beginning, boy.” Haley spoke slowly.

From a dark hallway Joe saw another form approach. He ran forward, throwing his weight from his shoulders and into his feet before his mother reached backward and thrust her hand into his chest and shoved him with surprising strength. As he flew from one end of the living room to the other, he noticed the glint of the knife in the man’s hand as he stepped out of the shadows. The

other Dugas brother turned his attention to Haley, but looked at Joe just long enough for Haley to conjure another whirling streak of flames. Fire wrapped around his entire body.

"All this trouble over two cruel boys," Haley mused over their screams. "Over two boys who couldn't be bothered to be good to their brother."

She pulled her arms towards her chest and the fire sliced through them. A severed head, a segmented body and slow, methodical flames were all that remained of the Dugas boys. Haley's torches were a gift from a god's forge, living flames which required fuel to stay alive. The weight of two good-sized men would make sure they lasted another fifteen years at least.

Joe rose, clutching a hand to his side and wincing.

"We need to burn the house," he muttered.

"That's where they kept him."

She pointed down the hall, to the only open door where a dim light shone through. Her shoes squelched on the saturated wood. Joe followed her, feeling the phantom panic of someone trapped. He was in tears when he followed her through, into a room with a large dog kennel and discarded branding irons.

He peaked into the kennel and gagged, the acrid smell of human feces piled in the back. There were symbols all over the walls, painted in blood from countless methodical bleedings. They had tortured him; the body was evidence enough of that.

"How long did they keep him here? How many times did they cut him? The amount of pain it takes to make a rougarou... what did they do to him to make him finally turn? Their own brother?" Haley asked.

Joe had no words for her.

"Brothers shouldn't do this to each other." She added.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and pinched gently.

"We need to burn the entire house."

\* \* \*

They sang a song as they worked, one with low notes and solemn words. One to make the ground sleep again and settle the pain-fed earth. The song would sooth the space, fill it so that no loose spirit would come to occupy it. They sang it loudest in Willie Dugas' old bedroom, letting the chorus rise as they made patterns and circles out of the powders that would cleanse the air.

"Thanks for saving me," Haley spoke as they finished. "I didn't thank you last night."

"Thank you for saving *me*," Joe responded.

Haley nodded and sighed.

They walked through the front of the house, letting the last of the powder leave a trail behind them. She bent low, almost kneeling as she put a finger to the powder and let a green flame loose.

The living flame moved slowly along the powder trail, spreading out as the path splintered across the house.

"Joebo," she started. "I'm glad you're here, because I need to tell you this. What we do," she motioned toward the fire, "It's not easy. You know that. Your daddy knew that. It's why your brother keeps his distance from it. And it's not always easy to tell if you're doing the right thing.

"I should've been faster, Joebo. I shouldn't have made you kill that poor boy."

"Mom—"

"No," She stopped him. The flames cracked, spitting embers a sky fading from purple to black.

"No, I just want to know that *you're a good person*. If you feel like you're not, just know... know your momma thinks different, okay."



In the green light Joe could see the glistening stream of tears fall from her eyes.

“Okay, mom.” He smiled, tired. He put a hand on her shoulder and hummed her favorite Sinatra song.

She laughed, turning to him with a smile.

“Your daddy would be proud to know the man you are.”

They sat together as the fire finished its work.

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S.L. EDWARDS is a writer and poet of dark fiction, including both fantasy and horror. He is the creator of the Bartred family, a series of occult detectives active since before WWII through the present. He is also the co-creator of ‘*Borkchito: Occult Doggo Detective*’, with artist Yves Tourigny.

His Bartred stories have appeared in *Occult Detective Quarterly #3*, and the anthology, *Occult Detective Quarterly Presents*. Borkchito strips can be found in *Occult Detective Quarterly #2, #3* and *#4*.

His work has been described as predominantly ‘political horror’, though he himself is not at all comfortable with the descriptor. However, he cannot deny that his characters often interact with political systems and their consequences, as he believes we all do in our daily lives. His characters often live through coups, run for public office, get caught up in a populist frenzy and are forced to live through historical moments. The Bartred family, regrettably for them, often finds themselves in places where geopolitics and the occult meet, and their antagonists range from refugee fascist warlocks, witches raising a cosmic insurgency and the growing threat of militarization. The intersection of real-world horror, political systems and the supernatural is the subject of his novel-in progress, *In the Devil’s Cradle*, which he hopes to find a home for soon.

Outside of writing, S.L. Edwards is a Texan, but has lived across the Southwestern United States, North, Central and South America. He is a long-distance runner, traveler, and consumer of craft beer. He loves all dogs, but especially your dog, who he believes to be a very good boy and/or girl.

His first fiction collection, *Whiskey and Other Unusual Ghosts* was released from Gehenna & Hinnom in 2019. His second collection, *The Death of An Author* will be released this summer from Journalstone, complete with an introduction from *Occult Detective Magazine’s* very own John Linwood Grant. You can find him on amazon and Facebook, and he always enjoys hearing from readers and fellow writers.

His Amazon author page is here – <https://www.amazon.com/S.-L.-Edwards/e/B01M34MZOT>

REVIEWS

We've always featured reviews in *ODQ*, and *ODM*, but since I'm also working on issue #8 and #9, it proved difficult to find the time to pull together enough new ones for this promotional issue too. I had just the one, contributed by Dave Panchyk on hand, so I decided to resurrect a few of my older reviews that were written and published before the magazine ever existed, and may not have been widely seen. The only one that was previously printed in the magazine is the first one...

They're Pernicious things, gremlins! We discovered their work quite quickly in *Occult Detective Quarterly* #3, and replaced the text they'd misappropriated from Bob Freeman's contribution to the 'Occult Legion' series of interconnected stories. What did they do? The little buggers made off with the last 77 words of my review of James Palmer's *Eldritch For Hire*. We really didn't want to pull the issue from distribution yet again to fix that, for fear they'd only go and mess up something else in retaliation. So, here, at last, is the complete text of that review...



Title: **ELDRITCH FOR HIRE**

Author: James Palmer

Publisher: Mechanoid Press

Format: ebook

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

Sam Eldritch is a hard-drinking, hard-boiled PI. He has reasons for his drinking. His partner is dead, but still talks to him regularly, and the Chinese demon who killed him remains a literal pain in Eldritch's gut. Rather than kill him, the demon gave Eldritch the gift of sight – he could see things normal humans couldn't, such as ghosts. If there was some purpose behind giving Eldritch this ability, it has not yet been revealed.

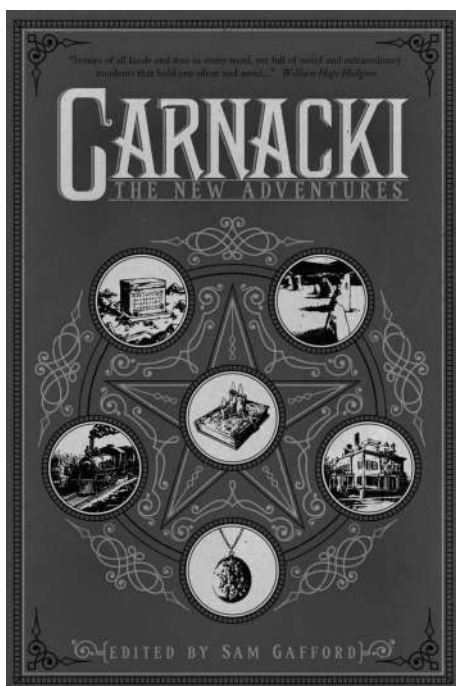
Eldritch For Hire contains two classic pulp styled stories. The first, 'Slow Djinn', has Eldritch sent to recover a stolen ring. It doesn't take a genius to work out that this is a magic ring of some sort – the amount the client is willing to pay for its return is a clue to that. The title of the story pretty much establishes the nature of the magic. Yes, there's a certain level of influence from both *Aladdin* and the TV show, *I Dream of Jeannie* here. The djinni is female, and refers to those who command her as "dear." James Palmer actually does a very good job of balancing the

lighter aspects of his story with the darker, dangerous side, preventing it from falling irrevocably into sitcom land.

Of the two stories, I actually preferred ‘*With Friends Like These, Who Needs Entities?*’. This time Eldritch is charged with acquiring a powerful occult tome from the estate of a recently deceased pulp writer, before it falls into the wrong hands. He finds himself travelling to the reading of the will in the company of an old friend of the late Frank Orless – a fellow writer of pulp tales. Eventually they arrive at Dupin House to find a mixed group of friends and relatives who would do any period detective novel proud. Naturally, with a setup like that, there’s going to be murder and mystery, and the “wrong hands” are guaranteed to be present.

The author has a lot of fun with this tale. All the characters are analogues of real, classic pulp authors, specifically the Lovecraft Circle. Readers will have a lot of fun working out who is who. Not all are immediately obvious and they’re never simply based on real people with just the names changed. Palmer is more subtle than that.

Please don’t take from this review the idea that this is just clichéd hackwork. This is a case of the author knowingly and cleverly using, and often subverting, clichés to tell an entertaining story. We are left with the impression that there are older stories not yet told, and many new stories still to come. I shall look forward to reading them.¹⁴



Title: **CARNACKI: THE NEW ADVENTURES**

Editor: Sam Gafford

Publisher: Ulthar Press

Format: paperback/ebook

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

This is yet another of those books that I bought on the day of release, and finally found the time to read and review a year later! The late, and much missed Sam Gafford was an acknowledged expert on the works of William Hope Hodgson, so a collection of new Carnacki tales edited by him was always going to be an essential purchase for Hodgson fans.

What better way to open such a collection than with a story by William Meikle, the author who has written more new Carnacki tales than any other? My review of his Carnacki collection – *Carnacki: Heaven and Hell*, can be found on the

British Fantasy Society website.¹⁵ His story in this volume, ‘*Carnacki: Captain Gault’s Nemesis*’, has William Hope Hodgson’s other series character seek him out for help with a cargo, which has been causing him serious trouble since he picked it up in Corfu. William Meikle is very adept at writing

¹⁴ Since this review was originally written, James Palmer has informed me that he has no current plans to write any further Sam Eldritch tales, which is a shame.

¹⁵ <http://www.britishfantasysociety.org/reviews/carnacki-heaven-and-hell-by-william-meikle-book-review/>

Lovecraftian stories, while avoiding name-dropping various books, races, or entities most regularly associated with the Cthulhu Mythos. This is just such a tale. An excellent start to the collection.

Quite a while back I had suggested to both William Meikle and Josh Reynolds that they should collaborate on a story telling how Carnacki came to pass on the mantle of 'Royal Occultist' to St. Cyprian – Josh Reynolds' own occult detective creation. Little did I realise at that time that Josh Reynolds had already detailed the first meeting between the two in '*Monmouth's Giants*' – the second story in this collection. It's not all that uncommon for heroes to start out anything but heroic, only to be set on the right path by a traumatic event, and this is pretty much what happens to young Charles St. Cyprian here. It's only the beginning, though, and I'm sure Messrs. Meikle and Reynolds might have more to tell us about the meeting of these two men.

'*A Gaslight Horror*', by P.V. Ross was an interesting idea for a story, which owes a lot to 'Casting of the Runes', by M.R. James. I liked it well enough, but felt it could have been slightly more substantial, especially when you consider that the first page and a half simply detail fairly irrelevant events that occurred before the traditional dinner and storytelling at Carnacki's home.

I liked Robert Pohl's '*Carnacki and the President's Vampire*' a lot. While I found the idea of a group of Native American Indians, in full regalia, knocking on Carnacki's door a little unlikely, this was the era when Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show hit London, so it's not beyond the realms of possibility. I found the character of Fire Dog, a very well-educated Native American who speaks perfect English, fascinating and found myself wondering if Robert Pohl might have written other tales featuring this unusual character. I rather hope he has. The story itself involves a meteor and is full of references to the works of Herbert George Wells, who also makes an appearance in the story.

'*The Spar: A Story of Carnacki*' by Fred Blosser, like William Meikle's story earlier in the book, ties in William Hope Hodgson's non-Carnacki work. This time it's a sequel of sorts to *The Ghost Pirates*, as a piece of the ill-fated cargo ship, *Mortzestus*, finds its way into a humble shop in Bow Street.

There's some deliciously creepy imagery in Robert E. Jefferson's '*The Braes of the Blackstarr*'. I will not soon forget the scene where a man opens the shadow of a window with the shadow of his hand. It would make a very creepy TV play. Some of the technology referred to gave me pause, but I checked and the author has done his research; there's nothing in the story that didn't exist in that period. On this occasion, Carnacki is limited to finding out what happened, rather than taking an especially active role, and is more of an "occult detective" for it.

'*The Magician's Study*', by Buck Weiss is one of my favourites in the book. A magician's wife calls in Carnacki when her recently deceased husband makes his presence once again known. There's a nice twist in the tale here.

On that seemingly endless list of authors, whose work I was aware of, but had yet to read, was one Charles R. Rutledge. I know the man through Facebook, in fact he helps me run a Facebook group dedicated to classic ghost stories, so I was very interested indeed to find he had contributed a story to this anthology. '*How They Met Themselves*' turns out to be a very worthy addition to the Carnacki canon. While, on the one hand, the author dispenses with the usual framing sequence of the gathering of Carnacki's friends to hear his stories, he does actually remember an idiosyncrasy

of Carnacki's, in the way that he periodically checks if the people he's talking to grasp his meaning. A Druid circle, doppelgängers and even a sly reference to Manly Wade Wellman's occult investigator, John Thunstone – what more could you ask for?

Considering the quality of some of the authors in this collection, it's really saying something when I claim, at this point, that Jim Beard, in *'The Haunting of Tranquil House'*, possibly captures Carnacki's character and mannerisms better than most. I was especially intrigued by the fact that Carnacki, having sorted out the problem at hand, has some concerns about something he saw while in a death-like trance, that could just possibly indicate that Jim Beard has more Carnacki tales in the offing.

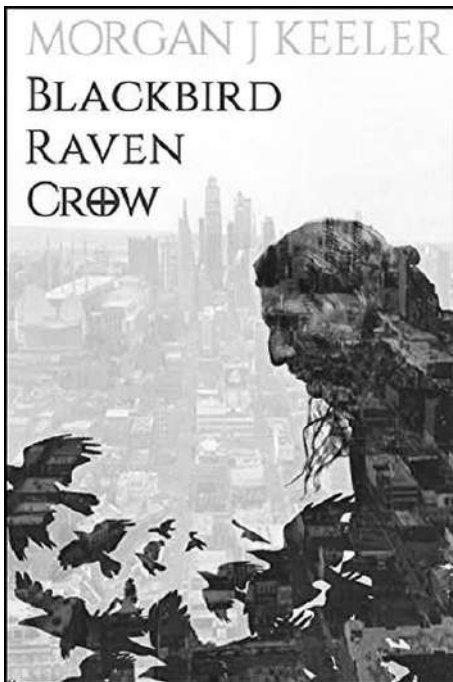
Amy K. Marshall's *'The Ghosts of Kuskulana'* is on the one hand a well-told, scary ghost story, but on the other hand, I found myself questioning whether, or not it was a Carnacki story. I felt that it must take place early in Carnacki's career for several reasons. Firstly, he tells the story to friends over drinks, but it's not his usual group of friends, and they're not at Carnacki's house. We never get to hear the name of the host, but he refers to Carnacki by his Christian name, which would again suggest he's not one of the regulars. Secondly, Carnacki blindly enters a case, with absolutely no preparation, and while he does discover the facts behind the problem, he doesn't actually do anything, other than give himself a severe fright. I did like the story, but I'd probably have liked it better, had it been a stand alone ghost story, with no Carnacki involvement.

I could easily have assumed by this point, that I'd already read the best story in the book, but Robert M. Price managed to prove me wrong. His capturing of the style of the original tales, and the quirks and idiosyncrasies of Carnacki's character and speech are flawless. In *'A Job For Carnacki'*, the author makes good use of his knowledge as a professor of biblical criticism to craft a tale of a beleaguered priest. Those familiar with Robert M. Price's work will not be surprised that there's also a hint of the Lovecraftian about this story. This may well be my favourite ever Carnacki pastiche.

M.J. Starling doesn't stoop to mere hints. His contribution has the words, "after William Hope Hodgson and H.P. Lovecraft" right there, under his byline. I use the word "contribution", rather than story, as *'An Audience With the Ghost-Finder'* is in the form of a script for a play. I'm generally not too keen on reading such things, but I have to admit I really enjoyed this one. The Lovecraftian element isn't really any more pronounced than in several other tales in this collection – there are none of those name-dropped entities, or tomes – which many modern day Lovecraftians tend to view as laziness in the authors of many modern pastiches – but the theme of a family, preyed on for generations by an entity from beyond our reality is very much in the territory of H.P. Lovecraft. I read in the author biography that this play has actually been performed a couple of times. I'm sorry I missed it. Perhaps another opportunity will present itself.

All in all, this is an excellent collection. I was especially pleased that one of the stories, and I'm not going to say which one, turned out to have no genuine supernatural involvement, which is in keeping with Hodgson's original canon. Most modern authors appear to be disinterested in writing Carnacki stories that turn out to have a mundane explanation, but I've always felt that trying to

guess whether the explanation for the events of a particular story will be turn out to be genuinely supernatural, or not, is an important element in the enjoyment of a good Carnacki tale.¹⁶



Title: **BLACKBIRD RAVEN CROW**

Author: Morgan J. Keeler

Publisher: Self-Published

Format: Paperback/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Panchyk

We continue to see stories and TV Shows featuring demons and angels as characters – witness my girlfriend bingeing the fifth season of *Lucifer* and lamenting the delays in shooting *Supernatural's* final season in Canada. Much less often we see a character who's neither demon nor angel yet entwined in basic Christian cosmology.

Raven – he goes by Ray; angels call him Blackbird to belittle him, demons call him Crow to imply close kinship – is a Judge. The Judge's purview is to make sure the articles of the Treaty of Year One ensuring human free will are followed.

Ray grew from a seed that fell from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to travel down the Missouri river before sprouting; Raven was the name given him by the First People there. His domain as a Judge is Kansas City, Missouri. As far as I can tell this oft-overlooked city in the American Midwest's Bible Belt has never had any kind of urban fantasy or paranormal gloss given it.

Ray is full of attitude, a hard-drinking, foul-mouthed guy whose taste in the Judge's black garb runs to old heavy metal t-shirts. Despite his outward presentation, he loves and cares for the human race. It's his love of one particular human that sets off the novel's action. Jaded about his job, he has disengaged to a large degree and does the bare minimum of work. It's because of this that he misses the early warning signs that something is going to happen to the human who's special to him. Driven in no small part by his guilt, he sets out to determine whether a Year One treaty violation occurred.

And so begins the investigation, interacting with a number of memorable characters – angelic, demonic, and human. The most colourful human characters are a group of Ozarks conjure women who liven up the novel when they appear. There's a good portrayal of the angels, including the expected Gabe and Mike. The demons are skeezy backstabbers who have a hard time working together, even under the circumstances that had them crying foul to Ray over the fate of his human friend. Ray's inquiries lead him to one of their number, exiled by the others to the backcountry, who takes predatory unpleasantness to a new level; Ray's encounter with 'Mr Louis' is chilling.

¹⁶ New Carnacki collections still appear now and then. Dark Regions Press has recently published William Meikle's fourth Carnacki collection, *Carnacki: Starry Wisdom & Other Stories*. Our own John Linwood Grant is currently hard at work editing *The Book of Carnacki*, for Belanger Books.

One quibble I have is with the author's use of footnotes, especially in a work with religious overtones.¹⁷ One doesn't really need citations for matters addressed in the Bible.¹⁸ Further in the novel they range out into facts the author wants us to know, but aren't critical to one's understanding of the novel.

Appearing nearly as often as footnotes are simple typographical errors. These are the kind no spell-checker will catch, like homonyms or missing plurals. Their regularity is the most frustrating thing about them. Not for nothing are indie writers advised to hire an editor. The flip side of this is no traditional publisher would have allowed the creative typographic manipulation that occurs at the novel's climax.

Blackbird Raven Crow is a fine independently published novel with a creative concept and well-sketched characters. This is Keeler's first published novel, but hopefully not her last.

I committed to reviewing *Blackbird Raven Crow* for *Occult Detective Magazine* having read no further than the sample of the ebook on Amazon. In the first chapter, the narrator mentions several aspects of humanity as they relate to the Bible. Each of these is indicated with a footnote. Or more accurately, an endnote – being at the very end of the book, they were not accessible in the sample.

So: The novel seems to be a first-person narrative by a cynical character, unafraid to use swear words, but with endnotes suggesting Scriptural references. It looks like a twenty, but I've yet to pull it out and flip it over.¹⁹ I have to confess I felt for a time like a character in an occult detective story: I had a book in front of me that gave me an uneasy feeling that it might reveal itself to be something different and quite unpleasant, but the only way to be sure was to press forward and continue reading despite my trepidation.



Title: **THE EXPRESS DIARIES**

Author: Nick Marsh

Publisher: Innsmouth House Press

Format: Paperback/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

When Nick Marsh contacted me to ask me if I'd be interested in reviewing his book, I said, "Sure, just send me a Kindle copy, or a .pdf." Nick said he'd happily send me a Kindle copy, but he'd really like to send me a copy of the hardcover too. I realised why as soon as I opened the package a few days later. The book is gorgeous! It's an obvious labour of love, from the fabulous illustrations to the red bookmark ribbon.

I hadn't realised at the time that it was based on a Call Of Cthulhu role-playing campaign. Had I known, I have to admit it might well have put me off. As a general rule, I've found books

¹⁷ Like it or not, footnotes are part of the narrative. They make more sense with an invisible, omniscient narrator; but when in the first person, they practically beg to be in the narrator's voice, as with the 'memoirs' of Bob Howard in Charles Stross's Laundry novels.

¹⁸ It's a game of sorts: the reader is left to identify elements of this foundational document of our culture and to feel clever when they do.

¹⁹ There is a trick peculiar to America in which one finds the corner of a folded \$20 bill tucked somewhere in a public place. Upon examination it reveals itself not to be a twenty but a religious tract.

and films based on games to be disappointing. Not always – I really liked some of the ‘World of Darkness’ based novels for instance – but more often than not.

I’m very glad I wasn’t put off, because I liked this book a lot. It’s a genre mash-up, set in 1925, combining an Agatha Christie style crime thriller with H.P. Lovecraft’s mythos. Nick Marsh does a superb job of capturing the period flavour in his characters. Each of them has their own voice, easily distinguished from the others, which is no mean achievement. The action is set on the Orient Express and its many stops en route. There’s even a very brief, unnamed cameo from a certain Belgian detective with a waxed moustache.

The Lovecraftian elements are much more subtle than I expected. There’s just the one early reference to *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* by von Junzt, but that’s it as far as the ubiquitous tomes and entities of the Cthulhu Mythos are concerned. This is by no means a bad thing. Many would say that over-reliance on such trappings does not necessarily make for good Lovecraftian stories and they’d be right.

Apart from the beautiful presentation, the main strength of this book is in the characterisations. This is ironic in a way, because that was certainly not one of the strengths of either Christie, or Lovecraft. All the characters in *The Express Diaries* are fully rounded, with both strengths and faults. Colonel Neville ‘Never’ Goodenough, for instance is in many ways a typical, jingoistic, racist, military man of the period, but that doesn’t stop him from being a good, stand-up hero in all other respects. He’s realistically handled in the way his growing respect for particular individuals doesn’t temper his opinion of foreigners in general. That particular lapse in logic is so common in many casual bigots.

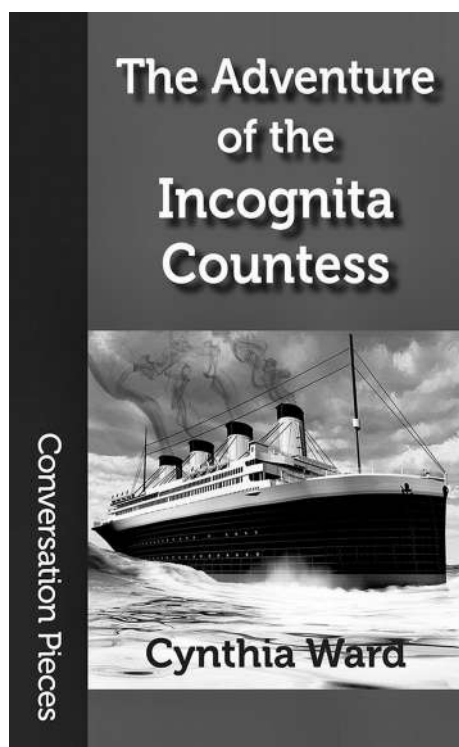
As well as Colonel Goodenough, the cast of characters includes: Mrs Elisabeth (Betty) Sunderland – widowed matriarch of the Yorkshire Sunderlands with a chequered past, which includes a one-time sideline as ‘The Silver Fox’; her niece, Mrs Violet Davenport – wife and assistant to the famous magician, ‘The Marvellous Davenport’; her secretary, Miss Grace Murphy – a young spinster; Professor Alphonse Moretti – an emeritus professor in European history and languages at the Universities of Florence and Belarus and Milos Valinчек – a Czechoslovakian arms dealer who was hideously scarred during the Great War.

The entire book is composed of diaries, letters and journal entries by the various characters, which is a nod to fiction of a certain vintage. It’s done exceptionally well though. Much as I loved *Dracula*, I thought I’d die of boredom during the interminable exchanges of letters between Lucy and Mina. *The Express Diaries* doesn’t suffer from this at all. The book remains gripping from cover to cover. Those who like the light tone of Agatha Christie novels, however, should be warned that at times the events take on a nastiness that would scare the hell out of many of her fans, and might even cause Miss Marple to drop her knitting in horror.

I intentionally haven’t said much about the plot. To put it briefly, we have a collection of fascinating characters in a classic setting; mysterious cultists and a particularly nasty monster, all trying to secure all the parts of a mysterious occult statue – The Sedefkar Simulacrum – which also has the unfortunate effect of corrupting all who possess it. The concept of a race against time with evil cultists to gather the disparate parts of some means to acquire great power is by no means new, but it’s particularly well-handled in this book.

The artwork by Eric M. Smith is exceptional. Apart from the cover, there are fourteen full page color illustrations, which are presented, for the most part, in sepia tones, which gives them an even more effective period feel. There are also many black and white spot illustrations, throughout the book, of letters, photographs, tickets, telegrams and other props from the story and a beautiful, colour map of the route our heroes take on the end-papers.

I recommend this book very highly. If you can afford it, buy the hardcover. I suspect it'll be quite sought after once it goes out of print.²⁰



Title: **THE ADVENTURE OF THE INCOGNITA COUNTESS**

(Conversation Pieces Book 53)

Author: Cynthia Ward

Publisher: Aqueduct Press

Format: Paperback/ebook

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

The Adventure of the Incognita Countess is above all else great fun. The main protagonist may sound familiar to many. In fact, Lucy Harker is the daughter of Mina and named for Mrs Harker's friend, Lucy Westenra. It's not giving away too much to reveal that Jonathan Harker is not Lucy's biological father. The fact that Lucy is a *Dhampir* (the progeny of a human female and a vampire) should point to her real parentage. The famous fictional relatives are not limited to her parents, since Lucy works for British Intelligence under the aegis of her stepfather, 'M', who is, of course Mycroft Holmes. She is sent on a mission to guard a scientist, who is carrying some

important plans involving an infamous submarine. Just to complicate matters, the scientist is a passenger on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. This is not quite our world, of course. In this case the Titanic's engines are based on reverse-engineered Martian technology, recovered after the failed Martian invasion of a few years earlier.

Lucy's mission is compromised by her growing relationship with another passenger she meets on the voyage, Miss Clarimel Stein, who happens to be an *upiór* (a species of vampire which can survive exposure to daylight). It shouldn't take most readers very long to realise who this character is based on – given that anagrams of her name are a notable feature of her original story.

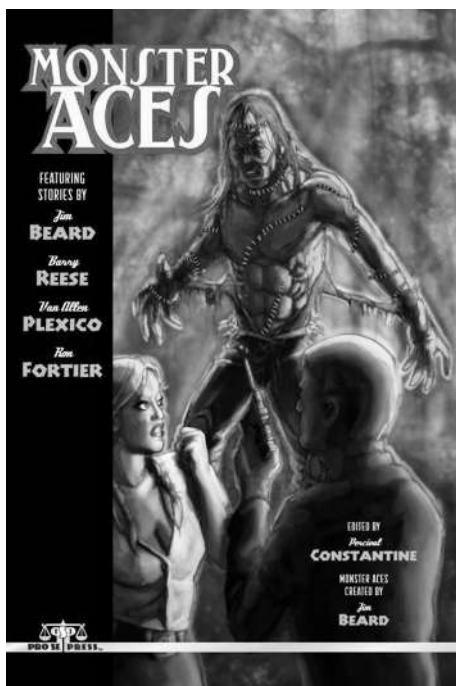
Enough detail! Half the fun of this entertaining tale is in working out who various characters are. There's an obvious, strong influence from Philip José Farmer's Wold Newton concept at work here. I don't however, believe this to be a Wold Newton story, as certain elements don't quite fit. I should also mention, for the benefit of those few who aren't familiar with the works of Bram Stoker, J. Sheridan le Fanu, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne et al, that the book works perfectly well as an entertaining adventure story without any foreknowledge of the supporting characters.

The author notes at the beginning of the book that she has attempted (quite successfully in my opinion) to employ the British spelling and grammar of the period, which results in a classic espionage adventure that could very easily have been published in the magazines of the time,

²⁰ Since I wrote this review the hardcover has indeed gone out of print. It's now more a case of if you can find a copy, let alone afford it. Thankfully, the Kindle version is still available.

albeit perhaps with a little more circumspection where certain character relationships are concerned.

For me, the most interesting facet is the way Lucy gradually comes to realise that many of the received wisdoms and attitudes of her youth do not hold up to serious scrutiny. Many authors would have left all the wrong-headedness to the supporting cast. Thankfully, Cynthia Ward is never that clichéd. It's always nice to see a character actually grow as her story progresses and I sincerely hope that we see more adventures of Lucy Harker soon.²¹



Title: **MONSTER ACES**

Editor: Percival Constantine

Publisher: Pro Se Press

Format: Paperback/ebook

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

Jim Beard (*Sgt. Janus*, *Spirit Breaker*, *Captain Action: Riddle of the Glowing Men*) is the brains behind the concept, so it was always going to be pulpy fun.

Beard contributed two of the stories in the book himself. The first introduces us to his team of 'Monster Aces', led by the enigmatic 'Cap'n', they include: 'Joker', the charming smooth talker of the group, so essential for smoothing their relationship with 'civilians'; 'Digger', the powerful gentle giant of a man, who strangely also happens to be their stealth expert and 'Gats', the weapons expert. If any monster claimed to be immune to mortal weaponry, well Gats was there to put that theory to the test. They travelled and more or less lived

on a massive sea vessel called *The Whale*, which was piloted by a man known only as 'Mariner'. Then there's 'Trill', unofficial member of the team. Enigmatic and pretty, almost ethereal in nature. Appearing and disappearing with no warning, she could be a nuisance but was often of immeasurable help. In fact she often as not was responsible for leading the team to wherever they were needed.

They hunted monsters and destroyed them. It was their sole raison d'être. Cap'n was single-minded in this mission and no monster was looked upon with any sympathy... ever! This could and would lend a certain moral ambiguity to their mission.

In Jim Beard's first story, *'The Devil's Clutch'*, the people of the village of Nacht are being hunted. There's an ancient legend, fearful, uncooperative villagers, a good soul damned and someone who delves into secrets that should have remained buried. It sets the tone for the series, somewhere between 30s pulp fiction and 60s Hammer movies.

Next up is *'The Swamp People'*, by Barry Reese (*The Rook*, *The Adventures of Lazarus Gray*). It involves an innocent teenage girl, her typically stupid boyfriend, a carnival and an ancient race of 'monsters', who have been driven to extinction by the spread of humankind. The moral ambiguity of the Aces work is brought into sharper focus in this one.

The next story reminded me somewhat of the classic alien monster stories by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the pre-superhero tales of Marvel-Atlas comics. In, *'The River of Deceit'*, by Van Allen

²¹ Since this review was written, Cynthia Ward has had two sequels published by Aqueduct Press: *The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum* and *The Adventure of the Naked Guide*.

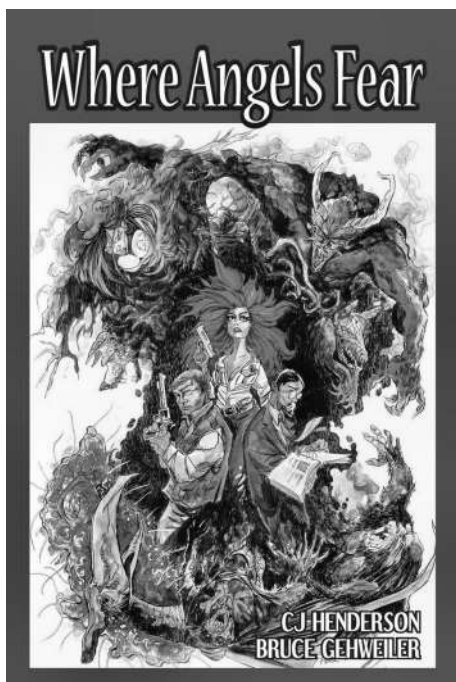
Plexico, our intrepid monster hunters encounter a weird and powerful Alien being on the shores of an uncharted tributary of the Amazon. As the story progresses the question of just who is the monster here is brought into sharp focus once again.

We stay in Kirby territory for Ron Fortier's *'The Ghoul'*. He has our heroes arrive in an armoured vehicle to take on a Ghoul, which in this world is a demon, who possesses a human victim. When the demon comes forth the hapless host transforms into an eight foot tall rampaging monster with greyish skin. It reminded me of those classic Marvel, or DC war comics, with their squads of misfit soldiers, in this case taking on a creature reminiscent of a certain Marvel Comics monster who has occasionally been portrayed with grey skin. Thankfully, for the Aces, this monster wasn't quite THAT strong! I've read quite a few publications from Ron Fortier's own Airship 27 productions, but this is the first time I've had the pleasure to read any of his own writing. It won't be the last.

Finally we come to Jim Beard's second story in the book, *'Hands of the Monster'*, in which the Aces kidnap a famous fictional doctor to help them deal with probably the most infamous monster of them all. It was never going to go according to plan.

There have been many monster hunters in fiction in the past. In fact there are quite a few around now, but these guys are more hardcore than most. They all get seriously injured on a regular basis. I would suggest that the Cap'n look into adding a regular medic to the support team.

This is a very enjoyable book. I look forward to learning more about the Aces in future volumes.²²



Title: **WHERE ANGELS FEAR**

Author: C.J. Henderson and Bruce Gehweiler

Publisher: Dark Quest Books

Format: Paperback

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

If there's one author whose work I would love to have featured in *Occult Detective Quarterly/Magazine*, it's C.J. Henderson! Few modern authors wrote more stories about a variety of supernatural investigators (Teddy London, Lai Wan, Piers Knight, Kolchak, Inspector Legrasse) than Henderson. I'd got to know the man a little, before his tragic death in 2014, and he expressed a genuine interest in contributing to any project I edited. Sadly, it was not to be.

This is a collection of separate stories, which have been put together to make a novel. They called this a 'fix-up' back in the day. All but the last story previously appeared in assorted magazines and anthologies.

Often, a series of related tales like these will be centred around a main character and a side-kick. In this case, however, there are two main characters, with different, if related areas of expertise, who are forced by circumstance into working together. This is not helped by the fact that they can't stand each other.

²² Since I wrote this review, *Monster Aces Volume 2* was published by Pro Se Press in 2015, but sadly, there are no current plans to continue the series.

The first two stories in the book, though they weren't the first to be written, are there to establish the characters individually, before they are teamed up.

'*The Legend of the Kongamoto*', introduces us to Dr Hugh Blakley, crypto-zoologist in residence at Duke University, Durham, NC. and his colleague the para-psychologist, Dr William Boles. After establishing the tense relationship between the two, the rest of the story is devoted to Blakley's investigation into reports of a pterosaur-like creature on the loose in Zambia. It has a nice Burroughs/Rider Haggard feel to it. My main criticism is that it feels a little rushed and may have worked better within a longer format, but such is the reality of working within commercial markets, with strict word-count limitations.

'*The Real Case of the Headless Horseman*' sees Dr Boles investigating a classic case of a vengeful spirit.

It is in the third story (actually the first written) that things really start to gel. The two leads, and their strained working relationship are a combination much greater than the sum of their parts. They encounter a legendary beastie called a skunk-ape, a native American shaman and a particularly nasty witch in a tale which also introduces a sidekick, in the shape of Donna Fargo – a classic tough pulp heroine.

Donna gets a solo story of her own, before officially signing up for the team, and a second, in which she teams up with another psychic investigator, C.J. Henderson's tortured Lai Wan, the Dreamwalker.

The final story, '*Where Angels Fear*' is the only one original to this collection and is the strongest, bringing Blakley, Boles and Fargo together to tackle a menace they believed already dealt with. Indeed it's the regular references to earlier adventures that brings the whole together as a fix-up novel.

I have heard on the grapevine that an actual Blakley and Boles novel is in the planning. I look forward to reading it when it's published.²³

It would be remiss of me not to mention the excellent cover and internal illustrations by Ben Fogletto.

Having established that I liked this collection a lot, I do have one major criticism to make. Dark Quest Books need to employ a decent copy editor. There are simply far too many typos and errors in this book, which somewhat hindered the flow of the stories.

Title: **THE HALLOWEEN LEGION**

Author: Martin Powell

Publisher: Dark Quest Books

Format: Paperback/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

I'd been meaning to get around to reading this for some time and I'm glad I finally did, because it's very, very good!

I wouldn't want to put an age range on this book, as I fear that would tend to put off many readers outside that range. Suffice to say this is very much an all ages book. There's nothing in it

²³ As far as I'm aware, it was never published, if indeed it was even written.

that a concerned parent (except maybe that lunatic fringe of Christians who strive to get classics like *The Wizard of Oz* pulled from school libraries) would worry about, yet it's still totally satisfying for the adult reader.



The book opens with Deputy Les Charles witnessing the death of his best friend and partner, Sheriff Dave Ross – trampled by a dinosaur! Trapped under a heavy steel sign, Les is rescued by a seven foot giant in a skeleton suit.

We are then introduced to teenage outsider, Molly Aldrich, as she learns that she has enough credits to graduate high school.

As the weirdness starts to spread the giant skeleton man is ever-present, helping people, then disappearing as mysteriously as he arrived.

Another strange occurrence causes Molly to lose the job she hated anyway. She soon meets a strange black cat, who adopts her and subtly guides her towards where she needs to be. En route she meets a ghost (complete with sheet and eye-holes).

There's a carnival coming to town. Thankfully, not a dark one, although there is something of the feel of Ray Bradbury's

weird fiction, not to mention Charles Finney's *The Circus of Doctor Lao* in the overall strangeness and sense of wonder in this book, which also echoes some of the classic children's fiction of the past.

Any more detail would just serve as spoilers, so I'll say no more other than to urge you to check out this wonderful book.

There's more to come – a graphic novel is due from Dark Horse soon (my review follows).



Title: **THE HALLOWEEN LEGION: THE GREAT GOBLIN INVASION**

Author: Martin Powell

Publisher: Dark Horse Books

Format: Hardcover/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

This book had a lot to live up to. I read the previous release from Sequential Pulp Comics, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which was also written by Martin Powell, and gave it a very good review. I also read and reviewed Martin Powell's prose novel introduction to *The Halloween Legion*, which I again praised highly.

I admit to approaching this one with a little trepidation. I liked the prose novel so much that I feared the writing might lose something in the comic strip format. I really shouldn't have worried. Martin Powell has a great deal of experience in both prose and comics writing and made the transition

flawlessly. I might have been further worried that Diana Leto, who designed all the characters,

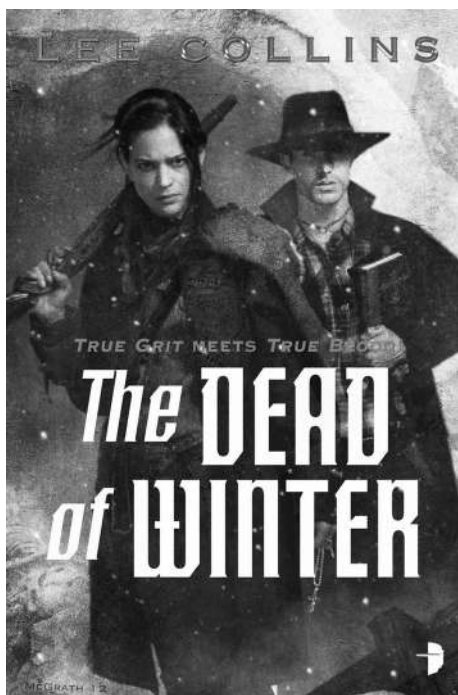
didn't handle all the artwork for this book, but I actually preferred Thomas Boatwright's art, based on Ms Leto's designs, to her own work on the bonus strip, which is not in any way intended as a criticism of Ms Leto's excellent work.

I probably shouldn't give away too much of the story. Suffice to say that it concerns an alien invasion attempt, which our heroes have to foil. We learn a little more about the abilities and limitations of the Halloween Legion along the way.

As I previously mentioned, there's a short bonus strip, with art by Diane Leto, which tells the true story of the events that happened to Martin Powell one Halloween, when he was just six years old. Events which would inspire the creation of these characters.

Like the prose novel that preceded it, this graphic novel is perfectly suitable for young children (unless you're one of those religious nuts, who think any mention of magic in fiction is the road to damnation) yet it's still a really entertaining read for jaded adults.

I generally like to include some criticism to balance out my reviews, as I sometimes worry that overwhelmingly positive reviews might not get taken seriously. Mr Powell seems set on making this impossible to achieve.²⁴



Title: **THE DEAD OF WINTER**

Author: Lee Collins

Publisher: Angry Robot

Format: Paperback/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

The cover blurb describes this book as “True Grit meets True Blood”, which is pretty close. There are no good vampires fighting for their rights to live in peace among humans here though. There aren't even any bad vampires pretending to be good. The only real similarity with *True Blood* is that the existence of vampires and other supernatural beasts does seem to be fairly commonly accepted knowledge.

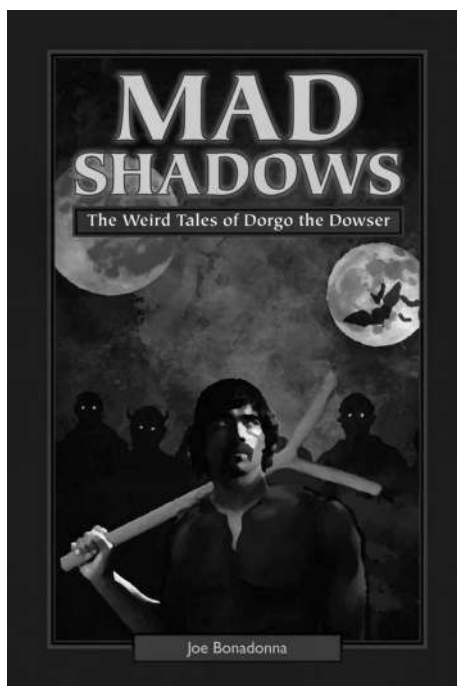
Cora Oglesby and her husband Ben are supernatural bounty hunters. They travel from town to town ridding the local populace of any supernatural threats... for a price. Cora can out-fight, out-gun and out-drink any man. Ben would rather read a good book. Along the way to deal with their

latest job, they meet the English occult scholar James Townsend, who later offers them a second commission, involving a nest of vampires in a nearby mine.

Cora comes over a bit like Calamity Jane, from the TV show, *Deadwood*, albeit somewhat cleaner and not quite so drunk. This makes for an interesting contrast with James, who is more knowledgeable, but with no real hands-on experience in fighting monsters. Cora soon sorts that out for him. The relationship between Cora and her bookish husband, Ben, is nicely handled. The author cleverly slips in clues regarding one major plot element, but it still took me a little while to get suspicious that something was not quite right, and I still didn't see the actual denouement coming.

²⁴ Those two reviews were written almost a decade ago. There haven't as yet been any further book, in either format, but Martin Powell told me recently that, while he couldn't give me any details as yet, “there are definite plans for further Halloween Legion adventures, likely both prose and graphic novel formats.”

Lee Collins captures the feel of the period pretty well and the characters are well-rounded. I will certainly be picking up the next book in the series.²⁵



Title: MAD SHADOWS: THE WEIRD TALES OF DORGO THE DOWSER

Author: Joe Bonadonna

Publisher: iUniverse.com

Format: Hardcover/Paperback/Kindle

Reviewed by David Brzeski

Joe Bonadonna is one of the growing number of authors whose work I have been meaning to get around to for quite some time. This particular book has been available since the beginning of 2011.

At first sight, it's classic sword and sorcery, set on a world populated by fighting men, merchants, wizards and a multitude of mythical, non-mythical and just plain made-up beasts. There's a difference, though, in the style of the storytelling. It's a first person narrative, executed very much in the style of the hard-boiled private eye genre. I was reminded of Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar tales, crossed with Chandler's Philip

Marlowe – sort of fantasy-noir. Dorgo Mikawber, himself, is roughly the equivalent of a private detective on this world, as he is a licensed dowser (complete with dowsing rod) of odylic (magical) energy, employed to deal with crimes of a supernatural nature.

In the title story, '*Mad Shadows*', he is employed to solve the case of the mysterious shadows that beset the city of Valdar by night, eating all the gold they encounter and killing any who get in their way.

Next is '*The Secret of Andaro's Daughter*', in which a friend entrusts him with a map for safekeeping, just in case anything happens to him. Of course, something does indeed happen to him and Dorgo finds himself involved in a case of intrigue and deceit worthy of Raymond Chandler, except with added magic.

In '*The Moonstones of Sor Lunarum*', a pair of villainous brothers learn that murdering a witch, to steal her moonstones is not the wisest of plans.

The witch-related problems continue in '*The Man Who Loved Puppets*', in which we are also introduced to Dorgo's one true love, Cerisa Yonsa. Children are falling comatose and the only link appears to be the dolls they had all been given.

I noticed as I worked my way through the stories that the Chandler influence gradually lessened. I felt some disappointment at this, but the author mentions various other influences in his afterword and they gradually begin to make themselves increasingly apparent.

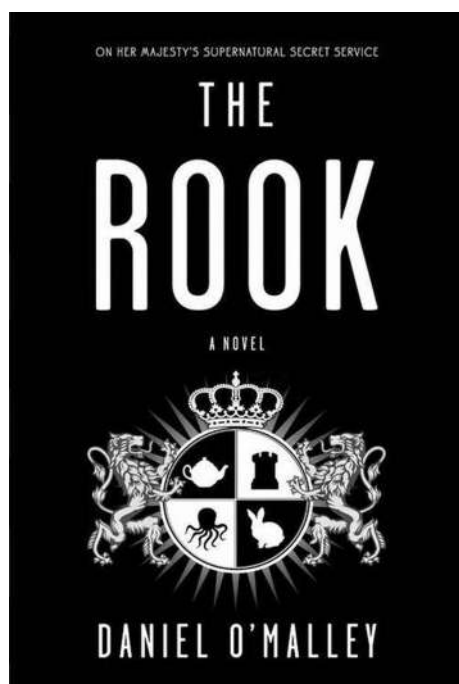
We leave the mean streets of Valdar for a foray into the lost city genre next. '*In the Vale of the Black Diamond*' introduces us to Dorgo's childhood friend and fellow ex-member of the Wandering Swords: the 7th mercenary legion, Yozinda Milio Andovo, who recruits him on a mission to find the mysterious black diamond – a shard of the meteor which originally formed the 'Forbidden Valley',

²⁵ A sequel, *She Returns From War*, was published in 2013. Collins also has a self-published fantasy novel, *Reflections of Fire* (2018).

when it fell to earth millennia before. On the way, they encounter myriad strange creatures and an odd race of skeletal looking people. Naturally, there's also a mad wizard.

After their adventure in the Forbidden Valley, Yozinda and Dorgo return to her father's village, Okalin, only to find themselves firmly in Universal Monster Movie territory. In the final story of this volume, *'Blood on the Moon'*, an astronomical quirk, which occurs once every nine years in Dorgo's world, has caused the moon to remain full for two weeks. Animals and people are being ripped apart by something wild and violent. The author even adapts a well-known piece of verse from the movies to fit his needs.

This is an entertaining well-written collection. While each individual story works as a stand-alone, they all follow on from, and reference the earlier tales in a way that makes them work together as a complete novel. I feel sure we'll eventually see more of the adventures of Dorgo the Dowser.²⁶



Title: THE ROOK

Author: Daniel O'Malley

Publisher: Little Brown

Format: Hardcover/Paperback/Kindle

Reviewer: Dave Brzeski

The Rook is a combination of the urban fantasy and spy genres. Similar ground to, but very different from Charles Stross' 'Laundry' series.

We are introduced to the main character, Myfanwy (rhymes with Tiffany) Thomas as she regains consciousness to find herself, battered and bruised and surrounded by corpses, who are all wearing latex gloves. The problem is, she has no memory of who she is, or how she came to be in that sorry situation.

She finds a letter on her person from herself. It seems she had known in advance that she was going to lose her memory and she provided herself with enough information to either

disappear and start a new life, or work her way back into her old one and discover who the traitor was who wiped her memory.

It transpires that Myfanwy worked for a secret organization called the Checquy who battle the many supernatural forces at work in Britain. She has supernatural abilities of her own, very powerful ones, but due to trauma suffered in her childhood she wasn't considered field agent material. Luckily for Myfanwy, she was also extremely talented at administration, so her position as a 'Rook' within the Checquy Court was secured.

We follow her as she gradually finds out more about her past in the form of letters left for her by her former self, while she tries to find out what is rotten within the Checquy. We soon discover one advantage to her memory loss in that she can no longer remember the trauma which psychologically crippled her effectiveness as a field agent. Along the way we are introduced to the other members of the Court – Gestalt, a hive mind with four bodies (three male and one female) is one of the most interesting and original.

²⁶ Since this review was written, this collection has had a revised second edition, and two more volumes of Dorgo stories, *Dorgo the Dowser and the Order of the Serpent*, and *The Heroes of Echo Gate* have been published.

While we are told these characters are all supernatural, they actually reminded me more of mutants, à la the X-Men, only perhaps a little weirder than anything Stan Lee ever came up with.

To complicate matters there's the Grafters, genetically/alchemically engineered nasties from Belgium, who were thought wiped out after their attempted invasion of Britain in 1677. One of the nastiest forms that Grafters take is somewhat reminiscent of Lovecraft's shoggoths.

The author's technique of bringing Myfanwy to a cliffhanger situation, then pausing to give us an info-dump in the form of another letter from pre-memory loss Myfanwy may be annoying to some, but he doesn't leave you hanging too long and I found it worked quite well.

All in all it's a superb effort for a first novel and I eagerly await more from Daniel O'Malley.²⁷

* * *

I can't deny that, on re-reading them so many years after I wrote them, I'm finding some of these reviews to say the least a little less substantial than I would prefer, but I decided to re-present them anyway, because the works discussed are worth promoting.

²⁷ As it turned out, I had a long wait. The second book in the series, *Stiletto*, was finally published in 2017, five years after *The Rook*. Since I had to accept that I really need to re-read book one, before starting on book two, I decided to wait until all three of the planned trilogy were available. I'm still waiting...

Since then, the first book has had a TV adaptation, which, while being a pretty good show in its own right, bore little resemblance to the book. The main characters were retained, and the original plotline where Myfanwy woke up with no memory, but pretty much everything else was changed. My main complaint being they lost all of the humour of the original.

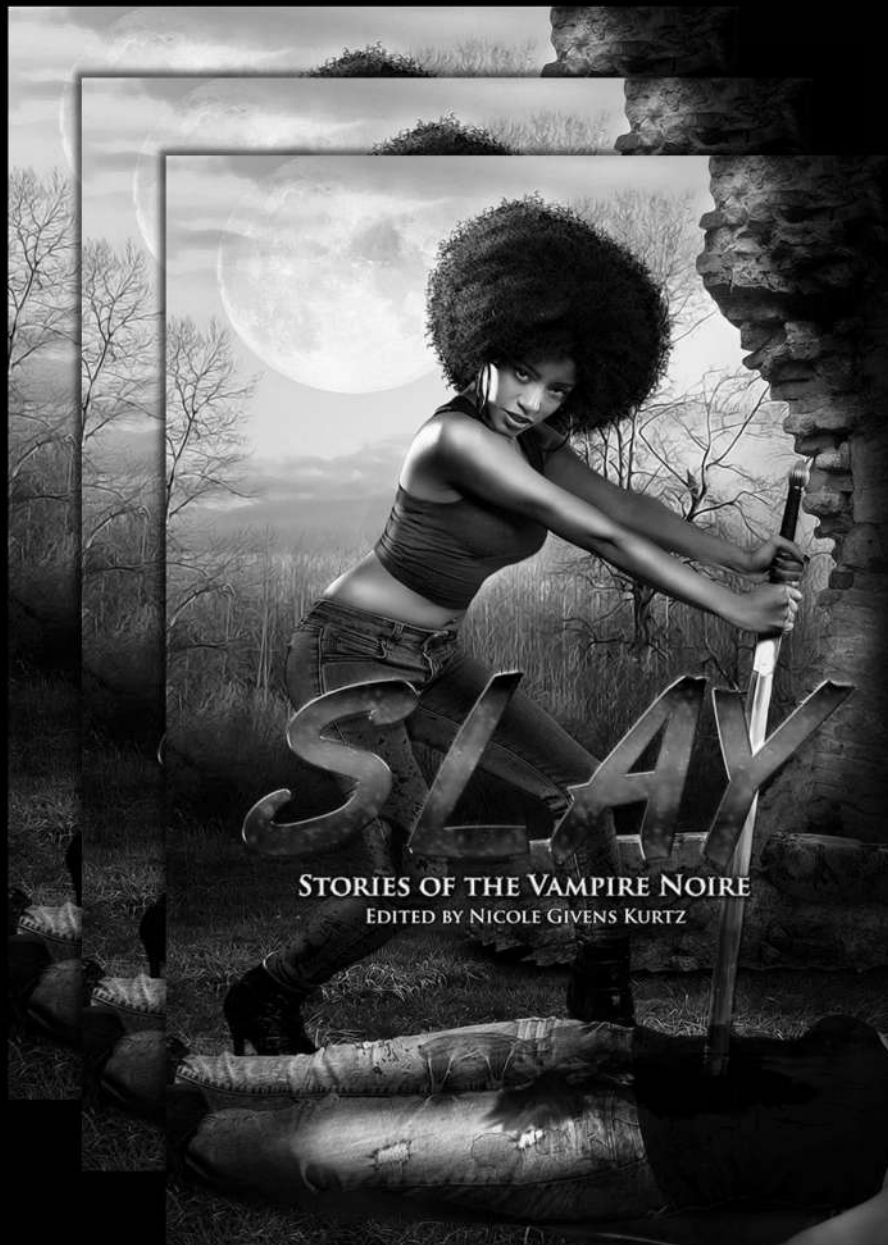
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