

TIGERSHARK magazine



Tigershark Magazine

Issue 22 – Summer 2018

Fantasy

Editorial

Journey with us as we enter lands of fantasy and imagination in worlds far beyond our own...

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme: High Tech, Low Lives

Cyberpunk, Steampunk and anything else that mixes the two...

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Mystic Woods

By Aeronwy Dafies

In secret glades
Down hidden paths
Unicorns whinny at the wind
Watched by elfin maidens
Hallowed spirits
Visited only by the pure

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Cover and additional internal artwork courtesy of Pixabay.com



Troll

By Max Sparber

I saw a
troll fishing
from the well
in top hat and
swallow-tail coat
he said
there's an eel
at bottom
been there three centuries
and the troll
had fished him as long
so I recommended
Deer Lake nearby
which is full of sunnies
now the troll
has a bucket hat
and the eel
is lonely.

Loving A Man Who Turns Into A Dragon

By Ennis Rook Bashe

creature of drawn velvet curtains, plucking scales from skin until pores bleed, painted candlelight and gold

you hear them whispering outside your sickroom of seclusion: what is he becoming? should it die before it bursts free? Only I dare to venture in, to stroke the changing textures of your face.

the knights and ladies fear you because you are becoming a dragon, a creature outside the silken bonds of trembling rules. the one who sets all lies afire. When you reach for an old friend with fingers turning into claws they remember they are human, helpless against their bodies, helpless against time.

Conspiring to slay a dragon cannot quench its flame. When they stack wood against your tower, light it with the sparks of whispers and fear, all they do is set you free. Carry me to the far-away mountains where no one can touch us. Where we love deeply and gather the sun.



The Price

By Jeffrey Zable

I awakened to find several of Dali's ants crawling over my bare chest, and one of his fish was squirming beneath my pillow. So the first thing I did was fill the bathtub with water and put the fish into it. Then, as I was about to brush away the ants, there was a knock at the front door.

Looking through the peephole I immediately saw that it was Salvador himself, dressed like a traditional Scotsman, and he was holding a package in his hand. Playing like I didn't know who he was, I said, "How may I help you?" And putting the package in my hands, he said, "It's a gift from our mother. Open it right way!"

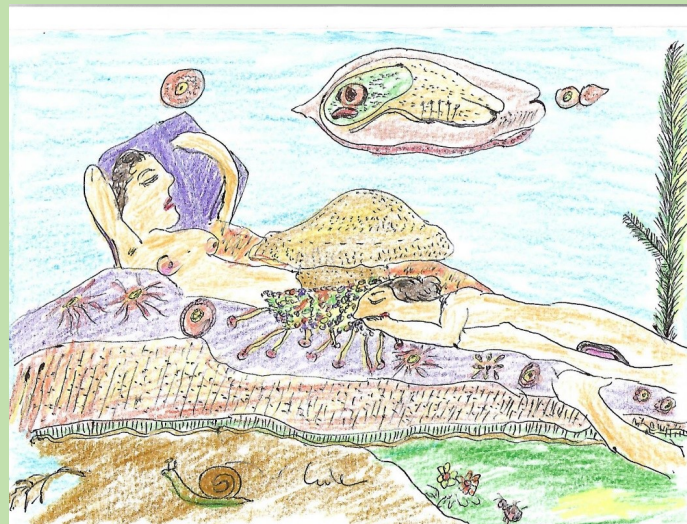
Closing the door I went into the kitchen and used a knife to open the box. There inside was a painting of me, Salvador, and an unfamiliar older woman, the three of us sitting on tired looking burros, and in the back-ground were some of Dali's signature symbols like crosses, disconnected body parts, and melted time pieces. Nothing seemed out of place except for the fact that I was missing two front teeth and had a buzz style haircut.

The painting was signed by Dali, which I knew would make it very valuable.

I had it framed, and subsequently sold it for a great deal of money.

Unfortunately, as hard as I've tried to get rid of the ants, they always remain.

Originally published in Former Cactus (2018).



Beowulf

By DJ Tyrer

In drear Denmark dank
A monster mars feasts
No more sweet song resounds
Former conqueror King
But bold Beowulf comes
Warrior bold in war
Grendel greets the moon
Approaches Heorot Hall
Quick and queer, it is
But Beowulf bellows
Sword strikes, slashes
Terrible the torment of battle
Might Beowulf battles bravely
The cacophonous climax arrives
Monstrous mother arises
Beowulf confronts the crone
Strong sword-arm strikes
To Heorot heads the hero
Victory unvexed
A golden age announced
A time told in tales

Death draws nigh
Mortal men quail
No Saxon skalds sing
Council counsels caution
Braves the beast's threat
Wyrd-marked wight
Grief goes with him
Where hope and hopelessness mingle
Bold men quake and quaver
Brutal and bitter the fight
Shields shatter, shorn
The tragedy of torn flesh
Bones break, blood runs
The cursed one cruelly killed
Seeks to murder the man
Comes forth to kill her
Sweeps skull from shoulders
Hope has its day
Virtue vanquished villainy
A cheer arises from all
The tale takes its close

Her Father's Arm's Ubiquitous

By Neil K. Henderson

In these days of organ donors and spare-part surgery, when stockpiling of body parts is commonplace, one case of limb hoarding has emerged which even now seems unusual. It all started when householder Croydon Snub went out to cut his neglected front hedge.

“There I was,” he told us. “I was cutting away at this huge expanse of hedge – it was taller than me, to be honest – when I came up to a rough bulging bit at the end, under a tree at the gate. I was about to hack into it when a woman popped her head round and yelled, ‘Not my father’s arm!’ Then an older man appeared at an upper window. ‘Hoi! That’s my arm!’ he shouts. ‘Leave my arm alone!’ He seemed to have an empty T-shirt sleeve, but it was hard to see with the curtain and shadows and stuff. Needless to say, I stopped where I was cutting and went indoors.”

That was bizarre enough, but things got even stranger. “His arm disappeared from the hedge, but I kept finding it later in odd outside places, such as the park or the bus shelter... even once in a pub several miles away. I started to think the thing was following me – it seemed to turn up everywhere I went. But then I realised that ‘Armless Andy’ – as the newcomer became known – probably frequented the same local places as myself. There aren’t *that* many things to do round here.”

But Croydon got a shock when he heard reports of Andy’s arm turning up on the beach at Saltcoats, and at the Macdonald Monument in Glencoe. It even appeared on the Mull of Kintyre, recognised as ever by the distinctive tattoo with Andy’s name and phone number.

“This seemed a bit too much, so I asked the girl upstairs how many arms her father actually had. ‘Just two,’ she said, ‘like everyone else. He keeps one on him, and stashes the other away in odd places, just to be on the safe side.’ But I couldn’t help inquire why he went so far afield. It wasn’t as if the arm stayed undiscovered long. She just shrugged and said, ‘My father’s arm’s ubiquitous.’ There isn’t any answer to that.”

Government health authorities now believe that ‘limb ubiquity syndrome’, or the squirrelling away of limbs for a rainy day, is a lot more common than was realised. “Take care when you’re building a bonfire this Guy Fawkes,” they have warned. “Somebody’s leg or elbow might be in those twigs. It could get a nasty burn.”

Ends

Book-editing, business card/label design, beaded jewellery

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New From Atlantean Publishing

The Dark Tower, Volume Seven: The Fallen Tower

Poetry by Cardinal Cox, Aronwy Dafies, DS Davidson, DJ Tyrer, and Matthew Wilson

£1.50 (UK) / £3 (RoW)

The Garden

By Louise Cooper

Jon had always loved his garden. Whenever he sat there, a sense of peace wrapped him up, like a warm towel after a cold swim. From his chair on the decking, he could see the rose bushes at the end of the pristine lawn, the beautiful, purple African Lilies planted by himself along the left, and, on the right, the pink rhododendrons prettily spilling out onto the grass. The little potted plants along the edge of the decking had been chosen and planted by his wife, Laura – she hated uniformed colour so reds, oranges, blues and greens all stood out boldly, one next to the other.

Jon thought back to the first day in the house. It had been an untypically hot mid-March day. He could distinctly remember Laura at the end of the garden, heavy with child, ready to pop, planting the first rose bush. Her curly auburn hair was tied in a loose ponytail behind her, slight golden wisps framing her face and sticking to her forehead in the heat.

“I love roses,” she had said. “I don’t care if it’s a cliché. They’re my absolute favourites.”

She had smiled up at him and slowly padded towards where he sat, while holding the base of her back. Any day now, he had thought at the time.

They sat on their makeshift garden chairs – old boxes filled with ornaments and trinkets, soon to be lovingly placed around their new home – and held hands, the warmth of the sun skimming their faces, whilst both imagining what their future would hold. He could feel the warmth of her hand now, as if she was right there with him, softly circling his skin with her thumb.

Another memory suddenly washed over him. He could see it before him, like an old photograph – slightly worn at the edges, but still clear. He was sitting in his favourite garden chair (no makeshift boxes this time), Laura next to him, looking across the table at his son, Toby, who must have been about 13. His arms and legs were at that awkward teenage stage – too long and clumsy for his continually growing frame. His dark, brown curls framed his freckled face (Toby had always hated those curls, and his freckles for that matter. “Blame your mother,” Jon had told him). He could remember how Toby’s inquisitive hazel eyes could always just about be seen through his fringe.

They sat there for hours that day, taking in the warmth of the sun, chatting about everything and nothing. Jon remembered cherishing that day because it was one of the rare moments that his teenage son had spent time with them – Toby had spent the next 5 years in his room, listening to ridiculously loud music and only communicating via grunts. He could still feel Laura’s hand holding his, making those little circles of comfort on his skin again.

His memory jumped forward another few years. Same chair, same decking, same garden. Ah, yes – he remembered this one well. This had been the first beer he’d ever had with Toby.

“Fancy a beer, son?” he had said, trying to sound nonchalant whilst shouting through to the kitchen from the garden doors.

Toby, who had been leaning against the kitchen counter, phone in hand, had suddenly bolted upright, eyes darting towards Jon, before regaining his composure. He was now much taller and had grown into a handsome, athletic young man. Jon could remember his long, slender arms sticking out of his crumpled Stone Roses T-shirt as if he was still there with him.

“Yeah, sure,” he had replied, in that same faux-casual tone that Jon had managed to muster.

They had sat outside on that mid-March evening, slowly sipping their beers, putting the world to rights.

Later that evening, Laura had returned from her night out with the girls and sat in between them.

“My boys,” she had slightly slurred.

She had always called them that. Jon remembered feeling very much part of a little unit when she referred to them as her “boys” and he was pretty sure Toby felt the same (not that he would ever admit it.) Jon could almost feel Laura holding his hand right in that moment, creating those gentle, little circles across his skin.

Back in the present, Jon continued to look out over his garden. He had a slight shimmer of a feeling of darkness and foreboding, but it disappeared as soon as it had arrived. He had nothing to feel sad about: no regrets, no enemies, no lost moments.

As he looked out, for the last time, the sun slowly descended towards the horizon; deep, velvet shadows crept across the garden, edging slowly towards him.

He could still almost feel Laura holding his hand; could still almost feel those gentle circles that she made with her thumb, caressing his now worn skin.

Soon it would be dark.

“Mum,” he whispered softly. “Mum, he’s gone.”

Laura looked slowly up at her son and then back across at Jon. Once a tall, handsome man, he now looked like a doll, lying on that dull, cold hospital bed.

“He’s gone, Mum,” Toby gently repeated.

“Just let me sit here a little while longer?” she asked, while continuing to hold Jon’s hand in hers, making small circles across his skin with her thumb.

Toby nodded, his eyes glistening with tears. He looked over to Daisy, the nurse who had been at Jon’s side since the cancer had violently overpowered him just over a year ago. She nodded and then silently left the room.

Once in the hallway, Daisy paused to take a long, deep breath. She would very much miss lovely Mr Haldrige.

When she had composed herself, she took her pen from her breast pocket and made a note of the date and time of Jon’s death.

Was that really the date? she thought to herself. It really was rather warm for mid-March.

Ends



Sleeping With The Fish

By Diane Arrelle

She pulled another pair of pants from the never-ending pile of laundry. Swiping her arm across her forehead, she inwardly cursed her stepmother, the king and her life. Between the hot black iron and the fireplace, it was stifling, no wait she decided, it was more than stifling, it was hellish.

The only relief was the small breeze that occasionally drifted into the window overlooking the distant waves. "What I'd give for an air conditioner or even a small oscillating fan," she mumbled then laughed because it didn't matter. The tower had no electricity.

Oh well, she shrugged in resignation; she only had to iron clothes like they did in the dark ages until she died. Mortality did have its perks... it gave her something to hope for.

She picked the heavy, black iron out of the coals and her arm started moving methodically once again just as it always did, always had too. She glanced out the window at the greenish blue swells and fantasized about a forbidden swim. She used to love to swim back when her father had been alive. She'd had the best tan, a surfboard, a bikini figure and lived the endless summer.

The sweat mixing with tears dripped off her chin onto the trousers she was ironing and created little puffs of steam. "Oh, I wish I could get away from this hell I'm stuck in." she muttered under her breath. Suddenly the iron stopped at a bump in the back pocket. She felt like smashing the lump, but a small voice told her not to do it.

She looked around and found the source of the voice in the fireplace. She heaved the black iron at it.

The small fairy quickly dodged it and yelped. "Hey, is that any way to treat your fairy godmother?"

The girl snapped. "Some fairy godmother! "I wished for a simple night out, and you up and disappeared while I'm at the damned nightclub, leaving me stranded and in rags. Now my stinking stepmother gets me trapped here for life by promising that dumb, inbred prince that I could spin straw into gold and fix the county's sinking economy. Well, of course I couldn't so I'm doomed to live in servitude in this tower forever. And where were you? Obviously went off on some vacation, and I'm stuck ironing mountains of clothes for the rest of my days. It's not like I didn't wish for a little help somewhere along the way!"

"That's right, always blame the little guy!" the small fairy snapped. "Look I'm sorry. You were my first gig, and, frankly," the wee lady with fluttering wings blushed a deep red, "frankly, I didn't go on vacation. I was... was... damn it, was recalled and sent back for training."

The girl started laughing, "That figures. My life has been one disaster after another. First Dad croaks and leaves me with that witch and her ugly daughters, then they make me spend my days cooking and cleaning. The only pleasure I ever had was swimming in the waves over there, but now that's been taken away, replaced by even worse hard labor. And now I discover that my fairy godmother is a washout!"

The glow around the tiny fairy dimmed a bit. "Look, I'm sorry. But they've put me back, and now, I'm here to help you."

The girl sighed. "Fine! Grab an iron. Better yet, get me one that actually plugs in and some outlets that work."

"Look, I've come to help. Just take that wad out of the pocket you're about to press and appreciate all the help you get. Not every girl gets a fairy godmother. Consider yourself lucky!" the fairy snapped and with a tiny puff of jeweled dust, *poofed* out of the locked room.

The girl reached in the pocket and found a handkerchief full of beans. She studied them for a moment than groaned. "Yeah, what's this, an organic snack? Heck, I'd rather have a chocolate bar." She threw the beans out the window, leaned out to watch them fall the three stories to the ground below, She thought briefly about jumping out the window and enjoying a little free fall before the end, but wiped the sweat from her face and returned to her drudgery instead.

A rustling sound from outside startled her and she turned toward the window and gasped. There, close enough to touch, was a giant beanstalk. Without a moment's hesitation, she stepped onto the sill and hopped onto the stalk and started climbing up. She knew what would happen if she climbed down. They'd catch her and put her back. She gave one glance to the ocean waves crashing in the distance and thought, *I wish I could escape to the water, I'd swim away and be free.*

She climbed upward effortlessly, her arms strong from the continuous ironing and after a while she reached the fluffy white clouds and ascended through them. Finally, she reached the top and found herself outside an enormous castle.

It was giant-sized. She walked up to it and went inside.

Then immediately turned around. It was filthy and she knew that if she stayed she'd get captured and have to spend the rest of her days cleaning giant-sized messes. She started back toward the beanstalk when a boy rushed up behind her, pushed her down and screamed "Outta my way! It's coming!"

She landed hard in a sitting position and watched the boy run as he struggled to hold a golden treasure and a chicken. "How rude!" she yelled after him and then felt the clouds shake as giant footsteps approached.

She jumped up, ran to the edge and grabbed the stalk. Climbing down as fast as she could she felt it suddenly began to rhythmically vibrate and sway. She gasped because someone below had taken a chainsaw to the base.

"Just great!" she mumbled and decided to take fate in her own hands. Pushing off from the beanstalk she leapt away from it and all the earthly restraints that trapped her. As she plummeted through the clouds she saw the ocean below her and steeled herself for the fatal impact. Even the one thing she loved, the sea, would betray her.

Just as she hit the water, it shimmered, grew soft and she glided into it. She continued her downward momentum wondering why her lungs didn't burst.

The tiny fairy godmother appeared before her. "Got it right this time!" she sang and twinkled away.

The girl suddenly realized that she didn't have legs anymore as she flicked her tail and headed to the other mermaids swimming toward her. Yes, maybe her fairy godmother had finally gotten it right this time after all.

Ends



The Half-formed Cloud Queen

By Paige Elizabeth Smith

Someone gives me a name. It sits
on Her tongue, unspoken. I live here,
in the Cirrus Palace.

I cannot step outside these walls
(the walls beneath my feet)
or I will fall & fall —
and can I even fly at all?

My kingdom shifts
position and size, and I
never know over which
Earthnamed territory I hover —

where the lines were drawn to divide
themselves into us / them.

I wonder what it's like
to step against the ground below
and not be enveloped by it —

to traipse with meaning. My advisors
tell me: creaking joints, the chiropractor
are the only things awaiting me there.

A jet approaches: the massive vehicle
used to cross those miles and lines
drawn by humans across the earth.

In the window,
an earthgirl appears,
half-asleep, staring
into my kingdom

imagining me.







Three Kings

By Valkyrie Kerry Kelly

Called to the eighth Henry's bed,
A joy not delighted in.
Locked his Queen between four walls,
Isolated from family,
Such was the need for control.
His roving eye failed to sate,
But acceptable was the man's philandering.
And when his wife was surly raped,
He destroyed her with courtly slandering.

And then came Philip the wayward sea farer,
Drifting from port to port.
Responsibility, a term unsung to his mind,
Hollow promises offered,
Such was the need for control.
His roving eye failed to sate,
But acceptable was the man's wandering.
And when his wife's time was late,
He destroyed her with courtly slandering.

Finally sly Caligula took top the throne,
Spawn of a twisted ancestry.
Devious and twisted a spell of deceit was cast,
Her innocence and innocents suffered,
Such was the need for control.
His roving eye failed to sate,
But acceptable was the man's sickening.
And when his wife forced to escape,
He destroyed her with courtly slandering.

From the ashes of gas-lit imperialism,
A new joy did emerge.
The free man locked his soul-mate in adoration,
Safe from scars of yesterday,
Such was the need for consummation.
Their eyes locked spirit to soul,
And acceptable was their mutual understanding.
Deafening screams of suffering now dull,
He saved her with truthful reasoning.

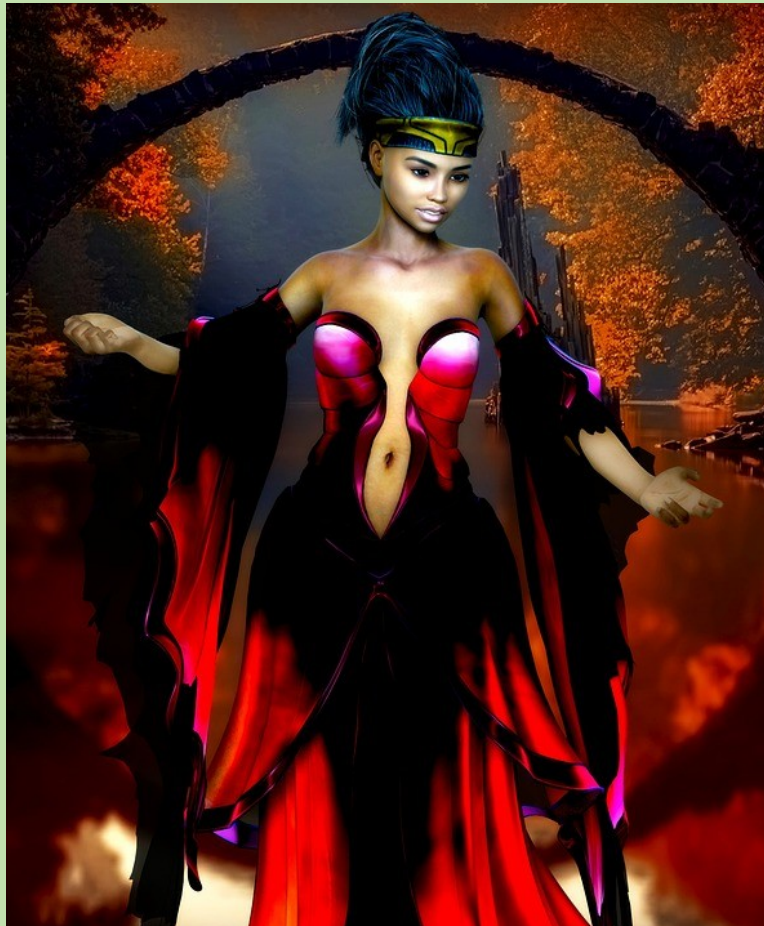




Ghosts in the Ghetto

By Mark Hudson

The door is the scene of no more
where bodies lay strewn on the floor.
The ghosts haunt the hallways inside,
and supernatural portals open wide.
The police have yellow tape spread,
marking the division line of the dead.
The parties involved are remorseful,
the drug dealers are so resourceful.
But they say the corner is still haunted,
where all the bad drugs are wanted.
And people still need a supply,
of the stuff that gets them so high.
And a generation of dealers is gone,
ghosts haunt the streets, a demon-spawn.
And even the cops are getting the jitters,
as junkies search for drugs in the litter.
All the people are afraid to try to act,
to change the fate of this blood-signed pact,
but people's fate here is set for the worst,
most people only get out through a Hearst.
And so the streets are forever haunted,
by the spirits of F.B.I's most wanted.



The Kraken's Return

By E. M. Eastick

Serena pressed the infant to her breast and closed her unseeing eyes against the sea spray. She missed the taste of anemone, the hippocamp rides under the moonlight, and the flirtatious taunts of the mermen. She smiled sadly at the memory of Galaman, his blond locks flowing around her face when they kissed, and wondered what he was doing now.

The infant snuffled inside the blanket. Tom was a good man, she reminded herself, and as long as they lived by the ocean, she convinced herself she could be happy as a farmer's wife.

"Serena! Serena!" screamed Tom. From the angle of the wind, Serena guessed he was in the third field, the one that lined the cliffs to the north. She turned to the voice and pictured her husband tearing through the pasture and launching over the stone wall that enclosed the house yard.

"Get inside," he yelled. "He's back."

And then his voice was beside her, his hand on her elbow. "Where's Madeline?"

"I'm here, Papa."

Serena had never set eyes on her daughter, but she knew Madeline was like her. At thirteen, her daughter was beginning to develop the thick, satiny head typical of the selkies and the full, lithe shape of a grown female. Serena gauged her daughter's development with her hands, late at night when Tom and Madeline and the baby slept.

"Get back inside," said Tom. "There are two sheep dead in the third field and three more missing."

"We need to stand up to him, Papa."

Her daughter's voice fell like thick raindrops. Her stubbornness rang clear. Serena smiled at her spirit, but feared her words. Not one, human or selkie, lived to tell the tale of challenging the kraken. Not one — except Serena.

"We can't beat him," said Tom as he led Serena and the baby to the stone walls of the cottage.

The evening wind carried Madeline's voice from the field. "The seafolk can help us."

Tom's fingertips turned to steel around Serena's elbow. He pushed open the cottage door and ushered her forward, but instead of stepping inside, Serena turned with her husband and beheld the daughter in her mind.

"Get inside, Madeline. Now!" called Tom.

"No, Papa. Don't you remember what happened last time? He slaughtered all the livestock and would have taken us, too, if it hadn't been for Mama."

"That's enough." Tom dragged Serena, the infant whimpering in her arms, inside the cottage and slammed the door. Even if she had a voice, her spirit to argue had long forsaken her, and she allowed him to seat her and the baby before the fireplace. The thud and scrape of wood and sharp hiss of a match told her he was building a fire even though the day was warm, and she had discarded her shawl.

The door remained closed. "She'll be in shortly," said Tom in a low murmur.

Serena's blood turned cold at the bellow that rattled the windows and shook the door. It was the same roar that haunted her nights and kept her from sleep; the roar that caused the ocean to tremble and the cliffs to quake when the great, clawed paw slashed her face and stole her skin. That day, the kraken stripped Serena's hopes of returning to the sea, and cast her as a human forever, or so she believed.

Tom's boots thundered across the stone floor, the door squealed open, and he ran, screaming Madeline's name.

"Let her go," said Serena, though no words left her lips. She rocked the crying child, and then laid him on the rug in front of the fire, where he stilled with sleep. As she crept to the open door, the wind slammed a second howl, closer than the first, into her face.

She stumbled through the grass until she reached the edge of the house yard. A scream from Madeline, like breaking glass, came from somewhere in front of her, on the other side of the stone, where the cliffs dropped to the sea. Tom was close by, loud with anger and frustration, urging her to come away.

Serena clambered over the wall and dropped to her hands and knees, groping the thinning grass until her fingers hit rock and the boom and crash of waves rolled over her from below. The breath of the kraken, like a storm at sea, and as hot as fire, told her he was fatally close.

"Serena! No!" screamed Tom, but the hand Serena felt wrap around hers was not her husband's.

"We can do this, Mama," said Madeline in a soft hush.

The creature must have lunged or snapped or swiped at them, as Madeline jerked her sideways and back from the cliff's edge.

"I'll distract him, you..." yelled Tom, but the roar of the beast drowned his voice and shook the land.

Serena squeezed her daughter's hand as she cautioned forward, feeling with the tips of her slippers until she stood at the edge of the cliff. The wind whipped and howled around them. The waves thundered below. In one smooth motion, she fell forward, pushing with her toes, and flew into the spray, the weight of her daughter heavy on her arm.

The water slid over her skin like silk, and her hand grasped at nothing.

"Madeline," she whispered in her head, doubting herself for the first time. A rumble nearby told Serena the kraken had followed. The undersea waves, thrown into turmoil by the giant beast, smashed against her and spun her in circles. A searing pain sliced her leg, and she closed her eyes to a darkness she had tried to forget.

A figure whirred past with a rush of water. A hot wave swept over her followed by cold. Muffled voices, the zip of arrows and spears, and the kraken's roar rolled in the swell. Down she dropped, deeper and deeper until the light strained to reach her. At last she settled, curled into a ball, on the ocean floor.

"Mama."

Serena's eyes shot open, but the darkness remained.

"Mama, over here."

She turned. A dark shape glided through the water towards her. "Madeline?"

A handsome young seal with liquid eyes and a sleek torso hovered before her, a dark pelt draped over one fin. "They all came, Mama. The merfolk, the hippocamps, and even the dolphins helped fight the kraken."

Serena spoke her reply in her mind, sharp exclamations expressing her joy and relief in a language she had almost forgotten. The clouds in her eyes lifted and the smooth of her shape rippled in the underwater current.

"One of the mermen asked me to give you this."

Serena accepted the pelt, a part of her she believed lost forever, and she wept. "All these years..."

"The kraken is dead. The skins are free to return to their rightful owners."

When had her daughter become so wise, thought Serena as she pressed the fur to her body and melted into herself. The sense of wholeness brought sparks of hope. "Who was this merman you speak of?" she dared to ask.

"You know, Mama," replied her daughter with a sly curl of a whisker. Madeline twisted her torso and torpedoed away, turning her snout to beckon her mother. "He's waiting for you."

Serena shook with fear, her reunion with Galaman a tired dream, an impossibility until the kraken returned as a wretched blessing. Tom would love the baby and raise it well. Perhaps he would take another wife who would bear him more children, and without the kraken threatening to destroy the farm, he and his family would live peaceful, productive, human lives.

Swimming after her daughter, Serena spun in the cool of the sea until she was dizzy with delight. Every one of her senses was alive and electric. When she paused to consider her bearings, a familiar shape, as tall and handsome as she remembered, his chest fuller and his eyes wise with age, swam slowly towards her.

"Serena," whispered Galaman with outstretched arms. "It's good to see you."

Welcoming his embrace, she smiled at the words, at the light that surrounded them, and her voice grew stronger. "It's good to be home."

Ends



The Heavenly Gaze

By Dan Belanger

I didn't know for how long it was that I'd been wandering. I was going somewhere but I couldn't say where. A pervasive darkness robbed my eyes of vision. My brain was numb from lack of sleep. My heart was heavy with a sadness that seemed to have seeped in, drip drop drip, from some unknown, external source, slowly filling it to the brim. I was exhausted, but afraid that if I stopped walking to sit down, and take a rest, I might not be able to get back up again.

So I kept moving.

Finally I arrived at a clearing. I stepped out of the wilderness, into a verdant meadow where a light green mist spread silently across whispering grasses. I could see a hill rolling up ahead where towering, flowering trees popped tops full of red, pink, and purple blooms up high enough to be seen from where they stood behind a tall garden wall. I walked slowly through the mist until I came to the wall, a twenty or thirty foot tall stone barrier that was covered in English Ivy and Virginia Creeper. I walked along the wall until I came to a big, wrought iron gate. I pushed against the gate, but it wouldn't open, so I continued walking. In a few minutes I came to another gate. I tried to open it, but this one wouldn't budge either.

I decided to keep walking along the periphery of the garden, hoping that I might yet find a way in. I happened upon four more locked gates. After having no success for what must have been weeks, I was about to give up when I came to a miraculous seventh gate that was made of pure gold. When I pushed against it, the golden gate moved a little. That's when a slight young woman appeared, wisp-like, with long, willowy hair and limbs as light as leaf stems, standing on the other side of the gate. She seemed to be at once dark and light, to varying degrees as she moved. She was clothed in pure green mist, which clung to her figure like a gown, accentuating her ethereal beauty. Her eyes changed colors as she spoke.

"Hello," she said, with a sweet blue-eyed smile.

"Where am I," I asked, rudely ignoring her kind greeting.

"You've arrived at the garden," she replied in a soft brown-eyed voice.

"Yes," I said, slightly annoyed. "I can see that this is a garden."

"It is the garden," she corrected me with no hint of criticism in her bright yellow eyes. "The garden from which all others grow."

"Oh, I see," I said, nodding. "The Garden of Eden."

"Some call it that," she said, her eyes sparkling green. "There are many names that have been given to it, but, like me, it doesn't require a name. It just is."

"You don't have a name?" I muttered almost to myself, my energy level was so low by then. "What do I call you, then?"

"Call me gardener," she replied, her aqua eyes glittering with little flecks of gold.

"Well, can I come in and rest, gardener?" I inquired politely. "I've been wandering for a long time"

"Not yet, Paul," she said, looking at me with sad, rain-colored eyes.

"You know my name," I said with surprise.

"Of course," she answered with a little laugh that sounded to me like the tra-la of a woodland stream tripping over smooth, round brook stones.

"If you know me," I asked, slightly exasperated by now, "then why won't you let me into the garden?"

"To walk in the garden from which all gardens grow, you must first accept that you, like all others, were made in the image of the gardener."

"But, gardener," I protested, "I don't look like you. Your skin, hair and eyes keep changing."

"That's because I am all ethnicities at once," she explained. "I'm all genders as well, but this is not always as easily seen or understood outside of the garden."

"So you are made in the image of all?" I asked.

"I am made in the image of the one who is all," she replied.

"Well, that's a little hard to believe," I admitted, "but so many unusual things have happened today that I might just be able to convince myself."

"Believing isn't good enough, I'm afraid," she said.

"What else, then?" I asked.

"Since you are made in the image of the gardener," she said, "your image is sacred. While you were alive, several images of you were created. Each one contains a little piece of your soul. To enter the garden, you must be whole. These copies must be eliminated."

"You mean I have to destroy all photos of myself?" I said, humbled by the thought of such a massive undertaking.

"Yes, all representational images," she replied. "Photos, videos, paintings. They all must go."

But why? I wondered. Is replicating what was created in the gardener's image considered to be making a mockery of the gardener?

I thought about all the images of those now dead that had been captured through the ages, and all the ways that they could now be stored, and preserved in the virtual universe. I envisioned endless processions of the dead slowly marching in a limbo that was neither here nor there as the worlds of heaven and earth drifted further apart. I wondered if we had crossed the point of no return with our development of newer and newer forms of technology, keeping our images alive while locking ourselves out of the garden for good. Had we exchanged the sacred for the virtual?

"With such strict rules," I exclaimed, "there mustn't be very many souls that make it into the garden! There can't be any one famous inside at all."

"It is very sparsely populated to be sure," she replied. "Some are too attached to their fame on earth to destroy all their images. There are no politicians, lawyers or movie stars inside. Those who prefer to be worshiped as idols idle on outside the garden, hoping to find a better option, a gate where they can enter without erasing their images on earth."

"Those who worship the heavenly through religions that do not allow the rendering of representational art fair better. Worshipers following doctrines forbidding photography are the most likely candidates. Others must be willing to go back and destroy all self images to gain entry. Many are too vain or sentimental to follow through on the required task. They wander by the millions through the wilderness outside of the golden gate."

"Destroying all images of myself is not going to be easy," I said with a sigh.

"We can help," she said. "Since you were made in our image, you have the capacity for omnipresence. We can turn it on for you."

"What do I have to do?" I asked.

"Walk back through the wilderness," she said. "Find those remnants of your life still lingering on the planet."

"How do I destroy all the images?" I asked nervously.

"You'll know when the time comes," she assured me. "Now go."

So I returned through the wilderness to the world that I had once inhabited. I felt like I was floating above it all, while at the same time streaming through it in a river of time and space. I could see now that the extent of my life was but a bend in that ever flowing tributary. People's lives gushed, flowed and disappeared down river. Thousands of images glimmered like fragmented ripples of time. I moved down into the river, through cities, buildings, houses and rooms. I flowed through them all at once, all photos of me fading as I found them.

I saw my wife searching through old photo albums for a picture of me to use for my obituary. She couldn't find any, though, because just as she turned each page to where they were, I saw them and they faded away.

"Oh well," she sighed. "At least I've got the insurance money."

I saw my children, David and Lisa, both of whom were fully grown, and married, with children of their own. When they couldn't find pictures of their dad to one day show their grandchildren, they shook their heads, remembering what a nudge I'd been about getting my picture taken.

I traversed a disconnected array of photos strewn across the internet, on Facebook, Instagram, and in distant data clouds. They faded and disappeared through the miraculous process of erasure that the gardener had switched on in my mind's eye. I was glad to see them go as I had always hated the way that I looked. There wasn't anything particularly disagreeable about my appearance, but there was nothing extraordinary about it either. I was nondescript. I realized then that my low opinion about my looks had led to low self esteem, which, in turn, affected the decisions that I'd made in life. I had chosen a mundane career. I'd lived in a small house on a quiet street. I had married an even tempered, pretty wife. We'd raised a thoroughly average family, that had come to disdain me, blaming me, and perhaps rightly so, for their own feelings of inadequacy, and consequentially dreary lives.

So as I watched the images of that weak continence fade, I felt an exhilarating sense of release. When I was sure that I had destroyed them all, I turned to head back through the wilderness, ready to enter the garden.

That's when a tiny yellow light flickering in the window of a dilapidated South Bronx tenement building caught my eye as if it were the brightest of spotlights. I followed it to the apartment of a little old Puerto Rican woman. She was wearing a locket around her neck that contained a picture of me as a young man walking on the street in front of her building. I recalled that I had worked as a social worker at a hospital in the neighborhood when I was in my early twenties.

I guessed that she must have snapped the shot of me while I was walking up the street on my way to work.

I was just about to grab the locket, and destroy the photo when she lifted it to her lips, and gave it a kiss.

"Good morning, poppy," she said. "You mucho guapo today."

She proceeded to go about her daily activities, occasionally pausing to kiss the locket as she swept, dusted and straightened up. It occurred to me that she had no one in her life, and that this incidental photograph of me, a total stranger, was all that sustained her. Why? What was so special about me? It suddenly it occurred to me, then, that I had seen the old woman somewhere before, but where?

That's when I remembered the fire. I was working the ICU when they brought in Roberto, the old woman's husband, who had third degree burns over his entire body. The old woman, whose name I now recalled was Lourdes, had been out shopping at Rodriguez, the local Bodega, when the building went up. Their entire apartment and all of

their possessions were consumed in flames. I sat with Lourdes for a little while each day, when she came to see Roberto. When he passed away, I helped Lourdes arrange the funeral at St. John's on Fulton Street. Other than Lourdes and the priest, I was the only person in attendance.

A few weeks later, I was able to get her situated in a new apartment, the one on the hill near the hospital. I don't know when she took the picture of me, but I now understood why it was so important to her. Since they had no children or other living relatives, all the pictures of Roberto had been lost in the blaze. When she gazed at my photo, it wasn't me she thought of, but Roberto who, with no images needing to be destroyed, must have made it into heaven right away.

Just as I was coming to this conclusion, the gardener appeared, floating in on a carpet of green mist.

"Are you ready to join us in the garden?" she asked.

"I can't," I told her.

"Oh?" she said with a raised eyebrow. "Why not?"

"I can't destroy the last photo," I replied, gesturing towards the old woman shuffling about the little rooms. "So I can't come to the garden."

"No," the gardener said with a sad, gray smile, "but you have found a garden of your own."

"I know," I said solemnly. "I can feel it blooming."

The gardener nodded, and said goodbye.

I drifted along with Lourdes, then, through those modest rooms until the river of time washed the misery of her life away. The rooms crumbled, the buildings fell, the city faded. I knew, somehow, that, even though I could easily destroy the last photo now that Lourdes was gone, I would never be allowed to enter the garden. There were no second chances.

Banished from heaven, and forgotten on earth, I wandered alone through a wilderness of shadows, all of which, I realized, after a while, were my own. They were the negatives from the numerous photos that had been taken of me in my lifetime.

The wasteland of negative self images seemed to go on forever. Then, one day, I saw a distant glimmer of light. I thought of Lourdes, and imagined the light was the glimmer of the gold on the gate as it opened, letting her into the garden to spend eternity with Roberto. The shadows seemed to fade for a moment as I smiled. Then, slowly, I walked on.

Ends





THE CARAVAN FROM THRAA

By DJ Tyrer

In the days following the sudden and calamitous destruction of the mighty city of Sarnath, the land of Mnar and all the lands between the Bnazic and Liranian Deserts that stretched from the frigid waters of the northern sea to the warm waters of the south were thrown into turmoil and violence as lords and princes vied for power and sword was set against sword. For centuries, the all-conquering legions of the kings of Sarnath and the auxiliaries drawn from subjugated nations had held a vast empire in thrall, ensuring order was maintained and trade flourished. But, Sarnath had been swept away from the world overnight in circumstances that few could comprehend, taking with it the king and his court and many of the great men of the empire. Overnight, authority had been swept away with the city. As swiftly as the news had spread amidst wild and peculiar rumours, it had taken time for the truth to be understood by the subjects of the empire, but understood it had eventually been and men began the brutal struggle to rule the suddenly anarchic lands.

Amidst the spreading chaos, Olbur of Rokol had discerned the potential for profit. Not for him the short-sighted robbery and raiding that inevitably brought down revenge and retaliation upon the thieves and bandits as new powers rose to fill the vacuum. No, Olbur understood that the greatest wealth would come to those who made themselves indispensable to the lords and war-leaders without making themselves a threat to their power. Soldier, guardsman, scout, bodyguard and officer; Olbur had been all of these, establishing a reputation for skill, strength, bravery and honesty that ensured a steady supply of well-paid and prestigious roles came his way.

Thus it was that Olbur found himself in the employ of the oily Zagyg-Hei, a man who tried to give every impression that he was an official in a noble household, but seemed to Olbur to be nothing less than some sort of sorcerer. Where he could, Olbur steered clear of magic, but he had to go where the money was if he desired to maintain the momentum of his success. Which meant not questioning too deeply when Zagyg-Hei offered him a hefty purse to help guard a caravan travelling from the city of Thraa to Olbur's homeland of Rokol.

"It will be useful to have a native of Rokol to help guide our way through the distant lands to our destination," the erstwhile major-domo had opined.

Zagyg-Hei was free with generalities, but suspiciously reticent about the specifics. The caravan would consist of a sealed palanquin that none was to approach save the four mute Liranian slaves who were its bearers, Zagyg-Hei's palanquin, and two dozen dromedaries, half for riding and half to carry goods. Olbur was to be the chief of a dozen guards; he was not best pleased to discover that his assistant, a young man named Peltamash, had already been picked for him.

"I like to know that not all the guards will owe their loyalty to you," Zagyg-Hei told him, his deceit reflected in his impressions of others. "That way, I can be certain of honest reports as to what is gong on...."

Olbur had just nodded and tried not to show his irritation. In his experience, employers who didn't trust you, whether with the full details of a job or to carry it out professionally, were a liability. Sadly, amongst the devious, paranoid and treacherous lords vying for control of Mnar, such an attitude was the rule rather than the exception and anyone who wanted to get ahead had but two choices, get on with things as best you could and pray for the best, or join in the backstabbing and prosper for a time before falling to someone who played the game better than you. Olbur preferred honest swordwork to the path of betrayal.

Olbur didn't have a good opinion of Peltamash. Olbur was of the northern stock, tall and broad with close-cropped blonde hair, a rough-bristled chin and clear blue eyes. Peltamash was of the old stock of Mnar that had come down from the upper reaches of the Xari, down the winding river Ai to settle the southern land; he was shorter than Olbur, shorter than many of his own people, lithe of body, and dark of hair, skin and eyes. Youthful, the warrior was clean-shaven with shoulder-length hair that made the veteran think he was callow and vain, unfit to bear a blade in battle beside him. He would have doubted the youth's claim to have served in the guard of the lord of Mtal had he not been able to name the captains he claimed to have studied under and their fighting styles. But, whilst he appeared to have a warrior's skills, Olbur doubted they were sufficiently honed for survival in the wilds beyond the support of his fellow guards. He made sure the other guards that he picked were the hardy sorts who could survive beyond the borders of civilisation, who had seen the world and fought for their lives.

“So, who rides in the sealed Palanquin?” Peltamash asked as they walked side-by-side at the head of the caravan. The curtains of the shoulder-borne transport had been kept tightly closed every day of their journey along the western bank of the Ai, and, at night, the mute bearers would set a tent up over it, concealing both palanquin and passenger, leaving them none-the-wiser as to who it was they protected.

Olbur shrugged. “We don’t need to know.”

The youth seemed to have attached himself to the veteran in a manner that he found most annoying, as if a puppy was trailing after him, nipping at his heels. He had no desire to play the part of a mentor to him.

“Aren’t you intrigued?”

“Naturally; but, we don’t *need* to know. Keep to the job in hand and you will go far.”

However, Peltamash was not to be deterred. “I’ve heard the rumours. Some say we are spiriting away the heir to the throne of Ilarneq as a hostage. Others say that it is a noblewoman, the lady Thalé, going to her wedding.”

“It is of no importance.”

“But, what if we carry an unwilling bride with us? Shouldn’t we help her?”

Olbur couldn’t resist laughing at the naiveté. “We are paid to do a job and we do it, no questions asked, no judgements made. We do not play games, nor indulge in treachery. We are professionals and we do a professional job; do you understand?”

The youth nodded reluctantly and Olbur had to laugh again as he actually pouted like a girl denied her doll, further reinforcing his low opinion of him. If he survived long enough and learnt the necessary lessons, Peltamash might mature into a skilled warrior, but Olbur had his doubts. He just hoped that the youth’s foolishness wouldn’t get them both killed. He couldn’t really understand why their employer had insisted on hiring him.

He was to discover just how justified his concerns were as the caravan wound its way past the junction of the Xari with the Ai. The land grew steeper and rockier as the pastoral and civilised land of Mnar approached the wilder lands of the north. Olbur noticed that his youthful colleague, clearly nervous, would absently fondle the medallion that he wore about his neck: it was one of the star-stones, flat, grey-green stone discs marked with a pentagram that could be found across the region and which were held by many to bring luck and ward off evil; not that Olbur cared for such things, preferring to trust in cold steel.

They set up camp and Olbur retired for the night; as captain of the guard, he did not need to stand watch, only being summoned if anything transpired, which it only had once or twice, proving false alarms. As usual, Peltamash shared his tent, to his mild frustration, and nagged him with questions when he would rather have slept. He didn’t sense that anything was wrong; perhaps the cooler temperature was dulling his wits.

The attack came suddenly in the middle of the night, without warning. Peltamash had just asked Olbur something about the time he had saved the Prince of Ilarneq from faceless assassins sent by a deathless sorcerer, when they heard cries of terror and surprise from the guards on duty outside.

“What is it?” exclaimed the youth. Apparently, from his expression, whatever his training and service, he had not experienced being attacked like this.

“Grab your weapon!” Olbur snapped back, taking up his own sword and heading for the tent flap and the night beyond.

Outside, the camp was in uproar and it took him a moment to realise why. The Laranian slaves stood guard, almost impassively, about the tent containing the sealed palanquin, armed with short-shafted stabbing spears with large, leaf-like heads of bronze. The guards who had been on duty lay dead on the ground, the others, like Olbur, had run out of their tents, swords, scimitars or spears in hand, and were looking about in confusion. Zagyq-Hei’s acolytes and servants held aloft blazing torches and the man who professed to be nothing more than a household official had both hands raised, holding aloft a medallion that flashed yellow in the torchlight, and was chanting something in a tongue that Olbur couldn’t recognise. He realised that Zagyq-Hei’s gaze was cast upward and followed it to see peculiar, dark, winged things flapping about above their heads, each the size of a man with wide, membranous wings and pincer-like limbs similar to a crab that snicker-snacked at the guards with vicious accuracy.

Even inured to the monsters and abhumans that lurked on the fringes of civilised lands and beneath the ground, Olbur could not help but flinch as one of the pincers lunged towards him and clacked shut just in front of his face. He slashed at it, but the claw retracted with lightning speed and his blade arced harmlessly through empty air.

“Fire!” he cried, having seen that the torches seemed to hold them at bay somewhat.

Olbur leapt forward, towards the campfire and a burning brand, only to feel something catch his leg and trip him, sending him face down onto the ground with a gasp of pain. Above him, a pincer snapped at where he had been standing.

“Sorry!” he heard Peltamash call as he dodged past him and snatched a burning piece of wood from the fire. With a surprising presence of mind, the youth produced a bow and quickly wrapped a cloth about an arrow and lit it. He shot and the blazing arrow struck one of the flying things.

To everyone’s surprise, the creature fell to earth, aflame. Its death seemingly shocked the others and they flew away emitting a peculiar buzzing sound that might have been the product of fear.

Olbur had just stood to his feet as the things flapped away. He felt a little foolish for having played no part in the battle. Looking at the burning and unpleasantly twitching creature, he had no idea what it was. The wings were vaguely like those of a bat and the body reminded of an insect. The head, if that was what it was, was like a lumpy egg and was weakly flashing different colours in parts. After a few seconds, it ceased to twitch and glow, lay still, then seemed to deflate before melting into a slick reminiscent of Dotherian oil, before that vanished away leaving no trace but the extinguished arrow.

“They are the demonic servants of our enemies,” their employer told them, “they seek to impede our progress.”

That was not the best thing to say to a band of mercenaries, several of whom decided to leave first thing in the morning. With those who had died, it left them with just two guards besides Olbur and Peltamash. Even a skilled swordsman, fearless against human opponents, balked at the thought of fighting demons. Olbur was happy to take it as a challenge, but was unhappy not to have been appraised of the threat earlier. This was just the sort of employer reticence that could get you killed. All attempts to elicit an explanation from Zagyg-Hei as to the nature of their enemies and their demonic servants failed.

“There has to be more to what is happening here,” Peltamash commented as they finally drew near to Rokol. En route, they had been assaulted three times by bandits, once more by the demons – which they had been able to drive off with fire and Zagyg-Hei’s spells – and once by vicious satyrs. It was far more than they would have expected.

“There’s always more going on,” Olbur muttered in reply. He was not happy with the youth: twice more he had blundered into him in combat, tripping him and rendering him temporarily unable to fight; Zonazi had been killed in front of him by a satyr whilst he had been scrabbling like a fool in the dirt. After that, he had kept clear of the clumsy youth during fights and had avoided further problems; peculiarly, Peltamash was a highly-skilled warrior when not stumbling into Olbur, who had developed a theory that the youth was attempting to undercut him in order to play up his own status. He detested such games – it was too like the politicking that he preferred to avoid.

“Have you noticed the peculiar medallion that Zagyg-Hei wears?” the youth persisted.

“The man is a wizard of some manner. All wizards carry medallions and clothe themselves in sigils. And, so do you.”

Peltamash’s hand moved instinctively to the star-stone that he wore on a thong about his neck. “Aye, but the symbol that our employer bears is not that of the Sarnath Sigil with its noble lineage. I have not seen its like before.”

“I have.... twice....”

“Truly? Where?”

“It is the symbol of the Shepherd God, the one who guided your ancestors down into the land of Mnar. I am not surprised you knew it not – the worship of your ancestral god has largely been forgotten in the south, save amongst a few nomad shepherds who cleave to the old ways from before you lived in cities.”

“Oh, but where did you see it? The people of Rokol are of different stock – do you worship the gods of Mnar’s past?”

Olbur chuckled. “No, we have gods of our own. But, worship of the Shepherd God remains strong amongst the shepherd-folk of the upper reaches of the Xari. That was where I saw the symbol for the first time, worn by a Narthosite whom I encountered in Jaren.”

“And, the second time?” Peltamash asked, sensing that this held more import than the first.

“The second time was in Kadatheron when I was hired to, shall we say, retrieve items from an expedition returned from the Bnazic Desert. Amongst them was a small idol of black stone veined with yellow in the shape of a lizard or dragon, not unlike the one that has recently come to rest in Ilarneek. Upon the brow of the lizard was a sort of diadem with a disc upon which was the same symbol.”

“But, what is the connection?”

“That I cannot say. Possibly it dates from some elder time, such as that primordial age in which the legendary city of Ib is said to have fallen to earth, and has come to be seen as a symbol of power, adopted and adapted by cults and sorcerers out of reverence for its antiquity.”

“I suppose so. Yet, once more, with all that has come to pass, all I can say is, there has to be more to what is happening here.”

Olbur couldn't help but throw back his head and laugh at Peltamash coming round full circle in his thoughts. That was the paradox of the youth: at times, he seemed manipulative, yet, at others, he was so naive in his thinking. Olbur wasn't sure how to take him.

“Well, we will be at Rokol soon and it will no longer be our business.”

“But, Olbur,” his name was uttered almost tenderly, “what if that which Zagyg-Hei plots is detrimental? I cannot believe he is one who would ever do good, even if it were to his advantage.”

The trouble was that, no matter how much Olbur protested his steadfastness and reliability, it was impossible to achieve what he had without having a certain curiosity and daring in your nature and, now, he found he could no longer resist Peltamash's words.

“Alright,” he nodded, “you have a point. He certainly has been entirely unforthcoming about everything that has happened. I suppose we should investigate what he is up to, and, I guess I have a duty to my birthplace to keep it from harm.”

“Well spoken,” grinned the youth. “Well, we will have to act tonight. Let us lay our plans...”

Their remaining fellow, Edil-Lei, was ostensibly on guard that night, but would distract the Lirianian slaves by offering them wine. Most likely they would reject the offer, but it would, hopefully, keep them occupied whilst they took a look in the tent.

They took up a position behind a couple of camels and waited for Edil-Lei to approach the tent with a skin of wine and some cups. Two of the guards came out and he offered them the wine to drink. Although mute, the guards could understand his words and seemed amenable to his offer, gesturing forth their two fellows to join them. Clearly, they were satisfied with the suggestion of celebrating their journey's end.

Making sure that all four of the Lirianian slaves were staying outside to drink, the two warriors began their cautious approach, ensuring that they stayed out of sight behind the camels until they were entirely out of view behind the tent. Then, they crept forward and slipped inside.

The interior of the tent was dark, lit by a single smoky oil lamp. Looking about, they could see four sleeping mats and rough blankets and four bowls that had held the slaves' meal of porridge. Other than those things, the tent was empty save for the palanquin; no sign of the one who rode upon the palanquin nor any sign that they had exited it.

“Strange,” Peltamash whispered into the veteran's ear.

Olbur gave a curt nod and muttered, “Seems to support your theory that she is held prisoner. Let's take a look....”

Carefully, quietly, they picked their way over to the curtained palanquin, listening intently lest any of the slaves enter the tent. Once beside it, the older warrior slowly moved the scarlet curtain aside, just a little way, so that they could see within. What they saw caused them to recoil in horror.

“Loban guard us!” the youth shrieked.

The four slave-guards burst into the tent, alerted by their cries, their short-shafted stabbing spears in their hands, Edil-Lei close on their heels, having guessed what was happening. Olbur had no way of knowing if they knew the horrific nature of what they had borne all this way and no easy way of enquiring, so drew his sword and lunged at them, parrying a spear aside and striking one down. He was a little surprised that Peltamash was at his side, wielding his sword expertly, not having blundered into him, but reassured at the skill he was displaying. Edil-Lei laid into them from behind, catching the slaves by surprise. As well as they fought, the four were dead within seconds.

“What did you discover?” Edil-Lei asked as he wiped his blade clean. Their pale faces, masks of shock and disgust, told him that things were awry.

“No time!” Olbur told him. “We must deal with Zagyg-Hei and his followers!”

The three of them ran out of the tent to confront the acolytes and servants who had preceded their master out into the night to investigate the commotion. Without hesitating, they charged forward and set about the men, most of whom were unarmed and confused, slaughtering them with ease and the dispassion of men who knew that life was cheap and survival achieved by stacking the odds in their favour.

However, when the sorcerer stepped forth from his tent to face them, they couldn't help but quail before his fearsome gaze, knowing that no matter how strong the sword-arm a wizard's wiles could easily destroy an unwary warrior.

"Base treachery!" Zagyg-Hei cried. Beside him, his closest aide drew a cruelly-curved ceremonial dagger and advanced on them.

Olbur lunged forward at the sorcerer, but found himself stumbling to his knees as Peltamash barged into him once more. Zagyg-Hei was intoning something, but the youth had thrust forward his star-stone which was glowing strangely and seemed to repel whatever curse the sorcerer was casting at them. With a desperate move, Olbur managed to strike the sorcerer in the leg, sending him staggering backwards, his incantation cut off by a cry of pain.

But, Edil-Lei had fallen to the knife wielded with a butcher's skill by the sorcerer's follower, who, now, lunged at Olbur's youthful ally, slashing his arm, causing him to drop the warding stone that protected them. Olbur turned on his knees, stones scraping at his skin, and swung his sword, sundering flesh and bone, severing the man's leg at the knee. Then, he threw himself forward, atop the bloodied man, plunging his sword to the hilt into his body, thrusting it up under the ribcage into the heart. The man twitched once, then lay still beneath him, his blood splashing out onto Olbur.

Looking up, Olbur could see no sign of the sorcerer, Zagyg-Hei seemingly having cut his losses and fled. Standing, he went to check on Peltamash, whose wound didn't seem as serious as it had first appeared.

"You saved me!" the youth exclaimed as the veteran raised him up. Olbur was surprised when he suddenly kissed him on his cheek. "Thank you!"

"Oh, um, you're welcome, Peltamash..."

The youth laughed and said, "You can call me Minon-Azal."

That was strange, a woman's name; then, he recalled the name of the Princess of Mtal and everything about the youth suddenly made sense.

"You are truly a great swordswoman, Minon-Azal."

"Thank you, Olbur." She kissed him again and he returned her kiss. Now that he knew the truth about her, Olbur could see beauty in her face, tempered as it was by a certain steel that he would never have expected from a princess. Whilst he knew nothing of what had brought her here, he could tell she was no pampered princess, but a woman with a mind of her own, every bit his equal, whom he could envisage as his partner in arms along the dangerous road of war and adventure.

Having bound her wound, he suggested that they burn the palanquin and its grisly contents.

"What do you think Zagyg-Hei's plan was?" Peltamash – Minon-Azal – asked as they soaked the palanquin and tent in oil of Dother and piled wood about it, before setting it alight.

"Some vile magical trap," he suggested, uncertain.

Together they watched the fire burn like a pyre.

"Whose body do you imagine it was?" she asked him, transfixed by the flames.

He shuddered slightly as he recalled what they had seen laying within the palanquin: a female corpse, desiccated and skeletal, with long blonde hair fanning out upon a luxurious pillow, richly clad in robes of scarlet and gold, the parchment-skinned face set in a rictus of terror. Upon the corpse's brow was a diadem with a disc mounted on it marked with a familiar symbol. Clearly, she had died filled with fear – a terrible emotion that seemed to radiate yet from the corpse in palpable waves.

"It looked ancient. I have a sneaking suspicion that it came from the same source as the idol that I saw. What his plan was, I do not know, but I seemed to sense something terrible about it, as if it were but a container for something else, a husk waiting to be emptied of something horrible."

The flames rose high and blazed yellow against the midnight blue sky. Suddenly, sparks erupted skyward and a sound like a deep sigh escaped the collapsing remnants of tent and palanquin. They both started at the noise. Possibly it was entirely mundane, the sound of falling drapes amongst the flames, but, to them, it seemed to be the cry of release of something unnatural escaping a prison of mummified flesh. Then, the fire died away as if it had been doused with water and the night fell silent about them, ashes dancing upon the slightest of breezes.

After a moment's nervous pause, they began to gather the bodies and lay them atop a bier of wood and the silk of the sorcerer's tent, creating a pyre for them. Here, the flames burned red and nothing untoward occurred.

"What about Zagyg-Hei?" Minon-Azal asked.

Olbur shrugged. “We thwarted his plan. I think he has fled. I have never known a sorcerer to be brave of heart.” To himself, he added that he had never known a princess to wield a sword, and hoped that Zagyg-Hei would not seek to surprise him, too. “But, whilst we may have won today, I doubt that we have seen the last of him.”

She nodded her head in agreement. “He seems the sort to seek revenge....”

“Yes. I daresay that we shall hear from him soon. But, till then, we have the camels and the treasures we salvaged from his tent. We are but a short journey from Rokol, so we might as well head there and enjoy ourselves.”

“Very good,” she agreed. “But, please, when we are amongst others, call me Peltamash and treat me as your fellow warrior. Only when we are alone together will I be your lover; if you will have me....”

“Oh, yes.” He enfolded her in his arms and kissed her, grateful that they were alone this night.

Ends



The Whale of Uthamus

By Neil K. Henderson

The whale of Uthamus
is eclipsed by the Moon,
when the seal-light of Venus
extends into June.
In the dog-lapping distance,
the cod-summer Sun
illuminates silence
with a wag of the tongue.



The Sandman Cometh

By Kent Rosenberger

Out of thin air, and seemingly from a great distance, the Sandman appeared, as he did every night, in the workshop basement of one mister Ralph Fallows. He regretted this part of his nightly trip across the globe, and, upon sight of the man in question, rolled his eyes and dropped his hand to his side, relaxing it from its prepared position above the sparkling gold grains in his pouch.

"Ah, my friend, come in, come in," Ralph's overly enthusiastic voice beckoned from across the room. He stared wide-eyed at his expected visitor from behind a tightly restrained pair of welder goggles, sporting a glossy, freshly brushed grin above his mismatched argyle sweater and bow tie combination. The square wooden stool on which he sat kept his thin legs and loafer-clad feet just above floor level. They swayed playfully from side to side as he took a deep, loving sip from an oversized cappuccino mug, then emerged from the depths of his drinking vessel to re-administer his caffeine induced smile.

To his right, atop a worn plywood workbench, an old-fashioned coffee pot percolated feverishly with a fresh quart of bubbling hot java, the whole of which he planned to drain before allowing his forlorn visitor to tend to business and be on his merry way.

It was a game, and the Sandman, like all the other populists of myth and legend, hated the games of mortals.

"Good evening, mister Fallows, how are you?" The Sandman's tone was anything but congenial, bordering more on the side of irritation laced with hopelessness. He took this lull in his busy schedule as opportunity to straighten his sagging, pointed red cap and smooth over gleaming purple robe folds, which appeared to radiate a happy energy all its own, contrary to the attitude of its wearer. His dwindling patience did not allow even a breath of time for Ralph to answer the intended rhetorical question. "I am a very busy man, mister Fallows. If you would be so kind as to remove your attractive eyewear, I will be but half a moment." He made no attempt to mask the sarcasm seething within him.

"Oh, ho-ho, you'd love me to do that, now wouldn't you my friend from the realm of nether? Why is it you make the same request of me night after night when you know very well I will be unable to sleep without first indulging in social companionship for a time? Look here, see, I've made all the preparations, just like last night. Snacks, coffee – lots of coffee – some games, a radio, television, videos, books, brain teasers, magazines, an amateur chemistry set, a model of the Empire State Building, and of course a comfortable chair for you. Sit down, sit down, sit down. I can't imagine a person with your occupation and the schedule you keep can't be the least bit tired. Sit, sit, sit. Be comfortable. Deal you in for a hand of rummy?" He flicked and shuffled a deck of poker cards back and forth nervously from hand to hand and kept on talking without any detectable signs of taking breaths or running out of conversation.

"Please, mister Fallows," the tall, grandfatherly Sandman pleaded in a gruff tone, "we go through this ritual every night. Your not allowing me to help you get to sleep accomplishes nothing but putting me behind schedule and pushing my patience even closer to the limit than the night before. I need to catch up. I have a job to do. Do you

realize your self-centred, self-indulgent craving for my company is the sole cause of the insomnia epidemic in the Midwest?" He was speaking over Ralph's continuous, soft bantering. Somehow this man had the ability to spew drivel and listen intently to someone else simultaneously. He had to wait, foot tapping impatiently, for Ralph to finish his sentence and the remaining liquid concoction in his mug before an answer relayed back.

"My concern is not theirs. My concern is mine. You come into my home, everyone's home for that matter, every single night, quite uninvited, introduce some form of hypnotic mumbo jumbo into their systems that causes them to sleep away one third of their lives. Is that fair? Is it right? Who asked you to take on this repetitive, objectionable task in the first place? Why can't we be allowed to enjoy every second of our precious lives and not miss anything? Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. If there is going to be some sort of visitor entering my humble abode, I don't care who it is, he will have the common decency and courtesy to at least greet me properly and allow me to show him some hospitality. I mean really, popping in, throwing dust and leaving without so much as a word is very rude and, I'm sure somewhere, violates at least a few of my civil rights."

"Your hospitality is much appreciated," the Sandman assured him flatly, wondering if this guy every tried to capture the Tooth Fairy when he was a kid, "but in all honesty, mister Fallows, this arrangement does neither of us any good. You obviously go to a lot of trouble and expense to set this place up for my benefit, but frankly I don't eat, drink, have any interest in your audio or visual media, or even have the ability to touch anything on this plane of existence.

Didn't you ever wonder why my feet never touch your floor?" Hoisting the hem of his robe to his knees, he demonstrated to his misguided host's slippers feet with curled points out past his toes hovering at least three inches above the checkerboard tiling. "Or why I don't sit, or have a cup of coffee, or take it upon myself to remove those stinking goggles and cake sand all over your face?"

Ralph fingered the translucent plastic on either side of his goggles, touching them in the same way a proud cat owner strokes the soft fur of her prize-winning longhaired Persian. "Ha-ha, you like this? Are you amused or disappointed that I caught on to your little game? Oh, sure, you can easily overpower an unguarded opponent head-on, and even those who wear glasses on a regular basis fall victim to your napping dust with that little ricochet trick you do, using their own lenses against them like that. But me, oh no." He tugged experimentally at both frames. They did not budge. "Whether you can touch them or not, the fact remains that the moment the sand leaves your fingers it becomes part of the physical world and must abide by all the scientific properties thereof. It hurts like hell to have these darned things pressing against my face, but it's worth it. All worth it. I've actually managed to capture, or at least delay, one of Mother Nature's entity helpers. Don't I get a pot of gold or something for that?"

"That's leprechauns." The Sandman's face waxed red. "Look, it doesn't really matter to me. I can leave here and let you stay awake all night and it won't make a bit of difference as far as I'm concerned. You're fighting a battle that has no victory. Eventually you will grow weary, remove the goggles, and I will interrupt my busy schedule to pay you an exclusive visit at some odd hour to carry out my duties. Now I will ask you one more time, mister Fallows, and if you refuse to comply, then I will take leave of your residence until such a time as you decide to comply. Will you please allow me to do my job?"

"Ho-ho. Threaten me, will you? That's it. That does it completely. You force my hand sir, and I find it necessary to renege on my offer of refreshment and comfort to you. If you will not appease me in my endeavour to make this relationship a more complacent one, I am afraid I have no choice but to taunt and delay and annoy you and your precious schedule with the midnight world until you learn proper respect and treat me with the reverence I deserve. I will not be made to feel unappreciated in my own home." His pinched, nasal falsetto prattled on to no end.

"We don't have a relationship," the Sandman interrupted. Ralph made no outward sign of being offended. The Sandman figured this guy was used to being cut off and took the initiative. "If you want a relationship, get yourself a pet or a friend. I am not compatible with mortals, I am constantly working, and outside of this regularly annoying visit I enjoy my existence. I can't stay. Good evening, sir." The self-sustaining illumination that sparkled like a thousand fireflies from the Sandman's robes began to fade like a dying sun. Behind him a dark circle, swirling in a counter-clockwise direction with traces of stardust, gyrated open until its diameter equalled the height of the Sandman. Hovering to a distance of approximately eight inches off the floor, Ralph's supernatural company pivoted one hundred eighty degrees to embark on his journey to elsewhere. "Get a pet", he says. 'Get a friend.' Ha! I don't have any friends," he began shouting, as if the silent portal was causing a ruckus with which he needed to compete. "No one likes me. No one. I know what you're thinking." He stood, set his cup on the table and took two steps to meet the Sandman's gaze. "Change yourself. Be more friendly. Less forward, less aggressive. Take an interest in life. I've heard it all before, but it doesn't help. I need someone who will listen to me. I've got all this stuff in my head and I just need to vocalize it. Questions, questions, questions. Observations. Things I need to share. I could go on for an eternity how to resolve the national debt, what a stupid idea it is to try and improve name brand products, and where missing socks go when you lose them. But talking to myself gets tiresome and resolves nothing. Wasted energy. Wasted caffeine. Gotta burn up this caffeine. It would take forever, I tell you. Forever." Again his mouth motored away.

Does this guy ever breathe? the Sandman wondered, feeling slightly guilty for dismissing this poor soul so harshly, but at the same time reminding himself the minor troubles and problems of individuals, or the entire mortal race for that matter, where not his concerns. Not unless, of course, those concerns involved sleep, and even then he was limited to the flexibility of his schedule. But something in this stream of endless conversation sparked an idea that would eliminate his problem once and for all and give Ralph exactly what he wanted. Something so simple he was surprised he had not thought of it previously. Okay." At his single word command the portal froze in mid-whirl

and stood motionless in time like a snapshot. "Okay. OKAY. OKAY!" At last he was screaming, drawing Ralph's attention away from his own feckless bantering. "I will help you, mister Fallows, if for no other reason than to break this cycle of my falling behind on my rounds."

Ralph was grinning again, deluged in the flood of victory. "You will? Oh, joy. How about a game of checkers to celebrate? You can be red if you want."

"No, mister Fallows. Haven't you heard a word I've said? I am not of the physical world and I cannot be your compatriot. But, if you will trust me and allow me to go about my business this night, I promise you I shall return tomorrow evening at this same time with a complete resolution to your loneliness."

Moments passed as Ralph turned the enigmatic offer over in his head. "What exactly will you do?"

"I cannot reveal anything to you at this time. Arrangements must be made, but I feel you will find my solution accommodating to say the least."

"No tricks." Ralph was suddenly defensive, a paranoid

human quality the Sandman and his fellow immortals found most offensive in lesser beings. "Any tricks and I go right back to my usual plans."

"I assure you I am not capable of tricks." It was a lie, but how was this mere human to know? "I swear upon the Four Winds that you will be completely satisfied with what I have in mind."

A few more grains in the sands of time spilled through the proverbial hourglass before Ralph stiffly sashayed back to his hard stool, poured a long drink of coffee and lifted his mug to his guest. "To tomorrow then." He drank, then removed his goggles, revealing a purple raccoon mask outline encircling his eyes.

Two dust flicks later he was out like a light and the Sandman was gone.

Tiny ellipses of sparkling cosmic silver circled like pixies in the night, opening the now familiar gateway in the basement workshop. Seated as he was the previous night, clutching a fresh cup of his favorite blend, Ralph waited in giddy anticipation, anxious for delivery of his resolve as agreed.

Beaming brighter than Ralph had ever seen, a smiling, radiant Sandman materialized at the mouth of the enchanted eddy, a gleaming sackful of sand at the ready. "As promised, mister Fallows, I have made all the necessary arrangements."

"Glad to hear it." A gleeful squeal replaced the human's standard strained phonation as he got to his feet, quivering.

"I see you have your goggles on again."

"A precaution," he admitted, straightening them. "Just in case."

"I see. It's too bad, for your sake, that you do not trust me. Because I am not human I am unable to understand the negative emotional impact of insult, but I am able to pity you for being suspicious. As I promised, no tricks. I will not even ask you to remove them if you do not want to."

At first Ralph felt he was being hoodwinked into a trap, but after reading nothing but compassion in the eyes of his visitor, he slid the goggles off his head as a gesture of good faith. He approached and stood in front of the floating Sandman, excited and impatient. "So what do I do? Where's my 'solution'?"

"Right through here." A ghostly finger indicated toward the portal opening. "I have someone waiting who will take care of your every need, just as I said. I'd like you to meet him."

"Certainly. Certainly." In his brown loafers Ralph found it difficult to maintain a decent grip on the cement floor. His inability to contain himself had him jittering from head to toe.

"Allow me to introduce the two of you." Trembling fiercely, Ralph reached experimentally through the space-time continuum rip, hand open, palm sweating but inviting, friendly. "Ralph Fallows, please shake hands with..."

A burning cold grip clutched around Ralph's extended fingers, crackling like icicles snapping off a barn roof under their own weight. His nerves fell instantly numb up the extent of his arm, then spread like an opened basket full of angered asps throughout his entire body until stood as stiff as an abandoned flagpole in the cruel wind, his wiry frame now a single, frozen column of humanity experiencing the absolute absence of feeling. A canapé of pale blue settled across the surface of his already pasty skin, from the tips of his stiffening fingers to the transfixed expression of shock on his face that somehow still comically expressed his barracuda overbite and woodpecker nose.

"...my good friend, Grim Reaper." Polished digits of bone released their clutch of finality from Ralph's brittle handshake, allowing his unsupported, now vacant earthly shell to teeter and drop backwards, meeting equally lifeless cement. A smoky, translucent version of his recently deceased still stood in the same spot from where the discarded body fell away, trying to make sense of why there no longer seemed to be color or substance associated with the apparition of the limb he just plucked away from the hand of Death. Dividing his attention between it and his shed corpse, laden with *rigor mortis*, at the foot of his coffee counter, he finally cast a confused glance in the direction of the Sandman.

There was a distinct smile of satisfaction across the lips of the nocturnal world's king. "You see, mister Fallows, everything I promised. You now have an eternity to babble on as much as you like, an ear to listen to you and no possibility of interruption, as my friend has no tongue to speak of." He snickered once at his own joke.

"But, but, but..."

"Oh, don't worry, mister Fallows. I'll take care of all the messy details on this end." He nodded once in the direction of the Grim Reaper.

With no effort, or choice, on the part of Ralph Fallow's spirit, his wispy form was involuntarily drawn to the mouth of the portal, toward the open, darkly robed arms of Death himself. The look on his face, that of sheer horror, was the most pleasant sight the Sandman had experienced in many moons.

With one last glance behind him before absolute darkness engulfed himself and his new host, Ralph Fallows heard the last words that would ever be spoken to him for an eternity, his lesson of not messing with Mother Nature's children and how many small sleeps are much less frightening than one long, infinite one learned much too late.

"Don't worry about a thing," the Sandman repeated joyfully, leaning over Ralph's deceased form one last time, scattering a thin sprinkle of dust on his hollow face like a farmer sowing seeds. "Everyone will remember you as how peaceful you are right now. As the embodiment of docile contentment. They will all say, 'Isn't it a sweet blessing that he died in his sleep?'"

Ends

Our Hero, Sir Blodry

By DJ Tyrer

A quailing heart a hero should not make
Yet our hero, Sir Blodry, is no fake
By some misfortune or luck most strange
To appear a hero fortune would oft arrange
Not through bravery, neither through skill
Nor manly virtue nor a mighty will
Not by design but by accident
Victory to poor Sir Blodry went
To his surprise he slew a fell beast
Yet of his successes 'twas counted the least
He thwarted his foes, even the Devil, they said
Although, to be honest, he just with alacrity fled
Yet his protestations oft were cut short
When offered rewards he never had sought
For no matter what one's intent
It's hard to refuse gifts to well meant
And though the why he never really knew
Sir Blodry's legend grew and grew
And whilst on adventures he loathed to go
The poor knight was declared a hero
And whenever evil threatened the land
All were glad to have him at hand
Yet no matter how his poor heart quailed
Through dumb luck Sir Blodry never failed
His legend waxing with all that entailed
As again and again he somehow prevailed

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**Tracas
Cohetes
Petardos**

**Cadenas
Motosierra**



The Openings

By Edward Ahern

It began thirty years ago when I was ten. My father came upstairs to get me and winced when he opened the door to my room: it was a Friday and I'd piled a week's worth of clutter and ripening clothes before the mandatory Saturday clean.

"Andy, Mr. Adamantius wants to talk to you."

My eyes widened. "Is it the dog?"

My father nodded. "Let's see what he has to say."

Mr. Adamantius' voice was a church organ "Hello Andy. You probably know that Frank Tessonni is going off to college in a few weeks. My dog Origen needs to be walked in the early morning and late afternoon. Would you be able to take care of him before and after school?"

Adamantius was wheelchair-bound, no one knew why, or why a crippled man would get a dog that needed to be walked through a blighted Connecticut neighbourhood.

"Ah," was all I could blurt out.

"He already likes you, so it should be easy. It would pay nine dollars a day. You would need to feed him in the evening. I provide all the poop bags."

Two hundred fifty dollars a month was more than I knew how to spend. My allowance for chores and room cleaning was ten dollars a week.

Adamantius spoke into my silence. "Tell you what, why don't you come over to my house and I'll explain things. Then you can tell me if you want to take on the job."

I excused myself for a second, and told my father what Adamantius had just said. "That seems okay to me, Andy. Just stay away from the sink holes during your walks. You could put money away for school."

I picked up the phone and said, "Sure. Okay. Thanks. I'll come over now."

The Adamantius house was a hulking black outline in the dusk. It was the oldest and biggest house on the block, perched on top of a mound. The front door was heavy oak, the kind they use for church pews. I swung the bronze knocker.

Adamantius opened the door and rolled his wheelchair backward so I could get in. "Hello Andy," he said with a genuine smile. Origen bounded forward and started licking me. His tongue was level with my nose.

I gently pushed the dog to one side and looked around the living room. The furniture was all heavy and old, except for a writing table and stool that had painted animal things on them and looked like they belonged in a museum.

"Thanks for thinking of me, Mr. Adamantius. I'll be glad to take the job. Could I ask, though, Origen is a funny name. Why do you call him that?"

Adamantius' mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't crinkle. "Origen was a deeply religious man who lived a century after Christ. He was so committed that he had himself castrated. But he was considered heretical, so was never made a saint, and was tortured at length by his own church. Some say the reports of his later death were falsified, and that he went on to another task. I just wanted the name to be used again."

I knew what castration was, but had to ask, "What's a heretical?"

Adamantius' laugh resonated. "Someone who believes differently from those around him."

"Why does that matter?"

His expression saddened. "It shouldn't. There are much worse things around here than differences of opinion, things no one believes in." He shrugged. "If you like you can take Origen out now for a trial walk. About twenty minutes is good."

"Sure, okay."

Adamantius held up a hand, palm out. "Origen may want to track down a scent. Don't try and stop him, just hang onto the leash until he stops. When you come back, tell me exactly where you stopped. And which way his head pointed. It's important. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Excellent. His leash is hanging by the door. Enjoy the walk."

Origen went about his business quietly, but I was sweaty nervous. He was a short-haired, big-jawed, bunch-muscled mongrel that weighed more than I did. He was known to be gentle with kids and other dogs, but if he took off I couldn't hold him back and would have to hang on and run like hell.

It was six weeks of walks and feedings before Origen took off on me. I wasn't ready, and the leash jumped out of my hand. By the time he stopped and I caught up with him I'd run three blocks. Origen's back hairs bristled, and his growl sounded like it would rip apart his throat.

But he wasn't growling at me. His head was pointed at the front door of a small one-story house. I grabbed the leash off the ground, chest burning, then remembered that I had to describe where he'd stopped. Kestrel Street, house number 282, three houses in from Laurel Avenue.

I tugged on Origen's leash to get him turned around, but it was hopeless. His nostrils flared so much I could have stuck fingers into them. His bandy legs were splayed out firmly, and it would have taken at least two of me to get him to move.

"Okay, Origen," I panted, "games over. You've found it. Now I have to tell Mr. Adamantius."

The dog cocked his head toward me, and stopped growling. Then he cocked his back leg and peed on the steps leading to the house, as if marking his location. The return walk was calm, and when I told Mr. Adamantius he didn't look surprised, just sad and tired.

"And again," he said.

"What is, Mr. Adamantius?"

"Never mind, Andy, I'm just talking to myself. Old people do that."

The next morning, curious, I walked Origen past the house on Kestrel street. or what was left of it. One side of the house had sunk about seven feet into another sinkhole. The siding above ground was blackened and warped. I saw a kid I knew from school and asked him what happened.

"The Volodkas had to leave. The house made a big grinding noise and fell into the ground. Nobody knows how the fire started but it took hours to put out. There was a really rotten smell."

Origen stood next to me quietly while the boy and I talked, paying no attention to the house he'd growled at the evening before.

Mr. Adamantius' reaction was subdued. "Really? Another sinkhole? If the people weren't hurt, that's the important part."

When I got back to our house and told my dad about the wrecked house he shook his head. "This neighborhood, Andy, is cursed, These monster holes destroying property and homes. You remember the Lowell garage on Brighton? The same thing happened there."

"But why did Origen snarl at the house a little before it collapsed?"

"I don't know, Andy. Maybe it could feel the earth shaking."

"Should we move, dad?"

His laugh was harsh. "We can't afford to. I bought it for a third of what it would be worth anywhere else. I've over-insured it, but we're stuck here,"

Origen irrigated the neighborhood lawns for another six months without incident. Mr. Adamantius rarely left his house, and never had visitors, so he liked to talk with me before or after the dog walks. had more stories to tell, about gods that changed shape, and flew, and seemed to be cheating each other.

Then, one fall evening, on the return leg of our walk, Origen yanked me along the street to the front of our own house, snarling and scraping his nails on the sidewalk.

Please God, I thought, not our house. When he quit growling, I walked Origen down the block to his home. Mr. Adamantius listened without saying anything while I told him what'd just happened. "Can Origen predict where a hole will open? Is our house going to sink into the ground?"

He rolled his wheelchair over next to me. "Andy, I can't change whatever might happen to your house. But you will hopefully be okay. Please do me a favour. Set your alarm for 1:45 a.m. and get dressed. Could you do that?"

“Why?”

“Explaining now wouldn’t make sense to you. And don’t look outside.”

I asked more questions, but Mr. Adamantius just dodged them. When I got home I set the alarm. His pipe organ tones and sincerity had gotten to me.

The alarm rang, and I almost shut it off and went back to sleep. But I didn’t. After I got dressed I stood for several minutes in my dark bedroom thinking I was a gullible fool.

Just then the house began to shriek. Not like the settling creaks of old houses when their joists get arthritis, but the sounds of finishing nails tearing out of wood, and six by twos splintering. My room seemed to twist its shape and I felt it lean to the front. I stumbled up to the front window and looked out. Two glistening shapes were standing in our front yard, staring down into a yawning hole in our front yard.

I blinked, then squinted. A car-sized animal with red eyes, its shaking head a blur, was tearing at shiny black things, like huge beetles, trying to scabble out of the hole. Their maws were open as if yelling but I couldn’t hear anything over the destruction of our house. Next to the animal stood a tall, thin figure, waiting.

When the flow of beetles stopped the man shape began waving its arms. His mouth moved in maybe words, and I was knocked to the floor as our house and part of the lawn dropped a half dozen feet.

I struggled up and went back to the window, but there was nothing in the yard but splintered siding and roof shingles. The screams of tortured wood had died away with the death of our house.

“Andy!” I heard my father call out. “Andy, where are you?”

“In my room, dad.”

We met in the hallway, and touched each other to make sure we were okay. Then we ran down the stairs and out of the house. The outside smelled of rank animal musk. When we looked back, there was no fire, just a broken-backed house that had staggered into a huge hole.

Once we’d finished with the police and fire departments a neighbour took us in for the rest of the night. I was at Adamantius’ door early the next morning.

“Sir, what happened to our house?”

“Are you and your dad all right, Andy?”

I nodded, then pointed at him.

“You knew this was going to happen. How? How could you let this happen? We lost our home!”

He looked at me for several seconds. “You know, Andy, all these sink holes remind me of a fable. Hard to believe, of course. If I tell it to you, can you keep it to yourself?”

“I guess.”

“There’s a legend about a gigantic dog called Cerberus that guards the entry to the underworld. It stops living people going in, but, more urgently, prevents nameless things from getting out.

“People used to think that this hell hole was fixed in one spot. But when the creatures are blocked from entering our world in one area they eventually move and tunnel up in some other region, Like yours, maybe.”

Mr. Adamantius saw the disbelief on my face and nodded. “Like I said, it’s just a legend. Now, this dog can find and kill these things like a rat terrier, but he can’t plug up the hole to prevent others from coming through. That’s the job of the keeper. To tend to the dog and seal holes. A little like the Dutch boy plugging holes in a dike with his fingers. Anyway, that’s the fable.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t have picked you to walk Origen if I didn’t think you were smart and brave. Think of this story as just an allegory, something to help describe that bad things happen to people who don’t deserve them.”

I didn’t believe what he’d just said, but I could almost believe in Cerberus. ‘I saw something in front of our house. A giant dog and a tall man. I wasn’t dreaming.’

“You shouldn’t have looked out. Anyway, two in the morning they say is the witches’ hour. Maybe you were bewitched.”

“There’s no maybe about our house getting destroyed.”

“No, and I feel really badly about that. You and your dad can stay here while you’re looking for another place. Please, there’s plenty of room. I hate to ask this after what’s just happened, but could you walk Origen this morning? He needs it.”

And I did. And we did. We moved into two bedrooms in the Adamantius house and helped him with cooking and laundry. I kept walking Origen. Dad eventually cashed the insurance check and bought another house in the neighborhood. “We can use the extra for your college tuition,” he said. “It’s unlikely that we picked another sink hole.”

I walked Origen for five more years, and once or twice a year he sniffed out a new hole that opened and swallowed tons of earth. Mr. Adamantius and I didn’t talk about the sink holes much, but I remembered what I saw and his story. Then, my senior year in high school, Mr. Adamantius told me he was moving.

I winced. “But like you said, you’re needed here.”

“Was needed. We’re going to a village in Wales. I have some obligations to attend to there.”

I’d walked and fed Origen for so long that he was a slobbery brother I didn’t want to lose. And in the middle of feeling sorry for myself about losing the dog, I felt sad about something else.

“Mr. Adamantius, did you ever have a choice about living alone and doing this?”

“He half smiled but admitted nothing. “Not really, Andy. I’m just a heretic defined by a commitment I can’t give up. Wind blows. Water flows. And we stand watch.”

Ends



The Great Cosmic Squawk

By Andrew Darlington

Mary Alexiad loved her chickens. They were more than just a source of smooth brown eggs to barter, they were her friends and companions. She'd always loved her chickens, since the first time it was her family chore to go out to the coop to up-end water into their troughs and scatter feed for them to scrat and pick at. Then run her hands into the feathery warmth beneath the perches and gather in a big basket of new-laid. She did it every morning, before heading off for the schoolhouse.

Each hen had a secret name. She'd say 'Good Morning Henrietta, how are you today?' and they'd warble and cackle back at her. Odetta, Oprah, Aretha, Mary-Lou, Priscilla, Peggy-Sue, Lucille, Jackie-O, Suzy-Q, Tiffany, and Bilko the rooster.

The other girls at school were forever chit-chatting about boyfriends, movie stars and Pop music, they made cruel jokes and call her 'Chicken Mary'. She didn't much care. She didn't need them no way, didn't need their primped-up giggly silliness.

But first Pa was took as Mary grew into her teens. She missed snuggling her head up against his big soft warm belly. She took over more of the running of the homestead, driving the beat-up jalopy down to the store laden with eggs, and coming back with the vittles she needed. Then Ma was gone too, and she was left alone. But never entirely alone. She would sit and watch the chickens in the yard. Knew each one by its character and behavior. She'd listen to their plock-plocking and recognize each by its tone.

Lefty Frizzel came around courting for a while. The only man that ever did. He made her laugh with his stories of out-of-towners he'd met and had to deal with. He told her she should get a television. She'd never had a television, although she listened to Swing music and catchy commercial jingles on the radio. One day he took himself down to the electrical suppliers and came back with a big clunky pre-loved set that he installed in her front room. He fandangled around on her rooftop setting up the aerial, then they sat together and watched a Western and a Cop-Buddy Show, but what she loved most was a Foghorn Leghorn cartoon.

'I swear, Lefty' she told him, 'that my hens talk just like that damn TV cockerel do.'

'If'n that's so, Mary, I reckon you should write it all down in a lined exercise book' he guffawed back at her.

So later she bought herself a spiral-bound pad with plain lined pages, and a blue-ink ballpoint pen, and even when Lefty no longer called around quite so often, she sat by the coops and listened and wrote down the sounds the hens made. She'd known those sounds forever. The cluck-plocking of the hens were the first sounds she'd ever heard, after Ma and Pa's cooing. 'Buck-Buck-Buck-Buckaw,' 'Caw-Ra, Caw-Ra Caw-Ra', 'Blawk-Blawk-Blawk.' She wrote them phonetically, and repeated them back out loud, over and over again, becoming better at imitating their chicken-conversations, until they turn their jerky chicken-heads towards her and talk back. It seems the most easy and natural thing in the world.

Then there was the morning she drove down into town and everywhere there was a hubbub. Back home she tuned her TV into a rolling news channel which she seldom ever did, and all hell was breaking loose. Seems from the excited voice-over that a giant shimmering saucer-shaped ship had landed in Central Park, accidentally destroying a couple of adjacent hotels as it descended. It stayed still, glistening in the autumn sunlight, as cops seal off every route and the army rushed in to surround the intruder, setting up a defense perimeter to keep the curious crowds from rubbernecking. At first Mary thought she was mistaken, and she'd got a Sci-Fi movie instead. But it goes on, the commentary-voice getting all excited about a hundred other saucers spotted on the Moon, and how the International Space Station had detected a hundred more in near-Earth orbit, with great egg-shaped carriers or motherships that make the saucer in Central Park look like an itchy-bitsy miniature.

It went on for most of the day. She sat on her porch for a spell. Then she fed the birds and talked to them awhile. When she got back inside, not a lot had changed. Other ships had touched down in Russia, the European Union, Central Africa and other places. The President and a whole bunch of brass-hats had set up in a swish hotel overlooking Central Park, with science advisers and diplomats and all manner of self-important folk.

Next, a series of vents or hatches slipped open on the saucer's upper hull, and a deluge of birds erupt up out of it in a storm of wings. The birds circle, the way that birds do, and then take off in each and every direction, with the might of aerospace trackers trying to get a fix on them.

Then a trapdoor drops away from the saucer's underside. Viewers from coast to coast hold their breath. They see the expression on the President's face, the generals with binoculars, the zoom-screens and circling drones closing in for a better peek. And a little naked gnome plops down onto the grass, then another and another, until there are four of them. Blinking blank-faced in a confused kind of way. Naked, but for what looks to be shiny black vinyl collars around their necks. Looking agitated and none-too-happy to be on Earth, they lower a framework of glistening ebony-and-white struts, and within that structure, at first all that viewers can see is two three-clawed feet, then scaly ringed legs topped by a ruffle of fine feathers.

'It's a chicken' howls the President, clearly audible over the sound hook-up, 'it's a goddamn chicken!'

'Is it maybe some kind of regimental mascot?'

'No, Madam President, I think not. The little guys look to be at the bottom of the pecking order.'

The four little men hoist the framework onto their shoulders, it was obviously heavy, and they shuffle forward into full view. Midway between their ship and the perimeter cordon they stop. And the sound roars in a bizarre Plock-Plock-Plocking around the park.

Watching on her TV it seemed to Mary that she recognized some of the sounds from her own notations in the ruled pad. She considered for a long while. Looked out over her coops. Made herself a strong coffee, and thought hard for a while until she'd arrived at her decision.

Her patriotic duty was clear.

She drove her pick-up to the pool-hall where they have a pay-phone, and she puts a call through to the President. Of course, it doesn't go direct, she was passed from one receptionist to another, put on hold while they play her wait-music, until eventually she's diverted through to linguistics where an annoyed Professor-woman listens impatiently – until Mary began imitating the chicken-sounds she'd heard on TV.

Within hours the motorcade arrived on Main Street.

Mary was scared, until Lefty reappeared from out of nowhere and promised to protect her and stay right here by her side. But who would look after her chickens while she was gone? Willing neighbours she'd not spoken to for years step forward, full of offers.

And so it was that Mary and Lefty were driven in style with escort outriders so far across the country she loses all sense of direction. She'd never imagined the world could be so big. She took her pad with her chicken-sound notation in it, her best Sunday church-dress and shoes. They were booked into a swanky New York hotel suite where Lefty immediately began chortling and working his way through the complimentary bar, and they share a huge Jacuzzi. Later, she got to meet the Professor lady called Eleanor Schönfield, and despite some initial awkwardness they got down to working together straight away. Eleanor had digital sound video recordings of the space-chicken which she could play over and over, forward and back, stop and repeat until they could split and analyse each squawk and cluck. It was different to Henrietta and Odetta – that was only to be expected, but the sounds and intonations have a common base. Mary could reproduce them accurately, and computers identified recognizable patterns encoded into the cluck-clucking speech.

It was a simple greeting. Expressing a willingness to establish friendship and trade.

The President was delighted by the breakthrough. She'd been conferencing with Prime Ministers, leaders and elected heads of state around the world. Now she had a response. Schönfield's team was expanded. A reply was carefully formulated for Mary to pronounce for broadcasting to the visitors. It was as easy as that.

When the news broke – 'The Woman Who Talks To Chickens' and 'The Chicken-Whisperer Who Saved The World' she became an overnight celebrity. Lefty was negotiating terms for networked chat shows about their romance, and news-teams track back to her hometown where suddenly everyone has fond memories of their close friendship with Mary Alexiad.

The birds released from the saucer began to return one by one, followed by drones and zoom-lenses. While the vocabulary expanded as the exchange of messages intensifies. The galactic community of worlds – it seemed, consists predominantly of avian and anthropoid species, but it was unusual to discover a world in which humans had become dominant. An amusing novelty. Usually it was the reverse situation.

'We have the Chicxulub asteroid-strike to thank for that' one of the serious science-men state. 'It knocked out the last of the dinosaurs and stalled avian evolution on Earth long enough to give mammals a chance to grab the upper hand. Without that extinction-event we could be those little naked gnomes.'

‘Me, I’m more concerned about the human rights of those little guys wearing the control collars’ adds another ruefully.

For face-to-face conferencing with what some were now calling our ‘new feathered friends’, Mary and Eleanor were there easing communications between the diplomatic teams. By now Mary had a number of close encounters with the aliens, and didn’t much like them. Although twice the size of her own chickens they were also taller and more slender, with disproportionately small residual wings and clawed feet of sagging yellow flesh, yet they carry themselves in a way both simultaneously graceful and arrogant. Some of them wear fine gold filigree chains or sparkling gem beak adornments.

At first the naked gnome-people embarrassed her. She didn’t know where to look. Then she pitied them. They simply supply the physical dexterity to the bird’s controlling intelligence. They were dumb, docile, and completely obedient.

As a reward for her work, Mary was whisked into the city to have a pampering make-over day, her nails manicured and painted, her hair tinted and styled, her complexion teased and primped. A full day at the beauticians. Then to the Mall for new outfits, shoes and designer handbags until she felt so dizzy-confused it was as if every Christmas had exploded at once.

It was while she was distracted in this way that every KFC on the planet vanished, leaving only a faintly irradiated blur. She returned to find the Hotel in panic, with new dialogue for her team to translate. ‘There’s no actual exact term’ explained Eleanor carefully. ‘Yet they consider KFC to be a terrorist organization.’

‘It’s also a warning’ thundered a field-marshal thumping his fist on the conference table. ‘It’s a demonstration of their power. There are hundreds of their ships up there, each of them weapons-capable of delivering such targeted strikes.’

‘Can we fight them?’

‘We have nukes.’

‘I’m putting this to you as a serious proposition, they’re strung out from here to the Moon where we can’t even reach them. So I’m asking you again, can we fight them?’

‘The birds’ someone else offered. ‘The birds have been acting as reconnaissance spy-scouts, seeking out abuse.’

‘We must be more species-aware’ suggests a diplomat. ‘Eating chicken – or fowl in general, must be regarded as an unacceptable form of aggressive species-ism.’

‘Hell man, do you realize the volume of chicken that’s channeled into the consumer food-chain on a daily basis in only one city? Just take a stroll down your supermart aisles. Chicken Nuggets, Chicken Pies, Chicken Wings and Drumsticks, Bar-B-Q Chicken, Chargrilled Chicken Fillets, Piri Piri Chicken, Chicken Twizzlers, Chicken Rogan Josh, Chicken En Crout, Chicken Casserole, Chicken Chow Mein, Chicken Burgers, Spicy Chicken Fajitas, Pizza Polo, Chicken Goujons, Chicken Royale, Chicken Supreme, Chicken Tikka Biryani...’

‘It’s already happening Madam President. Share-prices in all chicken-related products are bottoming out clear across every global exchange.’

‘Yes, yes, I get the idea. But what happens when the next spaceship that happens to wander through our galactic neighbourhood is crewed by pigs or cows? What then? What then?’

Mary, feeling just a little uncomfortable in her new clothes, wondered where Lefty was and what he was doing. She’d last seen him on the Late Late Show talking all kind of fool stuff about them that never happened. She wondered if Henrietta and Odetta were missing her. She’d be grateful when all this silliness is done and things can get back to normal.

And she wondered if it was time to mention a detail from the chicken-dialogue that had so far escaped scrutiny. Eleanor casually enquired what the aliens required from Earth by way of trade.

And they were told what was considered a delicacy clear across the galactic spiral arm.

Human nuggets.

Ends

RACE TO DISABLE SC-FI ROACHES: Planetary Survivor Royalty's Happy Hunting

By Gerard Sarnat

Escaping rain, ants now reign
throughout neurodiverse wintry house.

They occupy vast swatches
from the cabinets to drinking glasses.

Some way bunches persist
despite microwaved with lunch.

I have no hunch how hordes
of Star Trecky Borgish humanoid

hiveminds oy get into dinner's
leftover fish casserole Tupperware.

Put dishes of covered grub from
breakfast inside frig only to discover

it's where much larger colonies lived.
So each night wife must take

trash cans chocked with 'em outside
into bone-chilling temperature

weather to knock off many as possible
at least temporarily.

Eventually we are forced to adjust
standards of living including

strategies for storing even carefully
sealed dry goods.

Maybe using new sub-zero freezer
for staples might work.

One son, an entomologist
who concentration is social insects

luckily does myrmecology research
on specialized Formicidae

subfamilies' billion-year history
employing alien leaf-cutter

slaves to harvest aphid farms.
Perhaps he will be able to rescue

both panicked parents, return their home
to baseline status not lorded over

by gazillion tiny bugs' well-organized
impenetrable wall of

reasonableness that has mega-morphed
to span dish and clothes washers

sinks, tubs, throw pillows, end tables to create
a nonsense of chaos in humanity

resulting in *Homo Sapiens*' inability
to continue to exist here on

earth's surface: instead this threatened
species must seek refuge

sealed in individual deep underground
containers with no contact

among us except though entropy state
enabling stoical intermediaries

with our only hope seemingly dependent
not on self-help, rallying

friendly interventions or random kindness
but rather omnipotent Machines.*

* *The Machine Stops*, E.M. Forster, 1928;
The Machine Stops, Oliver Sacks,
New Yorker 11 February 2019





“I Grew Up With An Onion”

By Neil K. Henderson

Gardener’s Question Time will never be the same since the amazing story broke of a missing boy planted in a vegetable garden and brought up by onions. And not just gardeners, but the public in general, have been bursting with curiosity since the news emerged. But first, of course, the police have been gently grilling the Onion Man and trying to pick all the details from his case.

“To begin with,” DI Steve ‘Snotty’ McGill, the officer in charge, pointed out, “the gentleman in question wishes to be known as Clive Allium-Cepa. He finds the term ‘Onion Man’ offensive.”

Does this mean Mr Allium-Cepa has a family he can be connected with – beyond the sibling onion he was allegedly brought up with?

“Alas, we have no record of the gentleman’s existence prior to discovery. It appears he was abandoned at birth in the allotment where we found him, and has grown there undiscovered until now.” DI McGill paused to blow his nose. “Many allotments have been left untended since the Austerity came in.”

So he lay there like the Lady of Shallot, patiently awaiting release. But how has his experience affected his development?

“Well, obviously, having spent his entire life buried up to the top of his head in loam, you can imagine his social skills are minimal. And of course he dislikes bright light.” McGill brought his big red hanky to his face. “But you’d be surprised how well his intellect has developed. They’re very deep, onions. Layers within layers, if you know what I mean.”

Which leaves the question we all want answered: will he be issuing his memoirs?

“It’s not a three-ring circus to be savoured by those seeking tasty titbits. We are talking about a human being. His history is enough to bring a tear to any eye. Mr Allium-Cepa has been wounded beyond words. His soul has been cut and lacerated by fate. He –” Here DI McGill, tears streaming down his face, could only mumble into the folds of his handkerchief.

What he has seen should make pungent reading if ever it hits the stands. Don’t quote me just yet, but I don’t think we’ve heard the last of the Onion Man. Sorry, that should read Clive the Chive.

Ends

