

23 Theaker's Quarterly

The Orphans of Time

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**Devil on My Stomach:
a Tale of Tiana's World**

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Shaggai

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John Greenwood



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Editors, Writers and Money: in Defence of Amateurs

Stephen Theaker

I recently read a thoughtful blog entry, "4theLuv Markets and the Reader", by the editor of *Horror Literature Quarterly*, Paul Puglisi. (See <http://horrorlit.horrorfictionnews.com> for the magazine, and <http://gentlymadpress.com/blog/2008/04/15/4theluv-markets-and-the-reader> for the blog.)

HLQ is free to read online, and it's short enough (16pp) to make reading it a nice way to spend a lunchtime. The first three issues of the magazine were published during 2007, with the fourth slipping to 2008. It publishes professional writers and pays professional rates of at least five cents per word.

I doubt if the editor has ever heard of TQF, but the blog entry skewers us pretty well. Poor choice of colours on the website, non-paying, free to read and hosted on a free web hosting platform – that's TQF through and through! Our copy-editing and proof-reading aren't too bad (rather better than HLQ's in fact, going on the state of issue four's editorial at the time of writing) but in all other respects his argument felt very much like an accidental shot across the virtual bows of the good ship *Theaker's*.

The main thrust of his argument is that readers shouldn't read stories in non-paying magazines when instead they can read the much better stories for which he has paid the writers good money. Non-paying magazines, he argues, are bad for writers, bad for readers, and bad for themselves.

It's good to have your ideas challenged, and, as longtime readers know, I'm always ready, at the drop of a hat, to examine and reconsider

and bluster about the philosophy behind our mag. I want to believe that we're doing this for good reasons, and that no one is getting exploited or hustled by us.

As I've said lots of times, TQF doesn't pay because I want it to keep going for a long time. If I did pay our contributors, the money would have to come out of my own pocket, and I'd be extremely unlikely to ever see any of it back. How long would the magazine last if it cost me loads of money to publish? There's always going to be something else that I need to spend my money on, whether it's the children, the house or most importantly the Xbox 360 (the PS3, on the other hand, doesn't seem to demand much in the way of financial attention, being mostly happy with a supply of DVDs and Blu-rays from Lovefilm).

I know myself, and I know that the magazine wouldn't last long if I had to make a choice between TQF#24 and Fallout 3.

So far, our cheapskate strategy has worked. We're still going, with no intention of stopping anytime soon.¹ Over our four years of life we've seen lots of other magazines start up and shut down, or drift into publishing issues at irregular and ever-expanding intervals (though of course there are lots too that have kept on going).

So I'm unashamedly an amateur editor and an amateur publisher. It works for me, and it works for this magazine. Amateur editors publish amateur magazines. They usually pay very little or nothing to contributors,

they don't get paid themselves, and they don't make any money.

The opposite of an amateur, of course, is a professional.

Professional editors get paid for the work they do and pay writers with the publisher's money. They *don't* pay writers out of their own pockets.

Then we have editors who fall somewhere in between those two poles: amateur editors who *do* pay writers out of their own pocket.

For example, the magnificent DF Lewis pays good rates for the contributions to his superb *Nemonymous* anthologies. He spends his own money to encourage others to create works of art to fit his own taste. He may eventually recoup his money through sales, but in all likelihood the most significant return on his investment will be artistic, rather than financial.

Over the last couple of years, I've seen lots of people pop up on internet forums to announce that they are going to start a fiction magazine or website, and invariably they are told (usually by would-be professional writers) to pay the writers as much as they can possibly afford, or otherwise to drop the idea.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that professional writers prefer editors who pay, whether it's with their own money or someone else's. Who can blame them? Workers want to get paid for their work!

And I'm certainly not going to criticise any amateur editor for choosing to pay pro rates. That would be in very poor taste. They should be applauded for their efforts, and de-

serve the credit they get for it (especially those who are working hard to build their magazines into going concerns, like Jason Sizemore at Apex).

However, taking HLQ as an example, from what the editor says in his blog entry and on the website, he must have paid at least \$414 in total to the two authors appearing in issue four. That's quite a lot of money for just sixteen pages of fiction – enough to fund at least the next eight issues of TQF – and since it's all free to read online the editor isn't seeing a single penny in return (unless perhaps Ad-blocker was shielding me from advertisements).

No one can say that he's wrong to do that. Even if there were no magazine at all to put them in, would it be worth paying \$414 (or so) for the privilege of having a pair of exclusive short stories by Christopher Golden and Lavie Tidhar on your website? Some people might regard that as a bargain. For example, if I could go back in time and offer Philip K Dick a few thousand pounds for the exclusive rights to one of his short stories, I would, just to save him from having to eat cat food for a few months!

But is that really a good model for amateur magazine publishers? Are other amateur magazines following his example likely to have a long life, or are they likely to fold before we even get to see what they can offer?

Amateur editors have to think carefully about the path they want to take. Paying your writers lots of money will certainly make you popular with them, earn you respect, and give you access to a wider range of stories. But do you have a business plan in place? How many copies of each issue would you have to sell to cover your costs? Do you expect to earn back the money you hand out? If you don't expect to get the money back, how much are you willing to lose and for how long are you willing to lose it? If you see the money as an investment, how big does the investment need to be and how realistic are your chances are of getting it back?

As a rule of thumb, the more someone spends on an amateur magazine the more likely it is to fold. A few hundred dollars or pounds in the middle of summer might be nothing,

but what about December, when the kids are asking for something too expensive to afford unless the magazine slides for a month?

With every new issue resentment at spending the money will build up, and bitterness might even set in, especially when people seem just as happy to read less altruistic publications...

That's the way my thoughts would run in a hypothetical situation where I was paying money out and not getting the readers I thought I deserved. It's the way I think – other people are more balanced and less inclined to bitterness than I am!

So let's stick to the one thing I do know about: my own approach. I'd say the equations are simple:

Amateur publications
= amateur pay

Professional publications
= professional pay

If amateur writers get into professional publications they should expect professional pay (since someone else will be making money from their work), but the corollary of that is that if professional writers consider submitting to amateur magazines they shouldn't be surprised to be offered amateur pay (which is likely to be little or nothing).

I'd go a bit further than that and argue that a professional writer (or a would-be professional) who advises an amateur editor to start paying professional rates is as guilty of bad faith as an amateur editor who expects professionals to submit to them without being paid. Each knows that the other will end up out of pocket.

Every writer and editor should of course be aware of the adage that money flows to the writer, not in the other direction. Is that relevant here? I'd say that the point isn't that every writer should be paid for every word they write (few of us get paid for our Amazon reviews, for example): it's that the writer shouldn't pay to get their work published. They shouldn't be paying the publisher's wages. In amateur publishing, where no one is making money, I'd argue that no one is being swindled (leaving aside situations where payment is promised but

not delivered, of course). If the writer knows up front what the terms of publication are, if promises are kept, I don't think there's an issue there.

Whichever route an editor takes, it should be one that they consider to be sustainable – that is, if their goal is to keep the magazine going: for some people, publishing one glorious issue that fulfils all their dreams will be enough.

That's not the route for me: I just want to keep this silly magazine going, year in, year out, and I definitely wouldn't be able to do that if I paid professional rates. Even if I paid a token amount I doubt I would produce so many issues of such a length. Even token amounts add up, and become a drain – from experience I know that every five pounds or contributor's copy you have to send out becomes an argument against producing another issue. And what is a token payment, anyway, other than an apology for not paying contributors full rates? It's often a way of saying, "hey, I'm one of the good guys, or at least I would be if I had the money", but such an approach rarely washes with professional writers, who just find it insulting (if you approach a hungry dog with a tofu steak, don't be surprised if it decides to take a chunk out of your hand!), and makes little difference to amateur writers, whose goals in writing don't tend to be money-related anyway.

Now, having said that I don't want to take the path of paying professional rates (or any at all), should I just close the magazine? Aren't I doomed, by Puglisi's argument, to only ever receive rubbish submissions?

I don't want to resort to the cheesy answer of saying "take a look inside this issue and decide for yourself", because I don't want to put that kind of unexpected pressure on these stories. They're here to entertain, not to bear witness to whatever addle-brained theory I'm developing this month.

Instead, let's talk about writers. For the purposes of this piece (and it's admittedly a clumsy and rather theoretical distinction), I'd like to divide fiction writers into two main types: professionals and amateurs.

I would include writers who have

not yet made a professional sale, but who are working towards that goal, in the professional category, because they're on the same road, just not so far along it. They have the same goals and should follow the same advice as actual professionals.

In the category of amateurs I would include anyone who writes for reasons other than financial reward. Though that might come along from time to time by happy chance, they don't tend to write a dozen stories in the hope of placing one with a professional magazine.

What I'd argue is that, just as with amateur magazines persuaded to offer rates they cannot justify commercially (though they may be able to artistically), many writers are persuaded to class themselves as professionals, when they might instead be happier and prouder if they embraced their amateur status.

First, though, out of respect to the contributors to TQF, in this issue and others, I should make it clear that I'm not classing them all as amateurs, just because they've submitted to an amateur magazine. I'm not speaking for anyone but myself. Some of our contributors have professional credits already, others are working hard to earn them, and none (myself included) would turn up their noses if a commercial opportunity presented itself. None of them should be tarred with the brush of my hobby-horsery!

But writing is a unique leisure activity, because it seems to be the only one where everyone who takes part is encouraged to regard themselves as a professional-in-waiting.

I don't get paid for playing on my Xbox 360, listening to CDs or eating my dinner. Yet other people do get paid for doing those things: game testers; reviewers; supertasters! Should I refuse to do them unless I get paid?

If someone else was making money from my work, of course I would want a fair share. But like a lot of people, I enjoy writing without necessarily wanting to devote my life to making a living from it.

The question is, why is writing, of all the arts, seen by many people as something that must at all costs be sold to be considered a worthwhile

exercise? Should we assume that all worthwhile writing will inevitably find a buyer?

Part of the answer might be this: perhaps every writer really *should* regard themselves as a professional-in-waiting. The line between an amateur and a professional writer can be nothing more than one very good idea. Your writing could be your winning lottery ticket, and you should hold on to it just in case!

Another part of the answer may be that age isn't a factor in writing. If you haven't made it in football by your mid-twenties, you probably never will, and no one will criticise you for settling down to playing at amateur level. Writers, in contrast, can make the breakthrough at any age, from ten to a hundred, so they shouldn't be so quick to settle for amateur status. They must develop patience, which is an essential quality for anyone who would like to earn a living as a professional writer.

If your goal is to be a professional writer, it's absolutely true that you should husband your stories and your ideas. Iain Banks's second and third published novels were written before *The Wasp Factory* – it was only after that one clicked that he had a market for the earlier books. If Lulu had existed then, and he'd already self-published them... Well, Futura would probably still have picked them up, because they were so good. But a short story is a different matter – once it's been published in one place, a writer will be lucky to get even half-rates for it from a professional publication. And once your idea is out there, it's out there for good. What if someone else spins something great (and money-making) out of something in your short story, something you might have thought of yourself if you returned to the story after it spent a year or two in your trunk?

It might be suggested that I'm shooting myself in the foot here. I should really be encouraging people to give me their stories for free, and duping them with promises of how TQF is a stepping stone to professional markets.

But no: ever since I discovered Ralan's Specific and Duotrope's Digest there have been links to them

from our Submissions Guidelines page, directing people to look on those sites for paying markets before submitting to us. And recently I added a note making it very clear that would-be professionals should consider holding onto their stories till they found a market for them, rather than sending them straight to us.

The fact is, in a pinch I can get by without any submissions to TQF at all, so I can afford that little bit of integrity and honesty. I don't want anyone submitting to us for the wrong reasons, in particular because of a lack of knowledge about other options.

If someone (whether a professional or an amateur) thinks that TQF is a respectable enough venue to make it worth submitting despite the lack of pay, that's great. If they have a story that is unlikely to find a home elsewhere (length seems to be a common factor in the work people send us), it's welcome here.

But if every one of our potential contributors finds a paying home for their work, I couldn't be happier for them. I'll just spend the weekend at the keyboard and knock out some nonsense of my own to fill these pages.

Getting back to the point, I think there's another reason writers are advised to hang onto their work – simple economics.

Every time an amateur writer gives a story away for free, it has an effect upon the professional market. It might be imperceptible, but when supply outstrips demand, price inevitably falls.

The supply of short stories outstrips the demand for them by a colossal factor. *Apex*, for example, received roughly 2,800 submissions during 2007, and was able to accept just 25 of them.² If all 2,775 of those rejected stories ended up in amateur online magazines, the ultimate result would be, slowly but surely, a lowering of the price people were willing to pay for professional magazines. Faced with the need to lower their own prices, professional magazines would thus need to lower the price they were willing to pay their writers.

So it's clearly in the interest of professional writers as a class that

those trunk stories stay locked up, just as it's in the individual interest of every professional writer to keep their unsold stories locked up.

But not all writers want to be professionals, and my own feeling is that amateurs shouldn't feel an obligation to keep their work in a drawer just to maintain the value of other people's writing.

Is it fair to say that the work of those amateur (and professional) writers who occasionally give away their work is "usually crap", as Puglisi does in the blog entry referenced above?

It will come as no surprise that I don't think it *always* is. Having money on your mind helps to shape you into a writer that people want to read, it encourages you to work on your craft, but it isn't enough, on its own, to make you a better writer than someone for whom money isn't a consideration.

Everyone who puts pen to paper has in mind what they want to get out of the experience. Some want money, they want to support their families that way, and that's cool. They can write commercial fiction that ticks all the boxes, sell it and bank their cash. If, like the Beastie Boys, you have the skills to pay the bills, I can't imagine a better job.

But that isn't for everyone. Not everyone *can* do it, of course. Not everyone *wants* to do it. (For one thing, working from home can be rather lonely.) And by far the largest proportion of non-professional writers (in my utterly uninformed opinion) consists of people who don't really have the time necessary to find out if they could or not.³

Other people just want to show themselves that they can write something, anything. Look at the thousands of novels written during NaNoWriMo every year, most of which are never seen in public again. They aren't written to be sold, but because writing is a great experience, something that's good for the soul.

Other people have perfectly good careers outside of writing, and don't need to get any money for their stories, any more than the people who contribute their reviews free of charge to Goodreads or Amazon.

Maybe they don't want to put in the legwork necessary to eke out every possible penny for every single word. All they might want is the satisfaction of seeing their work in print, or just to hear what other people think of their work. Such people may never have submitted work to *Asimov's* or other paying markets. They may assume that the market won't be interested in their subject matter or genre or eccentricities or style. But that doesn't mean their work is necessarily bad.

Another significant category of writer has no interest at all in the demands of the commercial market. They have their own artistic goals, goals that could only ever be compromised by considering what commercial magazines might make of their ideas. (I would love to put myself into this category, but it would be more honest to say that the idea of writing for a commercial market fills me with such crippling fear that I would not be able to write a single word!)

Even professional writers, from time to time, may find themselves in possession of a story that they think they'll never be able to sell, but which they think is important work and should be seen in its original form.

So what's the role of TQF in all of this? Is our purpose just to Hoover up a few of those disappointed rejects from *Apex Digest* and scrape them together into something resembling a magazine?

Well, I don't doubt we've had a few! But really, we're here for all the authors who fall into the categories outlined above, and no doubt many more types that I've overlooked. We've published stories by lawyers, accountants, scientists and teachers, and so on, people from many walks of life who don't necessarily need to make money from their writing. Without speaking for any of the people we've published, some writers just want to write a story, see it put to a good use, and get on with the next thing in their life, whether that's learning to sail, building a model railway or writing another story.

The amateur status of such writers is by no means a guarantee of or an excuse for poor quality or craftsmanship. Similarly, the amateur status of

a magazine isn't an excuse for sloppy grammar, spelling or proofreading. Some of the most careful and assiduous work in the world is done by amateurs – think of modelmakers, collectors, cataloguers, campaigners, and so on. Amateur status doesn't have to be a stigma – it isn't an excuse for amateurism. It's sometimes just a sign that professional energies are concentrated elsewhere.

TQF does have something that commercial magazines will never have, and that's complete artistic freedom and complete artistic integrity. We're utterly free of commercial concerns. If we want to devote an entire issue to a single novel, we can (and probably will, later this year). If we want to publish a story that's so confusing it made me feel like I was riding a waltzer, just for that reason, we can (and did). We can publish stories that no one on Earth would pay to read, but that should still be seen. We can indulge ourselves and we can indulge our authors.

It might not produce anything ordinary humans would regard as readable, but, again, that's not something we have to worry about. In my biased eyes, that's not a weakness, but a real strength.

This freedom comes from one thing: my total outlay on each issue of TQF rarely goes above thirty pounds, and that includes everything from the paper and ink for printing the proofs to getting my copies printed up at Lulu. I'm not sinking huge amounts of money into this project, and so I've nothing to lose, no reason for resentment. The only factor governing whether I accept a story is whether I like it, not whether I think other people will like it too.

My hope is that someday, when someone comes up with an half an idea that seems half nuts, before writing it they will ask themselves who would publish such a thing, and they'll think of us. Maybe someday something wonderful will be written that might not have existed without us (even if it ends up being published by someone else). We're here to suggest that taking those chances isn't pointless.

Maybe that's pie-in-the-sky, wishful thinking plain and simple... but,

as an example, this issue sees us publish the eighteenth story in the Newton Braddell series by my pal John Greenwood. These have run in TQF, on and off, since TQF#8. If TQF didn't exist, these stories probably wouldn't exist. John wouldn't have bothered to write such meandering, wordy and inconclusive stories in the hope of a professional magazine picking them up. He wrote them, primarily, because he enjoyed doing it, and, secondarily, because he knew that I thoroughly enjoyed reading the first of them, and would publish as many of them as he cared to write.

So, from my point of view at least, a series of bright sunflowers has already sprouted directly from the poor soil of TQF. Who knows what other strange growths the future will bring? Our magazine might be "4theluv" – but love is nothing to be sniffed at!

Notes

1. Having said that, we might go back down to four issues for 2009, to accommodate my new job as editor of *Dark Horizons*.
2. Source: *Apex* MySpace blog, 28 December 2007.
3. As an aside regarding time and creativity, I read a recent article discussing research into whether there is a link at the genetic level between homosexuality and creativity, given how often gay men and women seem to excel in creative work. I can see how that might be an attractive notion, but I have my doubts. For one thing, people working in the arts are often more accepting of difference, so that you are much more likely to hear about gay painters than gay CEOs. But I think the real reason is this: a gay couple without children is incredibly time rich in comparison to a straight couple with children. If you can spend every weekend and evening painting or writing instead of changing nappies you're clearly that much more likely to succeed in your chosen creative field, *ceteris paribus*.

Contributors

Look at the length of that editorial! Is someone protesting too much, you think? What a enormous amount of hot air! Anyway, with all that off my chest (better here than spouting off like a deranged maniac in some other guy's blog, I suppose), let's see who has been hoodwinked by our evil elves into submitting stories for publication in this issue.

Wayne Summers, this issue's cover artist, first appeared in TQF thanks to his story of a mysterious garden surrounded by a wall, "The Walled Garden", which appeared in TQF#19. At that time he was about to be published in *On The Night Highways*, *Art&Prose Magazine* and *Creative Island*. He grew up in rural Kojonup, Western Australia, where his writing career began. While in high school he'd write small articles and stories for the local newspaper. He now lives in Perth, Western Australia. Wayne is an English language teacher and is studying to be a counsellor. His focus remains writing and during 2007 he had more than 17 horror and fantasy stories accepted for publication. A second story by Wayne, "The Exile from Naktah", an epic horror fantasy, appeared in TQF#21.

Richard K Lyon is a semi-retired research scientist/inventor whose hobbies include collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. He has also published numerous short stories and novelettes. A collection of the latter, *Tales From The Lyonheart*, is available from Barnes and Noble, etc. In collaboration with *Andrew J Offutt*, famed author of *My Lord Barbarian*, he wrote the Tiana trilogy (*Demon in the Mirror*, *The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*), and *Rails Across the Galaxy* for *Analog*. To our magazine they have contributed "The Iron Mercenary" (TQF#19), "Arachnis" (TQF#22), and, in this issue, "Devil on My Stomach", in which we meet a new player in Tiana's world. This story was originally published in *Dragonfields* (Summer 1980), and was reprinted more recently in *Flashing Swords* #2.

Anna M Lowther provides "When a Baby Laughs" for this issue.

If this unsettling (especially for anyone who has been present at a child's birth) little story makes you want to search out more of Anna's work, a short story of hers, "Miss Magnolia's Secret", opens the horror anthology *Damned in Dixie*. The first ten pages are available for preview at www.lulu.com.

Also, her voodoo tale "Gris Gris" appeared in the special Halloween 2007 issue of *Sinister Tales Magazine*. And her short pirate story "The Black Butcher" will appear in the anthology *Black Dragon, White Dragon*, currently in production at Ricasso Press.

John Hall is best known as a Sherlockian scholar, and a member of the International Pipe Smokers' Hall of Fame. His numerous literary interests include Raffles, Sexton Blake, and the stories of HP Lovecraft and MR James. He is the author of *Special Commission*, a medieval murder mystery.

John Greenwood has made contributions to most issues of TQF following his return from a round-the-world trip, and was ultimately made co-editor in recognition of his efforts. To this issue he contributes a further episode in the life of the universe's least favourite peripathetic astronaut, Newton Braddell.

Stephen Theaker is the eponymous editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. The earliest dream he can remember is of eating Weetabix, only to find it full of worms and woodlice, all because he had applied sugar and milk in the wrong order. A month or so ago he had an equally nasty dream about a Terminator (see this issue's huge review section, swollen due to the editor's bout of Goodreads fever, for the details). His most recent dream was rather nicer: his baby had learned to crawl and was following him around. [By the time this issue went to press this dream had actually come true.] He has written six novels to date, but spent no more than a month on any of them (and it showed). He was recently made editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society.

The Orphans of Time

Wayne Summers

The sky was a deep purplish-grey. Mountains of dark cloud were gathering ominously on the horizon as great bolts of lightning, jagged and threatening, speared down to scar the forest below. A wild wind had whipped up and it tore across the fields of unripened wheat growing on either side of the road, making it shimmer like a bolt of green silk being unrolled over some chipped and marked haberdasher's counter. The tempest wasn't far away and Mark was concerned.

The bonnet of his Mercedes convertible sat propped up and although he'd checked the radiator, the oil and wriggled a few wires, he hadn't the slightest idea what he was doing. He'd always paid people to do that sort of thing for him. Defeated, he slammed the bonnet down and looked behind him at the rapidly approaching storm. He bit a well-manicured fingernail while various options flashed through his mind, then, spitting the thin sliver of nail from his lips, he took his mobile phone out of his jacket pocket and dialled the number of his secretary in London. But there was no signal.

"Damn!" he snapped, almost tempted to hurl the expensive, but temporarily useless, piece of technology as far as he could into the wheat field.

Stranded out in the middle of nowhere without a car or a phone there seemed little chance of him making the meeting he had been

speeding to before his car had decided to die. He could picture with disturbing ease the look on his boss's face as the uncomfortable seconds spent entertaining their impatient clients turned into minutes. Nor would his wife, Astrid, be too happy at having to spend their tenth wedding anniversary alone. He cursed and kicked the nearest tyre with a force that made his toes smart.

A sudden blast of icy air reminded him that time was running out. He had to decide whether he was going to stay with the car or go in search of a phone. The decision took a split-second. He locked his car, buttoned his jacket and set off into the gale, struggling against a force much greater than he, though managing to travel half a mile before the rain came bucketing down, saturating him and chilling him to the bone.

He turned to run back to the shelter of his car but saw a clump of trees only a few metres away in the field and they were closer. He scrambled over the wire fence and raced through the wheat field, the whiskery wheat tips whipping his freezing hands, stinging them until they became so cold and numb that he lost all feeling in them. A bolt of lightning hit the ground beside him, sending a plume of bluish smoke into the air and burning the wheat black. Mark gasped and brought an arm up to protect his head but he kept running, the smell of electricity filling his nostrils and the atmosphere, charged and sparking all

around him, filling him with a primeval sense of dread.

He propelled himself forward, ever closer to the trees. His nose was numb and there was a burning sensation in the back of his throat. The very air he inhaled stung his sinuses. He pulled the collar of his jacket up but it was a waste of time. He was soaked through to the bone and even the physical exertion of running wasn't warming his shivering body. His suit jacket felt heavy; it was slowing him down, but he dared not discard it. It had cost him two hundred pounds and the pockets held essential items like his wallet and phone, his car keys and his cigarettes and lighter.

Finally he arrived at the small grove of trees, panting as he dropped heavily to the leaf strewn ground within. He fought to catch his breath but his throat was parched and he ended up coughing until he almost choked. Desperate for relief, he leaned out into the rain and by cupping his hands together he was able to catch enough water to slurp up and soothe the irritating tickle in the back of his throat. Water had never tasted so sweet. He could almost feel the icy trail it left in its wake as it trickled down into his stomach.

Further towards the centre of the grove the trees grew closer together and provided a more complete protection from the driving wind and rain. It was much warmer too. He looked up but couldn't see any hint of the dour, grey sky through the dense

foliage, nor did the roar of the wild wind seem quite so severe in this arboreal womb. He positioned himself so that he could keep an eye on the weather outside through a thin gap in the tree trunks, though it wasn't long before the drama of the afternoon caught up with him and he fell asleep.

The next morning Mark woke up to complete silence. For a minute he laid where he'd slept, listening and remembering how he had come to be sleeping on the ground. He stretched his stiff and aching body, grimacing as his muscles protested against such exertion after a rough night's sleep. He sat up and ruffled his short, blonde hair, shaking out all the seeds and bits of leaf that had collected there during the night. It was then he felt the first pangs of hunger.

Disorientated but eager to be on his way, he crawled through the tree trunks and out the other side. With the aid of a nearby branch, he hoisted himself to his feet and surveyed the landscape before him, though it was not as he remembered. Where there had been fields of wheat there were now only small patches of grass and wildflowers, growing in open glades amidst a vast forest. Bird-song filled the air and over to his left, by a small stream, a herd of eight or nine deer grazed and groomed themselves in the pale sunlight.

Mark scratched his head. He looked over his shoulder to discover that the small clump of trees he had sheltered in the night before had now become part of the great forest. It seemed that overnight he had been transported to another place.

"Very funny," he called out to anyone listening. "Good joke."

It was the only explanation. Someone, also seeking shelter from the storm, must have come along, found him sleeping then taken him further down the road to where the forest was thicker. He was surprised that he hadn't woken up. He was usually such a light sleeper.

"Come on guys," he shouted. "You've had your fun."

He stopped and listened on the off chance he would hear a snatch of laughter which would give the culprits away, but there was nothing, just the chorus of birds and the rustling of

leaves as a gentle breeze blew across the tree tops.

"Last chance, guys, before I get really pissed off!" he shouted, glaring out at the wilderness.

"That's it!" he screamed. "Get out here now because if I find you I swear I'll... I'll..."

He was so enraged he couldn't think of what he would do, but it would be something terrible. He turned and kicked the trunk of a nearby tree with his already bruised right foot, sending shock waves of pain up his leg and making him angrier. He bent down and picked up a small rock and hurled it over the clearing towards the forest on the other side.

Then, tired and weak from hunger, he sighed, his shoulders slumping forward as he thought about how he could get out of the mess he found himself in. Maybe if he crawled back through the trees, he would come out at the road and then he could walk along it until he came to either his car or a farmhouse. It certainly made more sense than throwing stones at trees.

He turned and re-entered the forest, walking as far as he could before having to stoop where the tree trunks grew too close together and the branches grew too low. Then things began to look familiar. He came to a place he thought he recognised and looked up, and when he couldn't see the sky through the foliage, he smiled. This was the place. Only a few more metres and he would emerge on the other side and this nightmare would be over.

He hurried along for what seemed like minutes, but there was a sinking feeling in his gut. It was taking him much longer than it should have to find the other side. In some areas the forest was thinner and he could walk a couple of steps before having to crouch down again. He hadn't been able to do that the day before.

He began to panic. He was lost and he knew it. It was abundantly clear that he wasn't in the same place he'd been in the previous day. A growing sense of dread began to fill his belly like a cup of poison; the fear that he'd be crawling around in the forest for days or weeks, perhaps even dying there, never to be discovered, gripped

him with iron claws. He could picture crows picking over his rotting flesh, leaving his stark, white bones to slowly sink into the ground.

He felt tears welling up in his tired and dark-ringed eyes. He couldn't die now. He was only twenty-eight. That was too young to die. He had a career in advertising; one he had devoted his entire adult life to. That would all go down the toilet if he died now. All his hard work and time spent away from Astrid would have been in vain. Then he thought of his long-suffering wife. How many nights and days had she spent alone because he'd been too busy with his career? How many tears had she cried while begging him to spend some time with her or at least give her the baby she so desperately wanted?

With these thoughts in his head he pushed on through the tangle of branches and tree trunks, oblivious to the scratches and tears they were inflicting on his skin and clothing. His two hundred pound suit was now ruined, as were his Italian leather shoes. Only God knew what had become of his Mercedes. He didn't want to think about it. All he wanted was to get out of the forest and back to civilisation. Back to Astrid.

Then he heard voices.

He stopped to make sure he wasn't hearing things, cocking his head slightly to one side to try to pin-point the direction they were coming from. Then he heard them again, and a drum. His spirits soared. It seemed he wouldn't be dying alone in the forest after all. His pace quickened as the sound of chanting grew. Soon he was crashing through the forest at a great rate. Finally, he burst through the dark undergrowth and into the light of day, laughing out loud to himself, elated at having escaped the prison of tree trunks. The sun felt warm and golden on his face and the fresh air was like perfume in his nostrils. He allowed himself a moment to luxuriate in both sensations before brushing himself off and scanning the countryside for the source of the chanting; the promise of sustenance proving more tempting than the kiss of sunlight upon his face.

He ran towards a small grassy rise with his stomach growling, demand-

ing to be fed, and his dry lips crying out for water. He was almost delirious from hunger and exhaustion though he didn't stop until he had almost reached the edge of the small hill.

"Hello," he called out to the people gathered on the other side, though it was strange how they were already facing him.

He smiled and waved.

"Hello," he shouted again, but the assembled crowd did not seem as pleased to see him as he was to see them.

"Get off there," shouted a middle-aged man, stepping forward from the crowd and waving frantically.

The man was dressed in a tunic of woven wool and a roughly sewn animal skin jacket with a leather belt at the waist. He wore leather coverings on his feet, tied with leather thonging up the leg. His hair was brown and curly, and he wore a moustache and a short, scruffy beard.

Mark looked down at the considerable drop not two metres away.

"Thank you," he called back, acknowledging the man's warning which had saved him from plummeting over the edge.

He retraced his steps a short distance and noticed a small incline at the side of the rise, like a ramp. As he made his way down the incline, he discovered that the hill appeared to have been man-made and that beneath the grassy top there was a wall made of stones, plastered with mud and painted white. As he came further down he realised the structure was semi-circular and that standing at the front, in the very centre like a gaping mouth, there was a door framed with rocks. Walking towards it was a small procession including five men who were naked and also painted white. The man in the middle was carrying a funerary urn, while the other four flanked him on either side.

Mark looked closely at the urn and saw that it was decorated with patterns of concentric circles. The men looked solemn and moved in time to the beat of the drummer, a teenage boy, also naked and painted white, who walked a few metres in front. Between him and the five men were two naked, unpainted women wearing garlands of flowers and feathers

woven together with grass upon their heads. Both had very long hair which reached almost to their buttocks and covered their breasts. Each young woman held a bowl of smoking herbs. Mark could smell the aroma they gave off even from where he was standing. It smelt sweet and even the thin wafts he inhaled made him feel light-headed.

The rest of the crowd were clothed in a similar style to that of the man who had waved him away from the edge of the mound and had their faces painted white. Some of those gathered were holding small posies of brightly coloured flowers and some were throwing their flowers at the feet of the two women with the smoking herbs. Then as the procession neared the mound, the singing stopped and an eerie silence fell upon the group.

"What do you think you were doing?" asked the middle-aged man as he approached. "Especially on such a day."

"I'm terribly sorry," Mark apologised. "I didn't realise what was happening. It's just that I seem to have lost my way. I've missed one important meeting and have another this evening that I really can't miss. Is there a phone I could use?"

The man looked at him strangely.

"What is 'meet-ting', 'phone'?"

Mark regarded the man coolly with just a hint of annoyance sneaking across his face.

"Look, I'm terribly sorry to have interrupted your little funeral. I don't know what more to say," he apologised again. "But if you can't help me is there anyone here who can? As soon as I get to a phone, I'll be out of your hair."

The man looked dumbfounded. He brought a hand up, ran it through his own unkempt hair then lowered it. He gave it a cursory glance then shook his head.

"Just keep off our tumulus," said the man as he turned and started walking back to the crowd. "Show some respect."

"Wait!" Mark called out after him. But the man didn't stop until he had rejoined the congregation.

Mark huffed and slapped his arms against his sides in frustration.

"Bloody idiots!" he mumbled to himself. "How difficult is it to point me to a phone?"

He reached into his pocket and took out his mobile phone. He tried it again, holding it up to find any semblance of a signal, but there was none. He was stranded.

After the procession disappeared into the tumulus, the crowd started to disperse. Some walked back towards the forest, but a large group of mourners began walking towards him. He looked over his shoulder to check his escape route then back at the approaching group. He bit down gently on his bottom lip. What should he do? Stay or flee? They knew this place better than he did so maybe it would be wiser to stay and be friendly.

"Where are you from?" asked a woman whose white mask accentuated her yellow teeth.

"London," he replied.

The woman looked at him blankly.

"Lon-don?" she asked.

"It's, er, about an hour from here. West," he replied. "Do you mean to tell me you've never heard of it?"

"How did you get here?" asked another of the women, looking him up and down from the safety of her position within the group.

"In my car, of course. How else do you think I'd end up in the middle of nowhere?"

The group seemed confused.

"Car?" the second woman repeated.

"Yes car. C-A-R," he replied, his patience wearing thinner with each ignorant question.

An old woman, slightly bent with age, stepped forward and took him by the arm.

"Come," she said, leading him towards the group.

Mark didn't know what else to do but allow her to lead him through the group, which parted so they could pass. As she slowly made her way towards the forest, the others began to follow, whispering and chatting amongst themselves while their children ran out ahead to get a better look at the strange man in the strange clothes.

"Can't we go a bit faster?" Mark asked impatiently.

The old woman, focused on the way ahead, smiled to herself.

"No," she said simply.

Mark sighed, exasperated, but didn't dare do anything that might upset the group.

Eventually they reached the narrow peninsula of forest only a few metres wide. They made their way easily through to the other side whereby they came to a small, primitive village. The collection of circular huts appeared to have been made from mud and each had a roof made of turf, still growing and supported by a wooden frame. A rough fence constructed of woven branches surrounded the village and on the far side, Mark could see a vast field of wheat, still green but close to ripening.

He smiled. At least the field of wheat was familiar, though it was strange that someone should build a theme-park out in the middle of nowhere.

"What is this place?" he asked the old woman.

She didn't reply, but one of the men did.

"Ansenbury," he said.

"Where's the nearest town?" asked Mark, turning as much as he could to face the man without pulling the old woman over.

"Shrevehold," came the reply, "but that's four days' walk away."

The villagers fell silent as they walked through the gate. As the old woman led him further into the centre of the village, the others started to break away, disappearing into their homes.

"Over here," the woman said at last. "This is my house."

Mark was taken inside the woman's small hut but had to duck down to get through the doorway. At six foot he was the tallest person he'd seen in the village so far and the huts had obviously not been built for people as tall as him. The interior of the hut was dim and smoky, and filled with the combination of a damp, earthy smell and lingering cooking smells. In the centre was a small fire, only just alight; its coals glowing in the semi-light. A large cow hide with blankets and furs folded on it covered the floor by one section of the wall and further around was a group of

three small stools. A large loom, already threaded, stood between the bed and the door. Hanging from the exposed rafters overhead, and from the ring of poles supporting the roof, were bundles of dried herbs and wild onions with their dried leaves plaited together.

"Get me a stool and bring it over here to the fire," the woman said, dropping a few dry twigs on the dying flames.

Mark did as he was asked.

"Well get one for yourself!" the woman barked when he arrived back at the hearth with only one seat.

Mark retrieved a second stool and joined the woman by the fire.

"Here," said the woman, "have some of this." She handed him a clay bowl of watery soup.

After testing its temperature with a sip, Mark gulped the warm liquid down, spilling some down his chin and onto his tattered Italian suit.

"Slow down!" scolded the woman. "There's plenty more where that came from."

She waited for him to finish and then refilled the bowl.

"Now," she started. "I have something to tell you that will explain everything, but you'll not thank me for telling you."

Mark looked at her as he scooped up the last traces of soup with his finger.

"First of all, my name is Celia. Let me tell you how you came to be here. First there was a storm, a great electrical storm. You ran for cover but you could feel it all around you – the static, the buzz and crack of electricity, couldn't you?"

Mark stared at the woman, holding the empty bowl in his lap and wondering how Celia knew about the storm.

"The same thing happened to me sixty years ago. My parents were friends with the Tyler's, who owned the farm you took shelter on. Or at least they used to own it. Anyway, they knew how mad I was about horses and since we lived in town they used to let me ride my horse on their property. In fact I was riding Stella the day of the great storm. I can remember the events as clearly as if they had happened yesterday. There

was an almighty clap of thunder, Stella reared up and I was thrown off. I scrambled to my feet and dusted myself off, but I could feel the electricity in the air all around me and smell a horrible burning smell. It frightened me."

"I ran to a small grove of trees in the middle of the ploughed field to shelter from the rain and when I emerged, after what must have been only a couple of hours, I was here."

"And where is here?" Mark hardly dared to ask.

"I can only say that we are still in the same place but not in the same time. I don't know much about history but I think we've gone back about four thousand years."

Mark stared at her in wide-eyed disbelief. "So why do they all speak English?" He folded his arms smugly.

"As they taught me their language, they learned mine. A secret language has obvious benefits for fighting men."

The woman was obviously senile and he'd wasted enough of his time in her company.

"I think I should probably make a move," he said, getting up. "I have an incredibly important meeting to get to and although I don't expect I'll get back in time, I have to at least make the effort."

"Listen," Celia said. "I realise how difficult it is for you to comprehend what has happened to you but you're going to have to trust me. It took me many months of confusion, tears and depression to realise that I had gone through some kind of slip in time and that I would probably never get back to my own time. I even ran away from the village for a time thinking I would find something I recognised, but all I found were other villages like this one, some much larger and some no more than family groups."

"Why did you come back here then?" Mark asked, finding himself being drawn back into the conversation.

"For the simple reason that it is the place I feel closest to my past. I had hoped that one day the circumstances would be right for me to return. I used to run out past the tumulus and into the forest behind it every time there was a storm, but I knew it was hope-



less. I could feel the conditions weren't right. The villagers thought I was crazy and maybe I was. I just wanted to go home."

Mark sat back down on the stool, shocked and unable to speak. He could sense the truth and conviction in Celia's voice. She had revealed to him the same incredulous feelings he was only beginning to experience.

"So go and find out for yourself if you want to. Wander the forests and glades looking for an answer, but I warn you that it will only end in disappointment."

Mark looked at Celia, at her face which was pleading with him to believe her so he could save himself some of the anguish and heartache she had gone through. And he did believe her, only he didn't want to. He knew she was right but he wanted to go back to the forest again, just once more to see for himself that his situation was hopeless.

"Do what you have to do," Celia whispered softly to him, patting his hand as she got up and walked towards the door. "And when you have finished there will be a place for you here in my home."

He heard the shuffle of her footsteps in the sand fade away and sat for a while quietly reflecting upon the things she had told him. Then, with a head full of thoughts, each one clamouring for attention, he got up and walked outside into the mild sunshine

of a spring afternoon. He wandered in the direction of the gate, watching the villagers as they went about their daily lives. Children ran freely about the huts, chasing each other and laughing, the village dogs running after them, barking excitedly and almost tripping one small tot over. A woman was skinning a small deer hanging from a pole by her hut, carefully punching the hide away from the meat beneath while she gossiped to a neighbour. A group of three women were crushing grain as one of their husbands returned home with three freshly killed rabbits tucked into his belt.

Mark felt at ease with these people, though he couldn't help but think of his own family as he watched them working and interacting with each other. Belonging was a crucial ingredient for happiness and the nervous smiles of those he encountered made him realise that at the moment he didn't really belong anywhere. The thought that he might never see his family again sent a shiver up his spine which pierced his heart and brought tears to his eyes. He walked through the gate awash with sorrow and self pity.

Some men carrying the carcass of a large stag hanging upside down on a wooden pole called to him and waved, but his thoughts were not in the present. Their hellos and waves didn't register and he walked right by

them without returning their greeting. He continued through the small arm of forest and as he approached the tumulus he could see a faint wisp of smoke and hear chanting coming from inside. Under normal circumstances this would have piqued his interest, but his thoughts were singularly directed at finding a way home. Nothing else mattered.

He bent down and pushed his way through the branches and shrubs at the edge of the forest, remembering how claustrophobic it was inside. Nevertheless he soldiered on, sustaining more cuts and bruises while pushing through the undergrowth and winding his way through the tree trunks. Then, when the forest began to get denser, he felt himself getting closer to the place he had slept the night before. Or was it just wishful thinking? The forest was like a maze, one part looking much like another.

He scrambled around for hours in the dim light before he found the clearing, falling into it exhausted and wishing he had brought some water with him. But this was definitely the place. He could even see his cigarette lighter, which must have fallen out of his pocket the night before, lying on the leaf debris. He picked it up then removed the damp packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, foolishly thinking that at least one of them might have survived the drenching he received the previous day, but it was-

n't to be. He dropped the soggy packet to the ground and found a comfortable place to rest.

With nothing better to do he closed his eyes and waited for the night to descend. He would spend the hours of darkness here and if there was a God, one of any use at all, he would wake to find it had all been some ghastly nightmare. He would walk through the forest, emerging to find his Mercedes waiting for him on the side of the road like an old friend.

He sank to the ground and curled up in a ball on the leaf litter to keep the creeping chill at bay. Celia's words echoed in his head, going round and round, cementing themselves into his brain. As the gravity of his situation became clearer, he begged God to return things to the way they were and prayed that Astrid was alright. He sobbed, regretting all the time he'd spent at the office or away on business trips instead of being with those he loved. He had been a neglectful husband and son, but if he could just return to his own time and place he would change all that.

He licked his dry lips to relieve them but only succeeded in drying them out more. His head throbbed from lack of nourishment but there was nothing he could do about it now. The night was cold. He wrapped his arms around his chest to keep warm and gently rocked himself, lulling himself to sleep which was nevertheless a long time coming.

When next he woke he assumed it was morning. Groggily, he propped himself up on one elbow, yawned and scratched his head while he got his bearings. Slowly he rose to his feet, though he was feeling dizzy and unsteady on his legs. His muscles were weak and he had to stand for a moment to gather the strength he needed to find what lay on the other side of the forest. When he felt ready he stumbled towards what he hoped would be the twenty-first century.

Finally, the forest seemed to open up. He could see the pale morning light filtering in through the canopy. He dared himself to believe that waiting just a few metres ahead was the field of wheat and beyond that his prized Mercedes. Spurred on by this hope, he staggered towards the edge

of the forest, smiling weakly and fully expecting to find what he was hoping to find.

But there was no field of wheat, only a vast expanse of grass and wild flowers bordered about a mile away by the seemingly endless forest. His hopes shattered like fine glass and his smile faded. Celia had been right. He was trapped. He scanned the landscape, the blue sky and the great white clouds which floated in patches across it; at the sea of green before him and the small dots of colour provided by the flowers which grew scattered amongst the tall grass; at the great flock of geese which flew honking across the sky towards some unseen body of water beyond his range of vision, then everything went blurry and he felt himself falling.

* * *

Two whole days passed before he regained consciousness, he later learnt. He came to in the grip of a fever and despite the fact he was lying on a cow hide and covered by thick woollen blankets by a healthy fire, he still felt cold.

"So you're awake," said Celia, coming through the door with a basket of pears.

"Here," offered Mark, "let me help you with that."

Celia put the basket carefully on the ground and hurried over to where Mark was attempting to get to his feet.

"Oh no you don't," she said pushing him back under the covers. "You stay there. You've got a nasty fever."

Behind Celia there was a movement in the doorway and a young woman with long, wavy brown hair decorated with flowers walked in. She was wearing a robe as red as any ruby, and hanging from a thin leather belt around her waist, partly hidden in the folds of her robe, was a calf-skin pouch. She walked towards Mark with all the grace of an angel, her movements adding to the ethereal quality that radiated from her like an aura. The woman was smiling serenely and Mark thought to detect great kindness in her eyes. Then, as she neared him, he recognised her as being one of the naked women he had

seen the previous day walking behind the drummer.

Celia stepped respectfully out of the way and let the woman approach the bed. Brushing her long, sweet-smelling hair out of the way, she leant down and placed a warm palm on Mark's head.

"I am Edith," she said in a voice as soft and soothing as golden honey.

Mark could only smile back at her like an idiot. He may have been feverish but a beauty such as Edith possessed was inescapably captivating. Celia watched his reaction from a distance with an amused twinkle in her eye.

Cocooned in a thoughtful silence, Edith picked up one of the blackened ceramic bowls that had been lying on a small piece of animal hide beside the fire and placed it carefully in her lap. She filled another bowl with water from the bucket which Celia always kept by the fireplace and put the second bowl on some coals by the edge of the fire to warm. She then opened the leather pouch on her belt and removed some herbs, a few scraps of bark and some dried flower buds, rubbing them between her fingers so they crumbled into the bowl in her lap. Finally, she carefully poured some of the hot water from the second bowl into the first then left it to steep for a minute or two.

Mark smiled up at her as she passed him the bowl, but his smile soon changed to an expression of horror when he looked at the murky green liquid it contained.

"What is that?" he asked in a most unappreciative tone.

"Herbal tea," Edith replied simply.

"What's in it?"

"Borage and white willow bark. Some camomile. It will reduce your fever and help you to feel better."

Mark brought the tea to his lips and screwed his nose up at the smell.

"Drink it," Celia told him. "It will help you get well."

Mark did as he was told, drinking the mixture down as fast as he could so he wouldn't taste it.

Edith leant down and took the bowl from Mark.

"Now stay in bed and let Celia look after you. I will leave some

herbs for you to take until you're well again."

And with that she turned and left without saying another word.

"Who was that?" Mark asked after she had floated out of Celia's hut. "She's beautiful."

"Edith is one of the priestesses and I would advise you not to fall in love with her as almost every other man does. It will do you no good. She is untouchable."

"Hey, I'm a married man," Mark informed her, then sank back onto the mattress. Of course his wife was several thousand years away, probably beside herself with worry. He felt his eyes water.

"Try to get some sleep," Celia said, knowing that sleep would both heal the fever and take his pain away, at least for the moment. And when Mark was free of his pain, she could forget the splinters of her own that time hadn't dulled and which Mark's tears always brought screaming back to her.

* * *

After recovering from his fever it didn't take long for Mark to assimilate into village life. He helped in the fields and whenever he had some free time the men would take him out and teach him how to hunt using flint-tipped spears and bows. Slowly he learnt their language. Some of the village women had sewn him new clothes and Wayland, a tall, robust village elder with a weathered complexion and a long beard, had given him a sheep skin jacket to keep the cold night air from bringing his chill back.

Despite the generosity and kindness of the villagers, there were times when all Mark wanted was solitude; time to be alone with the memory of his wife and of his parents and siblings. In those times he would wander the forests and glades or just relax in the tall grass at the side of the stream and stare up at the sky. He soon got to know the area surrounding the village as well as any of those who had been born there.

Then one day something very strange happened.

One afternoon as the sun was arcing towards the tree-line, a traveller

came to the village seeking lodgings for the night and something to eat. While he scoffed down the lamb stew Wayland's wife, Maude, had given him, he told a tale of two odd-looking strangers who had arrived in the area after travelling a great distance, and who had knowledge to share. The news spread like wildfire through the village and caused a degree of excitement amongst the villagers that hadn't been witnessed in a long time. A contingent of men was immediately assembled to investigate the traveller's claims.

Mark could not help but get caught up in the excitement nor stop himself from thinking that they could well be people from his own time. They had travelled a long distance, were strange in appearance and wore unusual clothing. How could it not be people from his own time? If it had happened to Celia and to himself, it could happen to others; and maybe they could help him return home. His heart was glad once more and hope flowed through his veins as surely as did blood.

Seven men, including Wayland and Mark, gathered at the village gate the following misty morning. Each had a small cloth bundle containing meat, bread, flint knives and small clay bowls for cooking and drinking. Some men took their bow and arrows, while the others took a spear. These were dangerous times and they would have to take care of themselves out on the open road. They would also have to hunt since the small rations they took with them would not last more than a couple of days.

As they were about to leave Celia gripped Mark's wrist, pulling on his arm until he bent down low enough for her to plant a tender kiss on his cheek.

"You're the only one who knows me," she said, her voice quivering and her eyes on the verge of tears. "You take care out there."

Mark was touched by the old woman's concern and when he said goodbye to her he felt for a moment as though he were saying goodbye to his own mother.

After the farewells and kisses the small band of men set off towards a place in the great hills that only one

of their number had visited before. It was a slow journey, walking over fields and through forests, crossing streams and getting wet, then having to endure the cold winds, which made them shiver and wonder why they had embarked on such an uncertain mission in the first place.

For most of the journey they didn't see another soul. They saw villages in the distance or smoke from unseen villages rising from behind small hills, but most of the land was wild and unsettled. The men had to sleep rough, getting comfortable at night in whatever way they could. Cold nights meant they had to sleep as close to the fire as they could, keeping one eye open for wolves and bears. Often they talked and laughed together to chase away the boredom, though there were many long periods of silence.

One day, after a particularly prolonged period of silence, a rabbit had the misfortune to dash across the path in front of them.

"Dinner!" shouted one of the men.

"Let me try," said Mark, loading an arrow into his bow.

The other men watched with interest as to how Mark would fare with the rabbit, which was bounding away across the grass towards a pair of trees further up the hill. Mark began to run, steadying the bow and aiming. He fired, hitting the rabbit in the hind leg and causing it to go crashing head over heels. Mark cheered and the other men laughed and applauded Mark's excellent aim. But as Mark ran over towards the injured rabbit it struggled to its feet and began limping towards the trees, jumping a few paces before collapsing again. Mark didn't know what to do, whether to load his bow or chase the rabbit.

He looked down at his travelling companions at the foot of the hill and caught them chuckling. He blushed, humiliated at being shown up in front of his peers by a rabbit. Determined to salvage at least some pride he dropped his bow and raced after the injured animal, but the rabbit was used to escaping the clutches of those who would eat it and every time Mark launched himself at the poor animal it changed direction. And every time Mark hit the dirt. The

chuckles of his companions, who were enjoying the light entertainment, soon grew into howls of laughter.

Then just before the exhausted creature neared the trees and while Mark was still sprawled out on the grass, an arrow came whizzing by him, puncturing the side of the rabbit and killing it. Mark climbed to his feet, walked over to the dead animal and picked it up. As he came down the hill he looked the men directly in the eye, daring them to say anything.

"I would have caught it," he said.

The men responded with snickers and muffled doubts.

"Sure you could have," laughed Eric, a tall, blonde man whose mother had come from far away. "Only we would have starved to death in the mean time."

After five days on the road the weary band of travellers arrived at the foot of the great hills, but were disappointed not to see any sign of the visitors. They expected to find a massive throng of people, all eager to discover the secrets the strangers had brought with them. Instead they found the range of hills deserted with only an eagle and the cold wind to keep them company.

"What should we do?" asked Wayland.

"Maybe we should take a look on the other side," Eric suggested.

The men looked north, then south, along the line of great hills which extended into the hazy distance in both directions, and nodded their agreement. Then Eric thought he heard something, a chipping sound; just a snatch of it carried on the stiff breeze.

They stood in a semi-circle with their ears cocked to the wind.

"Ahh, there it is," Wayland said. "And voices too."

Eric was beaming. He was even more determined to see what lay on the other side now and without another word he began climbing. Caught up in Eric's enthusiasm the others promptly followed, walking up the first part of the hill then scrambling their way up to the top where the wind was fierce, cutting into them and chilling each man to the bone despite their thick, woolly vests.

"There!" Mark shouted excitedly.

The men looked down to where he was pointing and saw a vast hive of activity. Dozens of men were spread along the base of the hills working busily while others appeared to be going inside the hill only to emerge minutes later with small carts full of rocks. Wayland gestured for the men to get down. He wanted to observe the scene before leading his men into a potentially hostile situation.

The men did as they were bid and obediently dropped to the damp, moss covered rocks. After a short period of time, just as Mark and another of the men were about to nod off, another small group of men walked into the camp from the south. Wayland and his men watched with interest as to how these men were received; watched as they made their way through the centre to the cave, barely raising an eyebrow from those already there.

"Right men," said Wayland with a hint of false bravado, "let's find out what this is all about."

The men cautiously made their way down the other side of the hill, watching out for loose rocks and any signs of aggression from the men at the base of the hill, although their presence was noted with all the indifference that had greeted the newcomers from the south.

"What's all this work in aid of?" Wayland asked a man who was chipping flakes of a blue-green substance off a lump of rock.

"Miracles," answered the man, continuing to chip.

Beside him was a man crushing the ore into a powder. As Mark surveyed the scene around him he could see that there were many men chipping away at the rocks from the cave and many others grinding the chips into powder. Further away by a group of makeshift shelters, there was a domed oven with men sitting around the edge using bellows to fan the flames of an intense fire. A tall muscular man, sweating rivers and bronzed from exposure to the heat and sun, was sliding small stone containers of the powder into the furnace, using long tongs to pull the container out when the powder had turned into a bright, burning hot liquid.

Wayland didn't know why but

there was a rising sense of excitement building within him. It was almost like he was on the verge of something big, though he didn't know what it was. Caught up in his own world and completely forgetting about the other men, he walked towards the open mouth of the cave.

Then just as he arrived, he stopped and stumbled back into the group he'd forgotten were right behind him.

"Does our appearance startle you?" asked the being, stepping out of the darkness to reveal itself completely.

Mark's eyes were riveted on the small grey alien, though his shocked expression was nothing to the sheer terror plastered upon the faces of his companions.

"You," said the alien extending a bony, snake-like finger out at Mark, "are not from this place."

Mark struggled to form coherent words but could only stare as another of the aliens emerged from the shadows. Their large heads seemed to rest tentatively on slender, almost emaciated-looking bodies. Large, black, oval-shaped eyes sloped downwards towards two tiny nostrils, though they didn't appear to have a nose as such. Neither did they have visible ears or noticeable genitals. Their spider-like fingers were padded on the ends and moved as gracefully as seaweed in an underwater current. Mark recognised them as being aliens; after all he had come from the twenty-first century where nothing was shocking. He could only imagine the horror his friends were experiencing.

"What are they doing here?" he asked himself, disappointed that the "odd-looking strangers" the traveller had mentioned were not what he'd been expecting.

"W-w-what are you doing here?" he finally managed to ask.

"You know these creatures?" Wayland asked, surprised and a little nervous at Mark's relative ease around them.

"No, but I know what they are," he replied, without offering any further information.

"We are here to educate; to nudge your race forward," said the first alien.

Mark surveyed the bustling scene spread out before the cave.

"What are you teaching them?" he asked.

"Bronze," the creature replied simply. "We have brought the Bronze Age to Britain as we have brought it to other places."

Mark was speechless.

"What is it saying to you?" Eric asked.

"Tell us what it means," added Wayland, still wary.

Mark glanced back at Wayland and the other five men who were just as eager to hear what he had to say, then returned his attention to the two aliens.

"Go ahead," they said.

"I am no expert," Mark began, "but our, er, friends here have come to show you how to make bronze."

Eric's brow furrowed. "What is bronze?"

"Well," he began, "it is a metal..."

"What is metal?" asked Wayland.

Mark paused to collect his thoughts. Without any points of reference it was going to be difficult to explain an entirely new substance to the men.

"Well, it's harder than stone and when you heat it you can change its form to make new things."

The men nodded, though Mark could tell they hadn't grasped the concept.

"Come over here," he said, taking them over to where the powdered copper and enargite, or copper arsenic sulphide, was being smelted.

"Look at these."

He held up some of the finished spear heads and knife blades. He showed them, with the permission of the men who were doing the smelting, that while the flint implements would shatter if hit in the right spot, the bronze implements were stronger and more durable, sustaining only light scratches when hit with rocks.

"Tis sorcery!" gasped Eric, the superstitious one, though no-one was listening. They were all too intrigued with the smelting process.

"Now we shall make some. Tell the grey ones to show us the way," said Wayland with all the authority of a village elder.

Mark, who it seemed had been

made the liaison officer, led Wayland and the others back to the cave where the aliens had just begun instructing a trio of enthralled men from the south.

"This way," said the first alien as it disappeared into the cave followed by its off-sider.

The men followed the aliens down into the shallow shaft and paid close attention as they explained what was happening. They showed the men how to follow a vein of ore through the rock and extract what they needed without expending energy needlessly on useless rock. Then, to demonstrate the second part of the process, they took the men over to the production line outside the cave and explained how to remove the ore from the rock, and how to crush it into a powder, mixing nine parts of the copper with one part of powdered tin from the south. Finally, when the powder was ready it could then be taken to the clay-lined hearth to be smelted.

Though simple and clear the explanations might as well have been in Arabic for all the good it did most of the men present; only Mark and Wayland had managed to keep up, both finding the process fascinating.

But the lesson wasn't over yet. After the ore had been smelted and purified, it was poured into a stone mould; the men gasping in amazement as the finished reddish-brown implement was dropped with a "clang" onto the mossy rock below to cool.

Mark, Wayland and the other five members of the group wasted no time in starting work. However, since they had no tools of their own they had to borrow whatever unused tools were available, which were few. Most of the time they improvised, using rocks and muscle, and taking twice as long as everyone else to do even the simplest tasks.

For days the men worked tirelessly, removing enough ore to smelt their first spearhead and when they had finished, lots were drawn and jobs allocated. Since there were only seven of them, it was decided that each man would take a turn at each part of the bronze-making process. That way no-one got stuck with the back-breaking physical labour or, likewise, with the relatively easier

smelting. It was important that every part of the process be learned thoroughly so that when they returned to the village it would be as experts.

On the day the men were ready to cast their first spear head, for that was the stone mould that Eric and Will had created, they became aware of a faint whirring sound which grew rapidly to a great roar. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned their attention skywards, to the almighty metallic disc that was descending upon them. As it neared the ground the men fled for shelter, the powerful vibrations from the giant craft's engines washing over them in great waves, petrifying them almost to the point of paralysis.

"It's the end of the world," one man cried out as he covered his head with his arms; and there were others who agreed, cowering where they hid to await certain death.

It didn't seem to bother the two peculiar-looking aliens, however, who calmly walked towards the centre of the craft, which was now only metres from the surface of the ground. The men leaned out over each other to watch what would happen, curious but not brave enough to risk exposing themselves to something unknown and possibly dangerous.

"What sorcery is this?" Eric asked.

Mark, who was the only man watching the scene with fascination and interest rather than fear, replied, "It's their ship, their transport. It will take them into the stars and back to their home far, far away from here."

"How does he know these things?" Eric asked Will, though the question was blatantly meant for Mark.

Mark turned and eyed his suspicious companions.

"I'm not one of them. I'm one of you," he explained. "And I cannot tell you how I know these things because you wouldn't believe me, nor, I think, understand me."

A great roar forced them to re-focus their attention on the silver disc. The two aliens had disappeared and the ship was powering up for take off. The noise was incredible and those left hiding behind the rocks and in the narrow shafts were forced to cover their ears or be deafened. Nevertheless, their natural curiosity could not

be deterred. Not one man could stop himself from watching the craft as it rose ever higher into the sky. Then, after an earth-shattering blast which scorched a ring in the soil beneath it, the spaceship shot across the sky. In the time it took one to snap their fingers it was gone, replaced by an eerie silence broken only by the crackling of the smelter fire.

The men waited several minutes in their hiding places before they found courage enough to emerge; the vast majority of them stumbling out onto the plain quite speechless and with hearts still racing. The ring of scorched, smoking earth drew them like moths to a flame, for although they were afraid, they were curious to investigate it. Only Mark ignored the circle, giving it no more than a brief glance as he headed towards the small pile of ore he had been working with before the arrival of the spaceship had interrupted him.

The men spent another fortnight at the site before packing their things up and leaving; their load this time being considerably larger. Between them they had to take the possessions they had come with along with two stone moulds, eight heavy, bronze spearheads, a dozen arrow heads and as much raw ore as they could manage since they had no knowledge of any nearer deposits of copper. As they had made many friends obtaining the tin needed for bronze production would not be difficult either; just a matter of trade and transportation.

Their return was celebrated with a great feast held in their honour. A large boar had been slaughtered and was roasting nicely on a spit in the village centre. Young girls with jugs of honey-mead filled empty cups and the atmosphere was filled with the sound of chatter and laughter. Only when everyone had assembled did the men reveal the great secret they had learned and everyone jostled for a position at the front of the crowd, eager to see what they had brought back with them.

Wayland opened the deer skin and revealed the spearheads and arrowheads to the gasps and murmurs of the other villagers. He picked up a nearby rock and smashed it down on the spearhead to demonstrate the

durability of the metal and everyone agreed that this new substance was indeed magnificent and unlike anything they had seen before.

"It will look even more impressive when I attach it to a spear," he added, since he had not yet had the chance to do so.

A cheer rose up from the crowd and everyone raised their cups high to toast the seven men who had brought their village this marvel. The musicians began to play and those who were so inclined began dancing wildly around the fire while those who weren't moved off to the sidelines.

"The coming of the Bronze Age, huh?" Celia said, smiling at Mark.

"I guess so," Mark replied, with a faraway look in his eye.

"What is it?" Celia asked.

"I wish I'd taken the opportunity to ask them more questions about us and our planet. At the very least I wish I had asked if they could take me home."

Celia took his hand in hers and looked up at him.

"I know," she said softly, "I know."

They returned their attention to the festivities, though Mark's thoughts were with Astrid. He knew she was forever lost to him. No more would he look upon her pale Scandinavian face and kiss her rubicund cheeks in autumn, nor would he be able to give her the child she craved. He just hoped that wherever she was that she was happy. He looked at Celia, standing beside him, as she had done since his arrival, and smiled at her as she clapped and watched the wolf dancers cavorting around the flames of the fire. If there was one thing to be grateful for it was her.

* * *

The arrival of autumn was heralded by honking geese flying chevron across the pale sky and by patches of rich golds appearing on the forest foliage. Time had slipped by almost unnoticed. Celia had become like a sister to him, or a mother. Thoughts of his old life still haunted him, though less frequently. This was his life now and he was as used to it as he had been to his old life.

One morning Mark was invited on

a bear hunt. He hesitated at first, looking over at Celia, who simply shrugged her shoulders as if to say 'it's none of my business' and went back to winnowing grain for storage.

"Come on man," Eric shouted. "It'll be fun."

Mark laughed.

"Sure. Why Not?"

He grabbed his spear, his bow and a small quiver of arrows and ran out to meet Wayland, Eric and Will as they headed towards the village gate where they were joined by a man he'd never met before. Tor was about Mark's age, but more robust, and lived in the forest, returning to the village each year for the winter.

Tor led the men through the woods, warning each one of them to keep their senses honed for the slightest signs of bear activity. Tor was an expert and had caught many bears in his short life. He even had several scars to prove it, including a large jagged tear which started on the left side of his forehead and finished at the base of his jaw on the right-hand side. With his long, curly black hair tied back to stop it from falling in his face, he stepped through the leaves and grass of the forest floor with all the skill of a predator, looking for bear manure, broken twigs or the remains of a kill.

"Shhhhh," he said suddenly, causing Mark's adrenal glands to release a rush of adrenalin. "Up ahead. Hear it?"

The others stopped and cocked their ears.

In the distance there was a low grunting sound, unmistakably that of a bear. With a wave of his arm Tor motioned for the men to follow him towards a slight rise up ahead where the trees were thinner.

"Spread out around him," he whispered, "but stay low. Don't let him catch your scent. I'll attack from the front then you run in from your positions, surrounding him and confusing him. Be careful. Go for the underbelly if you can."

The others nodded and Mark began to wonder if he had done the right thing in coming along.

"Go," Tor said. "Go!"

The others squatted down and scrambled as fast as they could

around the edge of the shallow crater where the bear was busy tearing up a small deer. Through a series of whistles the men indicated when they were in position and only then did Tor poke his head up over the rise.

The bear was just metres away from him. It had just swallowed a mouthful of bloody meat and was now sniffing the air. Its instincts were telling it that something was wrong. It turned its head to one side and sniffed the air from that direction. Tor saw his chance and rushed at the animal, screaming like a banshee as the bear spun around. Immediately it reared up on its hind legs, towering over Tor and releasing a blood-curdling roar. Thick strings of saliva started dribbling through its bared teeth, dangling from its bottom jaw before breaking off. The others watched in horror as Tor and the bear danced around each other, both ready to attack at any moment.

Suddenly the bear lunged forward, taking a swipe at Tor with its massive paw but missing. Tor seized the opportunity to hurl his spear. The slender missile with the new bronze tip sheared through the air and struck the bear in the side. The beast screamed in pain, shaking its head wildly and dropping to the ground with a dull thud. It bit and clawed the spear for just a few seconds, breaking it off at the tip then looked up at the human that had thrown it. With the speed of an arrow it launched itself at Tor, who by-passed the angry bear and ran across the dip towards the other side where the others were waiting.

"Now!" he called.

The others flew into the arena with spears at the ready. Eric threw his first, hitting the bear in the rump. The bear lifted its head and roared with pain, the sound reverberating through the forest. Wayland threw his spear. He was a skilful hunter but the bear was bounding forward in a blind fury, weaving this way and that, so the weapon meant for the creature's neck pierced its belly instead. As the bear charged forward, the bronze spearhead embedded deep in its flesh sliced its way slowly but surely through the bear's underbelly, causing a greater and greater stream of blood to leak from the wound.

Will came at the bear head on, yelling and shrieking like a wild thing before throwing his spear, which bounced off the creature's head taking a large piece of fur from its scalp as it passed across. Realising his error, Will turned and fled, screaming at Mark to spear the injured animal in the neck.

Mark appeared at the top of the rise on the bear's left but not before it brought Will crashing down with a powerful blow from its paw. A split second later the bear had Will in its mouth, shaking him like he was nothing more than a rag doll. It was blind with rage and intent on ripping Will to pieces. Soon Will's screams became nothing more than muffled gurgles. Seconds later he fell silent altogether. The bear shook him a couple more times then dropped him to the ground, kicking the body a couple of times to check whether its attacker was dead or not.

"Hit it, Mark! Hit it!" someone called out from behind him.

Mark swallowed hard and raced towards the bear, his spear raised high and his concentration absolute. When he was close enough he threw his weapon with as much force as he could, watching as it hurtled through the air towards the bear, puncturing the animal's neck and killing it.

"Well done, man," said Tor. "Not bad for your first time. Looks like you get to keep the pelt."

But there was no joy in the kill. One of their own had fallen. It was a risk they had all taken, yet a death was a death and the horror of it was not lessened by the knowledge that it could have happened to any of them.

The men tied the dead bear to the sturdiest branch they could find then hoisted it up on their shoulders. Even with four grown men it took them all the energy they had left to get the carcass back to the village.

They entered it with heavy hearts. Wayland offered to tell Will's family, a mercy the other three were thankful for; and Mark, fresh from his victory over the wild bear, offered to tell the priestesses, who would want to go and bless the body before preparing it for cremation.

* * *

The following day Mark helped Celia stretch the pelt over a wooden frame. The bear fur was thick and warm and would make a welcome addition to their hut when winter came, as it surely would soon enough. Even as they pulled the skin taut there were storm clouds on the horizon.

"We'd better get this inside when we've finished," Celia suggested. "Don't want it getting wet before it's finished."

Mark nodded but didn't look up from what he was doing. He couldn't stop thinking about the events of the previous day – the look on Will's face as the bear lifted him up in its jaws and the spears sticking out from the noble animal as it fought for its life. He'd never experienced anything like it before, such a vivid and bloody example of the cycle of life and death.

The first burst of thunder startled Mark, rescuing him from his morbid thoughts. The sky was completely covered with cloud, but there was something else in the air.

"Celia, come here."

Celia had gone inside but came out when she heard Mark call her name.

"Come here," he said again.

She noticed something strange about him, something in his eyes as he looked up at the sky.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

"Feel what?"

"It. That feeling. The electricity. It's zapping all around us. Look over there. Lightning!"

Celia was at first bewildered but as soon as Mark mentioned electricity she knew what he meant. She rolled her eyes and tut-tutted to herself. She thought he'd forgotten all that nonsense.

"And what about it?" she said suspiciously.

"Remember?" Mark said earnestly. "The storm. The electricity. Feel it. It's everywhere."

Mark dropped the piece of flint he had been using to clean the underside of the bear skin. He threw his arms up in the air and did a little dance on the spot. Celia shook her head.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Where?"

Mark looked at his dear friend, lined and bent from years of hard labour and so pale and frail that she

seemed to be fading slowly away. He could not think of leaving without her.

"Out into the storm. It may be our only chance. These conditions must be rare. I only felt them once before – when they brought me here."

Celia looked at him through compassionate eyes.

"The chance that the storm will take you where you want to go is minute, Mark," she explained with the quiet confidence of wisdom. "Al-most nil."

Mark took a step towards the old woman. "But shouldn't we at least try?"

While Celia knew in her very soul that Mark was daring to dream an impossible dream she couldn't help but be moved by his hopefulness.

"Sure," she said finally, realising that she had nothing to lose. "Why not? Let me get my shawl."

Mark waited anxiously for Celia to re-emerge from the hut then took her impatiently by the hand as the dark clouds loomed over them, bringing torrents of rain and a hard wind.

"Really Mark," she shouted as the rain poured down over her. "This is just too much."

But Mark wasn't listening. He hurried through the village towards the gate almost dragging Celia behind him, shouting words of encouragement to her as the other villagers watched from the comfort and warmth of their homes.

They walked through the thin arm of forest reaching out into the grasslands and reappeared in front of the tumulus. Behind it was the forest from which they had both emerged, the sight of which compelled Mark to let go of Celia's hand and go racing towards it.

He spun around excitedly but noticed that Celia had stopped.

"Hurry!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Celia!"

He stopped too. His eyes were wide as Celia stood clutching her chest. He looked above him at the lightning flashing in the clouds then back at Celia just in time to watch her drop to the ground.

"Celia!" he screamed running back to where she laid, cradled by the soft, wet grass.

He dropped to his knees and put his head on her chest. There was a heartbeat but it was faint.

"Celia. What's wrong? Tell me."

Celia opened her mouth to speak and with difficulty she managed to whisper in a voice that was barely audible, "You go. Chase your dream."

Mark didn't know what to say. As the life drained from her body and the storm raged around him, Mark raised his face to the pelting rain and cried. His tears were lost on a face already awash with raindrops, though they continued to flow regardless. Only when he had cried himself out did he rise to his feet and gather Celia up in his arms, walking solemnly back to the village and regretting his foolish behaviour.

He took the body directly to Wayland's hut. He didn't know what else to do. Wayland sent his eldest son to fetch one of the priestesses, who had just returned from the tumulus, while Maude poured Mark a cupful of mead to help settle his nerves. Upon seeing Edith at the door, the horrible realisation that his best friend was dead finally hit. He looked across to the other side of the hut, to the bundle in the corner, and knew that his life in the village would never be the same again. Celia had been his anchor, the only thing keeping him in touch with the world he had come from. She had shown him kindness and taught him the importance of people over everything else; a lesson he wished he'd learnt long ago.

Mark got up from the stool and walked towards the door.

"Are you sure you want to go home?" Wayland asked placing a hand on Mark's back. "You can stay here with us for the night if it would make you feel better."

Mark turned and flashed him a half-hearted smile then turned and left the hut without replying.

The next morning, after a night of little sleep, Mark arrived at Wayland's door with a bundle of possessions and an air of solemnity.

"What are you doing?" Wayland asked as Maude joined him at the door.

"I'm leaving for the copper mine," Mark replied. "I need something to take my mind off myself for a while."

"Will you return?" asked Maude.

"Probably. I don't know." It was the most honest answer he could give. "Of course I'll visit, and I'll see Eric whenever he comes to the mine. I guess when I've had enough of mining I might come back."

Maude wrapped her arms around Mark.

"Good luck, Mark," she said softly with a tear in her eye. "Take care of yourself."

"I will," Mark promised.

"The winter can be harsh," Wayland warned. "Are you sure you want to leave now? Why not wait until the worst of the weather has passed?"

Mark shook his head.

"I have to go now. Celia meant a lot to me. She was like a mother. I don't want to live alone in her hut. Besides, I have my bear skin to keep me warm."

Wayland nodded, ignoring Mark's attempt to lighten the situation. He understood a man's need to do what he felt he had to and what a man felt he had to do didn't always make sense.

"You will always be welcome here," Wayland added.

"I know," Mark replied. "I will always remember your kindness."

The men hugged, both fighting to keep their eyes dry, then Mark pulled away. They looked each other in the eye for a moment or two, then Mark turned and walked towards the village gate without looking back. He paused to look over at the tumulus in the distance and at the forest behind it, but only briefly. To believe he could return to his own time in the same way he had been ripped from it was folly. He had been a fool to think it would all be as easy as that.

Adjusting the heavy bundle on his back he looked ahead at the open grassland in front of him and started walking towards the far horizon. In an attempt to keep his mood from descending into darkness he began to whistle, realising only after two verses of the Rolling Stones "Satisfaction" that he still had at least a few connections to his own time. That thought alone added a lightness to his step.

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: At the Mountains of Madness

John Greenwood

A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the Tanjong Pagar encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.

Can a killer truly mourn his victim? The question pursued me across the peaks, as Eunos and I pushed further north, across increasingly barren inclines, forcing a path through the blizzards and rainstorms.

I was barely human, an outcast

from society, or rather I would have been, were there any meaningful human society left on this planet. I noticed the hardships of our journey less and less as thoughts of our late companion occupied my mind. I recalled our first meeting in the bat-haunted cave. It had been my firm belief that we had rescued the poet from slow starvation, but now I began to wonder whether he might have been better served had we left him to take his chances on a diet of bat-meat. He would certainly not have met his end on the side of a mountain, miles from his homeland, at the hands of a psychotically deranged extra-terrestrial.

Yes, I had come to think of myself in those terms. Of course, I did not belong on Kadaloor, but now I began to consider the possibility that my crash-landing here had brought nothing but misfortune to its inhabitants. The fate of the Bird-People I had put

out of my mind during the last months, and the close succession of events since I left their company had helped me to forget them. But now my misdeeds returned to settle on my conscience like dark birds returning to their nests. Had I slain those gentle Bird-People too? And what of Bukit Paiyang, the Punggol interrogator who had become my hostage? His disappearance was as inexplicable as my continued survival. The fate of Marsiling, my latest victim, was no mystery, and there was a supremely reliable witness in the form of my android servant.

Eunos led the way through the wind-blasted gorges, and around icy bluffs and pinnacles. I followed literally in his footsteps, placing my own feet in the very indentations he had made before me, dumbly trailing behind without question or comment. I had no further interest in the land-

scape, and my sketch book remained empty. During the day I was dimly aware of the increasing altitude, a growing shortness of breath, and the vertiginous gulfs which would open up at our feet without warning. Stone gulleys and ice crevasses riddled our path, compelling us to crazy, looping detours.

In my fever of guilt and recrimination, I had half-forgotten the purpose of our journey, but Eunos, driven by less volatile forces and always a dozen yards ahead, remained my constant compass. The Red Hill Clementi, had it been mentioned to me during those hazy marches, would have seemed like a fading pipe dream, rather than the one hope of a cure for my escalating lunacy.

Visions of Marsiling, miraculously gifted with powers of speech and hearing, ruled my sleep. He would appear to me, pleading for his life, or begging to know why I had committed the awful deed. What had he done to deserve such treatment? I could never find an answer for him, and he always slipped away, down the side of the waterfall, beyond the grasp of my outstretched arms.

"We will begin to descend in two or three days, but I am unsure whether you will survive unless we rest," Eunos told me with his usual candour. "You have not taken adequate care of yourself."

There was some truth in that: often when we set out walking in the morning, I would forget to don my warmest clothes, and later found myself shivering in pyjamas soaked through with snow and mud. These oversights brought on a severe cold, yet I did not ask Eunos to halt our ascent. I suppose I saw my sufferings as a just, if inadequate, form of punishment for Marsiling's death. But the android's warning struck home: I knew Eunos would not exaggerate the chances of my death, nor would he bother to warn me unless he considered it absolutely necessary. I had learned to accept that Eunos had no innate concern for my welfare. He was programmed to serve me, but if I had ordered him to throw me from the face of the mountain, he would have carried out my instruction without compunction.

"What do you suggest?" I asked him as I crouched before the tiny campfire of damp, spitting branches that Eunos had been rationing out since we left the last tree behind some three days ago. I was numb with cold, and could hardly remember what it was like to feel otherwise. Our tents, cleverly designed tubes which sprang out from their cases without need of poles or pegs, were no warmer than the air outside, and were never completely dry. Strange though it may seem, the robot spent each night in his own tent, avoiding the corroding effects of the damp air, as he explained. We had struck camp that night in the shelter of a vast boulder, precariously balanced across a gap in the rocks. The hollow underneath was large enough to accommodate both our tents, and sheltered us from the winds, at least on two sides. It was our most comfortable campsite in many days.

Eunos looked into the fire. "If you do not wish to die in these mountains," he said, "we must reach a warmer climate very soon."

I dragged the flaps of my hat down over my ears. "All well and good," I commented, "but how are these temperate anomalies to be located here in the icy wastes?"

If there was sarcasm in my reply, Eunos did not appear to hear it. He pointed to a location on my map. "This is a volcano," he said, pointing to a red circle on the chart. "Choa Chu Kang referred to it as Mount City Hall."

I knitted my brows at this eccentric moniker. "Why City Hall?" I demanded.

"My former master never thought it necessary to explain it to me. Perhaps some local legend was associated with the mountain. I cannot say. Place names are so frequently of obscure origin, especially those given by humans. A simple number would have sufficed to identify this geographical feature."

I had neither the energy nor the inclination to argue the point with him. "So what of this City Hall?" I asked.

"The volcano is dormant, according to Kang's most recent information."

"Surely any information gathered

in Kang's lifetime is now hundreds of years old!" I objected, wondering what point Eunos was labouring to make.

"And Kang's records show that City Hall had been dormant for hundreds of years previously," he countered. "There is every likelihood that the volcano is safe for us to ascend."

I shivered as a gust of wintry air howled through our inadequate shelter. "To what end?" I muttered through chattering teeth.

"Given City Hall's height and general shape, I calculate a high probability of geothermal pools located on its lower slopes. Although a volcano itself sleeps, it is often far from inactive. There are, of course, no guarantees..."

I needed no further persuasion. My imagination was filled with visions of steaming spas where the natural minerals bubbling up from deep within the planet would soothe my chapped skin and dissolve the hard knots of guilt in my head.

"How soon can we reach these thermal pools?" I demanded urgently.

Eunos appeared to consult some inner chart invisible to any but himself. "The base of the volcano is four days' march, possibly five. But I cannot guess when we might discover evidence of geothermal activity, if at all. Even if we do happen upon them, they may be entirely unsuitable for bathing. Some of these geothermal oddities are highly toxic."

It goes without saying that these were risks I was more than willing to take. Moreover, I had already convinced myself that my vision of a healing thermal spa was correct, and Eunos's qualifications and retractions would prove irrelevant when we entered the paradise of Mount City Hall. I confess that a style of delirium, born this time not from the parasites that had colonised my frontal lobes, but from the extreme cold, hunger and discomfort, had taken a hold of my rational faculties, and was leading me towards ever greater and more feverish expectations of the delights to be found on this legendary volcano. That night I dreamed of trees weighed down with sticky tropical fruits, framing a steaming green lake where

dusky maidens frolicked in the waters.

This apparition was to sustain me through the next week of ever worsening weather and ever shorter rations, as we hiked across snowfields and tumbled down scree slopes and edged across pencil-thin ledges from one bare rock to another. I was amazed at how quickly our provisions had dwindled, considering that only one of us required sustenance. Eunos had estimated our slog at five days, and before they were up I was reduced to dried strips of meat, the origins of which I preferred not to question. I began to suspect that Raffles, my pet snake-mouse, had been pilfering our supplies. He seemed to have hardly suffered the change in climate, and was neither losing nor gaining weight appreciably. His coat of white fur might have protected his fat reserves far better than any artificial insulation I could have worn, but I would have expected at least some sign of distress. Instead he slithered happily about inside my backpack, while Eunos carried what little food remained safely in his own. There were days when I began to estimate how much real meat there might be on such a small mammal as Raffles, but the moment I caught myself in these vicious speculations I reminded myself that I was already guilty of one murder. While the life of Raffles could not be compared to that of Marsiling, I recoiled at the prospect of adding yet another killing to my tally.

During this stage of the expedition Eunos and I spoke rarely, and at times our relationship dipped to ever-deeper nadirs. I began to suspect that my android servant was deliberately leading me in the wrong direction, away from any hope of rescue, to my eventual doom. Why would he pursue such a course of trickery? I convinced myself that he had grown weary of serving me, and had decided that I did not measure up to the illustrious Choa Chu Kang or any of his predecessors. Eunos had resolved to lead me to my death, so I believed. Why did he not simply bump me off there and then? From what he had told me, the act was well within his physical capabilities. But there was an obstacle to his liberty: Eunos was programmed, at

the most fundamental level, to obey my orders. Perhaps, by some perverse twist of his logic, he had outwitted his programmers, and was leading me towards certain death, not by his own hand, but by exposure or starvation. Mount City Hall did not exist – it was a ruse employed to keep hope alive in my heart. Meanwhile, a different hope burned in the inhuman soul of Eunos, the hope that I would soon succumb to the brutal climate of these mountains. Such thoughts as these, however paranoid and mistaken they might have been, only strengthened my resolve to survive the ordeal.

On the sixth day of our latest quest, I stopped walking, and found I did not wish to begin again. We were at the bottom of a boulder-choked gulley, slogging upwards along a dry riverbed in the penetrating drizzle. Eunos continued for several metres before he noticed that my footsteps did not echo his. He turned and looked at me.

“You said five days,” I whined. “It has been six. Where is Mount City Hall?”

He waved his hands in a grand gesture. “All around us!” he replied. “We are standing in its foothills!”

I looked around. Although the snow on these bleak slopes was patchy and melting, it was still a dismal landscape, lifeless bar the omnipresent white, stubby grasses, bitter and inedible. I saw no sign of any thermal pools, sticky tropical fruit, or frolicking maidens. I refrained from pointing this out.

“How are we going to track down signs of geothermal activity?” I asked, exasperated by the robot’s aloofness.

“The most reliable indicator will be the presence of Thanggam,” he said.

I could hardly believe what he was saying. Our entire trip into these highlands, with all the attendant privations and disasters, had served the aim of avoiding these tyrannical mushrooms, and now we were to track them down? I made my objections perfectly clear to Eunos, but he countered that once Thanggam were spotted, I would merely remain out of earshot of its calls, while the robot, himself immune to the telepathic at-

tacks of the mushroom, would destroy any individual fungi in the area. I had no reason to doubt his word, but my incipient paranoia taught me to mistrust everything I was told. Was Eunos plotting to lead me directly into the path of Thanggam? Next time I would not survive even a brief period of servitude: my constitution had been fatally weakened since our last encounter with the mushroom, and collecting animal dung would probably finish me off. Of course, once I had breathed my last, Eunos would be free. It was a neat plan, almost admirable in its elegant simplicity.

But nothing would be served by revealing my misgivings to the enemy at this stage. I made a great show of agreeing with Eunos’s conclusion, and continued to labour up the riverbed, following his tracks.

The gorge deepened and narrowed as we progressed, until smooth rock walls rose metres above us on either side, and we found ourselves penned in. Eventually the sky cleared and we glimpsed the summit, a perfect truncated cone, its top puffing out regular grey clouds of smoke. So Eunos had not made the whole story up: the volcano did at least exist. But this small scrap of hope was soon dashed: we found our path blocked by a wall of boulders and rubble. Climbing over the obstacle was too risky: even a brief clamber over the rocks brought a miniature avalanche of stones tumbling past me, inches from my head. As luck would have it, here the gorge was at its narrowest, and we would be forced to retrace our steps for several miles if we were ever to escape this dry channel. I was furious with Eunos for misdirecting us, and may have used stronger language than I would wish to reproduce in writing, but none of my complaints made the least impact on the android. He had nothing to apologise for, he told me. There had been no way to predict this impasse, given the information at his disposal. But in my mood of acute gloom I was not to be placated with logic, however impeccably presented. I demanded a solution, a miracle.

Eunos made no comment on my tantrum, but merely pointed out that in pounding my fists on the ground, I was wasting energies that might bet-

ter be employed in the long walk back. Of course, Eunos himself had no need to conserve his energies: his solar-powered battery would fuel him for thousands of hours of continuous effort before running low. In my emotionally charged state this seemed monstrously unfair, but in the next moment I was struck with an idea.

"Why don't you just shift the rocks yourself?" I asked Eunos, who was standing with his arms folded, waiting to begin the return journey.

Eunos frowned. "What?"

"Well, surely with your prodigious strength this barrier would be quickly dismantled!" I countered, pointing to the boulders that blocked our path.

"That had already occurred to me," said Eunos, "but there would be a distinct risk that some of the dislodged rocks might roll down and crush you."

It seemed a disingenuous excuse. I decided to call the android's bluff. "That's a risk I am willing to take," I said.

The robot stood motionless. "Your reasoning is faulty," he said. "The consequences of a mishap would be fatal, perhaps to us both. I may be sturdier than your frame of flesh and blood, but I am not invincible. Should one of these larger boulders fall on me, I would be utterly crushed.

"You are frightened?" I goaded him.

"Obviously not," he replied. "I am incapable of fear. But I am pro-

grammed to serve you. If I cease to operate, I will no longer be able to fulfil that role."

"If the boulders roll down and crush me to death, then you'll just have to find another human to serve," I argued. "And if they kill you too, then your worries are over. As you say, you have no fear of death."

"Correction: death is not a concept relevant to an android," said Eunos.

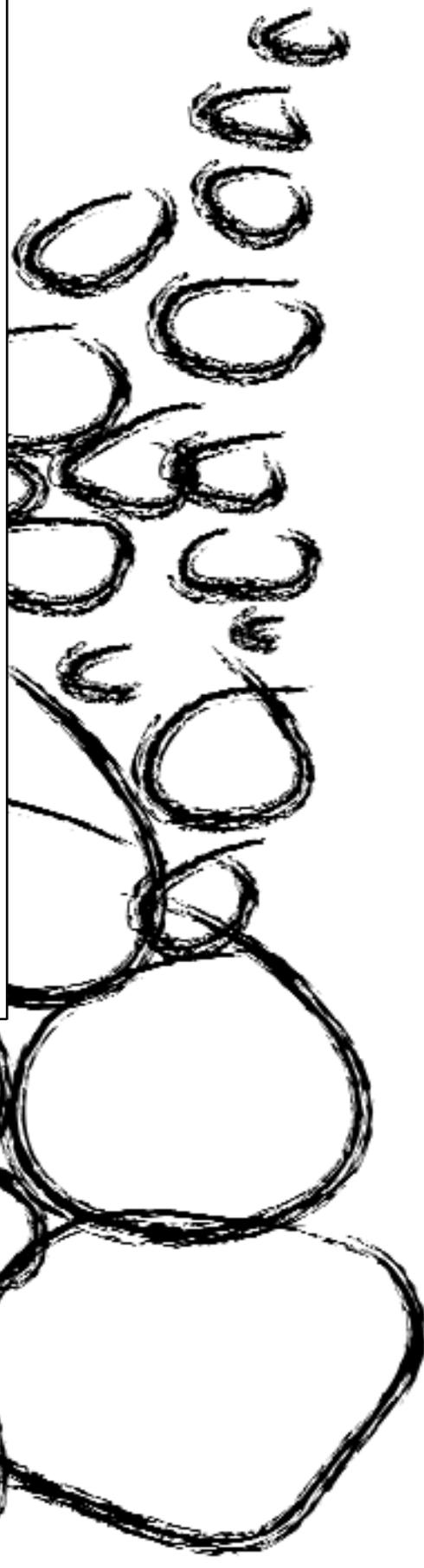
"Good!" I thundered. "Then let's get on with the job! I order you to remove these boulders!"

Eunos raised his synthetic eyebrows. "Orders will not be necessary," he said. "A simple request would have sufficed."

I merely nodded at this latest bit of insubordination. Now it was my turn to fold my arms and wait in silence. Eunos approached the wall, and stood for a moment analysing the higgledy-piggledy assortment of rocks, apparently choosing where to begin his Herculean task.

"Take as long as you want," I said, sitting down on a flat stone. I was determined to enjoy the spectacle of Eunos using his extraordinary physical strength for the first time in my presence.

"I calculate this rock to be the safest one to remove," said Eunos, indicating a moss and algae-covered stone three times his height. "Stand well back!" he said, bracing himself and putting his shoulder against the underside of the boulder.



Devil on My Stomach: a Tale of Tiana's World

Richard K Lyon &
Andrew J Offutt

Marlas, Autarch of Selis, Protector of the Sacred Web and Conqueror of Atea, Kran, Mesara, and Thilland, chose his steps carefully in his descent of the dark dungeon stair. The ruler's clothing was ordinary. There was nothing about the face or form of this man – who had crushed whole nations under his iron foot – to catch the eye or make him stand out in a crowd of four.

He who walked so quietly behind the autarch was easily remembered in nightmares. The short bloated body was topped by a yellow toad's head whose eyes were pools of dark wisdom. Since it walked on two legs, it could, for want of better term, be called a man.

Marlas strode to a scarred oaken door banded with iron. Smiting it, he bawled out, "Zark! You lazy plagul, open this door for your master!" The autarch blinked then, for at his blow the door swung quietly open. "Hmp! That's odd; Zark normally locks the door when he has a victim to play with."

Autarch Marlas stepped through

the doorway and glared about. The shadowy, pain-haunted room was littered with the instruments of Zark's filthy trade: clamps and pincers, the pails end funnels for various water tortures, other ugly apparatus, the large cradle whose inside was lined with spikes, and a box with the image of a woman painted on it, the Iron Maiden. A couple of toes strewn the floor, and the walls were darkly splashed.

On the rack in the chamber's centre was stretched a man. His mighty limbs were distended by the evil machine.

Tall and powerfully built was this victim, fair of hair and complexion. Welts and burns pocked his body. Icy blue eyes fixed their gaze on Marlas with primitive hatred unmitigated by any hint of begging for mercy. Marlas was uncomfortably reminded of a wolf he had recently helped slay for the sport of it; every aspect of this outsize man was that of a trapped beast. The animal had fought with intense fury to the very end, determined to wreak what harm it could before its

death. Marlas saw the same mentality here.

Not unnatural that this man reminded the Selisid ruler of a wolf; he was of that race of sea-wolves of the far north whose rapine and savagery made them a terror to the southern coasts.

Staring at Marlas, the Norther shook his head so that the tangled blond mane flew. "Well, jackal king," he roared, "I see you brought your pet toad to watch my execution!"

"Silence there, northish plagul! Show respect for your betters. I am still your lord. And this man is Shijamarshi, first assistant to the mighty Ekron, chief wizard of Naroka."

"Titles, titles. Hmp – couldn't afford the chief mumbler himself, eh? Ah, but I do humbly beg pardon, my lord Carrion Eater! But – why should a man under sentence of death mind his manners like you enlightened civilised folk?"

"Because, Bjaime," the autarch signed, "I've come to pardon you and grant you an exalted position." Marlas raised his voice. "Zark! Come free this man."

"You're lying," Bjaime said. "Exalted position, is it? Aye – you've come to laugh while I ride the one-legged horse!"

For a moment both ruler and pirate gazed upon the bloodstained shaft several feet from the rack. Rising up out of the floor to a height of some four feet, the pole was three inches in diameter, and sharpened on top.

"By the Cud and by the Web," Marlas said, "I swear I have come here to pardon and to free you."

Bjaime, blinking, thought on that. Marlas hadn't sworn properly by the Back of the Turtle that Bore the World, but still... the Great Web did mean something to these spider-lovers. "What, uh, persuaded you of my innocence?"

Marlas snorted. "Bjaime, Bjaime! I doubt you will ever understand the ways of civilised men! I..."

"I hope not! I might begin to act the same way, if I understood!"

"Um. Yes. I knew you were innocent of the charge when I sentenced

you to be broken on the rack and ride the horse."

"Oh," Bjaime said equably. "Now condemning an innocent man I can understand! Even uncivilised folk do that, sometimes."

Marlas shook his head, smiling. "My sister, dear Luquila, accused you of trying to rape her."

"Anybody who'd believe that would suck eggs in the henhouse!"

"Precisely, Bjaime, and I would not. Had you possessed the wit to plead guilty and beg mercy..."

"Plead? BEG!"

Marlas sighed, glanced at Shijamarshi, continued as if he'd heard nothing: "... on the grounds that her great beauty inflamed you, why then I'd have ordered you flogged and let it go at that."

Marlas raised his voice above Bjaime's laughter. "I would not waste a useful man for my sister's vanity. But Bjaime, Bjaime! You denied it! In front of my entire court and council you stated that a charge even of attempted rape was absurd for – how

charmingly you put it! – 'for when I want a woman I take her and there's naught she can do save to enjoy it!' Now I might have passed over your calling my royal sister a liar, Norther. But not your saying that she is so ugly she frightens gryffons and no man would want her unless he was blind and leprous!"

"It's true," Bjaime said, and shuddered at the thought of Luquila's face.

"You claimed that what truly happened was that you ordered the royal princess to fetch you wine. When she naturally did not obey, you beat her! That shocked my court and council, Bjaime – naturally. And then you proceeded to discourse at length on the natural superiority of men over women, whose place is to serve man, while every man has the right and duty to beat any woman to teach her her place."

"So I did. I'd said so plenty of times before, and you laughed and never disagreed!"

"True... but what you did and said the day before yesterday was in pub-



lic, and was a direct public insult to my sister's birth, and her royal blood – and thus my blood.”

“Ah!” Bjaine's blue eyes brightened and stared ingenuously at the autarch. “I see. Was you I insulted, then. Now I understand that but I don't understand why you have come here. With ole hop-toad, there.” Bjaine winked at Shijamarshi. “K'-gung!” he said, in a fair imitation of a large frog.

Shijamarshi stared levelly at the bound Norther and slowly blinked – from the bottom up. Bjaine's eyes widened still more. He was about to invite the wizard to repeat that fascinating art, when Marlas answered his question.

“I would put my hand in any cesspool to extend and protect my empire,” Marlas said, low and intense. “I pardon you because I need your services.” Again the autarch glanced around. “Zark! You lazy pig, where are you?”

Bjaine smiled boyishly. “I doubt whether he hears you. He is entertaining a lady.”

“What? I pay the knave to work at his trade, and he dallies with whores? I'll have that Mesaratan plagul rocked in his own cradle!”

For the first time, the wizard spoke. “I fear, my lord Autarch, that rocking Eark thusly would be... somewhat redundant.” He gestured at the Iron Maiden.

With a start, Marlas took note that the device was closed. Normally it stood open, displaying its spiked interior to impressionable subjects of Zark's art, to be shut only when occupied. Now it was not only closed, but was indeed leaking scarlet at its base. Marlas started to speak; instead stood open-mouthed.

With a sudden muscular effort that was hardly credible even to staring eyes, Bjaine stretched himself even farther – and slipped his wrist-chains off their hooks. Apparently the chains at his feet had never been chained to anything at all, for he stepped forward unhindered. He bowed to the ruler, very slightly.

“How may I serve your autarchship and what will you pay?” As he spoke, smiling so boyishly, he

reached behind the rack to draw forth a long and shining sword.

“I – I do not understand,” Marlas stammered.

“I believe I do,” Shijamarshi said. “Your torturer underestimated our friend here. In consequence, Zark is in the Maiden's embrace. Bjaine doubtless expecting you to come and witness his horse-ride, laid himself on the rack with his sword hidden to hand. A moat clever ruse, and trap.”

This time the smiling Norther's bow was more profound.

“B-but Eark had four strong assistants!” Marlas protested.

The ruler's voice was weak, for he realised the gravity of his situation. He was unguarded. He had previously admired this warrior's stature and mighty physique – as he might have admired a caged beast. Now the beast was free. Its claw was three feet long, and steel. Though Marlas was no short man, his head rose just above the corded plates of muscle that swelled the Norther's broad chest. And Bjaine's bright blue eyes stared down at the king.

Yet those eyes contained, not hatred, but calm speculation. Marlas had wondered at the seeming rule that all Northers had to be unconscionably tall. Now he wondered if they were all barbarians after all. Civilisation was as a patina on this man, and when he spoke, his words were smooth. Suddenly he did not seem so manipulably stupid. And his grin was that of a wolf.

“True enough,” Bjaine said, “there were four assistants. And do not forget the three Selisid army guards, lord Autarch! One of them thought it would be humorous to torment me with my own sword. Those are his toes, there, and his ugly little organ is lying about someplace. I fear your Highness will be at some small expense to replace those men. But – no use weeping over cracked eggs. Let us discuss the service you want of me, and my payment.”

The yellow toad of a man spoke in a calm and buttery voice. “I am told a session on the rack can create a... great thirst?” From within his robes he produced a wine bottle which he deftly unstopped and put into the Norther's eager hands.

Bjaine handed it back. “After you, topaz.”

He watched while the wizard tilted up the container. Once his adam's apple moved, Bjaine snatched it away. “Here, not all of it, you damned greedy Narokan toad!” And without a word of thanks, Bjaine drained the leather-clad bottle in a few mighty swallows. “Ahhhhhhhh!”

“Now, my friend from the far north, it is well known that you handle a ship better than almost anyone at sea.”

“What d'you mean, almost anyone?”

Shijamarshi said, “Well, there is a certain Tiana. She is for Marlas.”

“A girl?”

“A woman, actually,” Marlas said. “She is above the age of twelve, after all.”

Bjaine shrugged while the wizard said, “A certain chest of jewels aboard her *Vixen* is for me.”

“Umm. Tiana, hm? I've heard of that one, of course. From what I've heard she might come close to being enough woman even for me! And my lord Autarch wants her, eh?” Bjaine put his head on one side, grinning at the king.

Marlas smiled thinly. “I want her dead and off the seas, where she raids my shipping, and Naroka's.”

“Suppose I bring you her head, then, if the price is right? I may have use for the rest.”

“No, no,” Marlas said, “I want her here, alive, Bjaine. I will do the killing. After I wed her; she does happen to be bastard daughter of a certain Ilani duke, long dead. An interesting claim for me to present to King Hower of Ilan.”

Bjaine blinked. “Very complicated.” Then he laughed. “Sounds like a cannibal I once knew. He claimed to inherit a farm because he'd eaten the owner! Well. How soon can you have a ship and crew ready? Treasure seldom remains in one place long, you know, and I'd hate to find this seafaring slut a few minutes after someone else did.”

“The *Stormfury* is already provisioned,” Marlas said with some smugness, “and a picked squadron of Imperial Dragons is boarding her, in

addition to the best of crews. All have instructions to follow your orders.”

“Hmm. Didn’t old Iron Althax try that once,* for Naroka?” Bjaime’s chest seemed to swell another few inches. “But of course he was not Bjaime the Mighty!”

“Of course not,” Marlas said. The Autarch of Selis felt ready to join the Thespians’ Guild. He had managed to maintain a calm front, but now he was relaxing, sure the barbarian would not be difficult. Doubtless the wight was angered by the abuse he’d taken, but like any other sensible man he put his ambitions ahead of his feelings.

“Ah,” Shijamarshi said, “my medicine!” And he drained a small phial from the sash of his robe.

“You sick, sorcerer?” Bjaime asked.

“An allergy,” Shijamarshi said. “I cannot bear the scent of blood.”

Again Bjaime laughed, and shook his head so that dirty, sunny hair flew. “Well then Autarch, there’s only the matter of my recompense, and I sail to plunder a pirate. Hm – little challenge in tangling with a mere g...woman.”

“Do not, Bjaime, underestimate Tiana called Highrider, also called Queen of the Pirates! I said an exalted position for you, and I meant it: the throne of Fran. It’s a rich land, but rebellious. I need a man to rule it with a hand of iron. Bring me the pirate Tiana, alive, and you shall be King over Fran.”

“Why thank you, Highness. That is a most generous offer. But I did have my heart set on the payment given me by the cannibal I mentioned.”

“Above a crown? What payment was that?”

“There is but one payment for a blood insult: my dears, I am going to take your heads.” Bjaime took a pace, the great sword coming up. “So sorry you are allergic to blood, wizard.”

“But – I offer you a throne!”

“I do not sell myself to be tortured, Marlas, even for a throne.”

The Norther’s sword caught the torchlight and reflected on his face; it seemed the personification of Drood, lord of demons. King and mage stood motionless. The former was quite unmanned by this eventuation, and

ready to kneel. Shijamarshi, strangely, seemed amused. The sword’s blade was a flash of lightning as Bjaime whipped it high – and dropped it to ring on the stone floor. Bjaime followed, toppling stiffly like a great tree struck by lightning.

Shijamarshi chuckled at Marlas’s amaze.

“The wine, of course, was drugged,” the toadish mage said in his soft voice. “I quaffed the antidote, just in case. I am proud of the drug, a most unusual one. The victim feels nothing until he makes any violent motion, at which point he is instantly and completely paralyzed.”

With a grunt, and then another, the wizard turned over the Norther’s huge body. Beads of sweat stood forth on Bjaime’s brow and his eyes were blue fire.

“I know you can hear me,” Shijamarshi said. “You are going after that damned pirate who slew Derramal. I am taking a small guarantee that you will return her and her box of sorcerous gems back to us.”

Kneeling beside his victim, Shijamarshi removed various small jars and phials from his robes. “Yes, yes... good... I have all the staples I require. The only perishable needed for the spell is a cup of blood from a freshly murdered man. Marlas, do be a good fellow and fetch me such. You should encounter no difficulty, since from our bearish friend’s account there should be no less than eight corpses secreted here and there.”

An angry reply died in the autarch’s throat and he swallowed its corpse. He resented being first-named and treated as a fetch-boy. Yet he was also aware of the realities of power in the present situation. He moved off on his grim task, taking the tin cup used to water – or more usually to taunt – this place’s temporary residents. Shijamarshi, smiling down at the stricken Norther warrior, held before his eyes a small bottle of black liquid.

“Ink,” he said equably. “The formula is a mite unpleasant and some of its properties odd, but it is essentially ink like any other.”

First showing the prostrate man a brush, he commenced to draw on Bjaime’s stomach. “Damn these mus-

cle ridges! These marks are far from indelible. If you have care, they will last a reasonable time – long enough for you to complete your mission and return to us with Tiana and the valued chest.”

Just as Shijamarshi finished the drawing, Marlas returned with the cup of blood, not quite cold. Appearing more than ever a great yellow toad, the Narokan mage added to the blood from this jar and that phial. He stirred, muttering, and painted a few strokes on the muscular stomach of his human canvas. Again he added arcane ingredients to the blood, muttering words Bjaime could not distinguish. For the Norther could hear, and feel. When he tried to focus on the mage’s voice, though, it remained an impossible blur.

Bjaime stared up at the Narokan. He was sure it was no longer a resemblance he saw; the wizard was a great fulvous toad. In its black robe it squatted crouched beside him, making obscene noises while pointing with its hand-like forepaw. The torchlight paled. It seemed to shiver while whispers hissed from the shifting shadows. Bjaime knew the stones beside him formed an outside wall, beneath the very earth. Nevertheless he heard a knocking, as if something on the other side of that wall sought admission.

From the toad’s horrid throat croaked a single clear word: “Come.”

What came was total darkness, and Bjaime thought he was falling into an abyss.

If someone wearing white gloves, Bjaime felt, were to hold a ball of snow an inch from his eyes, he’d not be able to see it. He strove to move. He could not.

And then the dark was gone. Again the chamber was lighted and normal in appearance as normal as could be such a place of torturous horror. Shijamarshi was only an ugly misshapen man in a voluminous robe. Bjaime discovered that he was able to move, though he was weak as a child of civilisation. And Marlas was staring at Shijamarshi with horror-filled eyes.

“You – you changed.”

“Only an illusion, lord Autarch. Sometimes, during a Summoning, the

inner nature, the soul, of my master Ekron... becomes visible.”

Bjaine tried to rise and was too weak. At least he could move his lips: “Wizard... what did you summon?”

“Why, look at that so-muscular belly of yours, and see.”

The Norther was just able to raise his head and look down. On his stomach a pentagram had been drawn, in black ink. Within it had been painted, in blood and only gods knew what else, a demonic face. A fanged red thing whose eyes were filled with an avid hunger. For a moment Bjaine thought his sanity had fled. The eyes of the painted image moved to stare back at him – and its lips parted in an evil grin.

“You... have painted a... a devil on my stomach!”

“In a way. It is a real enough demon. When you bring us Tiana and the little box I require, I shall remove the demon. Serve us and you will live to be a king. Otherwise, before very long, time and wear will do away with part of the pentagram that holds the devil there, and it will be freed. I don’t believe that you will enjoy feeding it.”

Looking up at his captors from the floor, Bjaine saw the triumph in their eyes. His anger burned to a demonic heat. Slowly, testing his muscles, he levered himself up. He stood. Though he appeared no stronger than a newborn, the volcanic rage that fulminated in him was melting away the weakness. Cunning bade him conceal his returning strength. He forced his voice to calmness.

“Marlas... you have me like a dog in an obedience collar.”

“What a lovely analogy!” Marlas chuckled. “A collar lined with deadly spikes! They tear the throat out of an animal that fails to give prompt heed to its master’s commands. Aye – the teeth of that demon are like spikes, in truth!”

“And, Autarch... do you not remember what happened when your trainer tried to use one of those collars on a wolf?”

Marlas remembered. His face paled. Heedless of its own terrible pain, the beast had mortally wounded itself in order to gain a single moment’s freedom, just enough to slay

its would-be master. Marlas had had to find a new trainer. Looking now into the Norther’s icy eyes, the autarch saw that same bestial rage. It noted neither pain nor death – a fatal blunder had been made.

“Shijamarshi, damn you, you’ve...”

With an animal snarl the Norther lunged at the ruler. He grasped him in two huge hands, and whirled him up into the air with awful ease. He brought the autarch down almost delicately, astride the one-legged horse. Marlas’ shriek was cut off by his in-drawn breath of profound agony.

While Marlas, ruler and conqueror of a dozen lands, writhed in his last consummate anguish, wizard and warrior faced each other.

“That,” Shijamarshi said, “was rather foolish. By slaying the autarch, barbarian, you have thrown away the sapphire-set crown of Fran. Gain sense now, for attack me and you forfeit your life. I am invulnerable.”

Bjaine did not reply. Snatching up the great iron sword, he thrust at the toad-like enchanter’s belly. Like a stick thrust into water, his sword bent – and went whistling past its target. With a snarl he whipped the weapon back. He aimed a furious wide arcing cut that could not miss and that, impossibly, did.

“You do insist on dying, then,” the toad-wizard croaked. “So be it.”

His or rather its eyes were great pools of liquid green light and its reaching, fingered paw was darkness itself. Even as Bjaine swung his sword in a desperately mighty two-handed stroke, that darkness thrust at him. The sword struck nothing; the darkness touched his hands for a single instant of awful cold.

The sword fell from paralyzed fingers.

“Now you die,” the toad-wizard croaked.

Bjaine didn’t wait. Weaponless, his hands now clumsy useless paws, he attacked in the only way he could. He lunged forward to grasp the toadish thing in a furious bear-hug. Though his embrace had oft crushed powerful opponents, this one was as a great chunk of solid stone. The Norther felt his strength waning, sucked from him by cold occult

forces. The wizard slipped in his embrace. Bjaine strained. The toadish head was forced downward, down... into the pentagram on Bjaine’s stomach.

The ghastly howl of dismay and horror was cut off. Summoned by the wizard himself, the devil devoured the wizard’s head. Bjaine’s grip was broken by a spasm of irresistible force. Even as he staggered back, the darkness vanished and he felt his strength surging back into him. As for Shijamarshi of Naroka; arms flailing like the wings of a decapitated chicken, the mage’s corpse danced wildly about the room to collapse at the now motionless feet of Autarch Marlas.

Vengeance swiftly taken in direct action did sometimes present problems, Bjaine mused next morning, well out to sea. Once again luck, that beautiful goddess whose many incarnations he ardently worshiped, had smiled upon him. The late Marlas had departed this life with no opportunity to countermand his order that Stormfury was to sail with Bjaine in full command, and the big Norther had gratefully accepted fortune’s gift. What he would do with this crew of foreign seamen and squad of marines – and for how long – only time would resolve; Bjaine did dislike thinking.

Likewise time and his ardent worship of the Fickle Goddess would surely, somehow, resolve the bothersome problem of the demon now imprisoned within its pentagram on his stomach – which was well-swathed against friction and salt spray. Who said wizard’s spells died with them?

Bjaine knew the wisdom of living for the moment. He was dimly aware that others, nighted, brow-furrowed people, might well consider the devil to be certain eventual death, once one line of the pentagram was broken. Bjaine’s mind did not work so. For the moment he was in no danger. Indeed, as recent events had demonstrated, a devil on one’s stomach could even be quite useful. It would retain that potential, and present no danger so long as he did nothing to disturb the containing pentagram.

That should be no problem; he had Shijamarshi’s phial of black ink and besides, the mighty barbarian seldom bathed anyway.

When a Baby Laughs

Anna M Lowther

Bridget sighed as she pulled the needle to the back of the hoop and secured the last tiny stitch. She removed the soft ivory fabric and smoothed it out across her knees. In the centre was a smiling pink baby cradled on a sunny yellow rose. A tiny fairy hovered above the infant's head. Circling the picture were the words "With every baby's first laugh, a fairy is born." Nights in the maternity ward had been slow lately, and she'd been able to finish the cross-stitch in just two weeks. "Seanmhathair, this one's for you. I only wish I could see a fairie like you did," she whispered softly as she tucked the threadwork into her tote bag. Bridget sighed again, remembering her grandmother.

* * *

Born in the country just outside Kenmare, Seanmhathair's heart never truly left her beloved Ireland. Bridget's Seanathair, Ian Patrick O'Brien, moved his bride to America from Dublin in 1913 following Bloody Sunday. He'd lost his job as a tram driver in the lockouts, but more devastating was the loss of his best friend – shot through the heart by a strike-breaker. America held the promise of a brighter future, and Seanathair had grabbed for the gold ring. After docking in New York Harbor the young couple sought peace and prosperity in Maine, where the rocky coast was reminiscent of the Emerald Isle.

Five years later Bridget's Da, Ian Patrick II, was born. Before the boy's third birthday Ian senior was dead, succumbing to pneumonia. Seanmhathair never remarried, and young Ian remained fiercely devoted to his mother. At the age of twenty he married Lois Thompson, a sensible young woman from Yankee stock, and brought her to live in the modest home he'd shared with his mother all his life.

Ian and Lois brought Bridget into the world on St Patrick's Day, 1950. Her hair was a rich copper, just as her grandmother's had once been, and they shared the same green dancing eyes. Bridget spent many hours at Seanmhathair's knee listening to endless tales of the Emerald Isle. Lois tried to discourage the old woman from filling young Bridget's head with nonsense, but she never succeeded.

Of all the tales her grandmother told, Bridget's favourites were about the fairie folk. "Oh, Seanmhathair! I want to see a fairie!" she would cry. "I've looked in the garden under all the roses, but I can't find one! Not a single one!"

"Patience, child. One day you'll see a wee sprite. Watch for a babe's first laugh. That's when you'll be sure to see one. That's how they're born, ye know. Oh, but I saw a beautiful one the night you arrived. Ah, how she kissed your dimpled cheek and winked away." Seanmhathair con-

soled the young girl. "Ye were born under the light of the full moon with a caul o'er your face. You're destined to see the fey realm one day, I promise you. Remember, in the seeking for one thing will you find another. All in its proper time."

When Bridget was fifteen, she and her parents were in an automobile accident. Bridget sustained minor injuries, but watched in agony as her parents bled to death before help could arrive. She felt so useless, not knowing what to do or how to save them. It was at that moment she decided to devote her life to medicine.

She worked hard and put herself through school while working nights in a laundry. She graduated with honours and a Nursing degree in 1974. Her grandmother sat beaming in the first row as Bridget received her cap and pin. She took a job in the Maternity Ward at Mercy Hospital in Portland. Seanmhathair died six months later.

* * *

Eight years had passed. Bridget had assisted at almost three hundred births, and had cared for each tiny newborn. At first she had hovered over them, anxious of making any mistake. She never took a break, and often skipped her lunch to stay near the infants. Many had smiled, and some even laughed softly in their sleep. Still, though she always watched, Bridget never saw a fairie.



She rose and moved through the nursery, checking each swaddled bundle in the isolettes. Her crêpe-soled shoes whispered across the tiles. “Ah, well,” she said to herself. “I’ll be thirty years old next week. I suppose it’s time I stopped believing in nursery tales.”

She approached a small blue bundle. The card above his head announced the arrival of young Colin Brady O’Connor. Bridget smiled as she brushed the fine copper fuzz atop his head. The baby squirmed as much as the swaddling blanket would allow. She could see his eyes darting beneath his closed lids. “Playing with the angels, are you?”

He turned his head toward her and his perfect little rosebud mouth parted letting a tiny, silvery sound escape. “Your first laugh! How precious you are,” Bridget cooed as she stroked his head. She stared in amazement as thin pale wisps of fog formed above the sleeping babe. The fog thickened and condensed into a gray-green cloud. A faint breeze passed through the room,

dispersing the cloud. In its place was a winged creature barely two inches tall. It wore a pale green suit, soft moss-coloured slippers and a peaked green cap. “Top o’ the morning to ye, Bridget,” it said, doffing its hat.

“And the rest o’ the day to yer-self,” she responded automatically. Bridget shook her head, realising she had slipped into her Seanmhathair’s brogue. She hadn’t heard the traditional Irish greeting since her grandmother passed away. Her heart ached as she remembered a lifetime of exchanging these words every morning at the breakfast table with Da and Seanmhathair.

* * *

She stared at the wings, beating almost too fast to be seen. The muted nursery light reflected as an iridescent shine off their surface. “Are ye truly a fairie?”

“Aye, and what else would I be, now lass? Don’t be daft. Let’s see, this says me name is Colin. Ye can stop thinking of me as ‘it’. I’m a man,

right enough.” The tiny man straightened his coat tails and replaced his cap on his head.

“I’ve waited all my life to see a fairie. I’d nearly given up hope.” Puzzlement filled Bridget’s trembling voice. “Why now? Why are you here?”

The little man flew closer to Bridget’s face. “I’m here because this fine Irish lad birthed me. I’m speaking to you so that you will know the destiny you have to fulfil. Yer Seanmhathair told ye of the Faire folk and the Fey Realm, didna she?”

Bridget nodded silently.

“Aye but there are those less gentle and kind in the Realm that have escaped their bonds and are preparing to arrive. Ye must keep yer eyes sharp. Heed me warning well, child. Tonight ye will see an unholy fairie birthed when a human babe in your care screams. Dunna be afearad.” He extended a tiny gold shillelagh no bigger than her cross-stitch needle. “Take it, girl. I have na got all day.”

Bridget took the tiny cudgel be-

tween her thumb and index finger. It glowed with an intense golden light. "Ye'll have ter be fast," the little man continued. "When the unholy one appears ye must club her while her wings are still wet, before she can fly away. If she escapes, great evil will be spilled across the world. Do ye ken me words?"

Wide-eyed, Bridget nodded.

"Ye have been chosen to stop the evil ones from entering the mortal coil. Tis a grave responsibility, yet I feel ye have the inner heart for the work. May the Saints be with ye, child."

The fairie bowed low and disappeared.

* * *

"I must be losing my mind," Bridget thought. She moved toward the small desk in the corner and picked up her clipboard to make her shift report, though she had no intention of including any mention of the last five minutes. As she reached for her pen she realised she still held the tiny golden club. She dropped it into her front pocket and sat down, cradling her head in her hands.

Half an hour later she received a call from the Emergency Department. "We're sending a bad one up your way. Crack addicted girl, fifteen years old or maybe a bit younger. Says she's had no pre-natal care, and doesn't even comprehend that she's pregnant. Doctor Fisher's been called, but I think the baby's coming fast; you may be on your own for this one. Just wanted to warn you."

Bridget had attended a seminar about drug-addicted mothers just a month ago. This would be the first case for Mercy Hospital, but surely not the last. The larger facilities in the area transferred all the charity cases to Mercy. Without proper insurance, all the street pregnancies would end up in her care. The instructor had warned them the numbers of these mothers was rising at an alarming rate.

Bridget felt her stomach tighten, remembering all the things that could be wrong with the baby soon to be her charge. The infant was probably premature and would be far too small. He could be born in a drug-induced,

depressed condition if the mother had recently smoked crack. If she had not used recently the baby would arrive suffering extreme withdrawal. Either way posed serious problems for the helpless child.

"Bridget, I need some help here!" Jane struggled with the young girl who kicked and screamed at the orderly pushing her wheelchair. Bridget ran to assist, and the three of them managed to get the girl into a bed.

"Good luck with that one." The orderly took the wheelchair and disappeared into the elevator.

* * *

Bridget's job was to take the baby as soon as it was delivered, while Jane would tend to the mother. Mercy Hospital was short-staffed, so there were only the two of them on duty.

Jane looked up from examining the girl. "They were right. No time to wait for the doctor. This one wants out *now*."

The girl sat halfway up, shrieking obscenities at the two women at her feet. She gave a harsh grunt, and a tiny, blood-soaked bundle oozed onto the bed. The tiny baby lay motionless as the mother began to shriek and kick.

Bridget clipped and cut the cord quickly, wrapping the girl and rescuing her from the imminent danger of her mother's flailing feet. "Go, take care of the baby. I'll deal with her." Jane slapped restraints on the terrified girl, then pulled a syringe from her pocket and injected a sedative.

Bridget watched the girl go limp, still mumbling words that should not come from a woman's lips. She hoped Jane would encounter no difficulties while delivering the placenta.

Carrying the limp, silent bundle she rushed to the nursery. Under the warming lights she weighed and measured the infant girl who slowly began to thrash about. She wiped the baby gently and used a bulb syringe to suction her mucous-clogged airways.

The child tossed her head with uncommon strength, squinted her tiny face and balled her fists. Bridget was amazed to find she could barely keep her on the table. Suddenly the child grew rigid, and every muscle tensed

as her face turned a deep purple. Her tiny lips parted and a shriek of pure agony issued, resounding through the nursery.

Bridget watched in stunned silence as an ugly mist rose from the baby, the dark purple-black colour of a nasty bruise. The mist swirled and began to thicken and take shape. A hideous fairie woman shot out of the vapour. Her wings were black, and her hair was a streaming mass of purple. She began to wail in a high-pitched kean. The sound was hideous, and Bridget felt her supper rise in the back of her throat.

Bridget stumbled backward to get away from the sound, but remembered the tiny shillelagh in her pocket. She quickly withdrew it and struck the fairie on her acorn-sized head. The fairie exploded, sending splashes of purple-black darkness in every direction.

The infant whimpered softly, but stopped her thrashing. Bridget dropped the tiny club back into her pocket, and finished caring for the baby girl. Once the babe was moved to a heated isolette and sleeping, Bridget began to clean the table where the baby had been.

There were thin strands of purple-black goo clinging like a spider web to the wall behind the table. Bridget extended her finger, but the gelatinous mess began to smoke before she touched it. As Bridget stared at the wall the substance disappeared, leaving only a slight blistering of the paint behind to mark where it had been.

"Oh Seanmhathair, no one is ever going to believe this!" Bridget longed to talk with her grandmother, to try to understand what had happened. Her shift was nearing its end, and she decided to relay only the expected medical information to the nurse who would soon relieve her.

Later as she walked to her car, she remembered what Fairie Colin had said. *The evil fairies had escaped, and she must stop them. She needed to fulfil her destiny.* She looked to the dawning sky and said a silent prayer that she was not alone in the fight. After all, there was just so much that one girl could do.

Shaggai

John Hall

Picture postcard (depicting Dunchester cathedral, postmarked Little Snelling) from the Rev. Mr Hamish McLean to Mr Edward Lawrence, of Boston, USA:

Docken Magna, 2 Aug 1907

Dear Teddy,

Arrived yesterday after *long* journey via Dunchester, etc. No picture postcards of this place, nor yet a post office, nor a Dr – no sort of society at all – though there is an inn (of sorts), which I don't think I'll be patronising. I'll post this in Snelling tomorrow, and write properly soon. Trust you and family all well.

Regards,
Hamish

* * *

From Mr Edward Lawrence to the Rev. Hamish McLean, The Vicarage, Docken Magna:

Boston, August 28, '07

Dear H,

Many thanks for the p/card. No inn, no medical man, no Post Office, no society? My dear old chap, you really seem to have found either a rural idyll dreamed of by many and attained by few; or, the very back of beyond! You must write and let me know which it is. What about tobacco? Shall I send a few pounds of bright Virginia? I was talking with Peter M yesterday – you recall him from Oxford? – and he sends you his best. I think he intends to write; I passed on your new address. Ran into P quite by chance at the club, he's over here attending some symposium or other, I gather, and also looking up American friends, etc. Seriously, no inn? Still,

as a man of the cloth (I suppose I shall have to start calling you "Reverend" as we do over here) you won't need that sort of thing: *O, tempora, o mores*, as old Prof T used to moan! Do you see the old Oxford crowd at all, or is it too isolated? By the way, Mother sends her regards, as does the old man, etc, etc.

Teddy

* * *

From the Reverend Hamish McLean, currently at Docken Magna, to Mr Edward Lawrence at Boston:

The Vicarage, Docken Magna,
18 Sept, 1907

Dear Teddy

Thanks for yours received yesterday. Did it come by one of the new fast passenger liners? It seems to have arrived very quickly.

As to this place – well, frankly, I have to say it's more "the very back of beyond" rather than your imagined idyll! The place in and of itself is all very well – trees, fields, etc, "as advertised" – but nothing in the way of entertainment. And nothing much by way of congregation, I regret to say. A few rather nice refined old ladies, and one or two of the local farmers and their folk, etc, but the labouring classes seem reluctant to turn up. Although possibly it's just the new man in the vicarage they mistrust? We shall see!

The village itself is a tiny place, a hamlet, I suppose you'd call it? A score of houses at the outside, though half a dozen farms with cottages and such in the parish, which swells the numbers a bit. Still, I don't believe there are more than two or three hundred souls in my care, which makes

me feel rather a fraud, by the way, or would if this place were not so [here a word begun and evidently hastily scratched out] desolate. That is, perhaps, unfair on the place. After all, a good many rural parishes are thin on the ground these days. As the people move to big cities, lured by the prospect of streets paved with gold, etc. (The usual thing!) With company, of course (and that of the right sort) one might feel more at home. There is – I must tell you this! I forgot to say the nearest village is Little Snelling, with a Post Office – just a little shop and General Store all rolled into one, but sells stamps and takes parcels, etc. Little S (called "Snelling" by us all here) is 5 miles off; then Great Snelling (called "town", would you believe it, as in "we're bound into town") is 12 miles off, with the Dr and the nearest Vicar. A long walk, I managed it in a couple of hours, but was sweating profusely at the end, it being a hottish day (I'll hire a pony and trap from the inn next time). Dunchester is 35m off, a real expedition, and an overnight stay if one goes there. I passed thro' on my way here, and found a rather nice "calabash" pipe – a bit dusty, looked as if it had lurked in the tobacconist's window since the Boer War ended – but a good smoker. The inn here sells tobacco – of a kind! But the newspaper shop in Snelling has promised to order me supplies from London.

Anyway, I lost my thread rather – doesn't matter! The Rector of Great S, Dr Hastings (D.D., very grand, I thought it was only bishops that had D.D.s) has a daughter, *Marie*. A pleasant and lively young lass, with very fine eyes and a magnificent singing voice. I might as well tell

you, Teddy, she has pretty much stolen my poor old heart! Once things settle down – you know I have no family, or any money to speak of – but once I have saved a little, I plan to ask Dr H if he is agreeable to the match. Will you be my best man? Serious work afoot, old chap! I mean to make a will, and to be very grown-up about things. One must, after all. I'm 27 next year, and it's time to think about settling down... etc, etc.

* * *

From Mr Edward Lawrence to the Rev. Mr Hamish McLean:

Boston, October 17, '07

Dear H

Many thanks for your letter and *heartly congrats!!!* Though I suppose it's still pretty much a secret? I might as say that I, too, have been thinking seriously of matrimony, and intend to ask a certain Miss Dorothy Lathom if she'll have me! That is, assuming things go well – we are both asked to spend Christmas with the Rawlingses (Mr and Mrs Rawlings, of Washington. I think I mentioned their son – Charles – who is a friend of mine). If things go well – well! You did rather skate over your promise, expressed or implied, to describe your new abode. Do let me know what the place is like. Fishing, you say? Would I like it... etc, etc.

* * *

From the Rev. Mr Hamish Mclean to Mr Edward Lawrence:

The Vicarage, Docken, 2 Nov 1907

Dear Teddy

I trust all goes well with Miss DL at Christmas!

Yes, I meant to describe the village and etc, though the other news was, I thought, too good to keep to myself! Docken (Magna added on maps, but left out in ordinary speech *ut supra*) is as I've said: tiny. There is (or was) a Docken Parva, which must have been minute in the extreme. Nothing there now, just a few hummocks in a field belonging to one of the farmers. It might, perhaps, repay a little amateur archaeological work next summer. Can you get over and I'll lend

you a shovel? The field, by the way, is very rough and weedy. I asked the farmer and he shied away; I more or less get the idea that the place is pretty much avoided because it's regarded as *haunted*, or used by witches, etc. This from one of the farmer's men, in exchange for 6d and a fill of my tobacco (at which he turned up his nose, it being a bit "gentle" as he said). Very interesting! And, of course, it makes me all the more determined to investigate the place and its history.

I must add that it's all the more intriguing because this place – or the people, I should say – is a very hotbed of superstition. I mean, we all throw spilt salt over our shoulder, etc, but you would scarcely credit the diverse taboos you find here! Not cutting one's nails on a Friday, not having knives crossed on the table – all very ordinary, but they take them quite seriously and feel threatened if they miss anything out. Then there are also others, peculiar to the place, for e.g. Certain trees are regarded as unlucky and there is the farmer I spoke of – though a ruined village might reasonably be expected to be regarded as haunted. I suspect this arises from the place having no Dr or other medical man. We have a midwife of sorts – a "wise woman", I think the anthropologists would style her – and a sort of "wise man", an old chap who doctors the sheep and cattle etc with herbs and the like. And the humans, too, I shouldn't wonder! I've seen him come out of a few hovels, and the folk look guilty when you ask what's amiss. He – Mr Oldman (no joke) – actually cured a cold of mine which had been dragging on ever since I got here. Herbs – ugh – a foul-tasting brew, but strangely and wondrously effective! No wonder few folk bother with the Dr in "town" (i.e. Gt Snelling).

Oddest of all, there is a curious old – "statue" I suppose you'd call it – a stone figure, a "graven image", almost, if I were superstitious myself. A strange thing, much weathered, so that it is difficult – downright impossible, to be plain – to see what it may originally have represented. Squat, with more arms or legs than seems called for. No features visible on the

"face", if that's what it is (or was). There did seem to me to be some sort of inscription on the base, though indistinguishable to a hasty glance. I tried the old brass-rubbing technique, which, as you know, can bring things up, and it reads: "SHAGGAI". What do you make of that? I can only think it must be "S" for "Saint", which the Roman church uses, but what of "Haggai" – if I am reading it right – an OT prophet, one of the shorter fellows? Not, as far as I am aware, a saint though! I must find a RC priest and make further inquiry. I did take the trouble to ask Mr Oldman and one or two of the older (pun intended) parishioners about it, and – as so often here – they rather shied away! I forgot to say that the local "squire" as I suppose he must be, is a Mr Partridge (again, I'm not making this up) – and he told me (very seriously) – that the statue was intended to "keep the Evil One out of the church". So, yet another local superstition!

As to the fishing... etc, etc.

* * *

From Mr Edward Lawrence to the Rev. Mr Hamish McLean:

Boston, December 1, '07

Dear H

Your new abode sounds like a veritable witches' coven (is that the right word)! Your "statue" sounds *fascinating*. Yes, you must find a RC priest and ask him what it might be.

Christmas is fast approaching, have you any plans for the holidays... etc, etc.

* * *

Transatlantic telegram from Messrs Morton, Morton, and Balsam, solicitors, Great Snelling, to Mr Edward Lawrence (this having arrived with the above in the post):

Great Snelling GPO, 3:12 pm,
5 December, 1907

MR LAWRENCE DEEPLY REGRET YOUR FRIEND OUR CLIENT THE REV MR HAMISH MCLEAN DIED SUDDENLY YESTERDAY STOP LETTER FOLLOWS STOP JAMES FRANCIS MORTON MORTON AND BALSAM STOP

* * *

“Mr Lawrence? Delighted, sir! Though, of course, the circumstances are – ah – considerably less pleasant than either of us might wish. Sit down, sir. A cigar?” Mr James Francis was not exactly Teddy Lawrence’s notion of an English country solicitor, being only a year or two older than Teddy himself. He smoked a pipe, wore rather loud tweeds, and sported a luxuriant moustache. Teddy, had he not known otherwise, might have taken Mr Francis for a turf accountant in a flourishing way of business.

Teddy sat down in a slightly worn but very comfortable chair. “Thanks, I’ll stick to my pipe, if you don’t mind?”

Francis raised his own old Peterson. “A pleasure to meet a fellow addict! I may say, some of my clients – well, I have to open the window before they condescend to open their hearts.” He looked down at his desk, and grew serious. “I have not yet expressed my condolences, or not in person –”

Teddy waved this aside. “That’s understood, and anyway your letters were more than gracious.” There had been a busy time for the postal services with a minor flood of correspondence – though of a fairly impersonal nature – back and forth, before Teddy himself had arrived early in the new year at Great Snelling, and sought out Mr Francis. “Your telegram naturally did not – could not – elaborate as to the manner of poor Hamish’s death,” Teddy went on, “and you have, to be blunt, rather evaded the questions I put to you on the subject in my various letters.”

Francis looked a little embarrassed at this, but said nothing.

Teddy continued, “I appreciate that, inasmuch as we had never met, you knew nothing about me, and would perhaps not wish to say too much to a stranger. However, you will understand that, as Hamish’s oldest friend, or one of them, and since he has no family of any kind...” Teddy broke off, feeling he had lost his thread. “Anyway, what I mean is, I’d very much like to know some of the details. Just for my own satisfaction, if that word is appropriate.” He hesi-

tated once more. “It just seems so – well, so very odd. Hamish had, as far as I’m aware, never suffered from a day’s illness or anything of the like in his life. It was, I take it, a tragic accident? Unless it was some sudden seizure, but I cannot believe that.”

“Tragic? Yes, tragic.” And Francis made a great business of attending to his pipe, though it was burning perfectly well.

“Well, then?”

Francis blew a cloud of rank smoke at the ceiling. “Mr Lawrence, I understand your concern, my dear sir. Indeed, I do. However – you will, I’m sure, excuse my being evasive again – but I should be grateful if you would not press the matter.”

“Oh?” This was, of course, guaranteed to make Teddy want to press the matter, and it showed in his face.

Francis sighed. “As his solicitor – and since he had no family – there was an inquest...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I viewed the body.” Francis paused, as if reluctant to continue.

“Please be plain, Mr Francis,” said Teddy, a touch of impatience in his voice.

“Very good. The expression on poor Mr McLean’s face – I mean, once hardly expects a man who has just died to look happy – but, well, I have never seen such a dreadful expression on any face, living or dead.”

Teddy frowned. “Pain, you mean?”

Francis hesitated, apparently seeking the right words. “That, yes. Not pain alone, though, but the sheerest mortal agony. And there was more even than that. There was surprise, but also something else.”

Teddy shook his head. “I don’t follow you, sir.”

“Horror,” said Francis shortly. “It sounds strange, I know, but that’s the only way I could describe it. Sheer, naked horror.”

Teddy shook his head again. “But – was it an accident, then? What was the medical opinion? The coroner’s verdict?”

“Death by misadventure.”

Teddy gave a short laugh. “I know enough of English coroners to know what that means!”

“Oh I know, indeed, but the cir-

cumstances...” Francis broke off yet again. “Look here, are you quite sure you want to hear all of this?”

“Quite sure. As you said earlier, poor Hamish has no family, and I’m his oldest friend, pretty much. I couldn’t get there in time for the funeral – by the way your letter, or one of them, said that it couldn’t be delayed – and that’s another oddity. But, since I couldn’t, I’d like to find out as much as possible about it all.”

Francis nodded. “Fair enough. As to the funeral, there was... well, it was thought, I thought, *we* thought – the firm I mean – it was best not to wait too long.”

Teddy frowned. “We’ll let that pass, for the time being. You were about to tell me just how poor Hamish died?”

“He was found in a field,” said Francis, “at a place called Docken Parva.”

“Aha!”

Francis leaned forward. “You know it, then?”

“I know of it. That is, I know the name. Only what Hamish wrote to me about it. An old, deserted village, or something of the kind?”

“Something of the kind,” agreed Francis.

“Sorry, I interrupted you. The cause of death?”

Francis shrugged. “I’m not a doctor, but the medical opinion was ‘massive internal injuries’ leading to death. Heart failure, I suppose – ultimately – in consequence of those injuries.”

“You say he was found in a field? Was there any animal, a bull or something, that might have gored him?”

Francis shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve made the thing quite clear, I’m afraid. There wasn’t a mark on the body, unless you count that hideous expression I told you about. The injuries were to the various internal organs, but nothing – nothing at all – to show how they’d occurred. No cuts or scars or any other sort of mark.”

“Hmm. Odd.”

“Indeed. As to a wild animal – or even a domestic animal run amok – there was no entrance to the field from the other fields round about which held farm stock, and no marks

of any wild beast. Besides," Francis added, "this is rural England, not the wilds of America where you might expect to find a mountain lion! No, there was absolutely nothing to show how the injuries had been inflicted. Nothing whatever." He hesitated. "You don't know this area at all, I gather?"

Teddy shook his head.

"It's – well, it's a strange place, Docken, in many respects."

"Look here, who was the doctor who looked at the body?"

"Dr Wilson, here in Snelling. Would you like an introduction to him?"

* * *

"Mr Lawrence? Sit down, please."

Dr Wilson, like Mr Francis, was a young man, and Teddy – who again had half expected a much older man – felt his spirits rise. "I'm a friend –"

"Yes, yes. Francis told me that you'd written to him, and that you were coming over to see us in person." Dr Wilson paused, and took out a cigarette case. "Do you?"

Teddy waved the offer aside. "Doctor, I know that there are what you might call professional considerations which might make you reluctant to talk about a patient – a former patient – but I am, or was – rather – a very old and very good friend of poor Hamish's. That being the case –"

Dr Wilson held up a hand. "My dear fellow! No need for all that, I assure you." He hesitated, much as Francis had done earlier, and took his time over selecting and lighting a cigarette. "No, the plain fact is that no professional consideration, as you term it, would count very strongly with me in this instance. However, there are other considerations which make it a rather painful topic to discuss. Neither you nor I, now, can do anything which might make any sort of difference to poor McLean, so why rake over the thing? Just try to accept it as a tragic –"

"Accident?" The tone of Teddy's voice made his displeasure obvious.

Dr Wilson laughed sheepishly. "Yes. Look here, you're a man of the world, I take it? Well, then, I'll tell you the difficulty. When we... when we looked at poor McLean's body,

there wasn't any sign of an injury. None whatever. You understand that? Naturally there had to be a proper post-mortem examination, and that was the... the real devil of it, to be blunt." He broke off for a moment. "Look here, I don't normally drink during the day, but I think an exception might be justified in this case." He stood up and went over to a locked cupboard, unlocked and opened it, and took out a bottle of whisky and two glasses. "Will you join me?"

Teddy, feeling rather disappointed with the good doctor, said, "Thanks, but I don't –"

"I would really recommend it. My professional advice, you know. No fee, of course."

"In that case, perhaps a small one?" Better humour the fellow, thought Teddy. And a second thought followed hard on the heels of the first, to the effect that if this was the best the locality could provide by way of a medical man, then it was just as well that he had come here himself to look into the matter.

Dr Wilson handed Teddy a glass, and took a sip – no more – of his own before continuing. "The only thing I've ever seen that was at all similar," he said slowly, "was an old tramp who must have had a good day's begging one market day, and taken a drop too much to drink, or more than drop to much in fact. He must have stumbled in the road and the next thing anybody knew he was under the wheels of a hay wagon. Crushed his ribs, poor fellow, pushed them right into the chest, and the weight of the thing turned his lungs and other internal organs pretty much to pulp. Of course, in that instance, there were obvious external injuries to be seen."

"I see. And Hamish – that was the kind of thing –" Teddy took a drink, not a sip, of his whisky, wishing now it had been a larger helping.

Dr Wilson nodded. "Only with McLean, every organ – every single organ – in his body was in the same state. Pulp." He, too, took a longer pull at his drink.

"Phew! I see. Yes, I do see. But... no external marks?"

Dr Wilson shook his head. "Not a

scratch on the body. Outside, at any rate."

Teddy shook his head in disbelief. "But what could account for such a thing?"

"For the internal injuries? A fall, perhaps, from a very great height. Or a crushing injury, like the old fellow and the cart. But in either of those events there would be external marks as well. And there were none."

"So. I mean to say, have you no conjecture – no guess – as to what might have done it?"

Dr Wilson shook his head. He leaned forward and lowered his voice, although the two men were alone in the consulting room. "It looked – mind, this is not in any sense a medical opinion, rather a credulous man's fancy... It sounds sheer lunacy – damn it, it *is* sheer lunacy! But it looked just as if someone – or something – had carefully removed his skin, beaten the insides to a pulp, and replaced the skin with equal care and consideration." Teddy finished his whisky at a gulp. "Another?"

"No, no thanks." Teddy stood up, held out his hand. "Look here, I know – well – I know that this must have been a bit awkward for you, Doctor. I can see, now, why you would have preferred not to discuss the matter. But I'm sure that, equally, you can see why I feel obliged to look into it further?"

"Oh, quite so. That is to say, I can and I can't. By which I mean – and I hope this doesn't sound patronising or anything – but you're a newcomer round here, and I'm not. All I can say is, if it were me, I'd leave well enough alone."

Teddy looked closely at the doctor. "Any particular reason for that advice?"

Dr Wilson shrugged his shoulders. "Only that – well – there have been one or two odd occurrences round about here, in my time."

"Odd. How *odd*?"

"I'd really prefer not to discuss it."

Teddy stared at the other man. "Oh, very well! But this is all very mysterious, I must say." He felt this was perhaps a touch churlish, and added, "Still, thank you for your time, and your frankness."

"No trouble at all."

"Oh," said Teddy, who had just remembered something, "that lawyer chap, Francis; he said he, or perhaps *you* – those involved, anyway – had thought it best not to delay Hamish's funeral. Was there any reason for that?"

"Not really. There were no relations to make a special journey, of course, so no reason to wait on that account. As for yourself, there was no telling whether you'd want to come, or how long it would take."

It sounded plausible, but something – a hint of evasion, almost – in Dr Wilson's voice, made Teddy ask, "And that was all?"

"There was... talk." He gave an unconvincing laugh. "They're a superstitious lot round here, I'm afraid." He glanced at his watch. "If there was nothing more? Only I have my rounds to do, you know."

There was in fact a good deal more, but Teddy could see quite clearly that further enquiry would be useless. He merely smiled, nodded, and shook hands before leaving.

A Doctorate in Divinity may, as the late Rev. Mr McLean had noted, be more appropriate to a bishop than to the rector of a fairly remote parish. And indeed the Rev. Hezekiah Hastings was – to all outward appearance – eminently suited more to an Episcopal palace than to a rundown rectory, being a man of some fifty years, and almost entirely bald, with a kindly – almost otherworldly – expression now rather marred by a worried frown.

Dr Hastings waved Teddy to a chair and produced a respectable sherry, for it was by now getting dark, though it was only around four o'clock in the afternoon. "A trifle early," he said without a hint of genuine apology in his voice, "but I fear I have never got into the habit of afternoon tea, and one feels the need for a little refreshment at this hour."

"Thank you, sir." Teddy accepted his sherry, and sipped it cautiously.

"Now, you say you are – *were*, I suppose I ought to have said – a friend of Mr McLean's?"

"I was, sir. Perhaps his best friend."

"And you are naturally anxious to find out just what happened to him?"

Teddy nodded. "And I must say – if I may say so without giving offence, sir – that those to whom I have spoken already have been less than forthcoming on the subject."

"Ah." For a moment, Teddy thought that Dr Hastings was going to be similarly reticent, but after a short pause and another sip of sherry the older man went on. "These professional men, so-called! Doctors and lawyers and the like – they won't commit themselves, my dear sir, and that's a fact! Frightened, I suppose. Frightened that people will talk, accuse them of being fanciful, over-imaginative, not quite rational. A clergyman, on the other hand – well, to a very great extent we deal in the unknown every day, we're used to thinking about things you can't see or hear, but just have to accept anyway. Take on faith, so to speak."

Teddy was relieved. "Yes. Of course you do, sir. That being so, I wondered if you might give me some hint as to what really happened to poor Hamish – Mr McLean, that is?"

Dr Hastings coughed delicately, and studied his sherry glass carefully. "I must say," he began cautiously, "the subject is – ah – a somewhat touchy one, and a somewhat painful one, despite my previous assertion as to my own suitability for consultation upon it."

Teddy, feeling that an interruption might merely further postpone any discussion, said nothing.

Dr Hastings went on, "Does the poet not say something to the effect that 'there are more things in heaven and earth' and so on? It's quite true, you know. It may, perhaps, already have occurred to you to wonder as to just why a place like Docken should have its own vicar? It is really so small that under normal circumstances there would be, at best, a curate. More likely there would be nobody at all and the church would serve merely as a chapel of ease, with the people ordinarily being obliged to come here on a Sunday should they wish to attend divine service."

Teddy had lived in England long enough to know something of how things were done there. "And you,

yourself, sir," he said, greatly daring, "I did wonder... about..." He found himself uncertain as to how to continue.

Dr Hastings seemed to catch Teddy's meaning, though, and gave a little smile of self-deprecation. "You think that I am perhaps too highly qualified for the post of rector in such an out of the way spot? Well, sir, it is perhaps not for me to say it, but the plain fact is that for many years – possibly many centuries – it has been the custom to have a full-blown vicar at Docken, and to have an older, more experienced man here at Snelling."

"And why is that, sir?"

Dr Hastings leaned forward. "Because the history of the place – the occurrences, as it were, over the years, or the centuries – make it imperative that the church should have a presence here. Tell me, Mr Lawrence, do you believe in 'evil' as a concept?"

"I've known some very wicked men," said Teddy. "And, to be honest, some very wicked women as well. But 'evil' in the abstract? The devil walking abroad stinking of brimstone? With the greatest possible respect to your own views, sir, no, I don't really think I do."

Dr Hastings nodded, as if that were what he had expected. "No. You young chaps – all scientists and evolutionists I dare say – your modern theories have overshadowed the old teachings, of course. But I'm a bit more elderly, and I can tell you that some very strange things happen in this curious world of ours." He sighed, "And perhaps more particularly in this small corner of it. Naturally, it comes and goes," he added, almost as an afterthought. Before Teddy could ask what he meant, he went on, "Now, Mr McLean's predecessor, old Mr Farrer – I call him 'old'; he wasn't decrepit or anything, but he was twenty years my senior when he died – had knocked about a good bit. Done a lot of missionary work out in Africa, where the folk are not quite as sophisticated as ourselves – rough diamonds, you know – and not quite so eager to scoff at things which they don't understand."

Teddy waited a moment, then said, "You will, I'm sure, forgive me, Dr Hastings, but there is a great deal

about all this that I don't understand. I'm sure that all you've said is quite true, but you still have not said just what you think happened to Hamish."

"Ah." Dr Hastings studied his sherry glass again. "No, indeed. And of course you – indeed you are fully entitled to – yes." He looked round his study, although it contained only the two of them (this was something to which Teddy was by now pretty much becoming accustomed), lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, and said: "Witchcraft!"

"Witchcraft?" Teddy, who had unconsciously leaned forward in sympathy, sank back into his chair, and his voice showed the disappointment he felt.

Dr Hastings shrugged his shoulders. "You see? You ask my opinion, and reject it out of hand once given!" He gazed at Teddy with the benevolent smile of a father considering a mildly errant son. "Nevertheless, that's my private opinion, for what it is worth."

Frankly, thought Teddy, it wasn't worth much at all. It did, however, explain why a man with Dr Hastings' qualifications should end his days in a rural rectory. Clearly the bishop had got wind of Hastings' odd beliefs and put him out to pasture, sent him where he could do little or no harm. Teddy smiled back, as genuinely as he could manage.

Dr Hastings' smile broadened. "Humour the poor old chap, is that it?"

"No, no! But – well..."

"I understand, my boy, believe me, I well understand. Your reaction is precisely the same as my own when old Bishop Beaumont – dead now, of course – asked me to 'volunteer', as he put it, to serve out here." The smile vanished and sighed again, more deeply. "Well, I've changed my mind since those days, I can tell you."

"You must admit, sir –"

"Oh, I do! Have you not been out to Docken yet?" Teddy shook his head. "No. If you do – mind, I wouldn't advise it – you'll see for yourself that it's a very... odd sort of place, I suppose I should say. Yes, distinctly odd. The people," he glanced round and lowered his voice again, "don't travel much outside the village and so

– well, frankly, 'inbreeding' would be the modern term, although I'm afraid that we called it by a somewhat ruder name at theological college. Yes, very strange people, although one tries not to judge." He stood up suddenly. "No good talking to you youngsters! Have you dined, by the way?"

Teddy, appreciably thrown by Dr Hastings' revelation, realised that in fact he had not eaten all day, but had drunk a small whisky and a large sherry, and was both hungry and light-headed in consequence. "No, sir, I seem to have been so busy the thought never occurred to me."

"Then you'll dine here. No argument! My wife is dead, of course, but my daughter keeps house very well for me, and we have an excellent cook. I'll ring to make sure there's enough, though I have no doubt." Before Teddy could say anything else, Dr Hastings had rung the bell and given instructions to the maid who appeared in answer to it. When the matter was settled, he asked Teddy, "And where are you staying tonight?"

"Again, I have not really –"

"Then you can stay here, at the Rectory. No argument there either! We have plenty of spare bedrooms, and there's only one inn with rooms to let at Snelling – which is not even suitable for the farmers and commercial travellers who patronise it. No, my dear fellow, you'll stay here tonight, for you'll not get back to Dunchester for your train – not now."

"My train, sir?"

"Back to London." Dr Hastings beheld Teddy, "I take it you will be going back as soon as may be?"

"No, sir, I plan to say here – in Docken Magna, that is to say – for a week or so, to look into Hamish's death." Until the words were said, Teddy had not known what in fact his intentions were. He had come to England without thinking – almost instinctively – and now, just as instinctively, he saw what he must do.

"Oh, dear!" Dr Hastings appeared quite distressed at this news. "The village – well, there is not even a rudimentary inn such as we have here, only a beer-house, without rooms and meals and hot water! If you are determined to stay in the area for a few days, I suppose we could

put you up here, although it is a substantial walk into Docken – unless you hire a cart or trap, or some such."

"That's very kind of you, sir," said Teddy, with conviction, "but I think I should prefer – is there nowhere in Docken, no cottage, however humble, that would find me a bed and a simple meal?"

Dr Hastings shook his head. "The people are not exactly welcoming to strangers." He stared doubtfully at Teddy, as if seeing him for the first time. "If you are set on staying in the village, then we might do worse than give you a key to the vicarage. I have a spare here."

"Why thank you, sir!"

"Mind you, I wouldn't recommend it. For one thing, the place will be damp. It's been empty these past few weeks, and at this time of year..." The days had been cold, and the sky gave promise of snow, though none had fallen lately. "No servants in the place, of course," Dr Hastings continued, "although Mrs Oldman did go in every day to keep the house tidy and cook a meal for poor McLean."

"That sounds admirable."

"I don't know about that. Do you have any luggage?"

"I travel light, sir." Teddy nodded towards a large holdall which he had brought with him, having hauled it around all day, and left in a corner of the study.

"A man after my own heart; can't do with a load of traps and steamer trunks. Well then, tomorrow we shall arrange a ride for you with the grocer's cart. It goes into Docken three times a week, to keep them supplied."

"Bound for Docken, mister?" The grocer's assistant and carter, a generally uncommunicative man, spoke as if Docken Magna were at the end of the earth; as if he, personally, had neither been there nor desired to, and Teddy was headed for a destination unknown.

"Yes." Two can be uncommunicative, thought Teddy. He was in tolerably good spirits, Dr Hastings having given him a satisfying dinner last night and a hearty breakfast this morning. Teddy had met Miss Hastings, and found her rather ordinary

and a touch silly. So, the grocer's man having refused all offers of help when unloading goods in and around Little Snelling and smaller places on the way – and having broken an hour's silence to ask this asinine question – Teddy was pleased to answer him in kind.

“Bound for the vicarage?”

“Indeed.”

“Aye.” A short pause, then, “Stranger in these parts?”

“My first visit.” Teddy wondered if he couldn't perhaps extract some information from such a humble source, having acquired little enough from those he had thus far consulted. “I am – or was – a friend of the late vicar, Mr McLean.”

“Aye?” The man shook his head grimly. “A bad business, that, mister.”

“Aye?” It was said before Teddy could help it, but seemed to cause no offence.

“Aye. And I'll tell you this, mister, were I you – vicarage or no vicarage – I'd lock my doors of a night. And my windows into the bargain.”

“Oh? I shouldn't have thought an out of the way place like this would be much troubled by anything more wicked than the occasional bit of poaching.”

“Wicked?” The grocer's man turned this over in his mind in silence for a moment, then hawked and spat into the ditch. “Don't know as to that, mister, but were I you, I'd lock my doors of a night.” He gestured with his whip to where the road curved out of sight behind a thorn hedge, its dark branches now lightly dusted with the snow that was just beginning to fall. “Docken round the next bend.”

The cart lumbered round the sharp turn in the lane, and Teddy was somewhat disappointed to see nothing more than a ramshackle cottage on the right hand side, another on the left some hundred yards further on, and then another bend in the road. “Not a big place, is it?”

“Nay. Mind, this isn't what you'd call Docken proper. Main of the place is round this next bend.”

Teddy was prepared this time, and thus neither surprised nor disappointed to see that the “main of the place” consisted of half a dozen cottages every bit as dilapidated as those he

had seen already, scattered down a furlong of fairly straight road. “Is this all there is?”

“Aye. And more than enough, did you ask me.”

“What do the people do?” Teddy wanted to know.

“Do?” The grocer's man was evidently puzzled.

“You know: do they work on farms, or knit stockings at home, or just what?”

The man pushed back his cap and scratched his head. “Some do work for Farmer Burton,” he conceded, “but mostly his folk live at the farm, or the little cottages round about it.”

“Where is that?”

“Burton's Farm, they call it.”

Teddy sighed.

“Oh, aye, I see. Out by what you'd call Docken Parva,” the man pointed with his whip as he elaborated. “A short mile away, the farm. As for t'other folk, they – well, I don't rightly know what they do.” He scratched his head again, as if to inspire thought. “Squire Partridge, I suppose he looks after them, like.”

“Yes, Mr Partridge. He's the biggest landowner hereabouts, I believe? I meant to ask you where he lives.”

The grocer's man brought his cart to a standstill, and pointed again. “See that little lane, just before that last cottage? Go up there, no more than two – maybe three – minutes, you'll find his old place. Now, you're bound for the vicarage, did you say? See the lane off t'other side of the road, halfway down? Vicarage and church, they're both five minutes up that way.”

“Thank you. What about a Mr and Mrs Oldman, where might I find them?”

“Cottage just before the church lane. I'll take you there and up to the vicarage before I unload Widow Granger's goods.”

“No need for that, thanks very much,” said Teddy. “Thanks to you, I can find my way well enough now, and I'd like to speak to Mrs Oldman and Mr Partridge before I go to the vicarage.”

“Suit yourself. I'll be here a while, anyway. I take a bite of bread and cheese at the Crooked Billet before I

set off back, a dreary old day like this. If so happens you need me, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, thanks again.” Teddy produced a small silver coin, which much to his surprise was waved away.

“No need for that,” mumbled the grocer's man. “Just doing my job.”

“Go on,” urged Teddy. “Have a glass of beer on me, with your bread and cheese?”

“Well, then,” said the man, as if the notion were new to him. “I won't throw your kindness in your face, mister, and thanks.” He jerked his head at the nearest cottage, “Widow Granger's. Nearest thing to a shop in the place, should you need aught. If she hasn't got it, she'll order it from town next time I call.”

Teddy nodded, climbed down from the cart, and retrieved his trusty holdall. “Thanks again,” he said, setting off in the direction of the Oldman cottage. As he did so, a woman – presumably Mrs Granger – came out of the cottage that served for the village shop. She stared at Teddy without any sort of curiosity and ignored him when he wished her a good morning. Odd indeed, he reflected, but thought no more of it as he strode the few score yards to the Oldman door, and knocked loudly.

It was opened by a woman apparently identical to Mrs Granger – so much so that Teddy actually looked back over his shoulder to where the grocer's man was unloading the cart. “Oh – I beg your pardon. Mrs Oldman?”

This knotty problem was weighed in silence for a few moments. “I am.”

“My name is Lawrence, and I'm staying at the vicarage.”

Once again Mrs Oldman thought about this a while. “No good you going to the vicarage, there's nobody up there now.”

After several more minor misunderstandings Teddy managed to secure Mrs Oldman's services to the extent that she would light a fire or two at the vicarage, set fresh linen on the bed, and prepare a meal for the evening.

“Mind,” she added, “it'll only be cold pie, but there's a bottle of something or other in the cupboard – or

should be. Not that Vicar was a drinking man," she added rather hastily, making Teddy – who had not known McLean as an abstainer in his youth – wonder if Mr Oldman had not informally acquired some of the late vicar's cellar.

However, he was so pleased at having successfully concluded his arrangements that he let this pass, merely saying that he wanted to see Mr Partridge, and would return to the vicarage as soon as may be. Teddy enquired if Mr Oldman might be home, as he would have liked a word with him, but apparently the man of the house was "over to Burton's farm", at present.

"Have you a key?" asked Mrs Oldman. Teddy produced the key given to him by Dr Hastings. "Well, that's all right, then. See, I've a key myself, but did I give you that, I couldn't get in, could I?"

"No, indeed not." Their domestic arrangements were going to be positively scintillating, thought Teddy. "Thank you so much, Mrs Oldman, I'm sure I'll see you later."

"Not if it's dark, you won't. Folk round here don't like to be out after dark."

"Oh."

Mr Partridge's house, which Teddy found easily enough, was a good deal more substantial than the rundown cottages in the village street. It was, in fact, as typical a manor house as one might expect, set in among trees and fronted by a garden that was both formally laid out and decidedly untidy. When Teddy was admitted by an elderly manservant, he saw there was even a great hall inside the door, presumably a relic of some medieval establishment.

Mr Partridge came bustling out to greet his visitor. The squire was a man of indeterminate age – fifty or sixty – and was not unlike Teddy's private image of Mr Pickwick, being inclined to baldness and a slight fussiness of manner, and wearing a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles which he looked over rather than through.

"Mr Lawrence, is it? From America, I understand? Yes, indeed, we have heard of you, sir, and half ex-

pected you, as well. A sad business, sir, a very sad business." Mr Partridge gestured at the holdall which, since it was not particularly heavy, Teddy hadn't thought to leave anywhere. "Got your kit, have you? Good, that means you can stay here tonight, or for as long as you wish."

"That's very kind of you, sir," said Teddy, "but I've rather arranged to stay at the vicarage for a few days."

"Ah! The vicarage? I see." Mr Partridge digested this. Evidently, swift replies were not highly regarded hereabouts. "Well," he went on at last, "I suppose your mind is made up. Though if you should change it at any time, just let me know, and we'll find a bed here for you. You're probably hungry, I imagine? It's a fair way from Snelling, and the weather has taken a turn for the worse today, I fear. I dine in the middle of the day at this time of year, and would be delighted if you'd join me. We'll have a long talk – I know there must be many questions you wish to ask and I'll do my very best to answer them – then I'll take you over to the vicarage before it gets too dark to see the way. No street lamps here, you know!"

Teddy, in whom twelve miles of crisp, late January air had produced a keen appetite, thanked him profusely. Mr Partridge apologised for the fact that it was only a few minutes past noon, and produced a bottle of excellent sherry, followed soon after by a roast fowl complete with trimmings.

"My housekeeper, Mrs King, looks after me very well," said Mr Partridge. "Of course," he added thoughtfully, "she isn't from these parts."

Teddy thought it best not to enquire as to just what his host meant by that, asking instead, "Earlier on, sir, you seemed to think that my staying at the vicarage wasn't such a good idea. Was there a reason for that?"

"Only that the old place will be damp, and such, you know."

"Mrs Oldman has promised to air it, and light fires."

"Ah, yes. She's a good woman, not – perhaps – too intelligent, but a good heart."

"She bears a strong resemblance to Mrs Granger, are they sisters – or otherwise related?"

"A small place like this – you know," Mr Partridge smiled as one man of the world to another. "If the truth be told, I dare say I'm a distant cousin of more than half the people here."

"And feel responsible for them accordingly? There cannot be too much in the way of work, round about?"

"There are one or two farms, of course, but yes, one does feel a certain *noblesse oblige*, and such. As I was saying, Mrs Oldman will at least make the vicarage habitable for you. It'll need it, what with the damp."

"Just damp? It isn't –" Teddy hesitated, then thought that he might just as well try and get some sensible opinions on what was troubling him. "The vicarage isn't haunted, or anything, is it? Reputed to be, I should say, because I imagine you're as sceptical as I am about these primitive beliefs."

"Haunted? Dear me, no. The church, of course..." Mr Partridge trailed off.

"The church?"

"I was going to say that the Church rather pooh-poohs that sort of thing," he replied vaguely. Teddy had the distinct impression that the squire had not originally intended to say anything of the kind. Mr Partridge proceeded immediately, "As for being a sceptic, I can understand your views, but I'm afraid that having lived here all my life, I am reluctant to condemn these old beliefs – superstitions you might call them – too strongly."

Teddy nodded, embarrassed not for the first time in the last day or so. Emboldened by the sherry, or the fine wine Mr Partridge had served with the meal, he asked, "I have tried to determine exactly what happened to poor Hamish – McLean, that is – but all I get is a lot of... well, nonsense. You can't tell me anything, can you?"

Mr Partridge coughed delicately, and Teddy was not encouraged by the sound. "It depends very much, you know, on just what one is prepared to believe. Things have changed a good deal in the world even in my time. Electricity, motor cars – I dare say you have a motor car back home?"

"I don't, but my father does. Not very reliable," Teddy laughed.

"But you take my meaning? A cen-

tury ago, who would ever have thought candles would be replaced by a simple switch, or horses by evil-smelling engines? Belief, even the various shades of Christianity... a funny thing, belief."

"Yes, indeed, but what about Hamish? What do your beliefs say about him?"

"Ah." Mr Partridge looked over his spectacles at Teddy. "Mr McLean. You see, as I say, we – my family, I mean – have been here for a good time now, and in that time we have seen a good many queer things happen in the place." Before Teddy could put the obvious question, Mr Partridge raised a hand, and went on, "What sort of queer things? Well, unexplained deaths, such as that of your unfortunate friend. Oh, not as what you might call a regular occurrence, but sufficient in number – counted over the years – to make one wonder if the old tales might not be true after all."

"What might those old tales be, sir?" asked Teddy. "People seem to be reticent about them, unless perhaps they just don't know. But even the most unimaginative men – the fellow from the grocer's shop in Great Snelling, for instance – seem to feel as if something is amiss here. He went so far as to give me this." Teddy produced the little wood carving the grocer's man had given him, and passed it to Mr Partridge.

"Dear me!" said Mr Partridge as he examined it closely. "I've seen such objects before. A charm, I suppose you'd call it, or a *ju-ju* as they might say in Africa. As to its efficacy, real or imagined..." He gave a weary smile which spoke volumes, and handed the charm back. "But you do see how the place has a reputation far – relatively far – afield?"

"Is that on the basis of these unexplained deaths? I would have thought that if they are indeed occasional, their occurrence would not be so remarkable as to produce the reputation you speak of, especially in an out of the way village such as this."

"Indeed not. We are a long way from doctors and surgeons and the panoply of the dissecting room! As you suggest, country folk tend to make a mystery where none exists –

but there is the entire history of the place to be considered, too."

"Is there?" This, thought Teddy, was more like it.

"Did McLean not tell you any of it?"

"The truth, sir, is that Hamish had scarcely time to settle in to his new duties before his death. All I know is that he took an interest in local customs and legends."

"I see. He did not pass anything he had learned on to you? No? Well, let me see," Mr Partridge refilled his glass, and offered the bottle to Teddy, who refused. "At one time the village was a mile or so down the road, at what is now known as Docken Parva. I see you have heard the name. The folk there had the reputation of serving old gods –"

"Pagans, you mean? Woden, Thor, and the like?"

"No, much earlier than that, I imagine. The Romans – we have Roman remains here, you know – pretty much suppressed the old ways, moved the village here, and left only a farmstead where the previous settlement had been. Hence the 'Magna' and 'Parva' nomenclature. By the time the Saxon pagans arrived, the old ways had re-emerged, and were again suppressed. This was followed by the witch-fever of the medieval days, of course. Many a savage deed was done in this old place." He shook his head sadly and took a sip of his wine.

"You will forgive me, sir, but surely this talk of Romans and Saxons and witches is ancient history, in the most literal sense?"

"Ah," Mr Partridge had the grace to blush slightly. "Family records, you know, speak of the witch trials, so that much is certain. As to the rest, amateur archaeology has been pretty much a mania with my people over the years. True, I suppose much of what I have told you is speculation, but speculation based upon sound evidence, sir!" Teddy was nonplussed, but Mr Partridge saved him from the need to provide an appropriate response by looking at the clock. "Our conversation has been so interesting that I'd not realised it was so late. It will be dark soon, and I promised to show you the way to the vicarage."

"Please don't trouble yourself, sir. I can find my way quite easily."

"No trouble at all. I see that it's starting to snow, so it might be as well if I accompany you." Mr Partridge stubbornly refused to be put off. He walked with Teddy back through the village street, and up the lane on the far side, stopping outside a very ugly house built in the early Victorian style. "The old vicarage was burnt down," he explained. "I have often deplored the economies which dictated this rather repellent architecture, but what is the use?" He watched as Teddy unlocked the door, and added, "There is electricity laid on. Ah, you've found the switch! Makes the old place seem quite cheerful, does it not?"

"Will you step in a moment, sir? I don't know what there is in the way of refreshment, but –"

"No, thank you. I must be getting back, and you'll need to make yourself comfortable in the place. Perhaps once you've settled in, you will feel inclined to repeat the invitation, and I to accept it." Mr Partridge shook hands and raised his antiquated hat in farewell. After he couple of paces he turned round. "Mind, should you decide – for any reason – that the vicarage is not to your taste, then the offer of a bed at my house still stands. Any time, you know."

And off he went.

* * *

Teddy woke early next morning, perhaps the natural consequence of sleeping in a strange bed. He had found his way about the house without the slightest difficulty, including the cold pie left by Mrs Oldman. It was quite delicious and Teddy had muttered some nonsense to the effect that it contained some of Mr Partridge's partridges. Together with the half bottle of Long John scotch whisky he found in a cupboard, and the pipe and decent tobacco he'd bought in London, Teddy had done himself well the previous evening and turned in early. Mrs Oldman had thoughtfully put a stone hot water bottle in the bed, so he'd dropped off to sleep at once. Perhaps he had turned in a bit too early. That might explain his waking at an hour which,

if not actually ungodly, was a touch less than heavenly. Still, it did mean he could turn over for a few minutes – or more – and that was no privation, for the air outside the blankets felt chilly, as if there had been a hard frost.

Teddy eventually, reluctantly, rose from his bed, dressed, and made his way downstairs to the kitchen. There was an old-fashioned range with an oven and the like, upon which stood a kettle of water. The fire had burned low overnight, but a shovelful of coals procured a cheerful blaze, and in a few minutes the water in the kettle was hot enough for a wash, a shave, and a blessed cup of tea.

Teddy's preparations were interrupted by Mrs Oldman letting herself in at the kitchen door. She looked askance at Teddy fiddling with the stove, made reference to "the damper", and proceeded to arrange the mysterious device to her own satisfaction before allowing him to take his hot water upstairs.

By the time Teddy returned to the kitchen, feeling considerably more blithe, Mrs Oldman had prepared his breakfast of eggs and bacon, and made a very good job of it too. As he ate, she asked, "You wanted to see Oldman, sir?"

"Is your husband at home?"

Mrs Oldman looked at him, and he noticed her eyes had a peculiar blankness. "He's at home, now. If so you'd care to step down to the house, you'll find him at home. Meantime," she added with a disparaging glance around, and an audible sniff, "I'd best take a duster to the place. And if so you do go out, mind your step, for it's slippery underfoot."

Teddy finished his meal and then, well wrapped up and shod in stout boots, ventured outside with his pipe. He blew a great cloud of smoke into the clear, frosty air, and set off. The lane was icy, but a couple of villagers were out and about. Although they ignored his greetings, Teddy noticed that looked a touch "vacant", with the same blank eyes. This was not the only respect in which they resembled Mrs Oldman and Mrs Granger, for they all bore very similar features. Really, this was inbreeding with a vengeance. Teddy had heard of "the

village idiot", but here was a village well on its way to being entirely populated by imbeciles.

A few minutes' walk brought him to the Oldman cottage, and he knocked at the door. It was opened by a perfectly ordinary looking man – Teddy noted with relief that his features were distinct from the other villagers – dressed in shabby clothes. "Mr Oldman?"

"Aye. You'll be Mr Lawrence, I reckon? Come in, sir."

There followed the usual pleasantries. Teddy offered Mr Oldman a fill of tobacco, which was accepted, and then got down to business. "Mr Oldman, I'm really here to find out how Mr McLean died. Nobody seems able – or willing – to tell me, and I wondered if you might know anything about it? I'd be most grateful, just for my own peace of mind."

"Peace of mind?" For a moment, Teddy could have sworn Mr Oldman sounded amused at this, but the other man appeared quite serious as he adjusted the filling of his pipe, and Teddy assumed he was mistaken. "I'll tell you this: he died in a thunderstorm."

"Oh. Do you get thunder at this time of year... Are you saying he was struck by lightning, or something like that? Because in that case –"

"Lightning?" Mr Oldman did not trouble to hide his contempt. "He wasn't struck by no lightning! No, what I'm telling you is this, mister: whenever *They* come, it's always in a thunderstorm."

"*They*?"

Mr Oldman nodded. "Or *Him*, as may be. Some folk say one thing, some another."

Teddy shook his head. "I don't follow you, I'm afraid. Is this another of the local legends, or –"

"No legend, mister. You'll have seen that – *Thing*?" Mr Oldman's speech was littered with curious emphases, which Teddy thought of as Capital Letter Mania.

"I'm sorry, I don't –"

"In the churchyard?" Mr Oldman gazed at a garishly sentimental calendar advertising a popular brand of cocoa. "Today's Saturday, isn't it? Well, you just keep an eye on the church tomorrow. You'll see." He nodded mysteriously.

Somehow Mr Oldman managed to deflect all the supplementary questions which Teddy put to him. Frustrated, Teddy took his leave after a few minutes more of pointless conversation, returning the way he'd come. This time he turned right instead of left at the top of the lane, thereby coming to the church rather than the vicarage.

The church was a much older building than the vicarage. Norman, perhaps. Certainly the entrance porch had the arched top and heavy oaken door which spoke of Duke William and his contemporaries. There seemed nothing special about the edifice, though possibly the interior might repay the attention of the ecclesiologist. Teddy glanced inside, which seemed – as is so often the way with rural churches – to be far too large for the needs of the current population. There was, however, nothing to interest a man who was not a specialist in church furnishings or architecture, and Teddy stood there irresolute. He was for a moment at something of a loss as to what to do with the rest of the day. Had he wasted his time, and a considerable amount of money, travelling here from Boston? It was looking that way. More irritating than any waste of time and money was the insidious thought that he was making himself look just a little foolish.

He turned to go, but – as he closed the heavy door behind him – it struck him that he might spend a few minutes looking for the curious statue or figure McLean had noted. It was, Teddy recalled, somewhere in the churchyard, and it must be fairly obvious to the casual observer. He wandered slowly down the path, noting the broken-down tombstones, on a few of which he could just make out worn inscriptions: "Jabez Oldman" and "Elizabeth..., Gone to The Lord, AD 157..." There seemed to be many Oldmans resting here, but strangely enough the name "Partridge" appeared to be absent. Teddy lifted his eyes from the gravestones and looked around, seeing a small but substantially-built stone structure at the side of the church. Some sort of mausoleum for the squirearchy? He went over to it. It was evidently a tomb for

it had the usual cross over the door – no, there was a cross alright, but it consisted of two bones carved at right angles and surmounted by a skull, though this was much worn and not easy to spot. A macabre conceit, but quite typical of the sixteenth or seventeenth century, when the thing had very likely been built. There was no family name on the building, but there appeared to have been a coat of arms or something similar which had at some time been rather brutally defaced with a chisel. He rattled the door handle, and found it securely locked.

Teddy returned to the path. He went down as far as the gate by which he had originally entered the churchyard without seeing anything remotely resembling a statue. Disappointed, he looked around again, and noticed another entrance to the churchyard over towards the vicarage side. A lych-gate, with the usual little porch affair over it, gave onto the narrow path by which coffins were brought in for burials. Despite his robust scepticism and the warm clothes he wore, Teddy could not repress a slight shiver. He nevertheless went over to the lych-gate and looked inside the stone porch round it.

There, sitting on a ledge just inside the gate, was a small stone carving, for all the world like some heathen idol. About nine or ten inches high, no more, and not of the local stone, which was a brownish granite Teddy had never seen before. This carving was soapstone, unless Teddy was very much mistaken, but he would not have expected to find soapstone around these parts. And McLean had been right, the thing did seem all arms and legs. Or perhaps it was hair. Now that Teddy examined it closely, its face was weather-worn and flattened, with no features discernible, although the hair seemed to hang down in long locks. He wasn't sure if "locks" was the correct word, but the hair was a long tangle, at any rate, and seemed to merge with the lower limbs in an odd way that reminded Teddy of something. He couldn't be sure if it was Medusa, the Green Man, or Mithras. There was an inscription carved on the base of the statue, but – like the face – it was too

worn to be made out properly. Giving regard to McLean's opinion, Teddy supposed it might read "shaggai" or "S Haggai". But then it might equally read "shaggy" – accurate enough if it referred to the hairstyle – or "thuggee", or "A Present From Southend", or indeed just about anything one cared to read into it. There were a few withered flowers scattered around the base of the thing and something else – mouldy bread, perhaps – like some rude votive offering.

Intrigued, Teddy reached out to pick it up for a closer look – then jumped as someone shouted, "Don't!" He turned, and was considerably surprised to see Mr Oldman standing a few feet away. Oldman must have followed him to the church, Teddy realised, now recovered from his surprise and slightly annoyed. He was about to make a remark, when Oldman added, "You didn't touch that – that *thing*, did you?"

"Why, no."

Oldman nodded sagely. "Best you didn't, mister. T'other chap – vicar, as was – he messed about with it, and you know what happened to him."

"In a thunderstorm?" Teddy couldn't help himself.

Oldman shook his head. "Some folk won't be told. I've tried. At least I can say that to anybody."

He seemed sincere and Teddy felt ashamed at making fun of a man who had, after all, had none of his own advantages in life. He said, quickly, "Look here, Mr Oldman, I'm very sorry if I sounded flippant and if I seem to be taking your words and warnings too lightly. But you must see that to me – as an outsider, a stranger here – it all seems very far-fetched!"

Oldman, who had half-turned to leave, appeared mollified. "Aye, that's likely enough true. You see, mister, my family's been here for a lot of years and we've kind of grown used to the goings-on. Take it for granted, like."

"I see that, but you must appreciate that it's very annoying that nobody will tell me just what these *goings-on* are? Unexplained deaths, I gather, but –"

"And the rest," Oldman interrupted.

"Oh?"

Oldman looked around furtively – actually looked all the way around, which took Teddy slightly aback – and lowered his voice. "You'll have seen one or two of the folk hereabouts? All look alike, pretty much, don't they? Even the wife," he added with a touch of sadness.

"I assumed... a small place like this – marriage within the village, and so on..."

"There's that, I'll allow. But there's more to it than that. Things a man doesn't like to talk about, or even to own to himself." Teddy could do nothing but sigh. "Well, I'll tell you, even if you don't believe me – and you won't, I know that! There's *things* hereabouts, unholy *things*, *things* not of this world. Aye, laugh! But it's true enough, and you'll find out for yourself if you stay here long enough."

He seemed offended, so Teddy said hastily, "Again, I'm sorry if I find it hard to accept, but please go on."

"Nothing much more to tell. *They* – whoever, or whatever – *they* maybe come here in..." He hesitated, looking for the right words.

"A thunderstorm?" suggested Teddy. This time there was no levity in his voice.

"Aye, you might call it that. Come to think, I couldn't tell you another word for it. Only it isn't like a proper thunderstorm, if you follow me? A lot of lightning, the odd rattle of thunder, but not like any thunderstorm you ever saw."

"Just the lightning, electrical disturbances?" Teddy was intrigued.

"Aye," Oldman nodded. "And that's when they come. *They* – *they* do pretty much what they want... and then – and then go back... to wherever *they* come from."

"And since *they* – whoever they are – have their way with the village maidens – sorry, I'm not trying to be funny, just to put it delicately – that's why all the folk here look alike?"

Oldman nodded. "That's it."

"But *you* don't. And Mr Partridge doesn't. How do you explain that?"

Oldman shook his head. "Can't.

Look, mister, I may not be able to explain things very well – and I certainly can't explain everything – but I'm doing my best. There just aren't words to tell a lot of what I've seen."

"Yes, I understand that, but do try. What about these strange deaths, for instance? Are *they* responsible for those? And if so, why?"

Oldman looked down and muttered something incomprehensible.

"What was that?"

"A lot of 'em's strangers, like your friend the vicar. Don't know what to expect, don't know how to keep safe – or as safe as you can be. And then I think that sometimes *they* kill as you or I might kill a cow or a sheep."

"What, for food?"

"Aye, or for fun – like the gentry kill a fox or a fish they aren't going to eat."

"Good Lord!"

"Not that He's a lot of use," said Oldman with grim humour.

"At any rate, you've been more straightforward than anyone with whom I've yet spoken." Even, he thought to himself, if you've just told me the biggest load of gibberish since Munchausen. There was no doubt of that. Thunderstorms that weren't thunderstorms, but which allowed evil spirits or creatures from another world to come and disport themselves in – of all places on God's good earth – Docken Parva! Oldman, with his purely local reputation as a healer, or whatever he pretended to be, probably used spells and incantations along with his herbs and potions, and believed the nonsense he chanted over his cauldron.

But what about Hamish?

Looking at it logically, suppose Hamish had been found in – say, London – with massive internal injuries. Would the obvious conclusion not have been that there was foul play? Poor old Hamish had very likely broken – without realising it – some local taboo, and one of these inbred idiots had done him to death. The absence of external marks, of course, was a puzzle, but then perhaps Hamish had been beaten with a sack of flour or grain or some bucolic weapon that left no cuts or bruises. The bruises may have appeared after death, but the body had been hastily –

and was that haste itself not suspicious – buried. The "examination", if the word was even appropriate, had been by a doctor who hit the bottle in the middle of the day, but even the incompetent medico of Great Snelling might have found obvious signs of injury were it not for the unseemly rush to inter the corpse. Triumphant, Teddy returned his attention to Oldman, who was regarding the statue in silence.

"Do *they* look like this thing, then?"

"I couldn't say."

"Oh?"

Oldman shook his head again. "It's very funny, but you never remember seeing *them*."

"Hmm."

"And another thing – the time's all wrong."

"I don't follow."

"Well, how can I explain it? You see, you get this – lightning, I'll call it – lightning, and then next thing you know it'll be few hours after."

Teddy frowned. "After what?"

"After it should be, by rights. Say the lightning stuff comes in the morning. Then it seems as if it's only been a few minutes, see, but you'll find it's late afternoon."

"A whole chunk of time missing, is that right? Like waking up after a heavy night and being unable to remember just where you were, or how much you had to drink?"

Oldman nodded. "I see you're laughing at me again, but aye, that's just it."

I'll bet it is, thought Teddy, wondering what Oldman put in his potions. "I still don't see why this figure is here, in the churchyard, if it represents evil, as you seem to think."

Oldman shrugged, indifferent to Teddy's logic. "Couldn't rightly say. I do know, or at any rate I have the feeling, that they gather round it. Anyway, it's always been there, to keep the *evil* – as you yourself called it – outside the church."

"But what if it acts as a... a *mag-net*... for these *things*. Then surely it would be better moved right away from the village? Or destroyed completely?"

Oldman smiled. "Destroy it? I wouldn't, not if I was you, mister.

And as for moving it – well, then you'd never know just where *they* might turn up, would you now?"

"No, I suppose not."

Oldman turned to leave. "Just you keep watch tomorrow. Look out of the vicarage window. You'll see."

As he watched Oldman walk down the lane back to the village, Teddy realised just how isolated the place was. He had the rest of the day before him and absolutely no idea as to how to occupy himself. He was thus considerably heartened to see Mrs Oldman emerge from the vicarage door and wave at him.

He walked quickly down the path and called out, "Are you off, Mrs Oldman?"

"I'm off now. I've tidied the place as best I can, and I've left your tea in the oven. It's only lamb stew, but it'll be ready by tea-time. And there's bread and cheese for your dinner, if you want it. I'll look in again tomorrow." At which she left without waiting to hear the thanks Teddy had to call after her.

He entered the vicarage by the kitchen door and was further cheered by the aroma which greeted him. Judging by the cold pie last night, Mrs Oldman – though she might be neither attractive nor intelligent – was a very good cook. Whatever else might happen to him, Teddy wouldn't starve to death. He had a slice of bread and small piece of cheese, then decided to walk to the famous Docken Parva, to see if he could find anything of interest there. He wrapped up once more in coat and scarf, and set out along the lane to the village, turning right at the Oldman cottage as indicated by the grocer's man. Ten minutes along the narrow road, its surface now turned to iron by the cold, Teddy saw a farmstead on his left.

There was an elderly man working in the yard, and Teddy hailed him cheerfully. "Mr Burton?"

"Aye?"

"My name's Lawrence, I'm – I was, that is – a friend of the late vicar, Mr McLean."

"Aye." The farmer took off his cap, respectfully. "A bad business that, sir. Won't you step in, have some dinner?"

"Thank you, no, I've just had

something to eat. What I would like to do is to see the field where Mr McLean was found.”

Mr Burton’s brows knitted, but he pointed the way readily enough. “Across this field here, over the lane – you’ll see it. There’s a locked gate, never been undone in all my time here, so you’ll have to climb over should you want to go in. Mind, I wouldn’t, myself.”

“Thank you.”

“Look in on your way back – for a cup of tea?”

“Thank you, that’s kind.”

Teddy crossed the field, and came out into what was evidently the lane, though it was scarcely more than a footpath bordered by untidy thorn hedges. The gate was a few paces to the right, and Teddy scrutinised it closely, not entirely free from the suspicion that Hamish had met his death elsewhere. The gate was in fact chained and the chain fastened with no less than three old, heavy padlocks. All three padlocks were heavily rusted and showed no signs of ever having been unlocked since the day they were affixed. If someone had let a bull or something into this field, then they had gone to great pain to conceal the fact.

Teddy climbed over the gate, and stood in the snow-covered field in which his friend had been found dead. It was small, half an acre at most; not much bigger than the vicarage garden. High thorn hedges surrounded it and would make the place very gloomy, even in summer, although just at the moment the snow reflected the grey light, so it seemed a bit brighter. There was nothing to see, though, except for a few low banks or mounds here and there which could have been snowdrifts. Certainly there was no way by which anyone – or anything – could get into or out of the field without using the gate Teddy had just vaulted. He stood shivering, but only the cold was to blame for his discomfort. Teddy felt no kind of spiritual unease apart from the disturbing knowledge that this was, presumably, where his friend had died so mysteriously. He stood there for perhaps three or four minutes, no more – what was the point? There was nothing to be seen, nothing to be done. He

climbed the gate again and went back to the farm.

The farmyard was deserted so Teddy made his way to the farmhouse door, which stood slightly ajar, despite the cold weather. He knocked hesitantly, and the door was opened at once by a pleasant looking woman, who bade him enter.

“Mr Lawrence, is it? Come in, do, and sit down.”

Teddy removed his overcoat and accepted a large cup of very strong tea before taking a chair by the roaring fire. Mr Burton, seated at the old oak table, nodded a greeting and Mrs Burton introduced another man, who was very old and sat eating quietly, as “Jim”. Teddy wasn’t clear as to whether Jim was a member of the Burton family, or a farm labourer who qualified for special treatment. Regardless, he ate in a stolid silence.

After a few moments Mr Burton enquired, “Find it, did you?”

“Yes, thank you.” Teddy hesitated, wondering if it was bad form to talk about such things at the table.

“Gentleman’s been to see the field,” said Mr Burton to Jim, who nodded sagely, as if he understood the vague description perfectly.

“Superstitious nonsense!” said Mrs Burton, storming out the kitchen.

Mr Burton raised an eyebrow in Teddy’s direction. “Won’t hear of it, the wife,” he said.

“Some won’t,” said Jim, much to Teddy’s surprise. “Seen it myself more than once, though,” he added, struggling manfully with what appeared to be a piece of fatty meat.

“Have you now?” asked Teddy.

Jim nodded. “Cows, sheep. Never a man, not until now.” He glanced round the kitchen – again, thought Teddy – and lowered his voice, “My old dad, though, he had a tale, a young lass gone just in that same way. Same way as vicar, I mean.”

“What, in the same field?” asked Teddy, feeling that he might at last be getting somewhere.

Jim shook his head. “No, over to Docken village. ‘Tisn’t the field, master, it’s them as was in it.” Then he nodded once more, and bent his attention to the plate in front of him.

“Pay no heed, sir,” said Mr Burton – a touch too hastily in Teddy’s opin-

ion. “They’re old tales, them. Say anything, Docken folk will!”

“All the same, Farmer Burton,” said Jim, “you won’t go into Docken if it looks like thunder.”

Mr Burton flushed at this, but said nothing.

“You do lose stock in odd ways, don’t you?” asked Teddy.

Mr Burton seemed positively relieved at a question he could answer without dissimulation. “Always losing beasts, sir. Any farmer will tell you that. And the old vet, he can’t always tell just why...” He launched into a long tale of some sheep that had become lost, which was clearly intended to change the subject.

Teddy listened for as long as was decent, pleaded another engagement, and returned to the vicarage. He spent the time until dinner – which he would, he supposed, now have to call “tea” – examining Hamish’s books. They proved every bit as dull and soporific as he had feared.

* * *

Sunday morning dawned bright and cold. Teddy had slept badly, but the breakfast provided by Mrs Oldman cheered him quite considerably. He waited until she had gone – which, it being Sunday and therefore not a “dusting” day, was not long – and sought out a vantage point that overlooked the church, selecting a side window in a spare bedroom. The room had not been used recently, and presumably not since the time of Hamish’s predecessor, and was thus chilly and almost damp. Teddy sat on a rather hard chair in overcoat and hat, feeling foolish – not just on account of his costume, but because he was there at all, on the grounds of some half-baked superstition.

And yet.

And yet his friend was dead.

His friend was dead and neither Teddy nor anyone else could say how he had died.

That was all the justification required and Teddy pushed his uneasiness from his mind and settled down to his vigil. He was determined to watch, but not at all sure what he should be watching for. Dr Hastings had told him that there was no clergyman to take any service at Docken.

Those who wished to attend church today must therefore travel the twelve miles to Great Snelling, so there would be nothing for Teddy to see. After some twenty minutes, however, he noticed someone approach the lych-gate which held the stone figure.

Someone who looked familiar.

Mrs Oldman.

It was unmistakably Mrs Oldman, although she was wrapped up – either from the cold or in a vain attempt to avoid recognition. She glanced round furtively before bobbing down to go inside the little porch of the lych-gate, and Teddy could have sworn that she laid something down on the ledge inside it.

He sat back in the chair with mixed feelings of relief, amusement, and contempt – the last of which was directed at himself rather than poor Mrs Oldman. What a fool he was. And no wonder Oldman had tried to keep him away from the stone figure. Oldman would very naturally not want it known that his wife was given to some stupid, albeit harmless, superstitious ritual or belief or call it what you would.

Wait a moment... If Oldman wished to distract Attention from his wife's innocuous eccentricities, why on earth had he told Teddy to keep an eye on the church? Maybe he'd wanted Teddy to know the truth, and thought that Teddy deserved some explanation of the odd behaviour in the village, but was too embarrassed to simply tell him. Yes, that made a sort of sense.

Teddy found his mind considerably lightened by his perfectly logical rationalisations. He started to rise from his chair, remembering that Mrs Oldman had left his "Sunday dinner", in the shape of a leg of mutton, in the oven, complete with instructions as to the turning, basting, and general "fettling" of the morsel. Before he could straighten up, however, he saw Mrs Oldman glance hastily down the lane that led from village to church, then turn abruptly and scuttle off. Teddy was surprised to see another figure approach the lych-gate in the same furtive manner. Once again the figure – Teddy could not tell if it was a man or woman – made a little bob of reverence, lingered a few moments, and

then departed in haste. The worshipper was immediately replaced by a couple more figures, possibly man and wife.

Teddy sat down and remained in his seat for two, three, four hours. He watched as – one by one, two by two, or in little family groups – the entire village appeared to come to the lych-gate to pay their respects to what Teddy now thought of as the little stone idol. It was understandable that the villagers should come to the church on a Sunday, he supposed, even though there was no clergyman there to minister to their spiritual needs. They might have gone to say a private prayer or two, but very few of them actually entered the churchyard, let alone the church itself. One or two did enter the building, but only after they had bowed down before the idol, walked back down the lane and used the main entrance rather than the lych-gate. Teddy smiled as he considered the idol. He had a sudden vision of Mrs Oldman dancing naked before the thing under the full moon, and laughed out loud.

But not for long.

The whole village, he realised, was involved in this – what could he call it? – madness of a crowd, the sometimes violent herd instinct of the mob. Yet there was no crowd here, only individuals and families, acting as if they had been taking their usual Sunday stroll before dinner. It would have been easier to understand had there been an angry throng chanting or shouting. As it was, this was a private, almost guilty veneration – if that was the right word. Whatever it was, this idolatry was more insidious, more sinister than any angry mob could ever be. Worse yet was the sudden and chilling thought that he, Teddy, was the only soul in the place who had not yet seen fit to bow to the idol... No, wait, he wasn't. Mr Partridge hadn't been anywhere near the church, nor had Oldman. They could have been disguised, of course, but Teddy was fairly certain that he'd seen neither of the men.

Teddy looked at his watch for the first time since beginning his vigil. It was the middle of the afternoon already and, rather prosaically, Teddy remembered the leg of mutton in the

kitchen oven. As he trotted down the stairs, he became painfully aware of the smell of smoke emanating from the kitchen. He threw the mutton, burnt beyond all hope, into the galvanized dustbin outside the kitchen door. At least he didn't feel hungry. That was one good thing – the only good thing.

He remained outside, irresolute... Mr Partridge almost certainly hadn't been to the church, therefore he was very probably immune to the popular madness. Oldman too, was probably safe, but then there was his wife. Mr Partridge, too, was a hospitable sort of chap, had indeed offered Teddy pretty much the run of the manor house should he feel the need. Teddy could say that with some honesty that he felt that need now. He realised that he actually was hungry and that there was only bread and cheese in the cupboard. He also realised that Mr Partridge would, any time now, be sitting down to something rather more substantial than bread and cheese. Teddy closed the door behind him and set off down the lane, not even bothering to glance at the lych-gate as he passed. He went through the village and smiled grimly when he found the place deserted: everyone was evidently indoors. Teddy muttered "Devotions first, then dinner," to himself as he passed the Oldman's cottage and set off up the lane to Mr Partridge's house.

Mr Partridge was just about to have a glass of sherry before his dinner and urged Teddy to join him for both.

"I will, thanks," said Teddy, shamefaced. "The fact is, Mrs Oldman left me a joint of meat in the kitchen stove, but I rather let it spoil."

"These things will happen," said Mr Partridge. "Mrs Oldman would normally have stayed and watched it herself, but it being a Sunday..." he trailed off.

"Yes, I did fancy I'd seen Mrs Oldman at the church," Teddy said as casually as he could manage. "Or, at the side gate, I should say. The lych-gate, where the little stone statue is, you know?"

"Ah. Yes, indeed. You noticed that?" He gave an embarrassed laugh. "Yes, a place like this there are all

sorts of superstitions. The poor folk here don't have the advantages – education and the like – that are such a blessing to chaps such as you or I."

A thought occurred to Teddy. "Tell me, sir, did Hamish – poor McLean, that is – did he remark upon these practices at all?"

"Yes, I believe he did – ah – notice it just... well, just before his unfortunate death."

Teddy frowned. "But he'd been here a few weeks by then, hadn't he? Do the folk not visit the statue every week?"

"I believe they may, but out of deference to Mr McLean I rather think that they tried their best to pay their respects – as one might put it – when he was elsewhere."

"I see."

At last, Teddy thought that he really did see. Hamish was, or had been, a good sort, liked his pipe and a glass of whisky, but he had held very firm religious convictions, as befitted his vocation. Teddy could quite well imagine his friend's reaction to this odd little local superstition, could almost hear the fulmination from the pulpit. How would Hamish's sermon against idolatry have gone down with the odd, blank, inbred village folk? Very likely Hamish had threatened to destroy the stone image by taking a hammer to it. But one of the villagers, or perhaps more than one, had decided to take the hammer to Hamish before he could smash their beloved idol to smithereens. With the cunning of idiocy they had used some method which had left no outward sign of violence – no immediate outward sign, at least – and done away with the new vicar.

Teddy's mouth set in a hard grin. He was a broad-minded, tolerant man by nature, but whoever had killed Hamish must be found and brought to justice.

"Are you quite well?"

Gradually, Teddy became aware that Mr Partridge was looking at him anxiously. "Yes, I beg your pardon, sir, I am. Just a little distressed when I think of Hamish and a touch disquieted when I think of the whole village turning out to venerate that stone figure."

"Yes, quite understandable, of

course. But you know every village has its holy well, or tree, or something or other."

"Perhaps, but they seem to take it very seriously here."

Mr Partridge nodded. "It's true. I'm afraid they do, rather."

"Hamish mentioned the figure in one of his letters to me."

"Did he?"

"Yes. He thought he could detect some inscription on it."

"Ah," said Mr Partridge again. "Did he happen to mention what it might be?"

"Yes, he thought he discerned the name 'Haggai', or something similar. An Old Testament prophet, I gather."

Mr Partridge smiled suddenly, in a manner that reminded Teddy of a naughty schoolboy. "D'you know, there's a bible somewhere on my shelves. Shall we investigate?" Without waiting for an answer, he stood and walked over to one of the bookshelves which lined three walls of his study. "Yes, here we are. Hmm, a concise fellow – as those fellows went! Yes, a good deal about building the house of the Lord, but soon said. Ah, here's an interesting and apposite note. Chapter one, verse nine: 'Ye looked for much, and lo, it came to little.' Might serve as a motto for a good many of us, eh?"

Teddy laughed, the first time he had done so – or so it seemed to him – since he had landed in Portsmouth. "I fear you're right!"

Mr Partridge returned his bible to the shelf. "Shall we move to the dining room? Dinner should be ready about now. You know," he said as he waved Teddy to a chair at the dining table, "it isn't too surprising that these old beliefs – superstitions, if you will – should linger on in these isolated areas. Without contact with the wider world, people come to rely upon their old ways. I think we've talked about this before, I recall. I gave as an instance the case of the motor car, which, if seen by someone with no knowledge of the internal combustion engine, would appear to be drawn by invisible horses. You never told me about your father's machine."

Teddy, not entirely displeased at the change of subject, described his

father's new acquisition. Throughout dinner the conversation drifted over a wide variety of topics and Teddy was surprised – though he tried not to show it – that Mr Partridge should know so much of what was happening in the outside world. The meal over, Mr Partridge suggested that they return to his study for coffee and brandy.

"I don't normally during the day," he disclosed, "but this being a Sunday, I think we might stretch a point, don't you?"

Teddy, thinking that Hamish would not have objected, agreed that they might.

"I have, I'm afraid, a confession to make," said Mr Partridge as he poured generous measures of an old brandy. "I let you think that your observation as to the inscription on the stone statue was, as they say, *news* to me. My family being keen amateur historians, I am perfectly familiar with the inscription. I was particularly remiss in allowing you to think that it was 'Haggai' carved on the base when it is in fact 'Shaggai', with an 's'. Perhaps you have heard the name?"

"Never, I'm afraid."

Mr Partridge handed Teddy one of the glasses of brandy. "I dare say not a dozen men in the world have. I am in possession of another book, not nearly as widely read as the bible, but much more relevant to our discussion." He went to his shelves again, but stopped in front of a small, locked cupboard. "I keep my treasures in here," he said as he unlocked the door and removed a squat leather-bound volume.

Teddy looked curiously at the book as Mr Partridge sat down and opened it. "What is its title?" he asked.

"No title – dear me, no!" Mr Partridge held the book up and Teddy saw that there were no markings or label on either of the covers. "No, this is a manuscript written by an ancestor of mine. My... let me see... great-great-great grandfather, I think that's correct, although it may be a generation or two more than that. Yes, here it is: 'Shaggai. A demon of the third rank.' My word! It was all *demons* or *ghosts* to these old fellows, but then

they didn't have our scientific minds, did they?"

He smiled as he said this and Teddy thought he detected a note of irony.

Mr Partridge continued, "Yes, 'Shaggai loveth the thunder and lightning and cometh therein. He maketh men mad, but when he departeth again they think not of him, remember him not, and' – my word!" He looked round carefully, before lowering his voice. "'He lieth with women and soweth his seed where he listeth.'" He closed the book and smiled at Teddy. "Not, I judge, the sort of chap one would invite to the club."

"I don't know. He sounds just like half the fellows I meet in my club!"

Mr Partridge laughed heartily, and said, "Then there follows a... conjuration... to summon him."

"I'm not sure I'd want to summon him if he intends to make me mad and all the rest. It is a very interesting insight into the primitive convictions of our ancestors, but I can't for the life of me see why a clergyman would allow a representation of something like that anywhere near a church."

"Ah, yes." Mr Partridge regarded Teddy over his spectacles. "Let us suppose – just for a moment – that one did believe in this creature. Might it not make at least a modicum of sense to have the – *thing* – where one could keep an eye on what might be going on?"

"I recall Oldman said much the same thing to me."

"Did he?"

"Yes, I had a word with him on the topic." Teddy hesitated, then decided he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. "I couldn't help but notice that neither yourself nor Oldman visited the church this morning."

"We don't all share the popular delusions, you know! Oldman, I imagine, has his own beliefs. He is, as I think you're aware, something of a healer, with knowledge of herbs, rustic potions, and the like. He probably thinks himself above the local superstitions. As for me, I – well, perhaps I half believe. My family has been here for generations and it's difficult not to imbibe at least a few of the local beliefs, especially as a child. And perhaps those beliefs, silly as they may

be, remain with one to some extent over the years."

"But not enough to make you bow before the stone figure?" Teddy ventured.

"Certainly not."

"Is that your family tomb, or mausoleum, in the churchyard?"

"It is. A couple of centuries old – no more – built in the heyday of such things."

"Rather badly damaged at one time?" Teddy suggested.

Mr Partridge frowned. "Indeed. Even a sleepy place like this has not been entirely detached from the stirring events of history. The Civil War, the Reformation, right back to the time when one Stone Age tribe fought another for the land."

"And the witchcraft trials you mentioned the other day?"

"Did I? Well, them too, then. It all seems very silly to us now, but who can say how future generations will regard us?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I expect that your own family – local squires and magistrates – were very much against the witches?"

Mr Partridge smiled. "Such records as I possess – and they are somewhat exiguous – are pretty ambiguous. It appears that at times we were for persecuting the unfortunate, misguided wretches who claimed to be witches, while at others there seems to have been a certain sneaking sympathy."

"I see. Well, sir, it has been most interesting talking to you, and it was very kind of you to invite me to dine, but I should not presume too much upon your hospitality." Teddy rose from his chair.

"Not a bit of it! Look in any time, please." Mr Partridge waved at his bookshelves. "It occurs to me that the late Mr Mclean cannot have had much time to accumulate a decent library and that you are perhaps at a loss for entertainment. If you'd care to take a few volumes for evening reading, please do so."

"Thank you, sir." Teddy hesitated. "I wonder... might it be possible to borrow the book from which you quoted just now?"

"Dear me!" Mr Partridge looked positively ill at this suggestion. "The

thing is... I know that you'd look after it, but you see it isn't merely unique, so much as... ah, somewhat private. The old chap was, frankly, a bit of a reprobate in many ways – for which the family makes due allowance. I'm sure you understand?"

Teddy, very embarrassed, mumbled something or other and selected almost without looking a couple of vellum-bound books which later turned out to be even duller than those belonging to Hamish.

"By the way," said Mr Partridge as he saw Teddy out, "I don't entirely like the look of this sky. I think it likely there'll be a thunderstorm tomorrow."

"Really? One of the famous Docken thunderstorms, unseasonable and all that?" Teddy couldn't help himself.

Mr Partridge regarded him severely. "Young man, I've lived here all my life, you have not. If it should thunder tomorrow I advise you – advise you as strongly as I can – to stay inside, lock your doors, and don't look out of the windows. But I imagine you young fellows won't be told by an old fogey like me."

Teddy protested that he held no such opinions and would follow Mr Partridge's advice to the letter. Privately, of course, he hoped that although there seemed no sign of it in the sky, it would thunder the next day, so that he might see for himself what all the fuss was about.

Next morning the sky was in fact very ominous. Teddy stood at his bedroom window for a while, wondering just what to make of it. Snow later, perhaps? No, the clouds were too high and too thin, yet they had that menacing yellowish tinge one might expect in July after a few over-hot days. Despite himself, Teddy felt uneasy, as if the air were oppressive instead of bracing to the point of chilly.

The disturbing atmosphere seemed to have communicated itself to Mrs Oldman and the kitchen stove, for Teddy's toast was burnt and the water for his tea not properly boiled. Mrs Oldman not only failed to notice these defects, but kept casting anx-

ious glances at the sky. Finally, she muttered, "I'll have to be off now. Best you stay inside, sir," and hastened away without washing Teddy's cup and plate.

Teddy, much intrigued, put on coat and hat and went outside. The clouds seemed lower now, the air heavy and stifling. As he watched, a single flicker of lightning crackled down, predictably playing around the lych-gate. Teddy almost laughed at the shopworn stereotype. Almost, but not quite. Another bolt of lightning crackled, this time around the spire of the church. Some localised meteorological phenomenon, perhaps? The effect of the surrounding hills, or something like that; or perhaps because the spire was the highest point for miles.

Surely it couldn't be anything else?

In mysterious way he couldn't define – as opposed to sight or sound – Teddy became aware of a crowd of people streaming up the lane from the village, through the main gate of the churchyard, and into the church.

Now that made no sense at all. If the lightning were, Heaven (or Hell) only knew how, concentrated round the church, who on earth would choose to shelter there? Teddy made

his way to the gate, determined to ask what the devil was going on. But the crowd brushed past him, unseeing and oblivious to his stammered questions. Oldman, too, was there, his eyes beginning to cloud over and resemble the blank stares of the rest of the villagers. Teddy addressed him and received an unintelligent mumble in reply. He thought he could detect the name "Shaggai", although it might have been his own fevered imagination. Even old Mr Partridge stumbled past, apparently unaware of Teddy.

Two minutes... three. Teddy stood among the heedless crowd that brushed past him into the church. Then he was alone and through the open door he could make out a low, wordless chanting.

Teddy walked briskly over to the lych-gate. The stone figure was there in its place, though a flicker of blue light surrounded it, looking just like the experiments with static electricity he had witnessed as a student. It was an eerie sight, and he could see how the local superstitions could have grown from a phenomenon which no doubt had a rational, scientific explanation – albeit one currently beyond his grasp. But even as he pondered the mystery, the blue flame died

away, and the stone figure became dull again. Dull, lifeless, and harmless.

Without thinking, Teddy swept the thing up.

It was no great weight, merely a couple of pounds. There was only one way to bring their lunacy home to these halfwits. Clasp the stone figure in his arms, Teddy ran into the church. He pushed through the villagers standing inside the doorway, their mouths opening and shutting as they emitted unintelligible sounds. As they caught sight of the stone figure they fell back. Some were silent, others gave vent to a sibilant hissing. Teddy was considerably heartened to see old Mr Partridge standing in the high, old-fashioned pulpit. Oldman stood a step below, like an acolyte, and it appeared that the two men had been attempting to calm the crowd. Teddy couldn't hope to influence these incestuous clods himself, but he could at least lend his assistance to the efforts made by Mr Partridge and Oldman.

"Here!" he cried, holding the idol aloft, "This is what all this nonsense is about! Look, it's nothing but a badly carved bit of stone!"

The villagers fell silent, and Teddy felt sure that reason would prevail.

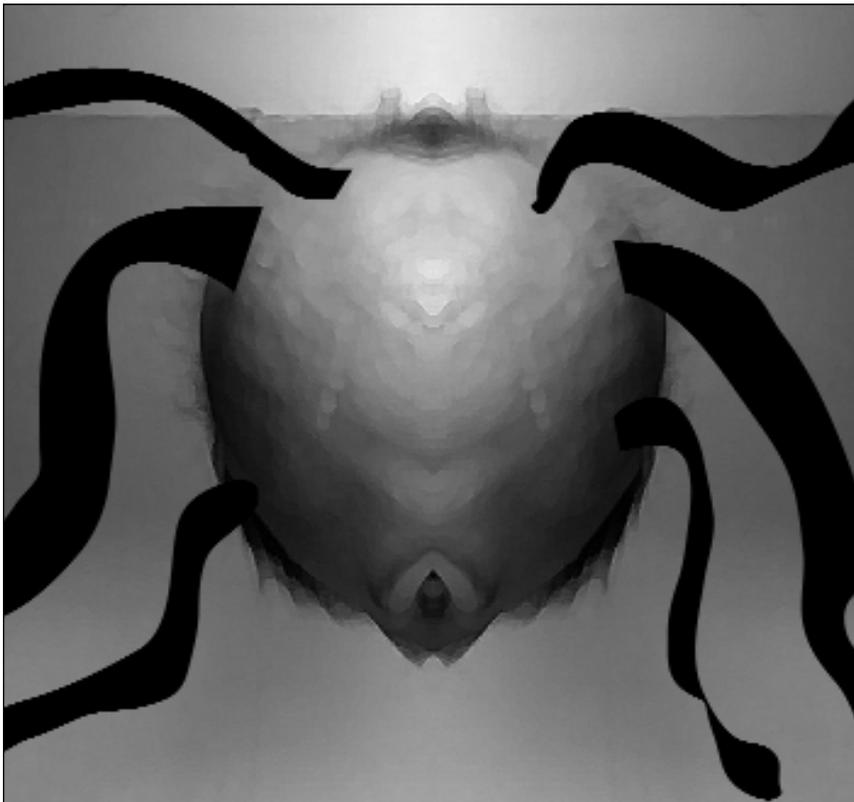
Mr Partridge leaned forward and pointed to Teddy. His bony finger was shaking. "He has brought the unclean Thing into the church!"

Before Teddy could register what he'd heard, he felt hands on his neck and arms as the crowd surged to seize him. He tried to call out, but someone had already thrust a brawny arm around his neck, choking him. They pushed him to the ground and he realised that they really meant to kill him. Teddy looked up at the pulpit, hoping against hope that it might be some hideous nightmare.

A flash of lightning outside the leaded window threw the shadow of Mr Partridge onto the wall opposite.

The old man's mouth was agape like a demon's. Instead of horns, his head was adorned with what might have been rank locks of hair, only they were thick, and waved about too much.

There were certainly far too many of them to be arms or legs.



The Quarterly Review

BOOKS

Ælnäthän

Ryan Robledo
Trafford, pb, 256pp

I'm not going to pretend that I've read this novel (a fantasy, self-published by a young man of seventeen) all the way through. I've done nothing but skim the pdf, and read passages here and there that caught my eye. So I shouldn't really write a review, and indeed I haven't.

If I *were* to write a review, my focus would inevitably be drawn to the disclaimer at the beginning of the book where the author carefully advises the reader that his book is not seeking "to supplant the true Creator of the universe". I'm fairly sure that the author didn't mean it as a joke, but I found it hilarious nevertheless.

It's funny however you look at it. If you believe that a god of some kind created the universe, how could it be supplanted from that position by someone writing a book about an alternative theory of creation? All such a book could supplant (at best) is a theory of that god's existence, not the fact of it. And there's part of the humour – implicit in the disclaimer is the idea that his true Creator is just a theory, and one that could easily be supplanted if the author of *Ælnäthän* forgot to add a disclaimer!

It also raises the question: if the author is a Christian (it's not spelled out in the foreword, so I shouldn't

jump to conclusions – he could just as easily be a Muslim, or a Hindu, or so on), why create alternative gods at all to create his fantasy world? Surely it's easy to imagine a scenario in which whatever all-powerful Creator he believes in decided to create an Earth that's different from our own? (After all, as everyone knows, on the seventh day, God created Narnia...)

And if you don't believe that a god of some kind created the universe, the disclaimer seems presumptuous and laughably pompous (and I know all about being laughably pompous – just read a few of my editorials).

I have nothing against self-publishing – as this magazine demonstrates all too incapably! – but if I *were* writing a review I'd go on to say that the book's self-published nature gives itself away in the way the author explains in the foreword that the beginning of the book (a condensed history of his world) is boring but it gets better. If he knows it's boring he should really have taken it out – an editor would have removed it without a second's thought, or at least relegated it to an appendix.

But when we publish our own stuff we don't want to throw away any of our work, however much it might benefit the finished product. (There are many similar passages in my own self-published work – not necessarily into which I have put a lot of work, since I haven't put a significant amount of work into anything I've ever written, but certainly my writing is rife with indulgences that an editor would not hesitate to excise.) To be honest, I found those early pages to-

tally unreadable, though I imagine the author put a lot of work into them.

Finally, in my hypothetical review, I'd say that if the author continues to put as much work into his writing as he obviously has here, who knows where he might end up. But the important thing is to keep working at the writing. I'd say to bear in mind that, for a writer, writing is much more important than publishing.

Publishing oneself can easily be a distraction to a writer, a dangerously easy way to dissipate creative energy. The important thing is to keep writing, and see how it goes.

And then, at the end of the review which I have not written, I would wish the author good luck with his book and sign off! – *SWT*

Bug-Eyed Monsters

Anthony Cheetham (ed.)
Panther (1970), pb, 256pp

I hope readers will indulge me in reviewing a rather older book than we would normally discuss in these pages, because this was one of the best anthologies of science fiction I've ever read. To be honest it's been far too long since I read such an anthology at all. I thought I'd run out of new worlds to discover, and it was wonderful to discover that I have not; to realise how short-sighted I had been was a pleasure.

If there's a movie producer in your life, you could do a lot worse than

pressing a copy of this book into her hands.

Some of the stories, like Fredric Brown's "Arena" and *The War of the Worlds* (represented here by the script of Orson Welles' radio version) have already made it to the large or small screens, while William Tenn's "The Deserter" seems to be the missing link between the *Starship Troopers* (the hawkish book) and *Starship Troopers* (the satirical film) (complete with brain-sucking alien bugs). Frank Herbert's "Greenslaves" perhaps has too much in common with *Mimic* to make adapting it worthwhile. Others, though, as far as I know, are still pristine, unspoiled, and ready for exploitation!

AE van Vogt's "Not Only Dead Men", in which a World War II-era whaling ship encounters alien life at sea, would make a stunning movie – preferably starring Tom Hanks as the captain. In fact, it would almost certainly be one of the best films of all time! Sadly I can also easily imagine it as a cheap direct-to-DVD movie, which would be a shocking waste of its potential. I can only dream of how good it would have been as a black and white film made in the 1950s.

Pixar and Brad Bird could do much worse than adapt "Surface Tension" by James Blish. I say that because the premise, of tiny people living in a puddle, although brilliant, might be a hard sell to adults, as I've found when trying to explain to my wife and friends why it was such a superb story. Children would love it, though.

When reading "Stranger Station" by Damon Knight I couldn't help mentally repurposing shots from films like *Solaris* and *Sunshine* – it might make quite a short film, but like James H Schmitz's "Balanced Ecology", Terry Carr's "The Dance of the Changer and the Three" and Philip Jose Farmer's "Mother" it would make for an amazing episode of *The Outer Limits*, if some version of that programme ever gains the budget to match its ideas.

Of course, even if no one ever makes a movie out of any of these stories, it won't lessen them one bit. That I've taken that angle in this review is just an illustration of how ex-

citing I found the concepts. That's what really marks this out as an exceptional collection of science fiction – every story has an utterly different and astonishing premise. And of course, no film could ever be this perfectly executed as these stories are – on screen there's always some flaw, however tiny, something that doesn't quite work. That's not the case here. Antony Cheetham did a marvellous job of bringing together a superb range of stories, by an immensely talented group of writers. The book's only arguable flaw is its title, which makes it sound rather sillier than it really is, but even that can be excused, given that it was what made me buy the book in the first place. – *SWT*

Hive

Tim Curran

Elder Signs Press, pb, 272pp

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937) scraped a living from selling short stories to *Weird Tales* magazine and ghostwriting for the less talented. Despite the fact that he never had a novel or anthology published in his lifetime, Stephen King considers him to be the most influential horror writer of the twentieth century. Mr King is not alone and many of today's most proficient and commercially successful speculative fiction authors freely acknowledge their debt to Lovecraft. The contrast is typical of the controversy inextricable from both Lovecraft's life and legacy. *At the Mountains of Madness* was one of his few novellas, first published in 1936, and concerned an expedition to Antarctica. *Hive* is billed as the first of a series of three sequels.

The tale is presented in such a way that it is both a sequel and a stand-alone novel. Newcomers to Lovecraft and his mythos will enjoy the story as is, while aficionados will delight in recognising the references to the original. The events described by Lovecraft are very neatly summarised, along with all relevant further exploration in the Antarctic. Mr Curran shows particularly good judgement

when it comes to finding the balance between old and new, and this is reflected in the perfect equilibrium between retrospective explication and plot development: the pace is fast and furious, and the narrative takes on a life of its own.

Protagonist Jimmy Hayes is an electrician based at Kharkov Station in the Antarctic, making preparations for the five months of impending winter isolation. The station is a base for a scientific expedition led by Dr Gates, who has found the mummified remains of the Old Ones unearthed by Misaktonic University in 1930; and a NASA-sponsored attempt to drill through the ice cap into Lake Vordog, a subterranean lake as vast as it is pristine. Shortly after Gates returns with the mummies, one of the support staff goes mad and attempts suicide – the first indication that all is not well. Gates confirms that the Old Ones are aliens, predating humankind by millennia, and discloses that their discovery is likely to have huge implications for the whole human race. A day later, the drillers break through the ice canopy above Lake Vordog; a probe sent down into the water reveals a submarine city inhabited by living Old Ones – completing the ingredients for one hell of a winter.

Sequels are always something of a dual-edged sword. On the one hand, the author and publisher can increase their readership by promoting a book as a sequel to a popular story; on the other, the more popular the original, the more likely the sequel is to disappoint. This element of reciprocity leads to the only criticism of *Hive*. While the novel is in most respects a very satisfying continuation of one of Lovecraft's best stories, the conclusion is at odds with his particular style of horror: there is too much action and too little damnation. It is a minor point, however, and doesn't detract from the overall enjoyment of the tale.

This is a very promising start to the series, and one can only hope the second instalment appears soon; if it is anything like *Hive*, it will be worth the wait. Mr Curran's writing is atmospheric, exciting, and – most important of all – highly entertaining. – *Rafe McGregor*

Odd and the Frost Giants

Neil Gaiman
Bloomsbury, pb, 80pp

I enjoyed *The Sandman*, though I wasn't the world's biggest fan of it. Since then, though, I've enjoyed everything Neil Gaiman has been involved with more and more, from the *Neverwhere* tv series to his children's books and his adult novel *American Gods*. He reminds me a bit of Damon Albarn, in that he seems to move from a brilliant success in one area to a brilliant success in another over and over again, through hard work and a lot of talent. This book continues the trend. It was specially written for World Book Day 2008, and, since I couldn't persuade my daughter to spend her World Book Day voucher on it I had to buy it myself... It was well worth the pound, being a sweet little story about a half-Scottish Viking boy and his encounter with the gods. – SWT

World War Z

Max Brooks
Duckworth, pb, 344pp

Subtitled "An oral history of the zombie war", *World War Z* tells the story from the initial outbreaks to the ongoing aftermath. Brooks wastes no time trying to reimagine or justify the existence of zombies. There's no scientific analysis of why their bite conveys the infection, or how their dead bodies can move. They are the zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*, plain and simple, with just the one difference. Here, only the infected rise from the dead; the previously dead stay where they are. The book is not about how a real world zombie apocalypse might happen, but instead about how the real world would respond to Romero's zombies.

Having said that, Brooks does come up with a number of new (to me, at least) twists on the way the

zombie plague spreads, none of which I'll mention here for fear of spoiling someone else's enjoyment of the book. I'll just say that the best such story, for me, is told in Brazil.

World War Z has a lot in common with James Herbert's *Rats* trilogy, though where Herbert has an omniscient narrator floating around to take us to the most interesting bits, everything here is reported first hand by the survivors. That might be thought to lessen the suspense, since we know they survive, but that's far from the truth – there's a very real sense that surviving this war was much harder than dying in it. Hearing the stories straight from the survivors is what gives the book its power and purpose, dragging us right in amongst the moaning hordes.

I had a few small issues with it. For one thing, it's a bit irksome to have the old nonsense about "no atheists in foxholes" getting trotted out, even in a first person narrative. The American soldiers in the Military Association of Atheists and Free-thinkers, for example, get very angry when people say things like that. It's also amusing to see how often people from around the world say things along the lines of "As your great American writer once said...", which often makes it seem as if the quotes were in place first and the character saying them came later. And I'm not convinced by how safe any safe zones could possibly have been, especially early in the war. I enjoy the odd zombie movie here and there, but I find them very depressing, because there's no way anyone would survive (unless, as in *28 Days Later*, the zombies would eventually run out of steam). Given the horrifying way that things play out in the early sections of this book, I'm not convinced that anyone at all would have made it out alive.

But those are minor quibbles with regard to a powerful book. It's so full of fascinating and terrifying episodes that everyone reading it will have their own favourite moment – for me it was the fleeting mention of the Queen and her castle. I'm far from being a monarchist, but that was cool. Also, Brooks is to be commended for fitting the whole saga into a mere 340

pages. I've no doubt that the resulting insensibility has contributed to the book's success.

I'm definitely looking forward to the movie. – SWT

COMICS

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Long Way Home

Joss Whedon, Georges Jeanty and Others
Dark Horse, tpb, 136pp

For the seven years that it was on television *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was my absolute favourite programme. Apart from loving the writing, the fighting and the biting, I think I really, truly fell in love with Buffy herself. (I think it was her incredibly sad eyes that did it.) Whenever I see Sarah Michelle Gellar in other roles now I'm filled with a huge sadness, as if I'd actually had a romantic relationship with Buffy, one that ended amicably, maybe because we moved to different cities. And now I see a doppelganger of her appearing in *Scooby Doo* and *The Grudge*. It's a bizarre feeling!

I'd heard about the Season Eight comic being published by Dark Horse, and that it was being written by Joss Whedon, the creator of the original show. I'd held off from buying it, partly because I've given up on collecting individual comics, but also from a reluctance to spoil the old memories. So I waited for the trade paperback, put that on my wishlist when it came out, and waited for someone to buy it for me. I was easing myself back into it.

I should have pre-ordered it myself! This is a fab book, continuing the story from season seven and mov-

ing it forward. Things can happen! Things can change! Tie-ins are nearly always much more exciting when the programme is off the air or when they aren't forced to maintain a strict continuity – see the Doctor Who New Adventures or the Star Trek New Frontier books, for example, and compare them to the stultified dullness of most Star Trek comics (at least those with which Peter David is not involved) – but with the original creator on board this takes that principle to a new level. Everything really counts. It seems stupid that that makes a difference – after all, like Alan Moore wrote in *Whatever Happened to the Man of Steel?*, they are *all* imaginary stories – but it does.

And the stories are great. It's quite easy to imagine these stories as they might have looked on television, but here they are portrayed with the budget of a movie – while still being paced perfectly for a comic book. It's wonderful to see Buffy, Xander and Willow interacting again, in a way that was often quite rarely seen in later seasons of the programme, and it's fascinating to see the reactions of those in power to the multitude of female heroes now in their midst. It's also nice to see some payoff on Xander losing his eye, which seemed a bit random onscreen.

Huge credit must also go to the artist, Georges Jeanty, who achieves the remarkable and rare feat of capturing the likenesses of the cast members while sacrificing nothing in expression, movement or character.

Highly recommended! – *SWT*

Clubbing

Andi Watson
and Josh Howard
Minx, digest, 176p

Minx is a new line of graphic novels from DC, but until reading this one, I'd got the wrong end of the stick and thought they were American manga. In fact they are more DC-does-Oni. This is a slight but entertaining story of dark deeds in the country, as investigated by a cute goth girl drawn in a

nice funky style. I was about to say that the title is a bit misleading, but typing that made me realise why it wasn't (the story takes place around a golf club – duh). I can't imagine this changing anyone's life, but that doesn't make it any less entertaining. I tried to avoid saying that it's a distaff Hot Fuzz... but didn't. Finally, watch out at the end for Lottie's Lexicon, which will provide much hilarity to British readers.

If for no other reason (I'll leave the reader to discover whether there *is* another reason), this publication is suitable for review in this magazine thanks to a lead male character by the name of Howard Phillips... – *SWT*

Doctor Who: Voyager

Steve Parkhouse, John
Ridgway and Others
Panini, tpb, 172p

Previous volumes in this series – the Tom Baker and Peter Davison ones – hit me like hammer blows from the past, but this first Colin Baker collection is even better: like the Paul McGann volumes this was all brand new to me. Before I get onto saying why it was brilliant, I should cover the two things that are slightly annoying about it. Like all of these Doctor Who books from Panini it has the words "Graphic Novel" on the front cover, when it patently isn't. A graphic novel is a lengthy comic book conceived as a single piece of fiction. At a push it might cover a single storyline pulled out of an ongoing series, but this is a collection of short serials. The other thing is that on the back it says "The Complete Sixth Doctor Comic Strips", when the Colin Baker-penned special, "The Age of Chaos", doesn't appear in this volume and isn't scheduled for the next either (maybe they'd argue that as a graphic novel itself it doesn't qualify as a comic strip).

Those minor niggles aside, this is a glorious book. John Ridgway's art is magnificent (and reproduced beauti-

fully) – pages 26 and 51 being particular examples of his talents being given free rein – and the storytelling retains the cosmic scope of the Fifth Doctor stories while reining in the more confusing elements. None of the television stories in which the Sixth Doctor appeared could stand even the slightest comparison to these stories, and it isn't often you can say that about a tie-in. – *SWT*

Essential Godzilla

Doug Moench et al
Marvel, tpb, 440pp

The first series of Godzilla films ended in 1975 (with *Terror of Mechagodzilla*) and the second began in 1984 with the *Godzilla* remake. This Marvel series fits neatly into the gap, being published between 1977 and 1979.

The story itself was ever so slightly dull, for me; the main interest comes from the unusual decision to integrate *Godzilla* into the Marvel Universe. (Imagine if Marvel had done the same thing with *Star Wars*? They did it with *Doctor Who*, though not to the same extent as this.) There are no dimension-hopping hijinks here – *Godzilla* has always been part of the Marvel Universe, and the heroes are vaguely aware of his existence, but until now he has confined his activities to Japan.

Unfortunately, though, given the opportunities available, for most of the comic's run the only sign that this is the Marvel universe comes from the presence of Nick Fury's supporting cast, who chase *Godzilla* around in a helicarrier, filling in for similiar monster hunters in the original films.

That's a shame. For example, the most interesting part of the comic comes when Ant-Man's shrinking gas is used to shrink *Godzilla* down to the size of a rat (this sequence seemed interestingly prescient of Masashi Tanaka's *Gon*, a fierce little dinosaur). (It beggars belief that

SHIELD don't destroy him at that point, while they have the chance.)

The Avengers and Fantastic Four turn up for an ineffective brawl towards the end, but I would have liked to have seen more of the ways in which existing in the Marvel universe would have affected Godzilla.

Professor X could have taken us on a trip inside Godzilla's psyche. We could have seen Namor's reaction to Godzilla swimming through his territory. Godzilla could have gone to the Savage Land.

Maybe Doug Moench made the right decision for the time, avoiding such gimmicks on the whole and just telling a straightforward Godzilla story (especially since no movies were being made at the time), but it doesn't really give us what we want to see now!

Still, it's a decent, if undemanding, read. It was obviously pitched at a very young audience, but it's still worth the time of any Godzilla fan. – *SWT*

Green Lantern: Revenge of the Green Lanterns

Geoff Johns et al
DC, hb, 164pp

I received this book as a birthday present, and I was very grateful for it, so it seems a bit churlish to give it a less than enthusiastic review. I guess I'm a churl!

It's not a terrible book, by any means. It's well-written, the art is pretty good, and the production values are excellent. It just all seems a bit pointless and slightly dull, and it lacks pace and wit. Its constant focus on the past is reminiscent of John Nathan Turner's tenure as producer on Doctor Who, where endless stories depended for their interest upon the programme's history, rather than

pulling it forward in new directions. It gives every indication of being written to squeeze into the gap between various company events rather than being a story in itself, especially given that it has a one year break in the middle for the Infinite Crisis and its aftermath to take place. Why on Earth would you bring a character back from the dead and then skip over his first year of being alive again? The creative integrity of this title clearly wasn't the first thing on anyone's mind.

The title makes the book sound very dramatic, but in fact is totally misleading – there are only two occasions and ten pages in total on which Green Lanterns (other than the title character himself) could be said to be out for revenge, and in both cases they are quickly mopped up or reasoned with and largely irrelevant to the storyline.

The principle preoccupation of the stories here is to undo the consequences of issues 46 to 50 of the previous Green Lantern series, in which Hal Jordan, Green Lantern, went mad with grief after the destruction of his home city (as part of the Return of Superman storyline) and went on the rampage, fighting other Green Lanterns, taking their rings, and trying to recreate Coast City. After that he went full-on evil, calling himself Parallax and trying to recreate the entire universe in Zero Hour. Eventually, he died saving the Earth in The Final Night, and his ghost became the new Spectre (DC's spirit of vengeance), of all things.

Now, while I might agree that the character took a couple of wrong turns there (Parallax's costume in particular was pretty lame), and I can understand why some fans would want all that undone, it's worth bearing in mind that the initial story of Hal Jordan's descent into madness came after 45 of the dullest comics ever created.

So for this series they seem (I haven't read the previous two volumes of new Hal Jordan stories) to have undone or explained away all of the interesting things that have happened to him, and now, instead of Kyle Rayner, artist, wisecracker, heartthrob and amusing irritant to the

older members of the JLA, we're back with steady, stubborn fifties throwback Hal Jordan. That is to say: your dad is the new Green Lantern.

(Are they planning on casting Kevin Costner as Green Lantern in an upcoming movie or something?)

He's a totally empty character, who never had anything to him. He did appear in some marvellous Silver Age stories, of course, and his powers were some of the most imaginative ever given to a superhero, but the man himself was a typically blank pre-Marvel fuddy-duddy.

Now he has nothing to him other than a vague regret at having murdered loads of people (though half the comic is spent on people telling him it's alright, it wasn't really his fault), and a constant look of irritation at the world not playing to his rules.

It's ironic that while his transgressions have been retconned, they now seem less out of character than ever!

One final note: if I ever read another DC comic where someone is forced into a dream of their perfect life, I think I'll scream.

I've got a feeling that I'll be doing a lot of screaming! – *SWT*

Heroes

Various Writers/Artists
DC/Wildstorm, hb, 240pp

Despite what it says on the cover, this is not really a graphic novel – though the sections about Hana Gitelman might just about add up to one, taken apart from the rest. It's a series of slices-of-life from the unusual lives of the Heroes (and villains), which won't make very much sense to anyone who hasn't watched the TV show.

But for anyone who has watched the programme this will be an entertaining read. As well as giving us the chance to see a bit more of little-seen characters (such as Claude, ho-ho), the creators have been pretty generous in letting the comic have a few big reveals, ones that they would have been fully justified in reserving for the programme itself. – *SWT*

JLA: Ultramarine Corps

Grant Morrison
and Ed McGuinness
DC, tpb, 144pp

It seems to me that the pace of many mainstream comics has dropped to the extent where an eight-page Jimmy Olsen story from 1958 will often have as much going on as an entire issue of a modern comic or even a trade paperback.

An exception to that rule is the work of Grant Morrison. He writes modern day comics that have as much packed into each panel as those eight-page stories did. The effect is exponential, moment piling upon moment to spin the reader up in a whirlwind: in his superhero comics that creates action adventures with as many beats as the RZA (who has a lot of beats), while in his more leftfield adventures it can come as a dizzying flurry of blows to the mind.

For comparison, try boiling each issue of, say, the *Revenge of the Green Lanterns* book down to 8pp – it's pretty easy. Try doing it with this book and you'd be left with an incoherent jumble. Morrison tells his stories with incredible economy, often skating absolutely on the line of the minimum information that the reader needs to be told, and flattering the reader with faith in his or her intelligence. Remarkably, too, for such a writerly writer, and one who reportedly has very little direct contact with his artists, he always gives his collaborators plenty of space to shine – or to fall on their face, as has happened from time to time, though not here. Ed McGuinness's art is a bit inconsistent (the Flash always looks a bit weird), but has many spectacular moments.

Morrison writes the members of the JLA with a surefootedness that must be the envy of every other writer working in comics right now. For example, his Batman has all the moodiness you would expect of the Dark Knight, and yet Morrison gives

him hilarious dialogue without it seeming at all out of character. What's more, this is a Batman who clearly lives in and could survive in the DC universe. He has access to DC super-science, and uses it when necessary to meet the threats that the JLA faces. He just doesn't choose to use this stuff in his day to day work – doubtlessly because criminals are more afraid of bats than they are of boom tubes.

It's a shame that we're back here with a cleanshaven Aquaman – with what appears to be a hand made of water (crazy – the harpoon on his wrist was both practical and unbelievably cool) – and that Kyle Raynor, Green Lantern during Morrison's classic JLA run, is AWOL, but as always Morrison makes the best of what he has.

What's remarkable about Morrison's JLA is that he has clearly put a lot of thought into the role each character plays in the team. When he was on the main title (this collects issues from the *JLA: Classified* spinoff series), he talked about (in Wizard's *JLA Special*, for example) building a pantheon similar to that of the Greek gods, something that could be seen most clearly in his brilliant recasting (sorry...) of Steel as Hephaestus. He thought very carefully about how each hero slots into the whole to create a unit, whether that's the Martian Manhunter as a telepathic switchboard, or the Flash on crowd control, and that thought shows through in every JLA story he writes.

Finally getting onto this story in particular: although I enjoyed it very much, my feelings were mixed. It deals with the fate of Superbia, a city founded by the Ultramarines in the story beginning in Morrison's *JLA* #24. Now, I'm not as widely read in the DC universe as I used to be, but I can't help having the feeling that Morrison, having created this cool super-city, and then seen no one use it, felt a bit embarrassed about it hanging around in the air over Montevideo and decided to clear it up. For all I know that could be a totally erroneous conclusion, but either way it seems a shame to have created this place and then... well, no spoilers in this review.

This book also includes the JLA/WildCATs crossover, which was okay, but not as much fun as I remembered it being at the time. It is of interest for one thing, though, and that's the way Morrison said at the time of its publication that in his mind he had had to work out a way for the two teams to meet, despite their living in different universes, and that in theory his idea could be used to link the DC universe with other worlds of superheroes – presumably he was talking about what came to be called Hypertime. So you could call this story the "Flash of Two Worlds" of the modern age. – *SWT*

Showcase Presents Superman Family: Volume 2

Otto Binder and Others
DC, tpb, 520pp

During the fifties the Superman comic was so successful that spin-offs were launched to meet demand. *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* and *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* went on to rack up over a hundred issues each, before the titles were merged into *Superman Family*, the title DC has used for these books collecting the two titles. The first volume was almost all Jimmy Olsen, his comic having launched earlier, but in this one Lois Lane issues enter the mix.

Reading this book, it's surprising that Jimmy Olsen has never had his own tv series. The structure of the Jimmy Olsen stories in this huge collection is remarkably similar to that of programmes like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* or *The Wizards of Waverley Place*: Jimmy wants to get ahead in some way (usually he's after a scoop, or sometimes a pay rise), takes an unnecessary risk or makes an error of judgment, and then runs into trouble, often undergoing a startling

transformation of some kind, before either learning his lesson, or finally making the right decision. One difference here, of course, is that while Sabrina or, say, Hannah Montana (someone who shares Superman's secret identity woes and pleasures) are usually the authors of their own misfortune, here Lois and Jimmy are the ones causing trouble – for Superman – which often casts them in an interesting dual role, as both hero and villain in the same story.

(If my knowledge of current children's television seems oddly extensive, put it down to how difficult it is to find anything for my little daughter to watch that doesn't put me in danger of falling asleep at the childcare wheel! Undemanding tweenie sitcoms are better than the alternative!)

In Sabrina and Waverley Place magic tends to play a karmic role, punishing vanity and rewarding selflessness, providing the virtuous lessons deemed necessary for children's entertainment. In Jimmy Olsen's adventures, that role is taken on by Superman, who seems to spend as much time teaching Jimmy (and Lois) lessons as he does saving them from danger. He's a kind of karmic avenger! (On the other hand, if he is

as Grant Morrison has said, a typical dad from the 1950s, he could less charitably be seen as a patriarch just doing his best to keep everyone in their right and proper place!)

Anyway, if Krypto can get his own cartoon, I think Jimmy and his many alter-egos deserve a run on Nickelodeon. Almost any one of these stories would form the basis of a wonderful tv episode (see below for one horrifying exception). In many ways they are magnificent. There are few limits on the imagination of the writers – the status quo must be restored within eight pages, but on pages two to seven anything can happen, and often does, usually at the same time as something else that's equally remarkable! Jimmy himself is cheerful and irrepressible, always ready to be the guinea pig in any scientific experiment, ready to try every strange position he's offered by his friend Professor Potter, and always looking for the upside of the disasters that regularly befall him.

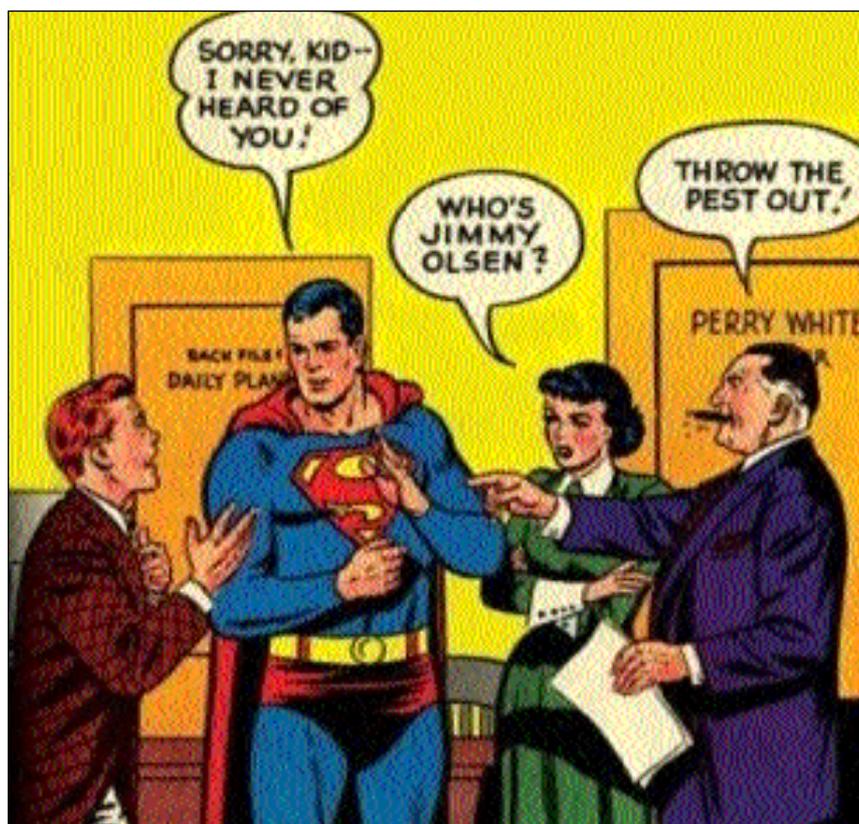
One thing that's very striking about these stories is the lack of supervillains (partly because Superman is so diligent in making sure that no one else can get any powers, or loses them quickly if they do). It's refresh-

ing to read stories about Superman that don't just involve him trading mighty punches with flying alien trolls and the like. Most stories revolve around petty gangsters who attempt to kill Superman or disable him long enough to rob a bank or two. The tension almost always stems from the constant rule bounding Superman's behaviour – he must save the day and restore the clockwork of his life without giving away his secret identity.

The downside of this is that as a result he can be rather a wriggling, shifty and devious Superman, always looking for a way to worm out of awkward situations through sophistry, semantics, technicalities and flat-out lies! Anything to avoid giving the game away.

This is particularly the case in the Lois Lane stories. (If I haven't said as much about those so far, it's because they can be a bit dull in comparison to the wild imagination on display in the Olsen tales.) Superman's stubborn refusal to countenance marriage with Lois, while still wanting to keep her on the hook, always seems odd, despite his protestations that it's for her own good, especially given the lengths to which he goes to avoid marriage, and the callousness with which he repeatedly ruins her dreams. Should we read him as closeted and gay, keeping Lois around as a beard? Or as an ageing playboy, with Lois as his respectable, chaste girlfriend? I don't really think he's either – he's an eight-year-old boy. He doesn't want to spend all day around girls, but he still wants them to think he's the coolest boy in town.

When it comes to showing Superman at his worst, though, one Jimmy Olsen story here really stands out: "The Son of Superman", by Otto Binder. In it, we learn that Jimmy is an orphan. Out of the blue (literally – he flies down from the sky to make the announcement), Superman offers to adopt Jimmy. The court approves the adoption, and the two of them begin to share a house. At this point Superman starts to be very unpleasant to his new son – for example he incinerates Jimmy's father's day gift with his x-ray vision. In the end, a sobbing, heartbroken Jimmy asks the



judge to rescind the adoption order, to which Superman says, "If Jimmy wants to call it quits, that goes double for me." Afterwards, Superman reveals that he was being deliberately rude to drive Jimmy away, because of a misunderstood prediction by his super-computer. Everything sorted out, Superman says he feels terrible that the judge won't reinstate the adoption order, but they can still be pals...

It's hard to imagine how anyone could at all admire the cold and cruel Superman of that story! He's like someone who takes a puppy home at Christmas, finds the poop and hairs a bit inconvenient, and chucks the poor thing in the river!

Luckily the charmlessness of that tale is very much the exception to the rule. In general, Superman's foibles in these stories are comical, more than anything else, and if they date the stories a bit, that only increases the period appeal. Taken as a whole, this is one of the most charming and delightful collections of comics it is possible to read. – SWT

The Terminator Omnibus: Volume 1

James Robinson and Others

Dark Horse, tpb, 352pp

This book came out at just the right time – I finally watched T3 last year, and found out it wasn't half as bad as I'd feared, and then this year watched and adored the Terminator tv series, which finished all too soon as a result of the writers' strike.

Luckily this collection of Terminator comics from the early nineties is available to step into the breach. The weird thing is, almost everything that's in the tv series turns up in here too, from human hit squads going after Cyberdyne people to cops slowly putting the pieces together to fleshless Terminators wearing motorcycle helmets.

Whether that's a sign that story op-

tions are a bit limited in the Terminator universe, or whether it's just comics, in their usual way, acting as pathfinders for other media, I don't know. Either way, I had a terrible night of nightmares after starting to read this book. (You try protecting your family from a Terminator with nothing but a corkscrew...)

The book contains four lengthy stories. "Tempest", "Secondary Objectives" and "The Enemy Within" form one continuous narrative, while "One Shot" is a side-story (with beautiful Matt Wagner artwork) of a Terminator going after a Sarah Connor who didn't get into the phone book quick enough for Arnold to find her in the first film. – SWT

Tom Strong: Book 5

Mark Schultz and Others

ABC Comics, tpb, 144pp

An all-star cast of writers fill in for Alan Moore in this one – Mark Schultz (of *Xenozoic Tales*), Brian K Vaughan (of *Y: The Last Man* and *Lost*), Ed Brubaker and Steve Aylett – and while the artwork and production values are up to the title's usual superb standard, the stories aren't quite as glittering as before. It's no fault of the writers – they obviously worked hard (I seem to remember reading that one of them would throw up due to the self-imposed pressure that came from working on an Alan Moore title) and they've produced highly readable entertainments. But one of Alan Moore's many incredible talents is to make the flimsiest of tales seem rich with significance. The stories in this volume remain whimsical, but lack a little magic. And there were things Alan Moore wanted to say and do with these characters – he had reasons for wanting to publish these comics – whereas the great talents working on this volume are reduced, if that's at all the right word, to simply writing good stories about interesting characters. – SWT

MAGAZINES

Apex Science Fiction and Horror Digest #12

Jason Sizemore (editor)
Apex Publications, 192pp
www.apexdigest.com

As ever, *Apex* looks great, and, as usual, I didn't find the time to read it! I've got over a thousand unread books in the house, you know... However, I always thoroughly enjoy looking at the adverts, which constantly surprise me with things I've never heard of before. Will I ever buy and read a copy of *John Dies at the End*? Probably not, but it's a great title. – SWT

GUD #2 (Greatest Uncommon Denominator)

Kaolin Fire et al (editors)

<http://gudmagazine.com>

The title of this magazine seems clever – it's a play on the word "good" and it is obviously meant to be the opposite of the lowest common denominator. I could understand the greatest common denominator; that would be the best thing we all have in common – our love of panda bears, perhaps, or our capacity for compassion.

However, what exactly is the greatest uncommon denominator? (I could of course look on the magazine's website to find out, but what would that leave me to speculate upon? I would actually have to read the

issue in order to write a review!) I would think that it was the greatest thing that we don't have in common. But no, this is not a magazine relating to Sid Meier's unique balancing of strategic gameplay, Lee Ranaldo's way with a detuned guitar, Michael Caine's ability to act without blinking, or any of the other amazing things that we don't have in common with each other. It's more about the things that some people have in common, but others don't – for me the title is a sign that we're in "happy few" territory.

Happily the magazine isn't anywhere near as precious as that might make you think, and is actually rather funny, charming and welcoming.

The stories in this issue (which I won't pretend I've got around to reading) include: "El Alebrije", by D Richard Pearce; "Four Torments and a Judgment" by Erik Williams; "Painlessness" by Kirstyn McDermott; "Watching the Playoffs" by Jim Kacian; "Offworld Friends Are Best" by Neal Blaikie; "Monkeyshine" by Hugh Fox; "Jamie Hawkins' Muse" by Vanessa Gebbie; "Freight" by Joseph Love; "The Salivary Reflex" by Tina Connolly; "Nan" by Scott Christian Carr; "By Zombies; Eaten" by Christopher Buecheler; "The Festival of Colour" by Paul Haines; "Thou Shalt" by Hugh Fox; and "Closer in My Heart to Thee" by Jeff Somers. John Walters has some typographical fun in "The Disappearance of Juliana", which is always nice to see. "Baby Edward" is by Jeremy C Shipp, a writer who unfortunately I know best from being the only person

to issue more bulletins on MySpace than Warren Ellis. (Though Ellis too sends plenty that say "read my book", at least it's not for the same book every single day!)

Also, there is some poetry. I am not qualified to review poetry, because I don't really get it. If it's a long poem telling a story it always seems like a very roundabout way of doing it, whereas if it's short it feels like reading a CD inlay when the CD has been lost. The poetry in this issue is: "Subtlety" by Lucy A Snyder, which surprises with a bit of swearing in the middle; "Hepatocellular Carcinoma, Stage IV" by Samantha Henderson; "Dolls" by Kristine Ong Muslim; and "Under the Flowers a Carcass Waits" by Rusty Barnes.

The magazine features some superb artwork from Jamie Dee Gale, Cameron Gray and especially Newel Anderson, reminiscent of Jae Lee at his best, plus a collaborative piece by Mike Capp, Justin Hillgrove, and Shana Marcoullier. Oddly, though, unless I've missed something while flipping through the issue so carelessly, none of the artwork seems to relate to any of the stories. It seems a shame, but perhaps the editors see the artwork as being the equal of the stories, something to be presented in its own right, rather than as something subservient to the text.

The magazine also features a very entertaining *Contributors* page. Maybe it's just me, knowing the fun we had cooking up pseudonyms for *New Words* (and occasionally since), but the more outré the biography, the less I believe the contributor to be a

real person. One or two of the biographies in this section fall into that category, but if they turn out to be real people, so much the better!

So not so much a review as a contents page with uninformed ruminations, but I hope these few words will repay the kindness the editors did by sending me an advance pdf copy. By now the issue is downloadable from the website given at the top of the review. – SWT

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Editors

SW Theaker & JB Greenwood

Website

www.silveragebooks.com

Email

silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk

MySpace

www.myspace.com/silveragebooks

Lulu Store

www.lulu.com/silveragebooks

Post

Silver Age Books,
56 Leyton Road,
Birmingham, B21 9EE

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Stranded out in the middle of nowhere without a car or a phone there seemed little chance of him making the meeting...



SPOILER ALERT!



After the ore had been smelted and purified, it was poured into a stone mould



I will always remember your kindness...

