

## The Rented Swan

By Joan Aiken

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“This, you know, will not do,” said Edwin Luffington. “It will not do at all.” He gazed distastefully at the arched brick roof, from which a greenish drip occasionally fell to the floor. “My dear David (I may call you David?), we must get you out of here.”

“Why? I’ve been here for a year. It’s handy.”

“It is quite unsuitable for a man in your position.”

David Glendower looked at Edwin vaguely and then, a good phrase suddenly occurring to him, returned to his writing. There was nothing particularly striking about his immediate position; he was seated on two orange crates and making use of two more as a desk. His room, an enclosed arch under a viaduct in Kentish town, was neatly furnished with a series of shelves piled high with manuscripts, and a bed, all constructed from more orange crates; at two shillings a box they must have represented some five pounds’ worth of outlay. The floor was muddy.

“Do you live here *all the time*?” pursued Luffington.

“Oh, no. I go to the castle in Wales for the summer months.”

“Castle?” Luffington’s expression perceptibly brightened.

“Pwllafftheniog. My ancestral home. I don’t stay there in the winter because it’s rather inaccessible; people won’t deliver groceries.” Reminded of food, he took another spoonful from a packet of mixed raw rice and currants which stood on his desk. “It’s a day’s ride from the nearest village.”

“On what?”

“Donkey.”

“Could you be photographed at the castle?”

“I *could*, I suppose. If it was a fine day. There are only two rooms with ceilings, and they leak a bit.... That’s why I like this place. It reminds me of home.”

“What’s the rent?”

“The castle belongs to me. Oh, you mean here? Five shillings a month.”

“You can afford more, now. How long has *A Nice Drop of Rain* been running?”

David glanced at a grubby theatrical poster and calculated on his finger.

“Ten months.”

“And *The Night Sky in May* opens next week?”

“I believe so. Really I must hurry up and finish *Chips in Coromandel*.”

“And we’ve only just found out where you live,” said Luffington, who represented an impressive firm of literary and theatrical agents. “Really, Mr. Glendower—David—you keep yourself rather too well hidden away. Weren’t you even interested to discover the amount of your bank balance?”

“I don’t seem to need money much.”

Luffington peered at him with disapproval. “You must get a new suit. And a new flat. Don’t you understand, people want to meet you?”

“I haven’t time to hunt for flats. I’m just at the crucial point in the second act. People must take me as they find me. But I’d rather they didn’t find me.”

“As to flats, you need have no worries at all,” Luffington said firmly. “There isn’t any need to hunt. Another of our authors is abroad at the moment and I happen to know hers is available, furnished, on a year’s lease. It will suit you admirably: a ground-floor flat in Curzon Street with a garden. And the rent is well within your present means. You can move in tomorrow; I will come here at ten with the office Bentley and help you move—you appear to have very little luggage—”

“I hope there will be room for my shelves; I don’t want my manuscripts to get into a muddle.”

“No there will *not*.” Luffington cast a disparaging glance at the boxes. “But I can assure you the flat is *amply* furnished with cupboards, desks, and bureaus. And I myself will help with the manuscripts.”

“There are forty-nine plays and seven sonnet sequences,” David warned him.

Even Luffington’s calm wavered for a moment, and the vaulted ceiling swam before his eyes in a superimposed vision of forty-nine box-office successes.

“How old did you say you were?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And *A Nice Drop of Rain* was the first piece of work you sent out?”

“Yes; this flat you speak of”—David’s tone was apprehensive—“I’ll have to keep it dusted and so on?”

“Don’t worry about *any* of that. The butler goes with the lease. He’ll take care of you.”

“Butler?”

“An old family retainer. The flat belongs to Louise Bonaventure—you’ve

heard of her, I suppose?” Even you, his tone suggested, but David looked vague.

“She’s an extremely well-known ornithologist. You must have seen her TV programmes—no, I suppose you may not have,” he added as his gaze trailed down the damp walls to the candle in its saucer. “She travels in remote countries looking for rare birds. Her programme is called *Parlour Treks*. She’s off on Whitsun Island at the moment, I believe. A delightful creature; you must meet her next year when she gets back.” David looked mulish. “That’s all, I think,” Luffington ended briskly. “Till tomorrow then.”

He departed, a willow-thin young man, wearing the very latest collarless haddock-skin jacket, with eyes as cold and intelligent as panel lights.

David went back to his writing and in two minutes had forgotten the visitor. The flat in Curzon Street was furnished and carpeted in the most elegant taste, but David, next day, hardly took it in, beyond noticing tiers of well-filled bookshelves with absent approval. Sitting down at a large, comfortable desk, he pulled out a pencil and notebook from his pocket, and had to be forcibly dragged away by Luffington to meet the lawyers and sign the lease.

Luffington rapidly read the document aloud. “Property on the ground floor of number tiddle-tum three, Curzon Street, hereinafter known as The Property, together with all fixtures, furnishings, fittings, appurtenances, trum, trum, trum, shall be...” David’s attention drifted away. Could Luffington really have read “live and dead stock” or was that a phrase dimly recollected from the long-ago day when Glendower senior was sold up as bankrupt? “Subject to quarterly inspection by lessor or lessor’s agents, trum, trum, trum ... shall retain the services of HENRY WADSWORTH OGLETHORPE as butler at a salary of not less than ... lease shall be subject to approval of hereinbeforementioned HENRY WADSWORTH...”

“Just a formality,” little Mr. Glibchick, the lawyer, was murmuring. “Miss Bonaventure was anxious to ensure that the flat should be sublet to someone, as she put it, on the same *wavelength* as herself. (The ladies, bless them, have these fancies.) She places the utmost reliance on the judgement of Oglethorpe—butler since she was a child.”

“I have to be approved by this Oglethorpe?” David came back from Act II with an effort.

“If you don’t mind, sir—”

“Where is he?”

“In the kitchen. I’ll just—”

“I’ll go myself. Through here?” David laid his finger in the notebook and folded Act II round it.

A plump, fatherly man sat at the spotless table oiling a seventeenth-century

musical box. His face was platter-shaped and pastry-coloured, with shrewd, friendly eyes.

“You are Henry Wadsworth Oglethorpe? Good morning. I understand you have to approve me. If you’ll just excuse me a moment—” David said politely, and wrote half a dozen lines, raising his head to say, “My name’s David Glendower.”

“Mr. Glendower, the playwright? You needn’t have troubled, sir.” Oglethorpe went placidly on with his task. “Miss Bonaventure has a very high opinion of you and so have I; I’ve seen your play twice.”

“Oh, well, that’s fine then. Very glad to make your acquaintance. What a beautiful musical box.”

“Miss Louise collects them, sir. Would you care to hear it play?”

It played “Can Ye Sew Cushions” very sweetly and hauntingly.

“I know the words to that,” said David, and supplied them in an agreeable tenor. Oglethorpe unexpectedly added the bass, and when, after twenty minutes, Luffington and Glibchick came in search, they had worked their way through to the “Ash Grove,” with falsetto cadenzas by David.

The lease was signed, and the two men of business took their leave, Luffington promising to return and escort David to a tailor.

“Before you do that, sir, I’ll get Mr. Glendower something off the peg,” Oglethorpe suggested, measuring David with his eye, “for he can’t be seen in Padrith and Kneale in *that* suit. And,” he added, as the front door closed behind Luffington, “in the meantime, how about a nice hot bath, sir? While you’re having it, I’ll just pop out and get the suit—a Lovat I think would be suitable, Mr. David—and then I’ll bring up a light, early lunch, shall I, and you can get straight on with your writing. An omelet and a bottle of Haut-Brion?”

“All right—” said David, steered neatly and inexorably in the direction of the bathroom. The hot water was already running. He felt vaguely that he was being remoulded, but since the process could not possibly upset his interior self, he did not particularly mind; in Oglethorpe’s capable hands it was rather comfortable. Certainly a hot bath was a luxury he had not experienced for years, and quite acceptable, though he found Miss Bonaventure’s bathroom, with its swansdown etceteras, dark-green marble, and sunk bath, alarmingly sybaritic.

Halfway through his bath, as he lay idly pushing the soap about with his toe and trying over lines of dialogue aloud (acoustically the room was superb), something rather disconcerting occurred.

A flash of movement caught his eye from a carved alabaster bracket by the window, on which reposed what he had taken to be a carved alabaster swan with its head tucked under its wing. Turning rather sharply, he now saw that the swan had

thrust its neck forward, so that the head just protruded from under the wing, and was regarding him with a black and inscrutable eye.

David started so violently that a tidal wave slopped over the edge of the bath. Swans are baleful and unpredictable creatures at best, even when viewed from the vantage point of rowboat or towing path; to meet a swan when oneself recumbent, unclad, immersed, and on a much lower level is an unnerving experience. David glanced towards the bathroom door, gauging his distance, but the swan forestalled him by spreading a pair of wings with an eight-foot span and gliding to a point midway between bath and door. There it settled, tucking its flappers neatly underneath, curving its neck into a meticulous S-bend, and fixing its flat eyes on David.

With such an audience there was no pleasure in further soaking. Indeed, it seemed alarmingly possible that the bird might elect to share his bath with David. He dried himself hastily. Oglethorpe had removed his clothes and left him a towelling robe which afforded highly inadequate protection against swan assault. However, this bird's manner, though watchful, did not appear to be hostile. When David gingerly skirted round to reach the door, it swivelled its head, keeping the flat black eyes trained on him like AA guns, but allowed him to leave in an orderly manner.

He found Oglethorpe laying out the new suit, together with socks, underwear, shirt, tie, and handkerchief, all selected with severely professional discrimination as suitable to the image of a rising young playwright.

“Oglethorpe.”

“Yes, Mr. David?”

“What is that swan doing in the bathroom?”

“It seems to like it in there, sir, when the weather's chilly. I suppose it's natural; the presence of water, you know, and the radiators. If you will not be requiring another bath this afternoon, I'll fill it with cold (adding just a dash of warm); it serves nicely as an indoor paddling pool.”

“But what is the swan doing here *at all?*”

“It's in the lease, sir; didn't you read it? Furniture, fittings, appurtenances, and one swan, care of aforesaid swan to be undertaken by the hereinaftermentioned Henry Wadsworth Oglethorpe.”

“I have to share this flat with a swan?”

“It is a very valuable bird, sir.” Oglethorpe's tone held a faint touch of reproof. “A gold-banded swan of Izbanistan.”

“Why isn't it at the zoo?”

“That wouldn’t do for it at all, sir. It’s a very particular bird.”

“Bad-tempered?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say so, Mr. David.” Was there a hint of reserve in his manner? “Keeps itself to itself, in general. When the weather’s fine, of course, it will be in the garden.”

David now understood why the garden, a pleasant little court with a grape arbour and fig tree, was three-quarters filled with an evidently new pool.

“What sex?” he asked. “The swan? Male or female?”

Oglethorpe answered repressively that the bird was a pen, and folded David’s handkerchief into a neat geometrical figure. “I’ll bring your lunch in ten minutes, Mr. David.”

The omelet was delicious and the wine mellow; nevertheless, lunch would have been a more cheerful meal if the swan had not chosen to trundle, slowly and with dignity, into the dining room, where it sat on the serving cart, following the progress of every bite into David’s mouth. He tried a placatory offer of toast fingers, which were ignored.

Hurrying back to work in the study, he heard slow, flapping footsteps behind him. Then there was a slight flurry, and Oglethorpe’s voice, low, but firm: “Mr. David is busy with his writing and doesn’t want to be bothered. I’ll fill the bath and you can have a nice swim.”

Feeling rather a pig, David closed the study door. Halfway through the afternoon (Act II was not going well) he felt obliged to tiptoe along to the bathroom and peer through the crack of the door. The swan was in the bath, sailing about above her reflection, and preening her back with brisk, housewifely jabs of the beak. She seemed contented enough, but was there a slight droop to her neck, as if she knew she had been rebuffed? Conscience-stricken, David left the study door open, and not long after kept his head assiduously bent over his notebook as a slow slipslop crossed the rush matting behind him. (Had she dried her feet before leaving the bathroom?)

At seven Oglethorpe, gliding in to inquire about the evening meal, found the playwright scribbling away like mad, while the swan, silent, impassive, but not unsympathetic, sat on a corner of his desk, pinning down a large heap of manuscript.

“I’ve made a casserole, sir. When would you like it?”

“I’d like it now,” said David, stretching his cramped hand. “I’ve done enough.”

When Oglethorpe brought the after-dinner coffee, David asked the swan’s

name.

“Miss Lou—that is, she hasn’t exactly got a name, sir. Miss Louise never thought to name her.”

“She ought to have a name. I shall call her Lucy Snowe,” said David, thinking of the memorable descriptive sentence in *Villette*: “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm.” Calmness seemed to be this Lucy’s forte.

“Very good, sir. Shall you be wanting anything more?”

“No. Thank you, Oglethorpe. You’re making me very comfortable,” David said, looking from the peacefully glowing fire to the swan on the ebony concert grand with her head tucked under her wing. It was surprising how quickly one became accustomed to the presence of a swan in the room.

“It’s a pleasure to look after you, sir.” Oglethorpe gently closed the door, leaving the silent pair to their own reflections.

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A week passed. Hounded by Luffington, David acquired a correct wardrobe, had a haircut that brought into view his haggard good looks, and attended the first night of his new play. It was an instant success.

With two plays running, David Glendower became a celebrity and, if Luffington had had his way, would have appeared at countless public occasions and TV interviews. David, however, had a strong faculty of self-preservation, which, backed by Oglethorpe’s quelling manner of answering the telephone or door, kept most of his admirers at bay.

One of them got through, however.

Everyone who knew Blair Lanaway described her as a horrible girl, “but,” they were obliged to add, “she does have staying power.” It was true, she had. To this, and not at all to the fact that she was a Hon. did she owe her job as gossip columnist for *Fancy* magazine; she always got the copy she was after and it was universally admitted that she wrote the liveliest, knowingest, bitchiest column in the business. She had a round face with pink pushed-up cushiony cheekbones, plum-black eyes, and a golliwog mop of black hair; her loud laugh and her ringing public-school tones were known from one end of Mayfair to the other end of Fleet Street.

The moment she laid eyes on David all her acquisitive instincts came into play.

David had the misfortune to twist his ankle slightly coming down the theatre steps after a compulsory visit to the three hundredth night of *A Nice Drop of Rain*. Blair happened to be at hand; she swooped on him like a hen harrier and insisted on driving him home in her nasty little car before he could extricate himself. Politeness demanded that he ask her in for a drink. As a matter of fact, Miss Lanaway practically carried him over the threshold, to Oglethorpe’s evident and deep

disapproval.

Before David could think of an excuse, she had invited him to dinner at her flat the following night, promising to come and fetch him.

In years to come when David woke, twitching from nightmares, he would remember that evening. Blair served him a hellish cocktail (he thought it might have been petrol and rosehip syrup with a pinch of phenobarbitone); thereafter he sat in a state of stupor. Blair curled herself up on the hearthrug and chattered gaily, but as the evening progressed she moved closer and closer until her elbows were on his knees and she was gazing intensely into his eyes; by about midnight she was saying with a boyish laugh, "Why bother to go home? I'll blow up the airbed if you prefer to sleep single."

"My butler will be worrying about me," David managed to articulate, trying to edge towards the door on his good foot.

"Bother your butler."

"And so will Lucy."

"Who's Lucy?" she said sharply.

"'A maid whom there were none to praise, and very few to love.' Thanks for a delightful evening," he said, finding the doorknob as thankfully as a drowning swimmer finds a rock.

She was so annoyed that she let him go, and he managed to weave and hobble to the taxi rank.

But the following evening she called at the flat in Curzon Street. As ill luck would have it, Oglethorpe was out; it was his evening off and he was singing with the Aeolian choir in Haydn's *Creation*. David had to answer the door.

Blair surged past him, all generous sympathy, crying out, "You poor dear! Do you feel terrible after last night? Never mind, I forgive you! I've brought a bottle of Volga Dew for a pick-me-up. Don't trouble to hunt for a corkscrew; you sit down and rest your foot. I'm a champion at finding things in other people's kitchens. No Lucy? I knew you were pulling my leg."

"She's in the garden," David said faintly.

"*Nonsense*, sweetie, you're just a great big *storyteller*, aren't you? Here we are, clever little Blair's found two tumblers and a corkscrew, so let's be cosy."

David looked longingly towards the study, where Act II was waiting, but he did not know how to evict his unwelcome guest. He wondered how long it would be before Oglethorpe came home.

Blair had kicked her shoes off and would have let her hair down had it been



possible. “Let’s sit on the sofa,” she said. “Now I want to talk to you about *contact*, David; for a man in your position, *contact* is so essential.”

People always seemed to be lecturing him about his position, David thought; at the moment it seemed to be deteriorating alarmingly; he felt homesick for the viaduct.

At this moment three loud raps sounded on the window. Blair shot upright, greatly startled.

“Oh, that will be Lucy.” David’s tone was full of relief. “I expect she wants her bath mat.”

He opened the window and laid in front of the fire a thick square of red towelling. Lucy hoisted herself over the sill and stalked forward onto the mat, where she carefully dried each flipper in turn. While she did so, she kept her head turned and her eyes trained on Blair; it seemed to David that there was something of definite malignity in the look she was directing at the visitor.

Blair felt this too. She paled. “I—I don’t go for swans much,” she said nervously. “Of course it’s *too* marvellously brilliant and amusing of you to keep one for a pet—we *must* get some shots for *Fancy*—but couldn’t it sit in the kitchen or somewhere?”

“Goodness, no. Lucy always sits with me. I wouldn’t for worlds hurt her feelings.”

“What about my feelings?” demanded Blair angrily. “Am I supposed to sit here with that bird staring at me?”

“Don’t stay if you don’t want to, of course,” David replied courteously. Lucy abetted him by choosing at this moment to move slowly towards Blair with outthrust neck, emitting a low but meaningful hiss which had a completely routing effect. Blair left precipitately, with many reproaches, and David was able to return to Act II, while Lucy settled on the arm of his chair and dangled a contented length of neck over his shoulder.

It became plain that as a chaperon Lucy was unrivalled. On several subsequent occasions she rescued David from similar predicaments, and once she dealt with a pair of burglars who had been tempted by the valuable collection of musical boxes, breaking the leg of one and stunning the other, with a neat right-and-left of her powerful wings, before David and Oglethorpe had even woken up. In fact, Lucy became almost as much of a celebrity as her temporary owner, and featured with him in many a double spread.

Two months passed peacefully and productively by. January, however, brought a severe cold spell, with concomitant power cuts and fuel shortages. David, hardened by years under the viaduct, hardly felt the weather, but Lucy and

Oglethorpe both suffered acutely and caught colds with distressing frequency. Oglethorpe nevertheless continued to look after David solicitously, while his care for Lucy was touching; he made her gargle—a process by no means easy for swans—night and morning, fed her vitamin capsules by the handful, and, when necessary, helped her to inhale steaming turpentine, sitting with her under the towel to ensure her compliance. One evening, fancying she looked a little pink round the eyes, he went out in the snow to procure her some tincture of cinnamon, and this was his undoing; he caught a bad cold which turned to pneumonia, and the doctor insisted on his removal to hospital. He protested vehemently.

“Don’t worry, *please* don’t worry,” David exhorted him. “I’ll look after everything here; you just concentrate on getting better.”

“Miss Lucy—you’ll look after Miss Lucy?” begged Oglethorpe. “If anything happened to her I just don’t know what—” His voice broke, and he was obliged to turn his head away on the stretcher.

“I’ll do everything you did, I swear,” David assured him. “Vitamin C, black-currant purée, quinine, hotwater bottle, the lot.”

For a week all went well. Then, when the thermometer had shot down to twenty-six degrees, there was a forty-eight-hour power cut. The temperature in David’s flat gradually sank to an arctic low, frost glistened on the walls, the bath froze (Lucy’s outdoor pool had frozen long before). For the first day David managed to keep himself and Lucy warm by burning coal dust and branches stolen from Green Park, and filling hotwater bottles from kettles boiled on a spirit stove. On the second evening Lucy sneezed twice, and David noticed that she had begun to shiver. He filled an extra bottle and wrapped an eiderdown round her, but she shivered still, and he stared at her in worried perplexity. It was plain that she must not go through the night in such a state.

The solution he finally adopted seemed the only one possible. He piled all the bedding in the flat on his own bed, put all the hotwater bottles into it, administered an immense tot of brandy to Lucy and took one himself, then, grasping her firmly round her feathery middle, he wriggled into bed and went to sleep. It occurred to him drowsily in the middle of the night that he should have done this sooner; their combined warmth, and Lucy’s feathers, produced an almost tropical temperature under the layers of quilt and blanket.

When he woke next morning he looked beside him on the pillow expecting to see black beady eyes and an elegant red bill. Instead, to his astonished dismay, he found an unmistakably feminine profile: that of a fair-haired, distinguished woman whom, if he had been a student of television, he would have recognised as Louise Bonaventure.

She opened her eyes and regarded him sleepily.

“How do you do?” she said. “I’m your landlady.”

He pressed his knuckles to his forehead. “How did you get here?” he asked.

“It’s a long story.” Louise stretched luxuriously. Then she sat up and stepped briskly out of bed. “Let’s have some coffee first, shall we? Is the power on again? Yes, thank goodness. How delicious coffee smells—it must be a year since I tasted it. Oh, you want to know how I got here? I was the swan.”

“*Lucy? My Lucy Snowe?*”

Miss Bonaventure had the grace to look a little conscious. “I suppose I should apologise. You see, I’d collected a pair of Abominable Snowgeese in the mountains of Izbanistan, and the Imam found out, and was annoyed about it, said I had no right to—ridiculous of him, they aren’t at all rare, over there, common as starlings—so in revenge he purloined one of my pair, had me turned into a swan by his top lama, a very accomplished magician, and popped me into the crate instead. If it hadn’t been for Oglethorpe, who very intelligently put two and two together, I should have ended my life in the London zoo.”

“But what broke the spell?”

She blushed faintly. “It must have been the old Frog Prince solution. I hope you haven’t caught my cold?”

“Ought I to marry you?” David asked diffidently.

She gave him a somewhat baffling glance, but merely remarked, “There’s no obligation about it—except on my side. I really am extremely grateful to you, and you’ve been an admirable tenant.”

“Shall you want the flat back now?” David felt very confused, and instinctively kept the conversation on a businesslike level.

“Not immediately.” Miss Bonaventure’s fine eyes flashed. “First I shall fly to Izbanistan for another snowgoose. I’m not going to be downed by that old trickster of an Imam. But first let’s go to the hospital and visit Oglethorpe.”

Oglethorpe’s delight at the restoration of his mistress was touching to witness. Tears of joy stood in his eyes. “It makes me better just to see you, Miss Louise,” he kept declaring. “And you won’t go back to those unreliable foreign parts any more, will you, my dearie?”

“Only to get another snowgoose, Henry dear. I must have a pair.”

“Then I shall come too,” the old man declared. He overbore all objections, and insisted on her waiting until he was well enough to accompany her. Meanwhile she moved to the Curzon Hotel, but spent a good deal of time at the flat, where she and David maintained their pleasantly easy relationship.

Two weeks after the travellers had departed, David suddenly realised how

bereft he was without them: no Oglethorpe to sing duets with of an evening, no sage advice as to ties and shirts, no imperturbable barricade against the outside world, and worst of all, no Lucy Snowe. Only now did he understand how much he had come to need her cool and silent presence. Without her he could hardly write.

He sent a cable to catch her at Elbruz: WILL YOU MARRY ME?

She replied, YES, OF COURSE, DUNDERHEAD, BUT MUST FIRST SECURE SPECIMEN. MEET ME HERE ON RETURN FROM IZBANISTAN.

Overjoyed, David booked a flight. All his urge to write had come back, and he was able to complete two acts on the thirty-hour trip. By the time he reached Elbruz, he calculated, her mission would be accomplished and they could get married at the British Embassy.

He reckoned without the Imam of Izbanistan.

When he reached the Taj Mahal hotel, the first person he saw was Oglethorpe, who looked travelworn and harassed.

“Oh, Mr. David, how glad I am to see you!”

“Is Miss Louise back?”

“Yes, she’s back, but—”

“Did you get the goose?”

“Yes, we got it, but—”

“What’s the trouble? She’s not hurt?”

“No, nothing like that, sir, but that old Imam’s been up to his magical tricks again.”

“Turned her into a swan? Well, we know how to deal with that now,” David said.

“Yes, well, it’s a bit worse, this time, Mr. David. However, you’d best come and see for yourself. I’m not sure how long the hotel management is going to stand for it.”

He led the way by lifts and corridors to a bedroom door which shook and rattled as if some huge and formidably active creature inside were attempting to get out.

“You’re sure you’re game, Mr. David?”

“Of course I am. Open the door, man!” David exclaimed. He was pale but resolute.

So Oglethorpe opened the door....

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