

# Clifford and the Bookmole

by Colin P. Davies

Two problems prevented Clifford King from meeting and marrying Zondra Amazon and probably becoming the happiest man on Earth.

One problem was their ages. She was twenty-one, though she looked much nearer eighteen and had a figure which could ignite puberty in parched twelve-year old boys. Clifford, by contrast, was fourteen and one week, spotty and spiky-haired, and had a tendency to perspire, though he endured all the grotty sufferings of his age with good spirits and always made the best attempt to be presentable. He was also rather shy.

The other problem — and by far the major obstacle to the love affair — was that Zondra Amazon was a character in a novel. However, never one to give up the race just because he'd lost a shoe and left a bloodied kneecap back at the first hurdle, Clifford determined to do something. *What*, he wasn't quite sure, but the Yellow Pages seemed like a good place to start. He looked for Inventors, Wizards, Sorcerers, and God.

Unfortunately there were no entries for Inventors, Wizards, or Sorcerers, and God was out. Clifford left a message on His answering machine, but didn't really expect a reply. Why should God be interested in his problems? Clifford, after all, was only a teenager, while God, let's face it, was a wrinklie.

By no means admitting defeat, but accepting the need to put his brain on recharge, Clifford went reluctantly upstairs to bed. Outside his bedroom window the moon grinned. He wiped the smile off its face with the curtains.

And wasn't it just like God to come calling in the night, to sweep in on the warm July breeze, to somehow climb in though Clifford's open window.

The first thing Clifford knew of the miracle was when he was woken by a gentle rattling. Someone was thumbing through his CD collection. The blackness in the room was thick in Clifford's eyes. He was scared — which no doubt explained why he was chewing his sheets.

"The Locomotion," said an easy, sonorous voice. "Kylie Minogue? I remember that song the first time around. *Come on Baby, do the Locomotion!* I could do it now if it wasn't for my joints." A shadow shifted towards the window. "Little Eva, wasn't it? Or was it Lulu?"

The curtains drew apart and moonlight fell upon a thin-haired, white-bearded, old man. Clifford switched on his bedside lamp. An old man wearing a beige raincoat.

"You see, I'm just a touch older than you, Clifford. You might call me a wrinklie." There was a glint in his eye which Clifford took to be a reflection from the lamp. "Now... you have a problem, I believe."

But the only problem Clifford had at that moment was how to wake himself up. He pinched his arm. He shook his head. He slapped himself in the face. Valuing his teeth, he decided to accept he was awake and that all this was really happening. He ought to say something; this was his bedroom after all. But what do you say when you meet...

“You say hello,” said the man.

“Er... hello.”

“Hello, *God*.”

“Hello, *God*,” said Clifford obediently.

“Hello, God... *frey*.”

“Hell!”

The visitor chuckled and scratched at his beard. “Works every time!”

“Godfrey?” Clifford threw back the sheets — he wished he’d been wearing pajamas, but the nights were so damned hot. He clutched his pillow as a shield.

“Godfrey B. Strange, Sorcerer, at your service. No job too big. Service with a smile.” He showed a keyboard of yellow teeth.

“I thought you were God.”

“I advertise that way. It brings in more calls.”

Clifford considered a moment. Could this man do anything for him, apart from make him quit eating cheese for supper? “So what can you do?”

“What can’t I do?”

“Find a good toothbrush?”

Godfrey laughed for precisely one second. “I like you, Clifford. So I’m going to do you a favor.”

Holding the pillow in front of him, and keeping a good distance between himself and the visitor, Clifford circled to the door where his dressing gown hung. He slipped the gown on and dropped the pillow.

Godfrey surveyed him with a glance and nodded knowingly. “You don’t need to tell me your problem. I know what it is.”

Clifford snapped the front of his gown shut and sat down on the bed.

Godfrey leaned closer and whispered, as if sharing a secret. “Of course, you do realize the real problem is your age? It’s a funny time of life, you know. Hormones bouncing about like bingo balls.” He leapt back. “Ping! There goes another one.” He snatched at the air. “Missed!”

Clifford realized his mouth was hanging open. “You’re a strange kind of sorcerer.”

“So now you’re an expert on sorcerers. A disaster at romance, but a connoisseur of fine magic.”

Neither spoke then. The air was tense, full of expectation, like the charged silence following flatulence.

“And what can you do for me?” said Clifford finally.

“Ah... now there you’re in luck.” Godfrey began to wriggle. He danced on one leg and slipped his hand inside his raincoat.

“The bathroom’s just across the landing.”

“Very amusing, son. Very droll. It’s not as easy as it looks, this conjuring lark.” Godfrey pulled out a white box from inside his coat. It looked like a shoebox.

“That’s a neat trick,” said Clifford.

“Thanks. You should see what I can do with a camel and ten rolls of sellotape.” Godfrey placed the box carefully on the bed beside Clifford. “I picked up this specimen only last week. Open it!”

“What’s inside?”

“Don’t spoil the drama. Open it!”

Clifford picked up the box and placed it on his lap. It was surprisingly heavy. Gingerly he eased the lid up. Before he could catch a glimpse inside, Godfrey snatched the box back.

“I’ll want paying, you know. And we haven’t agreed a price yet.”

Clifford laughed. “I’m not paying till I know what I’m paying for. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

Godfrey hugged the box to his chest. “From my perspective, son, you were born just after midnight.” From inside his coat, he drew out a pocket watch and held it up by its chain. It dangled close to his eyes. “About three and a half hours ago.”

“You’re short-sighted.”

“Only my eyes... my brain is as sharp as ever. And I can see through your game.” Godfrey held the box up to his nose. He sniffed. Lifting the lid at one side, he glanced within, then snapped it shut. “You want something for nothing.”

Clifford shrugged. He wasn’t taking all this very seriously. After all, he *must* be dreaming. Either that, or once again he’d rolled out of bed and butted the radiator.

Godfrey put the box down beside Clifford. “I can offer you what I offer all my clients.” With a flourish, he handed Clifford a business card.

“What’s that?”

“Like it says, *Godfrey’s Satisfaction Guaranteed Guarantee.*”

“And what does it mean?”

“That means if you’re not totally satisfied with the service, or if you feel that you got less than a fantastic bargain for the price, or even if you just suspect you got short-changed, you can take a baseball bat and beat the living crap out of me!”

Clifford tossed the card onto the bed and crossed to the window. In the moonlight the back garden was silver. A breeze brushed the small pond so that the surface shimmered. It was a beautiful night. Romance was on the loose — but Zondra remained bound with the pages of a book.

Clifford gazed at the cloudless sky. “Do you have many satisfied customers?”

“We’re all satisfied one way or the other.”

“So what is this favor you can do for me?”

Godfrey cleared his throat. “How would you like to *meet* Zondra Amazon?”

Clifford turned around. Foolish or not, dream or not, it was time to make a deal.

“Name your price!”

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It was Mum’s CD anyway! And chances are she had no idea it had found its way into Clifford’s collection. But he was still slightly troubled. Kylie Minogue seemed too small a price to pay for the magic Godfrey was offering.

Clifford stirred his soggy cornflakes. He was finally able to accept that last night had really happened. The box hidden under his bed was proof of that. He’d always considered himself a practical guy, open minded when it suited him, skeptical when put on the spot. Now suddenly it was as if his whole world had shifted sideways. If magic was real, then anything could happen.

“And don’t forget, Clifford. Come straight home after school. Auntie Flo can only stay an hour. She’s disappointed about missing your birthday and she doesn’t want to miss you today.”

“Yes Mum.”

Who had ever heard of a bookmole? That’s what Godfrey had called it. Intelligent, accurate, and trilogy-trained, it still looked like just a furry animal to Clifford.

“And don’t dump your bike on the drive again. I almost ran over it yesterday.”

“Yes Mum.”

Clifford sucked cornflakes from his spoon. Today was a big day, for Clifford at least. Zondra was due to be published in the third book of the *Interminable Chronicles*. The title escaped him at the moment, but *Sword* was in there somewhere. He would have to get to the bookshop straight after school.

“Are you listening to me, Clifford? And don’t slurp! You sound disgusting. You’ve got your father’s manners.”

“Yes Mum.”

Tonight he would send the bookmole in search of Zondra, possibly into the new book. Godfrey had given him instructions. It all seemed simple enough. Tonight he could have a girlfriend.

His mother tapped him on the back of the head. The shock made him drop his spoon into his cornflakes.

“Don’t be rude about your father.”

“Yes Mum. Sorry Mum.” He wiped milk from his tie.

“And don’t get milk on your blazer.” She went to the sink and began to wash the dishes. After a moment, she said, “Clifford. Have you been listening to anything I’ve been saying?”

“Of course, Mum.”

She turned to face him. In her hand, the dishcloth dripped. “I’m not surprised you’re Auntie Flo’s

favorite nephew. You're such a good boy. Get off to school now, or you'll miss assembly."

Clifford grabbed his bag and jumped up. "Oh, I'll be home a bit late tonight. I want to go to..."

She swung the dishcloth at him three times. He dodged twice.

\* \* \*

By evening Clifford was afloat on expectation. Telling his parents he was feeling a little dizzy, he retired early to his bedroom. He'd blamed the attack on a half-hour's exposure to Auntie Flo's chain smoking. In truth all the visit had left him with was a desire to introduce capital punishment for the removal of dentures in company.

Clifford closed the curtains against the twilight sky and switched on his bedside lamp. Then he jammed a chair under the door handle and took the box from under the bed. He flipped the lid. The bookmole was huddled in a ball. He picked it up. It was soft and warm and its short legs dangled. The creature reminded Clifford of a guinea pig — about the same weight and size. However, there were differences — not least the pink, heart-shaped ears and the central, single eye, which at this moment was fixed upon Clifford's face. Its fur was the color of parchment and it had no tail.

"Why only one eye?" Clifford had asked Godfrey.

"It only needs one. It's a *book* mole. Think about it. Writing on the page is two-dimensional. The reader creates the third dimension."

Now Clifford turned the bookmole around in his hands. It had a nose like a fat blackcurrant and was equipped with claws... short, but sharp. He poked the creature's nose, but withdrew his finger quickly when the pupil in its white eye contracted to a hard dot and began to tremble. Gently, he put the bookmole down on the bed.

Godfrey had told him that it fed irregularly and without pattern, as befitted a magical creature. It ate words and pictures: books, newspapers, magazines... It also occasionally ate slippers, which, Godfrey had explained, was evidence of insecurity and a need to be loved.

Clifford also had a need to be loved — by Zondra Amazon.

As he'd been unable to get to the shop for the new publication, Clifford only had the choice of two books. He opted for number one in the trilogy, in which Zondra was first introduced in a touching scene where she shakes free her prim, hoisted yellow hair, takes off her unsightly spectacles, and kisses the prince's horse. He collected the book from a shelf and sat on the bed.

He flicked through the paperback, searching again for the scenes that could bring Zondra alive in his head. Feeding the bookmole was, of course, going to damage the book. He would need to buy a replacement. It was a price worth paying.

He placed the book in front of the creature and waited. The eye glanced at Clifford and then the book. Clifford. Book. Clifford. Boo... the book was in its jaws. Clifford's flinch nearly tumbled him from the bed. He stood up.

The bookmole growled as it tore the book apart, tossing its head, showering confetti about the bedroom.

Now what were the words? He didn't have long. Within seconds it would have finished chomping the novel. He had to remember the instructions Godfrey had given him.

“Your mission...” Damn! He was always forgetting things. “Er... your mission is to locate and return Zondra Amazon in total, intact, and fully representative of the style and substance of the work currently under digestion.” Was that right?

As he watched, fuzzy, vague letters began to appear upon the bookmole’s coat. They drifted together to form words, all the while moving from right to left, in and out of vision, like an advertising display. Clifford recognized passages he knew well from the book:

*Zondra was a warrior amongst warriors. A warrior’s warrior.*

*“My sword is named Mercy... your death shall be ironic.”*

The bedroom door rattled. Someone was trying to get in.

“Clifford? Why won’t the door open?” His mother! The door shook, but the chair held firm under the handle.

“Clifford! Open this door!”

Clifford scooped the bookmole into its box and shoved them under the bed. He reached the door in two leaps and pulled the chair away. Now he felt genuinely dizzy.

He retreated over to the curtained window. His mother swept in.

“Did you jam that door? Did you do it deliberately? What’s going on?” Her eyes were wide with challenge.

“I...” He needed time to think. “I thought they were coming for me.”

“Coming for you?”

“Er... dentures. Giant teeth.” He was sweating. His shirt was stuck to his back. “I think I was dozing off... had a nightmare.”

She gave him a skeptical glance and looked around the room. “I thought I heard you talking.”

Clifford peeked through the curtains. Twilight had faded from the sky. Why now? Why did she have to come in just now? “Talking? Yes... quite likely.”

She pushed the door to, as if to prevent his escape, and joined him at the window. He backed away. Pulling a curtain back, she looked out. “How’s your dizziness?”

“I can hardly stand.” To prove his point, he stumbled onto the bed, lying back on the half-eaten book.

She pointed at the pieces of torn paper scattered about the room. “This place is a mess.”

“Tell me somethi...” Clifford sat up abruptly. Something was happening behind his mother. The air was flickering, a hazy shape forming.

The shape of a woman.

“Go away!” he yelled.

“Clifford!” his mother snapped. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Not you... sorry. I think I’m dreaming again.”

The shape was twisting, striving to gain solidity. Clifford tugged off one of his trainers and threw it at the swirling cloud, grazing his mother's hip.

"Clifford!" She started to turn to see what he was staring at.

"No!" He dived for the bedside lamp and turned it off. The room went black. "Go away! Cancel my orders!"

"Clifford!" yelled his mother. "Put that light on."

"I can't, Mum. It's the brightness. It hurts my eyes."

She went to the door. A wedge of light fell into the room. "Are you sure it's not those giant teeth again?"

"I need sleep."

"You need something. I'll see you in the morning." She slammed the door.

Clifford searched for the lamp. He could see nothing, but he sensed that a sword was at that moment descending towards his neck.

"Damn!" He knocked the lamp to the floor. Dropping to his knees, he fumbled for the switch. The room leapt into light.

Zondra was gone.

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Clifford chained his bicycle to a no-parking sign, chased a curious mongrel away from his wheel, and walked briskly into Hidden Planet. The prospect of buying the third book placed a thrill in his stomach akin to the butterflies of a first date. Or so Clifford guessed. Having never had a date, he could only use his imagination.

He scanned the shelves.

So many titles. So many colors. He wanted to read them all, but had neither the time nor the money. He considered the bookmole's odd appetite and an absurd notion overcame him. The book shop as delicatessen. And what a choice of flavors!

The subtle, crisp taste of a Leiber salad; the punning temptations of Anthony quiche; the heavy, colorful aftertaste of a leg of Donaldson.

He was hungry, and the food he craved was Zondra.

He strode to the counter and placed his order.

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"I am," whispered Clifford, "rather cunning for my age." As the front door clicked shut behind his parents, he abandoned the homework that he'd told them could not possibly be left till tomorrow. He had the house to himself.

It had been a simple — though brilliant — idea to copy Auntie Flo's handwriting from his birthday card and write a note to his Mum and Dad. Less easy had been the placing of a twenty pound note in the envelope. He hoped it would be money well spent.

His father had found the note half-hidden under a cushion, and Auntie Flo's suggestion that this surprise gift should be spent at the pizzeria down the road had been too much to resist — as Clifford had known it would be. His only disappointment was that there was no one here to admire his ingenuity.

That was about to change.

He dashed upstairs to his room.

The sun was setting in a flaming sky and orange light fell across his Vallejo posters. It was the sort of Hell-colored evening which could make him believe he'd made a deal with the Devil rather than with an eccentric sorcerer named Godfrey. A fine evening for magic.

"First take one bookmole," he said, attempting a cackle which came out more like a car with starting troubles. "One properly prepared, hungry bookmole." Though the creature was asleep, he kept his fingers clear of its mouth as he lifted it onto the bed.

"Add a sprinkling of freshly-published third volume of a trilogy." The book was on his bedside cabinet. Clifford flicked through the pages. "Unread, virginal," he added with regret. Hesitating only a moment, he tossed the book in front of the creature.

"And stand well clear."

The bookmole snapped its teeth upon the book. Even though he'd been prepared, Clifford jumped back. The gnawing and rustling of paper and Clifford's harsh breathing were the only sounds in the room. Now for the words. Once again he gave the command, this time without hesitation. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and waited.

A shadow crossed the sun, laying flickering patterns upon the walls. But the shadow was inside the room. Clifford stiffened. The bedsheets were clenched in his fists. In front of the window the air thickened, grew dark, took the shape of a woman.

Clifford forgot to breathe.

Zondra Amazon stared at him. Her expression was not entirely one of pleasure.

As Clifford's brain was currently feeding no words to his mouth, he lifted a hand and wiggled his fingers in a feeble wave.

"Who brought me here?" she asked. She glanced about the bedroom. Her hand was clasped upon the hilt of her sword, knuckles white with the promise of violence. "Let him give good reason, for I am sorely vexed." Her voice was feminine, but resonated with restrained power. It thrilled Clifford right down to his adolescent toes.

He gasped and sucked in air. "Er... Clifford... it was me... I did it." He felt a blush burn across his cheeks.

She fixed those beautiful blue-green eyes — one blue, one green — upon him. "Are you a sorcerer?"

"Yes, that's it. A sorcerer." Now his mouth was working without the aid of his brain. He made a mental note to kick himself later.

"Then you are indeed a mighty one." She bowed slightly; a restrained gesture of respect. But her hand remained upon her sword. "For my ring protects me from all but the greatest."



“Yes, I am a mighty sorcerer. Yes, indeed. Wise. Powerful. Yes, mighty is the word.” Clifford tried to maintain the grand timbre in his voice, despite the conviction that at present he sounded like an absolute idiot.

Zondra pouted with those ruby lips, those sensual, ample beauties which lately has teased and trembled through many of Clifford’s dreams and, in one particularly terrifying nightmare, had threatened to suck him to death.

He examined this woman of his dreams. Her soft yellow hair stroked across her forehead as she looked about in confusion. Tall and muscular, she was garbed in a short white linen blouse, even shorter brown leather skirt, and knee-high laced leather boots. *Such style*, thought Clifford, feeling slightly ashamed in his faded sweatshirt and saggy jeans.

“Tell me then, sorcerer. Why did you bring me here? You must have a purpose. All sorcerers have a purpose, even if only to antagonize a hard-working warrior. Why did you summon me?”

Ah... Now this could be difficult to explain without employing words like love or sex or others which could bring Clifford out in a rash. He stood up from the bed. “I like you.”

She nodded, as if that simple statement had explained everything, and began to loosen the laces on her blouse.

“I... No! I don’t mean like that.” Clifford waved his hand madly. “Well... yes I do.” He held his head in his hands. “I don’t know what I do... I mean think.”

Zondra stopped.

Clifford tried to keep his voice steady and his legs from shaking. “I just mean I like you. You know... *like*.”

Zondra twisted strands of her yellow hair in her fingers. “Are you seeking marriage?” she asked.

That threw Clifford. “Marriage could be difficult.”

“But you have powers...”

“My Mum’s powers are greater.”

“You have other plans for me then?” Her hand was again on her sword.

“Can we go back to where you unfastened your blouse?”

“You are no doubt a mighty sorcerer,” she said. “But you are also most strange.” She slipped her blouse off one shoulder.

His decision made, Clifford felt much better. For a moment then, he’d almost ruined the evening. Things were looking up. He dashed to the door and jammed the chair under the handle. His parents might be out, but he was taking no chances.

When he turned back, Zondra had gone.

Then, with a terrible emptiness in his stomach, he realized that she had not gone. He was seeing her from the side, and she was as flat as a sheet of paper.

“Where are you, sorcerer?” He heard her voice, but could not see her lips.

He drew in a deep breath; the room seemed to be low on air. Gathering his thoughts, and his nerve, he walked back to where Zondra could see him.

“So there you are, sorcerer. How did you do that?”

“Just one of the perks of the job.” A trick of dimensions, he thought. How could he explain to her that she was only a two-dimensional character? How do you tell someone they have the depth of personality of an earthworm?

“How do you want me, sorcerer?” She pulled off the blouse and held it to her chest. Clifford examined her face, her exotic eyes, the long scar by her nose where the prince’s horse had bitten her. From this angle she certainly appeared real. But it was a sham. Her features were no more than projections upon a woman-shaped screen.

“Dressed,” he said.

Her face twisted with anger. “You jest with me! You will find I am not to be trifled with.” She slipped her blouse back on and drew her sword. But, although she waved the blade to and fro and pointed it at Clifford’s chest, it did not approach him by one millimeter.

The front door slammed. Clifford could hear voices in the hall. His parents were back.

He dashed across the room, pulled away the chair, and eased open the door.

“Your tricks won’t save you, sorcerer. Reappear so that I may pierce your heart.”

“Sssh!”

Clifford’s mother shouted upstairs, “The place was closed for redecoration! Now what about this homework?”

“I needed the bathroom!” he yelled.

“Well don’t spend all night!”

Clifford closed the door gently.

“Why concern yourself with cleanliness, sorcerer, when you are about to die?”

He returned to face Zondra Amazon, this time at only arm’s length. His arm. “Doesn’t it concern you any more that I’m a mighty sorcerer?”

“I am mighty furious! What magic can stand against that?”

“What indeed?” What magic could stand against such blatant authorial license?

“Sorcerer. Have you any last words?”

“Yes,” said Clifford. “Have you ever heard of origami?”

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Clifford’s bed was piled high with books. They were quality books, classics, well-respected authors. It was costing him every penny he had, but somehow he had to find the right character. He wanted a girl, a woman, fully-rounded and as real as was possible upon paper.

Somehow he had to fall in love again.

He leafed through another Vance volume and considered again how he had been misled. Godfrey hadn't so much lied as held back on the full facts. It was a lousy trick to pull on a love-sick fourteen-year old.

He tossed the book onto the bed and was surprised to find a baseball bat lying there. He picked it up. It was certainly real enough, heavy, and scarred through years of use. He prepared for a practice swing, then froze. There was a tune in his head, getting louder and louder.

Someone was doing the Locomotion.

This story appeared previously in *Threads* #7 (a UK small press magazine) in 1995 and is the basis for Colin's first novel of the same name.

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