

The Devil Bats Will Be a Little Late This Year

by Ron Goulart

Perhaps the devil bats will be a smidgen tardy, but we expect the lavishly illustrated trade paperback reissue of Mr. Goulart's history of the pulps, Cheap Thrills, to make its scheduled release date in January. Also, a lavishly illustrated trade paperback edition of his coffee table book about 1930s and 1940s comic books, Comic Book Culture, is due out by the end of 2006. Alas, the lavishly illustrated new edition of Ron Goulart's Weekly is delayed in anticipation of more lavish illustrations, but with this new story in hand, who's going to complain?

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I'll never be able to explain to anyone the real reason why I'm going to be somewhat late turning in my script for Devil Bats of the Amazon: III. That's because my excuse involves ghosts, demons, two of my former wives, and a defrocked exorcist. Not, for various reasons, things I can safely discuss openly.

It's been my experience, after making a comfortable, though not spectacular, living as a screenwriter for over twenty years, that the average moviegoer doesn't pay much attention to writing credits. Therefore my name wouldn't produce a shock of recognition from most people. Anyway, I'm Frank Kennison and I specialize in horror movies. I wrote *Devil Bats of the Amazon* and its sequel *Devil Bats of the Amazon: II*. That latter one was nominated for an Oscar. Not, unfortunately, for my screenplay but for the Special Effects. Still, I can legitimately say that I'm associated with an Oscar-nominated film. Which I do in all my bios.

Some of my other movies, which do very well on the budget DVD market, include *Nosebleed*, *Nosebleed II*, *The Invisible Mummy*, *The Mysterious Carton of Chinese Noodles* (an unfortunate title the distributor stuck on my adaptation of a very scary Chinese movie), and *The Return of the Cannibal Coeds*, the thriller that introduced Betsy Donwin to the screen.

Betsy was my first wife and has only a little to do with this current mess. It was Carolyn Barnes, the very successful author of those cute kid books about the Incontinent Kitten, who was a major contributor to screwing up my life, entangling me with real supernatural stuff, and causing me to fall behind on this script that I owe Pentagram Pictures. I was married to Carolyn for just shy of three years. She's my third and most recent ex-wife and it was, basically, because she inherited a gloomy Victorian mansion in the hills above the Southern California coastal town of Santa Rita Beach that I experienced all the troubles listed above.

Over the years I've written several screenplays about malignant old houses, including *The Emeryville Horror*, *The Thing in the Septic Tank*, and *Fatal Mortgage*. But that was all fiction that fit into a traditional spooky movie genre and I never, until now, believed that such houses existed. Then Carolyn reinserted herself into my life by way of a message that I found waiting for me on my cell phone when

I got back into my eleven-year-old Mercedes (bought when my income was somewhat more comfortable than it is now) after an unproductive lunch with a very low-budget producer. That was on a gray Thursday toward the end of October.

The message, unlike many of Carolyn's recent communications, was fairly cordial. In that precise, slightly nasal voice of hers, she said, "I hope, Frank dear, you'll forgive the unkind things I said during our chance encounter on La Cienega a couple of months ago. Since you're an expert on matters occult, darling, I'm turning to you for help. This damned mansion of mine has.... Oh, my god, I—" Her words stopped abruptly and were followed by a long, heartfelt scream. The phone went dead.

When I tried to call Carolyn, I got no answer. Not even from her answering machine. Her hillside mansion in Santa Rita Beach was just one town away. A drive, even in a Mercedes of diminished capacity, of a little over twenty minutes. I decided, since she wasn't someone given to frivolous screaming, to drive over and determine what in the hell was wrong. That was only my first error of judgment.

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Anybody who's seen more than one haunted house movie, let alone a guy who's written fourteen of the things thus far in his career, knows you shouldn't walk into any old dark mansion where you find the front door partly open if you're interested in avoiding trouble.

I walked right into Carolyn's recently inherited mansion, however, despite the fact that the thick oaken door was standing at least a foot open. For one thing, it had commenced raining midway through my drive over, heavy aggressive rain. Beside the fact that I was eager to get in out of the downpour, I was very curious to learn what had happened to her. I seem to take an unfortunate interest in the wellbeing of most of my former wives.

"Carolyn?" I called out as I entered the long, dark-paneled hallway. It was dimlit and there was a strong, pervasive odor of brimstone. To my knowledge, I've never actually smelled brimstone but I was dead certain that was what I was smelling. "Carolyn?"

I took a few tentative steps along the faded Persian hall carpet and chanced to look into the parlor, also dimlit, on my right. "Holy shit," I observed.

Carolyn, who's a slim blonde woman of thirty-one, was floating about three feet above the venerable hardwood floor. She was unconscious, her long hair disheveled, and wearing only some lingerie the color of lemon curd.

As I crossed the parlor threshold, I bumped into a clawfoot table, causing a vase full of dried pussywillows to teeter, then go hopping downward to the floor.

From somewhere a few feet above my floating, supine, erstwhile wife, came an annoyed grumbling sound, followed by brief blurred shimmering and a loud

popping. Then Carolyn dropped to the floor, landing on a somewhat tattered throw-rug and sending up a thin spurt of pale gray dust.

Sprinting, I knelt beside her, took hold of one of her wrists and began rubbing it vigorously. The reason for this procedure I wasn't exactly certain about, but I've used it frequently in my scripts for similar incidents.

She was breathing in what struck me as a normal way. I noticed, even in the dim light of the late afternoon parlor, that there were reddish marks on both her bare arms and others on her freckled left shoulder.

Carolyn moaned at the same instant that I became aware that my left foot was entangled in some sort of cloth. Turning, I discovered it was a pair of the warm-up pants she always wore when she was writing. Beside them, in a wrinkled sprawl, was one of her faded UCLA sweatshirts.

"Frank," she said in a faraway voice as she opened her eyes. "You can't imagine what just happened."

"Judging by the evidence, you were partially undressed by an invisible man," I suggested, helping her to sit up.

"Don't be dopey. It was a ghost and he was in the process of assaulting me," she said. "Apparently your advent scared him off."

"Has this happened before?"

She shook her head, carefully. "No, today was the first time," Carolyn replied. "Though he's been lurking around the place for close to three weeks."

I, in my most gentlemanly manner, aided my partially clothed ex-wife to make her way over to the Victorian loveseat near the narrow stone fireplace. After helping her to get comfortably seated, I gathered up her scattered garments and handed them to her. "Is this a ghost that comes with the mansion?"

Carolyn frowned, touching at a tender spot on her shoulder. "Not exactly, Frank, no." She accepted the bundle of clothes, then dropped them on the loveseat beside her.

"Not exactly?"

"Well now, dear, don't go having a fit and playing the jealous husband when I explain that—"

"Hey, I haven't been your husband, jealous or otherwise, for almost two long, blissful years, Carrie," I reminded her while lowering myself into a creaky bentwood rocker facing her. "But considering the number of times you cheated on me during our tumultuous marriage, raising my voice now and then was certainly justified and—"

“Two or three teeny affairs and you treated me as though I were Madame Bovary or some dreadful woman left over from a Tolstoy novel.”

“Who just attacked you?”

“A ghost.”

“You already stated that.”

She sighed, draped the old UCLA sweatshirt across her thighs. “A divorced woman gets lonely,” Carolyn began. “Especially during the dry spells when I’m not in the throes of creating another Incontinent Kitten potential bestseller. So I ... well, availed myself of a few computer dating services in order to meet a few interesting new men. And one of them sort of moved in with me about six months ago.”

“That was this ghost?”

“Nitwit, he wasn’t a ghost then.”

“Details?”

She sighed yet again. “Ulrich seemed very nice at first. He was considerate, tall and very good looking, an excellent gourmet cook and very handy around the house,” she continued. “Unlike you, dear, Ulrich was a wiz at carpentry and there wasn’t an electrical or plumbing problem, and this place had lots of them, that he couldn’t solve. He—”

“Ulrich? You were shacked up with somebody named Ulrich?”

“It’s a perfectly acceptable old name. In Germany there are, I’d guess, legions of Ulrichs. The name is probably as common as Frank.”

“And his last name?”

She hesitated, then answered, quietly, “Well, it was Zillbusher.”

“You were shacked up with somebody named Ulrich Zillbusher?”

“Let me get on with explaining the terrifying situation I find myself in right now today, Frank dear.”

“In moments of passion what did you cry out? Ulrich, Ulrich? Or Zillbusher, Zillbusher?”

Ignoring me, Carolyn went on. “I soon discovered that he was an extremely passionate man. And, later on, that he had some strange interests.”

“Sexual interests?”

“Those, too, but worse yet, he was into black magic, sorcery, the summoning of demons from the netherworld, Satanic rituals and—”

“Wait, whoa,” I cut in. “Ulrich practiced all this stuff right here in this ramshackle mansion you inherited last year from your Great Aunt Marie?”

“Right here on the premises, yes.”

“How exactly did Ulrich become a ghost?”

“Well, that process began while I was suggesting that he pack up and get the hell out of here and troll the Net for a new sweetie,” Carolyn told me. “Perhaps one who would put up with his sexual aggressiveness as well as his unhealthy interest in the supernatural.”

“By that time stuff like Devil worship had no doubt warped his—”

“He became enraged and attempted to grab me,” she continued. “That was when I hit him.”

“With what?”

“A meat grinder,” Carolyn answered. “You know, one of those old-fashioned ones that you screw on the edge of a table and they weigh an awful lot. It belonged to my great aunt.”

“Sure, I used a meat grinder like that in *Guess Which Zombie’s Coming To Dinner* for Pentagram back in 1989,” I said, nodding. “So you conked the guy with one when he attempted to assault you. That’s clearly self-defense. I assume your attorney—that sleek son of a bitch who got you such an onerous divorce settlement despite your—”

“I never went to the police,” she explained. “I mean, innocent though I was, I wanted to avoid the media’s getting hold of the story. ‘Gifted Author of the Fabulously Entertaining Incontinent Kitten Potential Children’s Classics Bops Horny Lover on the Coco with Antique Meat Grinder.’ Not at all good for my reputation.”

“And much too long for a headline.” I gave her a questioning look. “So what happened to Ulrich?”

Very slowly, she pointed down at the floor. “These old Victorians have immense basements.”

“You buried the body in the basement?”

“I couldn’t very well bury him in the front yard.”

“True. When was all this?”

“This past August. The twenty-second to be exact.”

As a recent convert to a belief in ghosts, I then asked, “And when did his spirit start haunting you, Carolyn?”

“Exactly three weeks ago today.”

“Are there occasions when you can actually see the guy? When I got here, he was invisible.”

“Well, Ulrich goes in and out of focus. Sometimes he shows up looking just about as he did when he was extant,” she replied. “Others I can only infer that he’s about the house. No matter what phase he’s in, I can always hear his heavy, horny breathing and that annoying snuffling sound he sometimes makes through his nose.”

“Snuffling must be hard to do through a ghostly nose.”

“Will you quit making wiseass remarks?” my former wife requested. “The reason I phoned you earlier, Frank, even though we haven’t been on exactly friendly terms lately, was that you’re an expert on the occult and the supernatural because of writing all those cheesy movies. I need your help to get rid of Ulrich’s vengeful ghost.”

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In many of my movies, especially those featuring an invulnerable and undying serial killer, there’s always the possibility that the threat’ll return later in a film with a II or a III someplace in the title. Life, too, can sometimes go in for sequels. On that gray rainswept afternoon that I inadvertently rescued Carolyn from the ghost of Ulrich Zillbusher I voluntarily got ensnared with her once more.

Yeah, I found myself agreeing to move into her gloomy old Victorian mansion for a while.

“He dare not materialize with you here, Frank dear,” my former spouse assured me. “Your stay won’t be a long-term thing, since as an expert on occult matters, you’ll be able to clear my house of Ulrich in a jiffy.”

“The bodyguard part I can handle,” I said. “But remember that I only write about ghost busters, Carolyn. I don’t actually practice ghost busting.”

“Listen, I have faith in you,” she assured me. “While we were married, you often accused me, in that loud voice you assume when you’re deeply ticked off, of not having faith in you. But you can see that here and now I’m being completely supportive.”

“Your lack of faith in my talent as a writer was what I was complaining about,” I said. “But, okay, all right, I’ll spend a few days under your roof and I’ll try to come up with a way to eject Ulrich.”

Right there I had committed two more fateful errors. You should never move back in with a former wife, particularly one who’d proven her incompatibility in myriad ways. And, having no real life experience with unearthly things, you shouldn’t promise to exterminate a ghost.

“I’m really glad you’ve agreed to come back into my life, dear.” She jumped up from the loveseat, losing the sweatshirt that had been draped across her legs, and came, barefooted, over to the rocker. “I know that I’m going to be eternally grateful to you for clearing up this awful situation.”

When she sat on my lap and hugged me, the bentwood rocker began rocking vigorously.

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As darkness fell on the haunted mansion, I committed yet another mistake. But by the time I realized it, I’d been in bed with Carolyn for nearly an hour and it was too late.

Putting her lips close to my bad ear, she whispered warmly, “You’re much gentler than Ulrich.”

“King Kong is much gentler than Ulrich.”

She sighed in my ear. “I meant it as a compliment, Groucho.”

“Okay, I accept it as—”

“Oh, damn,” she exclaimed, sitting up and emerging from beneath Great Aunt Marie’s crazy quilt.

I heard the sound now, too. I had the impression that someone was, very slowly, dragging a wheelbarrow full of scrap metal up the wooden stairs to the second floor.

“What the devil is that, Carrie?”

“We should’ve discussed this earlier,” she said, staring at the closed door of the master bedroom. “I’m pretty sure this is Urgh Zgrun.”

The clanging and rattling was growing louder and closer. “Another of your Internet beaus?” I was leaning over the edge of the four-poster, groping around on the floor for my discarded shirt.

“Oh, it’s one of the demons Ulrich summoned up to do his bidding. They don’t seem to have gone away even though he’s deceased.”

“One of?”

“There are three of them I think.” She shivered, hugged herself. “But Shug Ngryz and Grb Shogov look an awful lot alike—big, green, and scaly—and they may be the same demon from the netherworld under two names.”

“Is this one who’s fast approaching likely to attack us?”

“Probably not,” she replied without complete conviction. “I’ve tried to

explain to them that Ulrich is as departed as anyone can be and they don't have to hang around anymore," she said, her teeth faintly chattering. "I'm afraid though that he still controls them even in his ghost state and he's using them to harass me. And now you."

Fetching up my shirt, I placed it over her bare shoulders. "Let me see if I can negotiate with—"

"Frank Kennilworth," boomed a huge gravelly voice from just beyond the heavy door.

"He means you," she said, nudging me in the ribs.

"You'd think a demon from the netherworld would get my name right."

"Frank Kermisson," said the demon at the door. "I bring a warning, rash mortal."

"Okay," I responded in a dim voice not quite like my own.

"Leave this house within one more day or meet your terrible doom!"

The sound of heavy scrap metal being dragged back downstairs started up and quickly grew faint.

"What produces that noise this demon makes?"

"He's got a lot of spiky protrusions and big hard scales. They flap and clank while he lumbers along."

"Lumbers? He doesn't simply walk?"

She nodded. "I'm really sorry, Frank. It looks like Ulrich's ghost wants you out of here so he can have me to himself again. Apparently he's using these demon buddies of his to scare you."

"He's been fairly successful."

"But you won't desert me, dear?"

I shook my head. "Nope," I assured my former wife. "But I'll have to figure out a way to evict Ulrich's spirit. Hopefully he'll take his assorted demons with him when he departs."

She sighed, putting both arms tight around me. "I appreciate that, Frank."

Okay, one more dangerous error of judgment.

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I'm an early riser, Carolyn isn't. By seven the next morning, while she was still slumbering under the multicolored quilt, I was descending to the kitchen and thinking

about how to remedy the deplorable situation in which I found myself.

What I needed, and soon, was expert help. Help of the sort Carolyn was convinced I was capable of delivering. There was a priest I'd interviewed three years ago who claimed to be a first-rate exorcist. At the time I didn't believe the guy, but he did give me some good ideas for my 1996 movie *A Room With A Ghost*. I'd phone Father Bray right after breakfast.

Maybe *before* breakfast was a better idea, I was thinking as I stepped into the big white kitchen.

"What exactly am I doing here?" asked the pretty red-haired young woman who was sitting at the heavy walnut kitchen table. Both her hands were clutching a cup of Starbucks coffee.

I inquired, "Betsy, what brings you here? The alimony payments you're still gouging out of me are being sent on time and—"

"Damned if I know," admitted Betsy Donwin, my first wife. She was wearing a white cable-stitch sweater and tan jeans and looking perplexed. "One minute I'm sitting in a Starbucks on Wilshire and then, bang, I'm here. How'd you work this nasty little trick, Frank?"

I sat, gingerly, across the round wide table from her. "I'll be honest with you, Betsy—" I began.

"That's more than you were able to be during our lousy, and fortunately short, marriage," she mentioned.

"Hey, let's not forget that, for all of my faults, I made you a star."

"You made me miserable," she said. "It wasn't until my agent got me out of those crappy movies of yours that my career blossomed and I became a major player. Which I still am, again no thanks to you, dear heart."

"What we have to figure out, Betsy, is how and why you—"

"Attend to me, vile mortal," she said in a new, deep and profoundly raspy voice.

I noticed that her coffee had started to boil and bubble and was spilling up over the lip of the container. "Shit, you've obviously been taken over by a demon," I realized. "I used a similar device in *Invasion of the Shapechangers* in 2001, but I never, until now—"

"Cease your prattle, Frank Kennison," ordered Betsy. "I am Shug Ngryz and I have taken control of this frail creature's body in order to deliver another warning to you."

"Urgh Zgrun—I'm only guessing since I never got a look at the guy—but I

think he called on us in his true form.”

“My true form, misguided creature, is many times more horrible than that of Urgh Zgrun, quite a bit more horrendous. A man of your advanced years gazing on my true form for the first time might well die of fright.”

“Isn’t that what you want me to do?” I asked. “And, hey, I’m only thirty-eight, which isn’t an especially advanced—”

“You’re forty-three,” spoke the demon inside my first wife. “We don’t wish you to pass away, Frank. As a favor to our departed master, we simply want you to vacate so that he can continue his spectral courting of the fair ... Jesus, have I got a sore throat.” That last line was in Betsy’s own smoky voice.

“Have you been able to hear what Shug Ngryz was—”

“I sure have, Frank, and it sounds to me like you’re in deep trouble.” She noticed that some of her coffee had spilled out onto the tabletop. “How about being useful for a change and getting something to wipe up this mess?”

I rose from my chair, grabbed one of Great Aunt Marie’s embroidered dish towels off a wall hook and started rubbing at the pool of coffee.

“Lost contact for a moment there,” said the voice of the demon. “As I was explaining to you, Frank my friend, pack your bags and flee or the vengeance of Ulrich Zillbusher will descend upon you.”

“Actually I don’t have any bags to pack. I haven’t had time, what with one thing and another, to get over to my place in Bayside to gather my laptop and a few—”

“Begone,” advised the demon. “Or be prepared to....” After a few seconds, Betsy got up, a bit wobbly. “Frank, it’s been nice to see you again. But the next time a demon wants to communicate with you, tell him to use e-mail or his cell phone. Can I go now?”

“I suppose so, since Shug Ngryz has apparently left for good.” I walked with her to the kitchen doorway. “Do you need cab fare?”

“Aren’t you going to drive me back to Starbucks?”

“I’d better stay here to look after Carolyn, just in case a demon—”

“You back with that bitch?” Shaking her head, she started down the long shadowy hallway. “A big mistake, Frank.”

“I didn’t, actually, have a choice. And it isn’t going to be a long term—”

“If the demons don’t get you, let me know how all this turns out.” She took hold of the big brass door knob on the street door. “But *phone* me, don’t try to

drop around in person. I'm not *that* interested in your fate." Opening the door, she went down the steps and away into the misty gray morning.

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It took more phone calls than I'd anticipated to track down Father Matthew Bray. That was because he was no longer a priest. Finally, about ten that morning, I got help from a friend of mine who writes the religious news column for the *Bayside News-Pilot*.

"They tossed Bray out of his parish," Dan Bockman informed me. "Then he was excommunicated."

"Some sort of sex scandal?"

"No, Father Bray was simply a crook and they found out he'd swiped something like \$63,000 from his church," Bockman said. "They didn't prosecute and he's still at liberty. Why do you want him?"

"I find myself in need of an exorcist."

"You still writing those cheap horror flicks, huh?"

No use trying to explain that one of my ex-wives was being haunted. "Exactly. I'm in the middle of a new script for Pentagram and need some technical stuff."

"I thought Pentagram went belly up last winter."

"They got bought out by an oil cartel over in the Middle East. How can I get in touch with Bray?"

"The reverend is now running an outfit he calls Supernatural Detective Services. It's in Santa Monica. Look him up in the directory."

I hung up and did just that.

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When Carolyn came down for breakfast at a little after eleven, looking attractive in a candy-striped blouse and a short gray skirt, I filled her in about what had been happening.

"This Father Bray charges how much?" she asked as she popped two frozen wheat-free waffles into her toaster oven.

"Ninety-five dollars per hour."

"Couldn't you talk him down?"

"I did. He usually charges a hundred twenty."

She turned her back on the toaster oven. "Maybe we should try for somebody else."

“He’s probably the best man for the job,” I told her. “He’ll arrive after ten tonight.”

“So late?”

“Bray says the best time for exorcising is after dark.”

She shrugged one slim shoulder. “Okay, let’s hope he’s not full of crap.”

“I’m going to have to drive over to my place to pick up some clothes, my shaving kit, my pills and supplements plus my laptop.”

“But, Frank, that’ll leave me alone and vulnerable.”

“Father Bray suggests you hang a wreath of garlic around your neck. That should protect you during the few hours I’m not here.”

“C’mon, every ninny knows that garlic scares off *vampires*, not ghosts or demons.”

“Bray says it’s a little known fact, but garlic is also effective with spirits from the beyond and demons from the netherworld.”

“How the hell am I going to create a necklace of garlic?” She placed the two waffles on a plate, carried them to the table. “What I’ve got in the house is two dinky cloves of the stuff.”

“That should do for a few-hour stretch.”

“I wish ghosts and demons were allergic to something less smelly.”

* * * *

Fifteen minutes later, as I was guiding my Mercedes homeward, my agent contacted me on my cell phone. “This is Lew Murdstone of the Murdstone-Terrific Talent Agency,” he announced.

“I guessed as much, Lew. Now, about the script for—”

“Ah, then you haven’t been struck with sudden amnesia,” he cut in. “You haven’t been kidnapped by terrorists and held for ransom. In fact, you don’t have one single goddamn reason for being late on *Devil Bats of the Amazon: IV*.”

“Three, Lew. We’re only up to the third one.”

“You know I always vet your scripts before I deliver them,” my agent reminded me in a disgruntled voice. “Your first draft was supposed to be on my desk *yesterday*, schmuck.”

“You’ll have it by week’s end.”

“The weekend isn’t yesterday.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. However, I’ve had some personal problems that slowed me—”

“Which one?”

“Hum?”

“Which former wife of yours lured you away from stern duty?”

“Matter of fact, Lew, I had to help Carolyn out of a small mess and so—”

“Carolyn Barnes,” Lew reflected, “that’s not as bad as it could be. She’s the least abominable of your team of shrews. All right, putz, I expect the script by Friday, early. Pentagonagram has to have it no later than November One. Farewell.”

* * * *

I returned to the gloomy mansion just before two in the afternoon. While I was setting down my suitcase, attach case, and laptop in the shadowy corridor, I heard two voices talking in the parlor.

Striding in there, I found Carolyn drinking wine with a bald, suntanned man of about fifty. “Christ, the demon has assumed another human form,” I exclaimed.

“Don’t be silly, Frank,” advised my former wife. “This is just Phil. Phil Renfrew.”

Getting up out of the bentwood rocker, Phil favored me with a cordial smile. “Hi, Frank,” he said. “I’m a great fan of your movies, especially *Nightmare in Oxnard*.”

Ignoring him, I addressed Carolyn. “Why is Phil here in the parlor with you drinking inexpensive California wine?”

“He was concerned about me,” she explained. “You see, before I called you yesterday, I e-mailed Phil to tell him about some of my supernatural concerns.”

“Is he a leftover from the louts you were seeing on the sly during our marriage or—”

“Phil is a new friend and you needn’t act like a—”

“Say, folks,” said Phil, setting his wine glass on a clawfooted table and easing toward the doorway, “I’d best be leaving.”

“There’s no need, Phil, to go hurtling away simply because—”

“Have an appointment with my personal trainer.” He hurriedly departed.

“There was no need to be so rude to my friend,” Carolyn told me as the front door closed.

“Let’s just hope we can get rid of Ulrich as easily.”

* * * *

After I unpacked in the second floor bedroom Carolyn had assigned me for my (hopefully brief) stay, I set up my laptop on a heavy oaken dressing table.

I was planning to get started by rereading the last few pages of *Devil Bats of the Amazon: III* that I’d written. But as I was scrolling along toward the page where I’d left off, I chanced accidentally to read what it said on the rest of the pages.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I remarked, pressing both my hands to the tabletop and staring at the screen. Someone had done major tampering with my copy.

EXT. NIGHT—JUNGLE

GENERAL CUSTER

Well, Annie dear, what do you have to report?

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

The President—better known to you as Prez—has instructed me to inform you that if this stooge Frank Kennison isn’t out of Carolyn’s house by dawn maana, stuff is going to hit the fan.

CUSTER

We better let Sitting Bull know. Tell John Wayne to send him a smoke signal.

ANNIE

John’s quit smoking.

CUSTER

Then we’ll have to set Frank’s laptop on fire and hope Sitting Bull sees it.

“Whoa, this isn’t my script,” I said aloud, glancing around the big bedroom. “Somebody’s sabotaged it.”

My computer produced a low explosive noise, then a full color moving image of a raging forest fire filled the screen. An animated cartoon featuring Little Orphan Annie took the fire’s place. “To borrow from Ethel Barrymore,” she said. “That’s all there is, there isn’t any more.”

The screen went black.

Hunching over the laptop, I tried every retrieval method I knew or had even heard about to try finding my lost copy. But the hundred and three pages of my nearly completed script failed to show up.

I slumped back in my chair, folded my hands, and stared at the dead screen. Black and white footage of the Oval Office at the White House came up. What was probably the Marine Band commenced playing “Hail to the Chief.” The President of the United States sauntered into the room and seated himself.

Briefly assuming an Uncle-Sam-wants-you pose, he pointed at me. “My advisers who advise me on paranormal matters, Frank,” he drawled, “have advised me that it’s just not smart to mess around with demons or Ulrich Zillbusher. If I was you, I’d scam while you can. Sometimes withdrawal is the wisest course.”

My laptop shivered, swayed, produced a series of lugubrious burps, and jumped clean off the table.

After a few stunned seconds, I remembered that I had my script notes and quite a few hard copy pages of an earlier draft in my attach case. I hurried over to the four poster. The mattress was covered with another of Great Aunt Marie’s multicolored quilts. My case sat smack in the middle.

I reached for the lock. The lid popped up before I could touch the case. Chocolate-colored smoke came billowing up to swirl around my head.

Lunging, I grabbed the handle. “Yow!” It was incredibly hot.

I stumbled back until I bumped into a wall.

From inside the open attach case came the sound of paper crackling and burning, plus the acrid smell of plastic melting and sizzling.

Every trace of my overdue script was gone now. “I’ll have to start from scratch,” I told myself. “And finish by Friday.”

Hurried footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. Carolyn arrived in the room. Wrinkling her nose, scowling, she inquired, “What’s happening?”

“Demons,” I replied.

* * * *

Wearing a simple black cocktail dress that she’d changed into after dinner, Carolyn entered the parlor at about 9:30. She was carrying a thick ancient leather-bound book. “Ulrich collected a great many odd books, of which this is by far the oddest, Frank.” She halted and looked slowly around the shadowy parlor. “Funny.”

“Are you sensing that Ulrich’s ghost is in the vicinity?”

Placing the heavy book on one of the clawfooted tables, she said, “I’m getting

that just-before-the-goose-pimples-show-up feeling. Maybe I'm merely nervous and imagining things. I don't think so, though."

I left the rocker to examine the book. "*The Dark, Forbidden and Most Accursed Prolegomena to the Study of the Black Art of Summoning and Mastering Demons from the Fiery Pits of the Netherworld,*" I read aloud. "Catchy title."

"It's an early eighteenth-century reprint of a much earlier work attributed to the notorious sorcerer Count Monstrodamus."

"Yeah, I see his name here on the cover. They call him, 'The Vile and Infamous Disciple of the Prince of Darkness and Foul Master of the Black Arts Who Was Burned at the Stake for his Blasphemous Practices.'"

"Ulrich found the count's writings, while a bit verbose, very useful in helping him contact his demons and control them," she explained, sitting on the loveseat. "It was Ulrich's belief that if you could get a powerful demon working for you, every sort of success would come your way. And he explained to me how certain spells worked."

I asked her, "Why'd you bring the book down here now?"

"Use your head, dummy. Father Bray will obviously want to consult it," she told me. "In addition to very effective spells for summoning demons, there are also spells for sending them away. I've browsed through this book quite a few times and I'm certain that any occult expert would find Count Monstrodamus's book helpful in—"

"A nice thought, hon," remarked the small, white-haired man standing now in the parlor doorway. His hair was close-cropped and the pockets of his black priest-style suit were full of small objects (one of which was making small croaking sounds). Under his left arm he was holding a large, fat volume that was bigger and heftier than the tome Carolyn had brought.

"How'd you get in?" she asked the exorcist.

Bray smiled. "I think I've finally mastered the art of teleportation, my dear," he said "Last time I tried it, I was attempting to call on a client in Bel Air but I ended up at an overly quaint soda fountain down in Disneyland with a sweaty lad in a Mickey Mouse suit giving me a welcoming hug."

"What's that book you're lugging with you?" she asked him.

He lifted Ulrich's book off the table, dropping it to the faded Persian carpet. "This book of yours, my dear, while serviceable, is the abridged 1803 Lisbon edition and lacks several important spells as well as Count Monstrodamus's brilliant essay on how to name demons. Mine is the rarer 1733 Paris edition. Only 230 copies were printed, twenty-five of them, it is rumored, bound in human skin." He replaced Ulrich's book with his.

“Well, Ulrich thought his edition was superior to any—”

“Ulrich was quite probably a dimbulb,” the defrocked priest told her, reaching down to tap the massive red leather cover. “Whereas Count Monstrodamus was an extremely gifted magus. A shame, in a way, that they hanged him before he reached the age of fifty.”

I pointed a thumb at the book he’d dumped on the rug. “Says there that he was burned at the stake.”

“They *tried* to knock him off that way, but he escaped,” said Bray, eyeing me for a few silent seconds. “You’ve gone further to seed since I lent you a hand on that quintessential turkey, *There’s a Ghost in My Room*. A man approaching fifty, my boy, ought to exercise more and cut down on the carbs and booze.”

“*A Room with a Ghost* was the title, Father,” I corrected. “And I’m only approaching forty-two.”

“Alas, then you’re in even worse shape than I—”

“Mr. Bray,” interrupted Carolyn, “could we, please, get back to the business that I’m paying you such an inflated price for? How are you planning to rid my mansion of—”

“Forgive my digressions, ma’am.” Reaching deep into one of the lumpy pockets of his rumpled black suit, Bray extracted a folded sheet of yellow memo paper. “I’ve written out an itinerary.” As he unfolded the memo, a small grayish toad came wiggling up out of the coat pocket he’d just dipped into.

Emitting a single forlorn croak, it sprang to the floor, bounced upon landing, then hopped off into the shadows beyond the fireplace.

Carolyn, perturbed, asked, “Why are you carrying that poor little thing around with you?”

“You’d be surprised how many spells call for a toad.”

“I sure hope you aren’t planning to sacrifice any living creatures in my parlor.”

“Suppose,” I suggested, “we get on with the house cleaning.”

“I’m in the process of so doing.” Bray paused to scowl in my direction before returning his attention to his itinerary for the evening. “Prior to ridding you of any lingering demons, Ms. Barnes, I intend to search the mansion for a trace of the spectral manifestation who’s been annoying you. Once I locate the wraith of Ulrich Zillbusher, I’ll swiftly dispatch him to the hereafter and—”

“I’ll save you some time, asshole. Here I am.” Completely visible, the ghost of Carolyn’s dead boyfriend was standing in the parlor doorway, arms spread wide. “And *you*, padre, are the one who’s going to get dispatched.”

Ulrich was large and wide, his shaggy blond hair worn long. His nose had been broken at some point in his lifetime and his chin wasn't as prominent as it might've been. For some reason he was wearing polka-dot pajamas. This was my first encounter with an actual ghost and for all I knew all sorts of actual ghosts went around in polka-dot pajamas. Still, it struck me as odd and I knew I would never dress a ghost in any of my movies in polka-dot pajamas, especially a pair with legs that ended an inch or so below the knee.

Inhaling sharply, Carolyn watched wide-eyed as Ulrich eased farther into the parlor.

Unobtrusively, I moved closer to my former wife. "Why the pajamas?" I inquired quietly.

"His idea of a joke," she whispered. "I gave them to him in happier times."

The ghost pointed a spectral finger at me. "So this is your ex, Carolyn?" he said. "Even Phil is an improvement over him."

"Enough of this." Father Bray's voice sounding even more Irish, he brought the yellow memo up closer to his eyes. "Okay, we'll start with the Holy Water."

While our exorcist was patting one of his coat pockets, Ulrich took two ghostly steps in our direction. "I can tear you limb from limb. Kennison," he told me. "Or you can haul ass and leave Carolyn to me. Your choice, buddy."

"You aren't going to be on this plane of existence long enough to do much tearing of anybody's limb—"

"Why have you got your Holy Water in an Evian bottle?" asked Carolyn, who was gazing over in Bray's direction.

"It *is* Evian." He twisted off the cap. "Much purer than tap water, chlorine-free and no salt. I bless it myself, same as I did back in my priestly days."

Grunting once, Ulrich spun around. "Okay, Kennison, I'll have to take care of this defrocked dude first." He moved across the parlor toward Father Bray.

"I think not." He threw the contents of the bottle at the approaching specter.

When the first drops hit Ulrich, his polka-dot pajamas commenced to smoke, sending off thin foul-smelling yellowish tendrils.

"Candle, candle," Bray urged himself, patting his pockets. "Ah." From the same pocket that had contained the memo and the toad, he took a squat yellow votive candle.

Ulrich, smoking impressively from head to toe, staggered closer to the exorcist.

Bray lit his candle with a wooden match dug out of another pocket. Grasping it in his right hand, he held it straight out and recited what was apparently a spell he knew by heart. Much of it seemed to be in Latin. I caught the names of several religious and occult entities, plus a few interpolated English words and phrases, such as depart, abandon, and hit the road.

Ulrich halted in his lurching approach to Bray. He was swaying now, engulfed in thickening swirls of smoke and making faint annoyed grunts.

Our exorcist tossed the burning candle at the now-flickering specter. When the flame passed through the fading ghost's polka-dot-clad figure, Ulrich's ghost vanished and a substantial explosion occurred.

The explosion was of sufficient force to shove Carolyn and me back against the parlor wall. The table holding the heavier edition of the Count Monstrodamus book shot up off the floor. The big leather-bound book went spinning through the smoky air to whap Father Bray hard across the forehead. He yelped once before toppling over, hitting the carpet, and passing out.

Shivering, Carolyn hugged me and sighed. "Well, that takes care of Ulrich," she said, relieved.

"But not us," announced the largest, greenest, and most repulsive of the three demons who'd materialized in the center of the room. His scaly head bumped the dangling crystal chandelier.

Carolyn hugged me more tightly, sighed more deeply and increased her rate of shivering.

"Our first demand," announced the demon spokesperson, "is that you revive your sprawled cleric and instruct him to reverse his exorcism."

"I have no intention of doing that," Carolyn informed him defiantly. "Not after all we went through to get rid of Ulrich in the first place."

"We wish him *back*," demanded the demon, who I assumed was Shug Ngryz, since he was the least personable of the lot. To further indicate that he was ticked off, he stomped on the carpet with a scaly clawed foot. A smoldering patch of rug, the size of Shug Ngryz's right foot, resulted.

Another of the demons, who possessed, I now noticed, a long forked tail, warned, "If you do not obey us, we shall devour you." In addition to a forked tail, he also had a great many large, very sharp teeth.

Carolyn, her face very close to mine, said in a low voice, "Cause a diversion. I'll get to Ulrich's copy of Monstrodamus and use one of the spells."

I gave a very discreet nod, then pushed her aside and shouted, "No, Carrie, we must capitulate to these guys." I walked nearer to the green trio. "I'll get to work

reviving Father Bray.”

“You have made a wise decision, worthless mortal,” commended the one who was probably Shug Ngryz.

I took a couple of steps in the direction of the still unconscious occultist, then faked a sprawling fall over the tipped clawfoot table.

Regaining my balance, flapping my arms to maintain it, I went staggering beyond Bray and bumped into another of the parlor’s many clawfoot tables. That fell over, causing the stuffed owl that had been perched atop it to slam into the rickety Chinese screen in front of one of the shuttered windows.

Impatient, the fork-tailed demon observed, “You’re annoyingly clumsy.” A foot-long burst of flame shot out of his mouth along with the angry words.

When I’d weaved my way back to Bray, I knelt beside him and pressed my palm to his chest. “Good lord!” I exclaimed. “He’s stone cold dead!”

Bray somewhat spoiled the effect by moaning at that point, loudly, and sitting up to glance around him. He noticed the demons, all of whom had been watching my progress and were now producing roars that indicated disappointment in my behavior. “What have we here, my boy?”

“Basically a screwed-up diversion.”

At the other side of the parlor Carolyn grabbed up the book and was opening it to the spell she wanted.

My diversionary tactics ceased to be effective just then and Shug Ngryz’s head turned toward Carolyn.

He glared at her. “Foolish wench!” he shouted, pointing a scaly forefinger at her. A ribbon of flame, this one about six feet long, came crackling out of his mouth.

The flames fell about a dozen feet short of reaching my onetime wife. But they did set fire to one of the Chinese screens.

“Duck!” I suggested and at the same time yanked up an imitation leather hassock and hurled it right at the fire-spouting Shug Ngryz.

Carolyn executed an impressive back flip, the Count Monstrodamus book clutched to her breast, and ducked behind a sofa.

The demon lost his balance, fell over on his backside with a huge thump. That caused another smoldering patch on the carpet.

The onetime priest pulled several religious objects from a pocket, including a white-beaded Rosary and a frayed scapula, and was waving them at the other two demons in an effort to distract them.

Carolyn began reading a spell.

Bray now looked from Carolyn's sofa to the demons to me. "Faith, Kennison, she's fair mangling the Latin," he pointed out. "Not to mention the Sanskrit *and* the Portuguese."

"Best keep silent for a moment," I advised.

The demons kept producing more angry roars. Then two of them commenced shrinking in size.

"Ah, it's the Count's famous spell that shrinks them down till there's nary a trace left," observed Bray. "Not the one I'd have chosen, yet reasonably dependable. Even her butchering of the pronunciation doesn't rob it of its effectiveness."

Shug Ngryz was also diminishing, but at a much slower rate. He took two shaky steps in Carolyn's direction, small spurts of crimson flame dribbling out of his green mouth. Then he halted, stood swaying, groaning. The other demons, now less than a foot high, produced, in turn, loud popping sounds and vanished.

Carolyn, reaching the end of the spell, slammed the big book shut.

When Shug Ngryz reached a height of roughly four feet, he all at once turned into a nearly soundless green explosion, becoming a greenish cloud of demonic dust.

Recalling one of my favorite script lines, I remarked, "That was a close call and we're lucky to be alive."

"Oh, I don't know," said Carolyn with a gratified smile. "It wasn't all that difficult. Had I known I had a real knack for this sort of thing, I wouldn't have had to hire an occult detective at all."

"Keep in mind, my dear, that it was I who removed your lecherous ghost," Father Bray reminded.

"You did, yes," she acknowledged. "I'll pay you for that." She glanced at me. "How long did that take him, Frank? Less than a half hour, I'd estimate. Even so, I'll write him a check for, say, fifty percent of ninety-five dollars, and—"

"A moment, my dear. My *minimum* fee is ninety-five bucks. Plus you owe me twenty-five dollars for travel expenses, nineteen ninety-five for the holy water, and the toad will run you—"

"I'll find your damn toad and ship him home to you," she assured him. "As for the holy water, I'll buy you a bottle of Evian and you can bless it at your leisure."

"But, dear lady, that—"

“I’ll send you a check for all the rest of your expenses, Father,” I promised.

“You may be a second-rate writer, but you’re a first-rate gentleman.”
Gathering up his book and his equipment, Bray took his leave.

Carolyn, while straightening up the parlor, said, “Stupid to offer to pay him for all that other—”

“Getting rid of Ulrich was worth it.”

“I suppose you’re right, Frank.” Sitting down on the loveseat, she arranged her copy of the Count Monstrodamus book on the coffee table. “You know, I really do seem to have a talent for this supernatural business. Being around Ulrich, I picked up quite a lot of—”

“Whoa, Carrie. I’ve written enough movies to know that it’s not wise to mess around with things like this.”

“I’m pretty certain I can do better than Ulrich,” she persisted. “I could summon up a milder demon. One that would do my bidding and not be as surly as Shug Ngryz.”

“You really can’t deal with demons,” I warned. “Besides, I doubt you can find a mild-mannered one.”

“My Incontinent Kitten books do very well, but demonic help could make them even bigger sellers and win me the literary prizes that I deserve,” she said, crossing her legs. “Ulrich told me once that there are at least three bestselling authors right here in the Greater Los Angeles area who made deals with demons and now they’re rolling in—”

“Forget about this.”

“And I’ve got to tell you, dear, nothing short of supernatural assistance is going to get *you* a big budget movie deal.”

“No, nope, Carolyn.” I said from the rocker where I’d perched. “Anyhow, I’ve got to get back to my place now to get to work on *Devil Bats of the Amazon: III*.”

“C’mon, Frank.” She came over to join me on the chair, causing it to creak and sway. “Considering all you’ve been through, you might as well stay here tonight.”

After a moment (somewhat like the one where Dr. Frankenstein is persuaded to once again revive his monster) I replied, “I suppose so, sure.”

She laughed softly, hugging me. “I’m sure you’re going to help me on this demon project.”

Most times at the end of a movie all the threads are tied up, all the problems solved, lovers are together, killers are in prison. The words *The End* then appear on the screen and everybody goes home, happy, while the final credits are unrolling. In many of my films, the ones where the monster is going to return in another sequel, I don't do that. I use a tag that I'm afraid maybe I ought to use now. *The End ... Or Is It?*