

The DEVIL *in* CHAINS



ADAM CHRISTOPHER

FOR AS long as I might live, I hope never again to hear the cicada's song.

I am, of course, intimately familiar with the rasp and rattle of chitinous plates as they scrape rhythmically against one another. Although not usually a visitor to northern climes, however warmed they may be now by the furnaces of industry, the cicada is instead common to much of Asia and the East. Indeed, most of my field-surgeon experience in the North-West Frontier was accompanied by a continuous chorus of insect communication. But it was that *sound*, that awful cacophony that assaulted us as we entered the subterranean chamber on the Isle of Man that will forever be held a terrible memory. Never again shall any humble arthropod – be it beetle, bee or dragonfly – be regarded with anything other than, at best, uncomfortable suspicion, and at the very worst, sheer mind-rending fear.

All after a night in the barrow, with the sound of insects swarming. With Bellamy on my left, and Gef on my right, and the devil in chains before us.

1. A Charge of Treason

I FIRST met Alexander Bellamy when he entered the farmhouse kitchen to the attention and salutes of two Lancers, who stood rigidly flanking either side of the main door. Bellamy acknowledged the formal greeting with the casual wave of an officer, and sat at the opposite end of the large country table. Although by this stage of the proceedings I had been unmanacled, I was vexed enough at the situation not to stand and offer a polite greeting. But if Bellamy recognized my silence as a deliberate snub, he did not indicate. Instead, he removed his feathered cap and smoothed down his carefully parted hair, straightened his tunic, and after a moment looked me directly in the eye, face expressionless. Clearly he was expecting me to start proceedings. Versed as I was in military life, I glanced quickly across his insignia in search of an identification tag or number, but found none. Instead, a string of unfamiliar pips was set above the left breast on the black patrol jacket, which was itself decorated with heavy black lace. Although I had been out of the army for some years, I found it strange that I could not seem to identify his rank, or even which regiment or division his uniform signified, although overall the cut and style was familiar. The black of Bellamy's tunic was only interrupted, aside from the strange pips decorating his pocket, by two brilliant silver buttons at the neck. Without my glasses, now trampled somewhere in a muddy field not one mile distant, my sight is

passable but not extraordinary, and I leaned forward slightly to better identify the button inscriptions. I couldn't see whether they were engraved or embossed, but... wait. A skull, inside a five-pointed-star? Unusual at the very least. And around the edge, a delicate string of rune-like symbols, which I felt I recognized from my own studies of the occult and magical. Good lord, which part of the armed forces used such a device?

I must have been staring at the badges too long, for I was drawn from my thoughts by the officer politely coughing, his hand adjusting the uniform at the neck and temporarily obscuring the silver buttons and their remarkable design. I sat back quickly, cursing myself for being so obvious.

“File, please.”

A third Lancer stood watch behind me, and at Bellamy's request instantly produced a bland manila folder. Bellamy flipped it open to reveal the single sheet of typed paper within. Upside down and out of reach, I was unable to read this report which apparently contained some salient facts about my own self.

“Mr. Jackson Clarke.” Bellamy's eyes again fixed my own, his head still inclined to study the report. “Forty-seven years of age. Medical doctor, trained at Royal Infirmary Edinburgh. Late of the Eleventh Hussars, distinguished service in the North-West Frontier province.” Bellamy read the concise history of my professional career, although for whose benefit I was not sure, as he must have been briefed beforehand. Part of the authoritarian show, I suspected. Bellamy paused only a moment then

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continued.

“Service discharged, *dishonourably*. You are now science correspondent for the national news magazine *The Gazetteer and Times*.”

Bellamy turned the single sheet over, and quickly cast his eye down the remaining text without summarising aloud. Removing a pen from a concealed pocket on the front of his tunic, he made a series of ticks against a few items on the reverse side. Folding his hands together, he once again sat in silence, a penetrating blue-eyed gaze meeting my own.

Despite my precarious position, I could not hold back my natural curiosity, and set about assessing the gentleman on the other side of the table, gathering what clues I could from not only his countenance but the manner in which he presented himself.

Despite his relative youth – mid-thirties, at the latest – this officer clearly held some high position. His calm, efficient manner spoke of a career officer, discipline drilled into him from a young age. Born of a military family perhaps? The parted hair was regulation length but rakish in style; this and a crisp waxed moustache on such a young face spoke of high class and probably a rich social circle, consisting perhaps of childhood friends who, having once shared the school playground, now shared the officers’ mess.

“Mr. Clarke, I hope you appreciate you have caused myself and my men not a little inconvenience. We are here on this island as a matter of both national

security and secrecy. The Northern Republic poses a very real threat, and this island is a key position and first line of defence. Our job is dangerous and difficult, and the safety of this island and indeed England itself may well be at stake.” He paused, eyes scanning the sheet again. “As illustrious an organ as *The Gazetteer and Times* may be, you have overstretched the mark by some considerable margin when you managed – somehow! – to enter a secure military establishment. I have enough on my plate as it is, Mr. Clarke, I really do, without extracting civilians from a potential warzone.”

Although delivered in a firm tone, the dressing-down was not quite as bad as I had feared. I had expected the dull lecture about national security and the danger of our enemies abroad, to be followed by a decidedly unceremonious return to the mainland, carrying a stiff warning on official letterhead addressed to Pemberton, my editor-in-chief, advising him to keep his errant staff well away from Man if he knew what was good for him. Or words to that effect, stated in a suitably military and formal fashion. And once officially admonished, Pemberton would offer a sly tap on the nose and slip a card quietly across the desk, detailing a return route by bribed fisherman. A good story was worth pursuing!

Bellamy was impatient for a response.

“Ah, it’s *Doctor* Clarke actually. Sir.”

Bellamy’s expression or posture did not alter. The silent seconds stretched to an age. Finally he spoke again.

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“Oh. *Doctor* Clarke is it?” The officer said in sarcastic surprise. “You left the army medical corps a disgrace, and retired from general practice to become a journalist, *Mister* Clarke. Do you have nothing else to say save an out-dated claim to a qualification? Well, man?”

He certainly knew my history. Lost in thought for a moment, it must have appeared as if I were patently ignoring the officer sitting in front of me yet again. Still Bellamy’s expression did not change, but there was a slight tightening of the skin around his eyes.

“Sir, forgive me, I can offer a full explanation of my actions. I was...”

Bellamy quickly stood and closed the file, bringing my explanation to a premature end. He gestured to the guard behind me.

“Mr. Clarke is to be placed under arrest and transferred to *The Prince Albert Victorious* immediately, where he will be confined to the brig. He will be contained onboard until we have finished our duties on this island, after which he will journey with us to Portsmouth where he will answer to the charge of treason before the Tribunal. That is all.”

The Lancer placed his hand on my shoulder. Suddenly, my situation was more complex and far, far more serious than I thought. The Portsmouth Tribunal meant only one thing: the Isle of Man must have been placed under martial law, with Bellamy in charge. Understandable, given the events I had seen unfold in the last day. But treason? Great heavens above. *Treason?* And wait, transportation on which craft?

“The *Victorious*?” I asked, quickly. “That’s one of the great destroyers. Surely you mean the craft we arrived on, the *Defiant*?”

I gestured towards the door, indicating the general direction in which Bellamy’s own small patrol boat, the *Defiant*, was tethered above the field outside. Still standing, Bellamy opened the file again, signed the paper within, then passed it to the guard behind me. He fixed me with another emotionless stare. Bellamy’s cold manner spoke of something else in addition to high rank. Some kind of special responsibility or attachment, perhaps, and not just because of the situation on Man. Something else. My eyes were again drawn to the occult symbols embossed on his collar buttons.

“*The Prince Albert Victorious*,” the officer stressed the full and correct name, “Docked at Douglas last night, ready to defend Man in the name of his Royal Highness the Prince Consort. You will be transported to it on *The Prince Albert Defiant*. Now, perhaps you have a better understanding of the situation?”

I blanched. The *Victorious* – the *Prince Albert Victorious* – was the largest and most powerful rigid airship of the Royal Navy. Vast and silver, its underside studded with armaments, it was capable of raining death from ten miles high. The Royal Navy only had two such ships, and if one had arrived at a relative backwater such as Man, then war with the North must be imminent. Bellamy’s outfit was no routine patrol, and I then understood my position with painful clarity. Snooping around a military base in peacetime was one thing. Knowingly entering a restricted area in what appeared now to

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be wartime was another altogether. Indeed, as Bellamy announced, it was treasonous. Collusion with the North. And as this must, must, have been the start of a military cover-up – for the North had nothing to do with the strange events on the island, of that I was sure – a wave of nausea swept over me as I realized there was probably very little I could do now to change my fate.

And yet, there was something about Bellamy. This was no ordinary officer; strange insignia spoke of some peculiar, esoteric and very special branch of the military. Although I knew full well that military decoration often took an unusual direction in design, the runes encircling the skull and pentacle were no mere aesthetic touch. At last, I recognised the script.

I had little, if anything, to lose. It was clear now that not only my immediate freedom but my long-term future was in serious jeopardy following my indiscretion at the military base. It was time to put all the cards on the table.

“It’s the ‘ghosts’,” I said, carefully and quietly. My lips were dry and stiff as I spoke, and I ran my tongue along them nervously. Bellamy froze in the doorway, turned, and delicately sat back at the table. For a moment he thoughtfully twisted one waxed moustache tip.

“The ghosts,” I repeated, satisfied that I had the officer’s full attention. “The empty room at the base, the farmhouse poltergeist, the fate of your government geologists. There’s a connection. That’s the very reason I was inside the base, to confirm the link. There is a danger on the island that has little to do with warlike movements in the North, I am sure. We are all in

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very grave danger, man. But I can help!” My voice rose, and I found myself slapping the table to emphasise the point.

Bellamy nodded, almost imperceptibly. Perhaps I was making progress. Time to leap to a conclusion and hope for the best.

“And if I surmise correctly, you do not belong to any ordinary branch of the military. The insignia at your collar. The inscription is of an ancient text, a spell to protect against evil. Your file there will tell you that I conduct my own research into such affairs, and I think there is much we can discuss about what is going on here on Man. I hope that you may find my own investigations of the past day of interest and importance. They may even prove to be of material value, and if, sir, I might presume as much, I would much rather be of help than of hindrance in whatever mission you have on the island.”

Bellamy sat in silence as the words tumbled out, quickly, but I hoped intelligently. It then occurred to me that my attempt at brokering may have sounded desperate and hollow. I just hoped that the officer was familiar with the details of my past work, summarised perhaps in his file.

Certainly I had discovered much in my short time on the island. A haunting with unique properties, coincidental with a substantial military presence arriving on Man. An apparent mutiny at the island’s own military base, and walking among it all a most unusual officer in an unidentifiable uniform marked with magical insignias. I sensed I was on the threshold of something both dark and important.

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Then, for the first time at our meeting, Bellamy smiled and his whole demeanour changed. Although his posture remained perfect, it appeared as though a weight were lifted from his shoulders, which drooped slightly. He glanced over his shoulder at one of the Lancers at the door to send for tea.

“And that, *Doctor Clarke*, was what I was waiting for. An interesting series of deductions as well, redolent of an astute mind. You are correct, and I believe we have a common interest in matters that are, shall we say, of a difficult nature to define.

“I must apologise for this charade, but I had to be absolutely certain I was address the *real* Dr. Jackson Clarke of Manchester. As you have discovered, we are facing any enemy here possessed of unique resources, and I could not risk enlisting an impostor to our cause”

I was much relieved, and heartened that I had reasoned correctly. Bellamy’s position was apparently one which brought a professional interest to the occult, paranormal and magical. Although mere staffer of the *Gazetteer*’s science desk, my own interest and experience in such fields was extensive and, at times, all-consuming. This Bellamy seemed to appreciate.

Tea soon arrived in an army thermos with two tin mugs. Bellamy poured mine first and spoke as I eagerly accepted the warming drink.

“Dr. Clarke, may I introduce myself. I am Colonel-Commandant Alexander Bellamy, as of zero-one-hundred hours commander-in-chief of the Manx

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forces. As well as the Royal Victorian Naval and Marine Forces, I also have authority to represent, as I think you have estimated correctly, His Royal Highness the Prince Consort and the Society of Arts, on their behalf in matters of the occult and magical sciences. I cannot say more than that, and you will appreciate that any information imparted to you in the course of this investigation constitutes a state secret. Any communication outside of approved circles *will* be an act of treason.” A reminder of the fate I had narrowly escaped; I gulped my tea gratefully.

“Now that we have our *bona fides* established, Dr. Clarke, you will tell me everything of what you have discovered on this island.” He sipped his own mug delicately, regarding me in a more friendly light over the rim.

“Everything, Colonel-Commandant?” I asked.

“Everything, Dr. Clarke.”

2. A New Assignment

IT WAS Harris who called me into the editor's office, two days before. Pemberton himself was busy on the telegraphphone when I was shown in to the small, file-filled room. I gingerly removed a stack of papers from the guest chair before seating myself, and readied my pen and notepad. An impromptu meeting with the editor of *The Gazetteer and Times* generally meant fast assignment to a breaking story. Such events were rare for the science desk, and I felt a thrill of excitement as I postulated on what news may have reached us.

Pemberton gestured in a friendly manner as he rushed to end his call. In front of him lay a large landscape notepad, covered in pencil jottings. Beneath, just visible, I could see the front page of a newspaper I did not recognize. The masthead had been folded under and the main headline was partially obscured, but I caught the first two words: 'Dalby Sensation'. The date was also visible – it was this morning's edition of the whatever-it-was, the nineteenth of February, 2001.

"Thank-you Mr. Lambert. Good-day." Pemberton placed the tele's earpiece in its cradle and switched his attention to me.

“Jackson, here’s a treat for you! Take a look at this!”

I took the proffered newspaper and unfolded it to its full length – it was the *Isle of Man Examiner*. The front page revealed a smattering of local affairs: news of the latest Northern Republic rhetoric on the subject of island sovereignty; a report on a suspicious barn fire; an opinion piece decrying proposed changes to postal zones within the territory. But on the left, a small article was circled in Pemberton’s thick pencil. It was short, with no picture, but the headline was in a somewhat bolder font than the other news items of the day. One Richard Lambert reported:

“Listen to this story of the occult; to a description of incidents which beggar description, details, as far as we are able to present them, of events which have no equal in fact or fiction; and yet, which are solemnly vouched for by people whose sanity brooks no question. It is the story of what has been elsewhere described as ‘the Spook of Dalby’; a ‘spook’ which is not a ‘spook’ nor, if we accept the word of responsible persons, is it the invention of an unbalanced mental state.”

Intriguing, if somewhat amateur. The text continued to describe a certain manifestation at an isolated farmhouse on the island. The family within had been terrorised by events which bore all the hallmarks of a classic poltergeist haunting – pots thrown, doors locked and unlocked – which, after some months, culminated in the appearance of a small, shadowy form; a mongoose-like animal shape which granted an audience only after the hours of darkness, and which appeared to have the power of speech. So enthralled

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was the local village by this tiny apparition that the farmhouse had been placed under nightly siege each evening for the past month by rowdy rural types who, convinced that this was local folklore made real, insisted on carrying out a noisy and troublesome appearance of their own to adhere to an ages-old – but probably quite spurious – tradition. The family, although initially pleased with the attention, now found it a genuine impediment to their normal daily activities.

I replaced the newspaper on Pemberton's desk and exhaled, long and slow. A remarkable, if not completely believable tale. Pemberton read my expression, and taking his meerschaum pipe from the desk, relit it with a flourish. Blue smoke curled from the carved Turk's head that formed the pipe's decorative bowl, filling the room with a rich, sweet aroma. The editor anticipated my first question.

“You are asking, are you not, why a national news magazine such as *The Gazetteer and Times* should be interested in such a strange, parochial item when firstly there would be little interest on the mainland, and secondly this amazing apparition is likely a load of bunkum anyway. Hmm?”

I nodded. “Quite right. This story is interesting but surely a fiction. A lonely family on an isolated part of the island. They crave attention and excitement, invent a charade, and now it has got the better of them. Leave them be, and I'm sure local interest will wane with time.”

I was surprised at my own advice, logical as it indeed it was. The purview of the science desk, of which I was the sole reporter, was to cover not only

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developments in industry and science, but any other areas of an unusual nature which were, as was well known, of personal interest to the Prince himself. It was Pemberton who had recognized that my previous, home-spun work researching the occult and magical would give *The Gazetteer* an edge that other periodicals would not have, and it was he that convinced me to create the science desk and ensure that such matters were included in its remit. Rumour had it that old Albert himself was a regular reader.

As such, the story did indeed grasp my attention. Ghost stories *were* popular, but this sounded more a light entertainment. Unless there was something else afoot?

Either Pemberton was himself possessed of the preternatural gift of mind reading, or I had a habit of unconsciously broadcasting my thoughts across my face. The editor concerned himself momentarily with improving the flame in his pipe, before taking a series of short puffs and then smiling broadly in my direction.

“Yes, leave the poor family well alone,” he agreed. “And so it should be, if it weren’t for the fact that what on the surface looks like a fanciful tale created by lonely and idle minds is but the latest in a string of events on that fair isle which, when viewed as individual occurrences, would be seen as nothing more than diverting footnotes in a book of odd tales. But when placed together in sequence, an altogether more curious affair becomes apparent.”

My interest was certainly piqued. I asked the editor to continue. He indicated

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the telegraphone on his desk, and puffed some more.

“I was just talking to the principle author of that latest news report, Richard Lambert. Good chap, keen etymologist. Has written extensively on the island’s insect life. While the folk of Dalby appear most concerned with scrambling up dangerous hill paths to the farm at midnight, desperate to catch a glimpse or even hear some words of wisdom from this ‘Dalby Sensation’ while enacting whatever ‘pagan’ rite was developed that evening in the local free house, there is another ghostly tale unfolding not two miles away. One which has not got much attention at all.

“As you know, the Isle of Man is an important strategic position between England and the Northern Republic – sorry, I’ve asked Harris to unearth a map of the island and surrounding waters but the office doesn’t have one to immediate hand – and the island is thus home to a sizeable military establishment that serves both land and air forces. A barracks to house troops, a monitoring post to observe movements in the North, and a small naval dockyard providing coastal patrols, as well as being fitted out to support larger airships that might arrive. Mr. Lambert has developed a hobby of ingratiating himself into the social circles of the base crew, who, during what must be a decidedly dull tour of duty on the island, are only too happy to accept a few rounds of drinks in an evening in exchange for some idle gossip with interested local folk.”

Pemberton paused. He clearly enjoyed being the central clearing point for any assignments that he had to hand out to the staff of the *Gazetteer*, but as his long hours confined to the office prevented him from taking part in any

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field reporting himself, one could hardly blame him for taking what pleasure he could from behind the desk. Certainly, I sensed the story from the Isle of Man was developing into something with a fascinating, mysterious angle.

Two pipe puffs sent heavy smoke towards the ceiling. Pemberton considered the rolling cloud momentarily before recommencing his briefing.

“Probably bad form of Lambert to take advantage, as it were, but a journalist is a journalist. The general mental state of troops on the island seems to be one of abject boredom, so any chance to regale others with exciting information that isn’t a state secret is pounced upon, doubly so if there is, ah, lubrication involved. So, to cut a long story short, the military base is also having problems of a supernatural turn. Indeed, remarkably similar to those at the farmhouse up the hill – equipment being moved, doors and cupboard locked or unlocked. And at night, a small shadow in the soldiers’ mess room. Burly though presumably they are, most of them won’t set foot in that part of the base if they can help it. Instead they’ve established temporary residence in a kitchen attached to the monitor room, in a forward part of the base.”

A fascinating coincidence. Local island gossip perhaps building upon itself? “Interesting indeed. Does Lambert suspect some connection between the two manifestations?” I asked. My question was mostly rhetorical but Pemberton nodded.

“The last Lambert heard, the base CO wasn’t too pleased, and was rather happy to let attention be focused on the farmhouse, however unhappy that

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may make the farmer and his family.” Pemberton smiled again, and paused for a beat. There was more.

“There has also been an... accident. Well, Mr. Lambert isn't sure, but just as I spoke to him he was off visiting another nearby location which may offer a third connection in this peculiar little mystery. On top of having to deal with a disruption to normal activities at the base due to a spook of their own, there has been some kind of hoo-hah involving a visiting group of scientists from the Society of Arts, undertaking an academic survey on the island. I'm not sure what field of science, but something archaeological, or perhaps geographical. But it's being kept very quiet, and we're the first people outside Lambert's own paper to hear of this. To top it off, the CO must be bursting a blood vessel, as a boat of special military personnel have now arrived on the island, unannounced, to apparently investigate said accident.

“Lambert is trying to dig up some information on what the scientists were doing on the island and what the nature of their predicament was. But he has possession of a most singular scrap of data. The site he is trying to access – a stone circle, by all accounts – has been mentioned specifically by the spectral voices heard at both the base and the farmhouse. Due to the level of secrecy surrounding the scientists, nobody appears to have made the connection yet. Although Lambert has no clue as to the identity of the military investigators, he suspects the Prince may have a hand in this.”

I slumped in the chair and whistled. A confusing tale, sketchy in detail, but clearly a line of connection could be drawn between the disparate events. Whether some novel form of incursion from the North, or a bizarre glimpse

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of the supernatural lore of Man, I was already running a feature outline for the *Gazetteer* through my mind. I owed both Pemberton and Lambert a debt of gratitude for getting me involved in what appeared to be a case of singular interest, although I was still unsure as to why we had been invited to collaborate with Lambert on a piece for national circulation.

“Mr. Lambert then wishes his *Isle of Man Examiner* and our own magazine to devise a special article on recent events on the island? I’m grateful for the opportunity, but would we not be blocked at every turn by official secrets? What story is there to tell?”

Pemberton nodded his great, jowled head once more. “Lambert has been approached by the farmer at the centre of the turmoil, who wishes to state once and for all their position, in the hope that with a full report, local rumour-mongering and speculation will die away and they will, eventually, be left in peace. National circulation would be the best way to achieve this, and Lambert knows of the reputation of your science desk, Clarke.”

I gestured my appreciation of Lambert’s judgment. Pemberton continued.

“Also, as you suggest, there is a larger though more difficult story to expound, involving events at the military base and quite possibly the fate that befell the expedition of the Society of Arts. Certainly the arrival of the special investigators bodes of a serious matter, and if you play the line correctly, Clarke, we may well be able to present a substantial investigation which would make *The Gazetteer*, and your column, the most widely read publication in the Empire.”

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I mulled the suggestion over in my mind. “Although I have no lofty ambition for my journalist career, I will admit that writing for *The Gazetteer* fills me with a certain pride, and an increase in subscribers would certainly be a positive. How do we proceed with this investigation? Does Lambert have a strategy in place?”

Pemberton jerked into action from his recumbent position in the large editor’s chair and dividing his large jotter pad into a clean side, began writing directions in his quick, jagged hand. “Indeed yes,” Pemberton spoke through clenched teeth, pipe held rigidly in place. He puffed during each pause of his speech rhythmically, like a steam engine. “Our Mr. Lambert is today on a recce to what he hopes is the accident site. Or at least the location he has been told about. I’ve taken the liberty of asking him to book you into local accommodation in Dalby, initially for three nights, which you may extend yourself as you see fit, starting tomorrow. If you catch the ferry at seven in the morning, Lambert will meet you at the dock and fill you in on any new data he may have gathered. Keep me informed, Jack!”

With that Pemberton finished his pipe and my audience was over. I thanked the editor as he showed me out of the office, and he gave me a hearty and a silent mouthed “Good luck!” as he handed me the jotted note. Harris the clerk appeared at Pemberton’s side, and the two of them returned to the office to discuss other great matters of the day.

Returning to my own desk, I decided to spend the rest of the afternoon researching the island I was to visit tomorrow, as I had never once set foot

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there myself. Glancing over my notes and the directions from Pemberton, I felt a fascinating and useful few days lay ahead.

3. A Late Arrival

THE MORNING was bleak. A slate sky the colour of Pemberton's pipe smoke arced above as I stood and read the new edition of the island's *Examiner*, picked up on board the ferry from Liverpool. The airship's departure from the mainland had been delayed by a half-hour, due to a forecast of an extremely severe electrical storm over the Irish Sea. While larger passenger craft were designed to handle such atmospheric conditions, the smaller ferry-class dirigibles generally employed to ply short routes around the British Isles were at the mercy of the elements, the conductive nature of their silver-plated balloons not ideal in stormy weather. But although the sky was possessed of an ominous tinge, the thick clouds seemed content merely to brood at altitude, and the storm itself did not eventuate. The impact to the ferry's timetable was slight, and having caught up time on the short journey over, I arrived at the dock at Peel only a quarter-hour behind schedule.

I was surprised, then, to find that my host was not there to meet me. Those in the profession of journalism usually take to extreme punctuality, if not with a tendency to be perpetually early for every appointment. But Lambert was not among the small crowd of meeters and greeters that had gathered to

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welcome the ferry's arrival, and assuming Lambert's morning was itself subject to some timetable alteration, I was content to stand at the end of the ferry boarding platform, updating myself on latest developments in the case of the 'Dalby Sensation', as reported by my host in the local newspaper.

Except that morning, unusually, news of the farmhouse spook was absent. During my researches of the previous afternoon, I had called up the back catalogue of the *Isle of Man Examiner* with the help of the *Gazetteer's* gnarled but kindly archivist, who was delighted to present after less than an hour a hamper of newsprint and small box of microslides that represented the *Examiner's* sum output for the last month.

Lambert's recent feature on the so-called Dalby Sensation, presented to me by Pemberton in his office just the day before, was not actually his first report on the curious affair. Since the beginning of January, nearly every single daily edition of the paper, which itself was published six times per week, contained at the very least a mention of the farmhouse haunting. Large articles, such as the one that had introduced me to the case in Pemberton's office, were rarer, appearing maybe once per week, centred as they were around Lambert's personal visits to the family. But even when there were no particular developments of interest to report, the affair was inevitably mentioned briefly in editorials or short, double-paragraphed articles detailing the pratfalls of locals as they scrambled over hill and hedgerow in the dead of night to see and hear the ghost for themselves. In addition, it appeared that the staff of the *Examiner* were in reality few in number, as one would expect from a quiet, regional new publication, and while the haunting was clearly Lambert's primary focus, he also provided a

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fair proportion of other new reports with each edition.

Which is why, in the latest copy I now held, I was surprised to find not a single mention of the Dalby Sensation, and indeed no by-lines carrying Lambert's name at all. When Pemberton had spoken to the island reporter in his office yesterday, it had only just gone lunchtime, and even with a reconnoitre of the site where the secret scientific expedition met a mysterious fate planned for later that day, Lambert should have had ample time to file at least something with his own editor. And, depending on the results of his expedition, it may well have been expected that a stop-press item was called for late publication.

But today's newspaper was devoid of Lambert's input. He had clearly not filed the previous day. It was odd, and broke the pattern previously established, but if Lambert had discovered new links between the mysterious events taking place on Man, then he may well be in the thick of the investigation with a larger, in-depth feature to follow in the next days to more than make up for his lack of work in the interim. Satisfied with this explanation, I then realized that greeting me at the ferry dock may have become a lower priority for him than it would otherwise have been. Folding the paper neatly, I hefted my carpet-bag and proceeded to the taxi rank to continue my journey to my hotel in Dalby alone. As I entered the steam car and asked the driver to take me to The Devonian Hotel, it occurred to me that Lambert had probably left a message there for me to meet him later in the day, no doubt with exciting new developments to discuss which would explain his sudden absence.

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The Devonian was, I am pleased to report, not nearly as prehistoric as the name suggested. Dalby itself was a pleasant locale, with the hotel comprising one of the village's larger edifices. Although the larger town of Peel lay not far to the north, Dalby had seen much growth in recent years – as I had learned via the *Examiner* – thanks to the establishment of the permanent military base and port on the coast. The village was therefore the closest point on the island for both accommodation, supplies and entertainment for the many employed at the base, of both military and civilian position.

I had hoped to pry some local gossip from the cab driver *en route* to my lodgings, but was hampered by the fact that – unlike the city taxis I was used to in England, where the driver sits in a compartment immediately in front of the passenger – on Man the equipment appeared to be of a certain vintage. The driver sat, therefore, on a platform above and to the rear of the passenger box, much like the old horse-drawn traps from which the steam car had taken its original inspiration. I sat then alone for some twenty minutes, my near silent observation of the surrounding countryside as we travelled interrupted only by the quiet *put-put* of the taxi's steam engine.

I was likewise disappointed to find no message from Lambert awaiting my arrival at The Devonian. Clearly the man from the *Examiner* had discovered something of great import at the accident site – assuming, that is, that he had indeed been given the correct location and had not, I hoped, been waylaid by the military. The incident was, after all, being hushed up to a not inconsiderable extent, and the site was likely under a heavy guard.

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Freed from appointments, I realised I had much of the day to explore Dalby and familiarise myself with the locations described in Lambert's newspaper reports, a selection of which I had brought with me. So in preparation I installed myself in the hotel bar, ordered a ploughman's lunch and local ale, and began to re-read key tracts, jotting the names of people and places as I went. Little did I know at that point that my plans for the day were to dramatically alter within the next two hours.

4. A Violent Interruption

TUESDAY AFTERNOON in Dalby high street – if you could call it a high street – was decidedly quiet, as expected. Given Lambert’s non-appearance, I decided to make a day and possibly a night of it away from the hotel, and had prepared a small rucksack for a possible vigil at the farmhouse that night. A portable torch with spare solar battery, thermos of hot black tea, thick-cut cheese sandwiches courtesy of the Devonian bar, as well as a furled overcoat, rain hat, and blanket was most sufficient for a night outdoors. In my hand I held my jotter pad, inside the back cover of which a local map was folded, with key locations marked. My plan was to identify two key points – the farmhouse and army base – while it was light, and to press any locals encountered (in a friendly manner) as to the tale of the ‘Dalby Sensation’, the disturbances at the army base, and if anyone had heard about any scientists from the mainland.

It was this agenda I was about to initiate at the local butcher store, when suddenly a great commotion sprung up at the other end of the road. Looking to the west, a pub, The Ballicallin, flanked one side of the road, while a small goods store stood opposite, the remainder of the street lined with stone cottages and a handful of other minor establishments. Just beyond, the road curved out of sight to the left, presumably connecting to the main north-

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south route of the west side of Man.

It was from around this corner that the shouting came, indistinct at first but progressively louder and more decipherable. Then came the sound of running – many booted feet, in fact, pounding the tarmac surface. One particular set were possessed of a different tone, the runner clearly wearing footwear different to the others.

I scarcely had time for further analysis before a figure in clear distress tore around the bend and headed in my direction. He was clad in dishevelled and muddied tweeds, tucked into sensible walking boots. His white shirt front was rumpled, a large red stain spreading across his chest. But it was his face that was most distinctive. The man was grasped in the fist of terror, eyes wide and protruding horribly from their sockets. His jaw was stretched as wide open as the musculature would allow, tongue lolling from side to side. He moaned loudly, his voice producing a long, steady note that varied only slightly in pitch. He tumbled down the road, arms flailing, a man apparently driven out of his mind with fright.

Behind appeared a squad of soldiers, a full sixteen men in all, bayoneted silver rifles held before them. The one in front – a staff sergeant I think, distinguished from his black-clad men by red epaulettes – shouted to the runner, commanding an instant stop or to face their firepower. This sounded awfully like a final warning.

There was still some distance between the running man and the troops, and it was impossible to judge for how long the pursuit had been maintained. But I

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was now uncomfortably aware that I was directly in the line of fire; the running man had apparently seen me, and waved. He drew his arms in front of him, almost reaching out for me, as he closed the distance between us. His expression, though still desperate, changed at the sight of me, and his mindless wail started forming half-words. A few more seconds and he would be upon me. Behind, the staff sergeant ordered his men to halt and barked an order to take aim.

There was a fearful crack, and instantly a sharp metallic smell as the air between the runner and the troops was turned for a half-second to solar plasma. The running man was flung forward towards me, and my heart leapt as I instinctively caught his torso before he hit the ground. Looking up, I saw the soldiers re-shouldering their rifles. The staff sergeant issued orders again, and the troops fanned out along the street while the sergeant and three followers jogged towards me and the dead man in my arms.

No, not quite dead. As I gently lowered him to the road and turned him over, his eyes opened and he looked at me. He was calm, and clawed at my jacket, whispering something in a language I could not translate. A local dialect of Manx Gaelic? I wasn't sure.

“Mananna mac Lir... Buggane...”

“I don't understand, man. Do you speak English?”

Ignoring my question, the runner's whispers grew fainter until he passed into unconsciousness. Instinctively checking his pulse at the neck, I was

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dismayed to find the man had succumbed to the injuries inflicted by the solar rifle. Military boots appeared at the edge of my vision, and I looked up to see the staff sergeant and his attachment standing over me, rifles pointed. I drew breath to speak but was cut off.

“Thank-you very much sir, your assistance is much appreciated in this matter. It is unfortunate that you happened to get caught up in this, but rest assured this man will receive the best attention.”

The best attention? He was already dead, thanks to them! But the sergeant gestured to his three troops, who scooped the runner’s body up and briskly marched back down the road. I noticed then that the other soldiers had meanwhile been visiting each store and house on the street one by one, probably notifying the inhabitants that it was safe to be outside.

“Sergeant?” I called after the retreating back of the warrant officer, but received no indication that I had been heard. “Sergeant! Look here! Who is that man? What are you doing with him? And why were you chasing him?” No response; I was being pointedly ignored. I continued to call out, and paced down the road after the soldiers, but they showed no sign of stopping to answer. Indeed, as the sergeant and his man-handlers rejoined the main body of men, the patrol made a smart about-face and proceeded at some speed back down the road, the body of the runner lifted off the ground and carried between them. I stopped in my tracks, realising my calls for attention were entirely futile. I stood still for a full minute, long enough for the unpleasant wash of adrenaline to subside and my heart rate return to a more comfortable pace.

I felt eyes on me. Some locals had been drawn by the commotion. They were few in number, and counted among them were the butcher, two ladies from the small goods store, an unidentified worker from another shop or office, and a few residents leaning or simply looking out of open windows or doors along the high street. But they were not, it seemed, looking at the soldiers as they marched off. It was me, in fact, that was the subject of their attention, and certainly for some one of extreme distaste given the expressions of some of the onlookers. Not quite in unison the inhabitants of Dalby closed their doors and windows, pulling curtains across to close the street off, or in the case of the shops, pulling down blinds and locking doors.

What had the soldiers been saying? Were the residents warned – or even threatened? Had I been falsely and casually implicated in some way, simply to allow the military to perform a shocking operation in broad daylight and in public view? Easy enough to spread a false rumour about a visitor from the mainland, if it meant they were able to carry out their operation without disturbance. Did that mean my presence had been observed on arrival?

A whirl of questions entered my head. Who was the man? Was there a connection with the scientists? That may explain the heavy-handedness of the soldiers, if a secret operation was in progress. It occurred to me then that Lambert's failure to make an appearance may not have been due to a busy investigation, but because he may have been arrested in the course of his reconnaissance. I sincerely hoped he had not received the same treatment as the runner just had, if indeed he had been intercepted.

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Several minutes passed as I processed the scene I had just witnessed; regaining my senses, I found myself alone in the street, with not a soul in sight, facing now-closed shops, doors and windows. With a trigger-happy military, Lambert, wherever he was, may have been in some difficulty, and it was imperative that I contacted both his paper and my own editor. The *Examiner* had no office in Dalby, and Lambert had been based in Peel. Picking my notepad off the tarmac where I had dropped it, I packed it in my rucksack and made haste back to The Devonian.

5. A Conversation from Beyond

I FOUND my reception at the hotel as convivial as it had been when I first arrived on the island earlier that morning. The hotel was set several hundred yards from Dalby's main road, and clearly the word of the soldiers had not reached it, otherwise I would have been met with the same cold indifference as possessed by the locals in the street. Casting my bag onto the bed, I went straight for the telegraphphone on the desk; picking the earpiece up, the hotel's operator-cum-receptionist was on the other end within a few rings.

"Switchboard?"

"Hello, this is Dr. Clarke calling from room six. I need to place a call to editorial offices of *The Gazetteer and Times*, Manchester."

"Very good, sir." The young girl's voice was faint, despite her being seated not far distant from my desk. The telephonic system of the Devonian was old and worn.

The operator tried three different numbers I gave, including that of a little-used auxiliary office tele that I had to look up from the depths of my notebook, but had little luck in establishing a connection. The weather, although grey, was hardly of sufficient tempest to affect the connection to

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the mainland, and on a few occasions it seemed that a connection had been made to my office, only for the line to go inexplicably dead with a loud pop. The young hotel operator was becoming ruffled.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” she said plaintively. “I can’t connect to any of those numbers. I can keep trying if you wish, sir.”

It occurred to me to try another mainland number, that of my own household. A suspicion was forming in my mind. After a number of tries, each terminated with the distinctive ‘pop’, I had become convinced that the lines connecting the island to the mainland had been deliberately suspended. Whatever operation the military were engaged in, they did not want any information reaching beyond the Manx borders.

“No, no need,” I told the operator. “I have another number, a local one. It is for the office of the *Examiner* news magazine in Peel. Let’s see if we can establish contact over just a few miles distance!”

I felt a sick feeling as the peculiar ‘pop’ of disconnection sounded after several attempts. Were communications on the whole island cut-off, or was it even just those of the Dalby exchange? I thanked the operator for her patience, and replaced the earpiece in the cradle.

Sitting at the desk for several minutes in silence, contemplating my next course of action, I was startled when the tele rang. Expecting perhaps Pemberton, I reached so quickly for the device that I knocked it to the floor. I scrambled for the earpiece as it rolled under the desk.

“Pemberton?”

“Dr. Clarke? I am Lambert. I write for the Examiner. I am pleased to meet you.”

The voice’s peculiar monotone and decidedly odd manner of speech were lost on me, so grateful was I to finally establish contact with my Manx colleague.

“Mr. Lambert! Good lord, I’m pleased to hear from you. I thought you might have been busy with your investigation of the accident site, but I’ve just witnessed the most extraordinary event. I was in the high street of Dalby when...”

“Yes, Dr. Clarke. I have found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse, I will show you.”

“A man was shot, dead, in the centre of Dalby! The military are up to some damned funny business. I think the story here is not the farmhouse spook, but the accident. Something of importance must have occurred to justify such harsh action. On Man, of all places!”

“Yes, Dr. Clarke. I have found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse, I will show you.”

It was now that I hesitated. Was Lambert not listening? The line was terrible

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– Lambert’s voice was high and faint, picked out against a background of white noise.

“I say, Lambert? Did you hear what I said? Important events are afoot. Did you find the accident site?”

There was a pause before Lambert answered, the white noise increasing in volume to fill the void. The delay was reminiscent of calling over an extremely long distance, such as I often encountered when calling the *Gazetteer*’s London bureau from Manchester.

“Dr. Clarke, yes. I found interesting things. Come to the farmhouse. There is light and colour there. Dr. Clarke.”

Light and colour? But as I drew breath to question Lambert, there was a loud ‘pop’ and the phone went dead momentarily, before the hotel operator picked up.

“Yes, sir? What number would you like?”

“Hello? I’m sorry, I think you’ve cut me off. I was just taking a call.”

I could hear the operator lean over her phone desk and flick a few of the large, heavily-sprung switches up and down. As she sat back, her chin brushed against her mouthpiece.

“I’m sorry Dr. Clarke, no calls have come in today. Do you want me to try

those numbers for you again?”

No incoming calls? Curious, but mistaken. The hotel’s switchboard was indeed unreliable.

“No, that won’t be necessary, thank-you.” I hung up.

It was now late afternoon, and looking from my window I could see the oppressive cloud layer had not lifted and it was rapidly approaching dark. Come to the farmhouse, Lambert had suggested. Had he discovered a connection between the Dalby Sensation, which I had yet to hear of first-hand, and the activities of the military on the island? If the family who currently played host to the poltergeist on the farm were innocents caught up in events beyond their ken, it would be well to protect them from the attentions of the military if indeed there was some mysterious link. Secret operation or not, it was my duty as a journalist to report the truth as I saw it, and to stand up for those not able to do so themselves by circumstance.

As the light continued to fade, I began to hear voices in the distance. I was unable to see much from my room as the angle at which the window was set did not offer much of a view over any inhabited area of Dalby, but by all indications the horrid gang of pleasure-seekers was once again heading off to congregate at the farmhouse and disturb – if not downright terrorise – the family through the night. From the reports filed by Lambert, very few locals apparently made the trek up the hill with lamps, resulting in slow and sometime perilous progress in the dark. This would give me a precious time advantage.

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I opened my rucksack and hefted my solar torch in one hand. It was heavy, but by its light I judged that it would be possible to find a quicker route to the farmstead, avoiding the crowds and reaching the family ahead of them. I placed the spare solar battery in my inside coat pocket, deciding to leave my pack at the hotel. Forgoing the heavy coat I had brought with me, I instead satisfied myself with a flat tweed cap, and hoped that the night would not be bitter. If I was to travel fast across the hills, I had to travel light.

6. An Extra, Extra Clever Mongoose

EQUIPPED AS I was with light to guide me, I found it easy to both pick my way across the fields that bordered the village and which rose to the hilltop, at the summit of which the farmhouse lay, and to avoid the growing mass of locals determined to make a night out of disturbing a family of their own community for the sake of some half-remembered island custom. Darkness came and the volume of the mob increased as they began to slide around the hillside, tripping and falling over each other. True, there were a few lights bobbing amongst the throng, but such was size of the crowd – well over one hundred at my estimate – that such puny illumination did little to assist the passage up the hill.

I myself took an easterly path, and found the hill more or less even in slope on all sides as I hiked to the summit. I kept the slow-moving Dalby crowd on my right, carefully shielding my own torch away from them where possible. Within twenty-five minutes of medium exertion I found myself at the apex and looking across the village behind me. Ahead lay a large plateau, at the centre of which stood a meagre collection of stone buildings – a two-storied house, two small outbuildings, and a large, open-fronted barn. The field that lay between myself and the farmstead was intersected by drystone walls and divided broadly into two flanks by a long drive which

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snaked from the outside the house and away across the field, down the side of the hill opposite to that which I had just climbed. I estimated that the distance travelled along the road from the farm to the village below was considerably longer than the direct route up the hill, a thought which had likewise crossed the minds of the gaggle of now-muddied and increasingly vibrant villagers.

Lights were on at the house, and confident that the villagers were possibly at least an hour away from the farm – they made no apparently attempt at haste, and were hampered not only by the dark but a large gully, no doubt widened by their own progress in recent weeks, which created an effective bottleneck to impede their progress – I replaced my torch in my pack and began to navigate the walled fields towards the main building.

The quickest route was again easterly, and skirting the hilltop plateau I was soon within view of what must have been the military base on the beachfront. The edifice was hidden from the main view of Dalby by a series of hillocks which, although reduced to mere silhouettes by the twilight, were clearly artificial in nature. Indeed, one reached almost to the farmer's field, and at this closer range I could see they were perhaps ancient iron age fortifications. I scanned their line down the hillside towards the military base, and noted they continued for some distance near to the seashore before encountering a second large hill. Atop this was some activity – again, only shadowed forms were visible, but a marquee of some sort left edges fluttering in the wind, and the distinctive shapes of two armed men patrolled the periphery, highlighted against the slight brightness of the evening sky. Was this the mysterious accident site?

The military base itself was approximately equidistant between my present position and the marquee, perhaps a mile in either direction, and consisted of a long, single-level oblong, functional in design and lacking any detail whatsoever, surrounded at the perimeter by the standard wire fence. Various smaller constructions were arranged nearby, forming a large enclosed area to the front of the establishment, at the centre of which stood three docking masts for naval airships. Presently one such rigid dirigible was tethered, the silver sides of the balloon glistening wetly as it was illuminated from the underside by the yard lights. A few men could be seen, busying themselves in the yard, with several more stationed at points near the main gates of the base and along the seafront perimeter. I also noted that while the seafront portion of the base was brightly lit – and indeed, people could be seen moving within through the large windows – the rear portion nearest the farmstead hill was in darkness. Several large, black windows suggested that this should have been an area in common use, but was apparently empty and quite dark. Aha! The haunted wing?

I now knew the lay of the land a great deal better than from the Dalby high street, and continued to the farmhouse. As I approached, I could hear voices – a man and a woman, talking over each other in what sounded like a minor disagreement, and that of a young girl. I could not make out what they were saying, but the discussion was certainly possessed of some heat. A few solid sounds were suggestive of chairs being banged as people moved around.

Then a fourth voice stopped me in my tracks, so peculiar was it in nature. It was high and melodic, and quite pleasant in tone, but was impossible to

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establish the sex of the speaker. It was neither male nor female, young nor old – possibly a falsetto male, or maybe female soprano. It came in short statements, each apparently ignored by the others until, suddenly, it announced that the family had visitors. At the same instant I reached the main door, and felt my heart skip as I heard the voice call my own name. This was the Dalby spook!

“Come in Clarke! All are welcome here! The fire’s going and there is tea in the pot!”

The other voices fell silent, and the door was quickly opened by a thick-set man in his middle age, shirt sleeves rolled up after a day working the field. At first he looked at me with annoyance, until he realised that the spook had spoken the truth. Clearly my appearance was not that of an over-excited, dirt-encrusting local. The farmer broke into a broad grin, and grasping my hand with both of his, virtually yanked me inside.

“Dr. Clarke? From the Manchester newspaper? At last! We’re very pleased to meet you – Mr. Lambert said we were to expect you today. Please, come in, come in, let me introduce you to everybody. You are in luck, too! Gef is here!”

He said this as I was led down a short hallway into the kitchen, a large square room dominated at its centre by a long rectangular pine table. The farmer eagerly proffered me a chair before moving behind his already seated wife, giving her shoulders a supportive squeeze.

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“Hello,” I said at last, removing my cap and placing the rucksack on the floor beside me. “I am terribly sorry to arrive unannounced, but it seems I was expected, Mister...?”

“Irvine, John. Please, call me John,” began the farmer, who then indicated each person in the room. “This is my wife Margaret. Get our guest some tea, Margaret! And this is our daughter Valerie.”

The girl sat on the opposite side of the table to me, slightly in shadow cast by the inadequate main light. She was young, perhaps twelve or thirteen, her smile flickering nervously on and off. I tried to smile back in a friendly manner, but my expression froze as an unruly interruption sprung from the shadows behind her.

“You Irvines are a bloody disgrace. Why don’t you clear off and let me do the talking for once.”

Valerie’s smile dropped, and she looked downwards, embarrassed. But Mr. and Mrs. Irvine seemed to ignore the rudeness of the remarks, and I soon found a mug of tea in front of me. I took a long sip and found the drink pleasantly sweet. Exactly what was required in these unusual circumstances.

I coughed, politely. “Gef?”

“Who else?” came the odd voice sharply. I could still not identify the source. Valerie continued to shuffle uncomfortably. All eyes were in her direction.

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“Pardon me, but clearly I was expected? I was invited by Mr. Richard Lambert of the *Isle of Man Examiner*.”

“Bah!” spat the voice. “Foo and pah! Lambert invited you? Please! Invited you to write a cute little story about a cute little ghost. Go hang yourself, Clarke. Go join the throng on the hillside. Get lost.”

I had some experience of supernatural voice phenomenon and their vocabularies, and had expected that if I was to be lucky enough to hear the Dalby spook speak myself, it was likely to be most unpleasant. Gef, as Mr. Irvine had said the entity was called, was fulfilling the stereotype admirably. Valerie’s own behaviour in response to the voice indicated a connection between she and it.

“So, Gef, what are you? A spirit trapped on this Earth? A noisy ghost bent on causing this ordinary family trouble? I must say, I’ve had quite some experience of the extra-normal and you are nothing special!” Taking a confrontational approach was equally likely to send the tempestuous Gef into a sulk, or may have just been the provocation required to get some more detailed information from the disembodied voice. “Mr. Lambert said you were a talking mongoose, which is as an absurd a suggestion as I have ever heard!” As I chuckled I glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Irvine, and catching their eyes I gave a slight wink. My authority and experience on such matters had obviously been conveyed to the family by Lambert on a previous visit, as they both subtly indicated understanding.

Gef gave a shrill laugh. “Why should I tell you anything? You’re nobody.

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Go on, slide down the hill. What are you a doctor of, anyway? Bought your degree by wire, eh?”

“I *am* a doctor, indeed. My speciality is phrenomesmerism.”

At this statement Gef remained silent for a few moments. For only the second time, Valerie looked up from the table and met my eye, the corners of her mouth twitching again into smile. When Gef spoke, his tone had changed from boisterous impoliteness to thoughtful conversation.

“Phrenomesmerism you say? I’m almost impressed. And go on the ghost-hunt often, do you?”

“I will admit, the study of the supernatural and magical has been a hobby of mine since I was a small boy. Having retired from my primary profession, I’ve found my position at the *Gazetteer* has enabled me to devote more time to the subject. The days in which we live can be full of wonder and the otherworldly, if you only look for it. Prince Albert himself has a keen interest in the subject – and just look at the situation on the Continent.”

Gef harrumphed. “Ah yes, your Prince Albert. How old is he now? One hundred and sixty-odd? Kept alive by steam and magic, eh? Rebuilding the Empire on the crest of scientific and technological achievement, eh? Still looking for his beloved Victoria, eh? For goodness sake, the humble electron is still much of a mystery to you! And it’s precisely because of his ridiculous stumbling in the dark that I’m here!”

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“Why are you here then, Gef? Why have you appeared now, and what has this got to do Valerie and her parents?”

“I am, oh phrenomesmerist, an extra, extra clever mongoose. I’m here because of the fools on the hill! But perhaps you are not as backward as you seem, good doctor. The world is ending, and perhaps you are one of the few to perceive it. You’ve heard my story. You’ve heard about the military base down the hill, I presume? You’ve heard about the hilltop adventures of your Prince’s scientists? Did Lambert call you today and tell you to come and see me?”

“Yes he did, as it happens. I had been expecting him to meet me when I arrived. He was unable to make that appointment, and I was happy to hear from him at last this afternoon. He said to come to the farmhouse at once – I expected him to be here, actually.”

There was a snort from the shadows. Behind Valerie, in the near darkness underneath a kitchen cupboard, I thought I could see a shape moving. Something small, animal-like – like a tail, swishing in annoyance. The shape moved forward, Gef now comfortable enough in my presence to reveal ‘his’ form. It was familiar to me from my time in India – weasel-like, but slightly larger, with squirrel-like bushy tale. A talking mongoose indeed! The sight of it held me enthralled momentarily – the stories of the Dalby Sensation were entirely true.

“That wasn’t Lambert.”

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Gef's statement snapped me back to attention and, perhaps, confirmed a suspicion that had been growing in my mind. "Who then? An impersonator from the military?"

"That's not Lambert either."

A second later came a sharp knock on the front door. I realised that the sound of the villagers had become increasingly loud, the gang having presumably made it to the fields outside. The knock would, no doubt, be the fastest and most nimble busy-body Dalby could produce.

Mr. Irvine took a deep breath, composing himself. Though the nightly routine was clearly placing a strain on the family, given their drawn expressions, the stout farmer had devised his own method of dealing with them. Muttering reassurances to his wife, he moved to the door, prepared to bellow his usual – unheeded – request for peace and quiet to the crowd.

Valerie's smile dropped suddenly. Gef spoke again: "Don't open the door." It was too late.

At the threshold stood a man I instantly recognized. Medium height and medium build, aged in the late twenties, neat reddish-brown hair, and dressed in country tweeds and thick-soled walking boots. Smiling broadly, he walked into the hallway towards the kitchen as Mr. Irvine, recognising him, let him pass. The man's stare was fixed at me, seated at the table.

"Dr. Clarke. I am Lambert. I write for the *Examiner*."

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Mr. Lambert, island reporter extraordinaire. The man who died in my arms in Dalby high street just hours ago.

7. A Shocking Discovery

THE MAN claiming to be Lambert stood in the kitchen, and stiffly proffered a hand. I stood, mind reeling at the situation. As far as I knew, Lambert had died, shot square in the back with a solar rifle. John and Margaret looked pleased to see him, but noted with worry my shocked expression. Margaret spoke first.

“Dr. Clarke, this is Mr. Lambert, from the *Examiner*,” she began uncertainly, repeating the introduction as her eyes searched my face in confusion. “Mr. Lambert? He invited you to the island – you were going to write about our story in the national press?” Behind her, John smiled, nodding in encouragement.

I ignored Lambert’s request for a handshake. His expression remained in a frozen grin, waiting for a response. Gef chirruped, causing Lambert to flinch.

“Yes, Mr. Lambert, how do you do? I’m pleased to meet you,” I said politely, going through the motions of greeting, all the while studying the figure before me. Aside from strange manner, Lambert appeared to be healthy and intact.

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“Dr. Clarke, how do you do.” The hand was automatically retracted. “I’m so pleased you are here. There is much you can help me with. I have lots to talk about. Do you like light and colour?”

Not Lambert, Gef had said. The *thing*, then, sat at the table, still smiling. His voice was almost monotonous, and the words almost rehearsed, as if the speaker was asked to repeat a statement in a language which he did not himself understand. I then felt a tickle on the back of my neck that sent a shiver down my spine – the sensation of light fur brushing my skin. Gef was on my back, out of sight of Lambert, with his tiny furred face just touching the back of my neck. As he whispered, I could sense the jaw moving, and a slight breath. If I had had any doubts as to the physical reality of the Dalby Spook, these were now firmly out of my mind.

“I apologise for my earlier rudeness, but I am affected by the mind of Valerie. Our materialisation in your world is dependent upon harnessing the energy, and indeed personality, of a spirit already here. Valerie is young and her mind unfuddled with politeness and protocol, and she has a picture book about mongooses. Well, it was that or the cobra. But your mind is logical and ordered, and very refreshing.

“That is not Lambert. It is one of us, in a way. As I am an avatar of a, shall we say, ‘lighter’ force, that is one of the opposite mode, forced into being by the foul presence which slowly awakens under the nearby stones. You need to leave. Go down to the base and you’ll find some answers. I’ll get rid of this creature and look after the family until you get back. The world is in

terrible danger. We must work together, Clarke!”

It seemed this whisper was not audible by the others in the room, although a quick glance over my shoulder revealed that Valerie, at least, knew that Gef was clinging to my jacket. Mr. and Mrs. Irvine stood near Mr. Lambert, uncertain of what to do. Outside, the village mob got ever louder.

Suddenly, with incredible speed, Lambert – whatever it was that had taken Lambert’s shape – leapt from the chair and flew across the table with a terrible screech, hands held aloft like talons, and face still set in rictus grin. Adrenaline flooded my body, such was the fright, but as I raised my arms to instinctively protect myself I was spun forcefully around to face away from my attacker. From my back, Gef launched himself at the Lambert thing, transforming in mid-air to a much larger, fiercer animal, somewhere between the innocuous mongoose form and a muscular brown bear. Roaring, the Gef-bear collided with Lambert over the kitchen table and the two tumbled to the floor, locked in terrible combat. Mr. and Mrs. Irvine leapt out of the way, while Valerie just sat and watched, eyes fixed on Gef’s writhing form. I recovered my feet and turned to watch the horrid battle, but no sooner had I regained my composure than Gef clamped a terrible jaw around the Lambert-thing’s neck, and the impostor dissolved into a peculiar red mist. Gef’s bear shape lay alone on the flagstones for a moment, before transforming between the blink of an eye back into the small mongoose shape and scuttling into Valerie’s arms. The girl purred at Gef, and ensuring the small creature was uninjured, gave me a clear directive.

“Go to the base and find what is there. Gef wants you to go! Go, out the

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back! Now!”

Although the safety of the family was top of my mind as the gaggle outside bore down on the house, I knew that not only did Mr. Irvine have much experience in barricading the farmhouse, but that Gef was possessed of some remarkable powers and I had no doubt he was prepared to defend the family with some ferocity.

Gef’s instruction was clear – a clue was held in the military base. At once, Mr. Irvine sprang into action, righting the toppled kitchen chairs and ushering me through another doorway. “Follow me, I’ll show you the quickest way down the hill.”

We left via the scullery and out into the large yard behind the house. To the front, some of the villagers were now running the last short distance to the house’s main door, so I quickly wished the farmer very good luck and allowed him to return to his family and brace for tonight’s inrush of unwelcome guests. At least the immediate and most dangerous threat – the Lambert-thing – had been disposed of.

Skirting around one of the outbuildings, I saw I was directly in line with the military base, the lights of which I could see in the distance, and at a point opposite the gathering crowd. Preoccupied as they were, I had no difficulty traversing the field without any notice being taken, and within fifteen minutes of half-running, half-sliding down the hillside, found myself within yards of the base’s perimeter at the darkened rear of the complex. From just outside the barricade, the black, dead windows of the rear of the building

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confirmed that this part was indeed unoccupied, all activity having been removed to the seaward side of the establishment.

Despite local hubbub, important visitors and a top secret accident, I was surprised at the decided lack of security. For a few minutes I was able to traverse down either side of the empty block from the far corner towards the base's lighted area and docking yard, and found the fairly unimposing fence the only apparent obstacle to my entry. The soldiers patrolling the docking yard were, in fact, mostly motionless and silent, and I could trace no obvious surveillance system that would monitor areas outside of their patrol. Although the isle was becoming of increasing strategic importance in the growing tensions with the Northern Republic, the situation was not yet dire enough for the base to have been transformed from a sleepy coastal watchpost to a defensive fortress.

The fence was well maintained but not impassable, as the slope of the hill I had just semi-tumbled down provided an excellent platform from which to launch first my jacket, to protect from barbs, and then myself into the upper portion of the fence. From this somewhat precarious position, I was able to swing both legs over and drop into the base proper.

The windows were in fact barred across the inside surface, so my only point of ingress was a door, relatively insubstantial but still secured with a formidable lock. With no tools at my disposal and no particular skill with lock-picking, I was momentarily at a loss when I remembered the heavy weight in my jacket's inside pocket – the spare solar battery for my torch. The battery itself was long, rectangular and narrow, and tapered at one end

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to a flat wedge which would in any other circumstances slot neatly in the torch's handgrip. It was also composed of a most dense and inflexible alloy, required to house the solar cell within with any safety, and made an admirable crowbar with which I was able to slowly jimmy between the door and the frame and break the lock. I paused for any alarm, but there was none. Inside, all was quiet.

I had entered a featureless corridor lined with numbered doors – the whole design was plain and very probably prefabricated, the whole base shipped to the island in standard segments and affixed together. There was no particular indication as to what lay behind each door, but I decided it would be best to explore to the left, being a direction that would take me away from the occupied section of the building.

I spent several minutes pacing identical corridors – the building itself was not large at all, and with solar torch switched off I suspected I had travelled along the same passageways more than once without realising. Eventually I found a noticeboard and a larger set of double doors, both indicating I had reached the Mess, the focal point of the earlier ghost stories.

The Mess itself was a single large room, filled with comfortable furniture and tables both small and large. Along one side ran a countertop and beyond a small kitchenette. A large circular television was installed on the wall opposite, and various stacked magazines indicated sport was a popular entertainment for the men to watch on the screen. The men, I assumed, whose bodies I now stood over.

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Every flat surface – floor, tables, sofas – was stacked with corpses, some lying individually, others piled neatly on top of each other as space had begun to run out. All the bodies, some two or three dozen, were of young men in uniform, soldiers stationed at the base. I reacted quickly and knelt beside the nearest, but the skin was cold and slightly damp, and the body was entirely devoid of life. It was the same for as many more as I could reach by carefully stepping over others. The entire room was filled with death.

To my left there was a sudden hard thud, as though a book were dropped on one of the large tables. Startled, I could see nothing, but then the tale of the army poltergeist entered my mind. Was this room genuinely occupied by a noisy spirit, or, as Gef intimated a ‘dark avatar’? I waited momentarily, but the sound did not repeat, and the room remained silent. Until:

“You there!”

To my right this time, the opposite side of the room. A soldier had appeared, uniformed but unarmed. “What are you doing?”

The tone was firm but polite, hardly what one would expect when discovered sneaking around a secure military establishment. Unsure of what to say, Gef’s oblique description of how ‘his kind’ functioned came to mind. Horrified, I looked down at the first body I had checked when I entered the room. The lifeless cadaver remained unmoved. And yet, the soldier confronting me from across the room was the very same man. It – whatever had claimed this room as a residence – was using my own mind to fashion

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the form and personality of the soldier before me. I turned and fled, and heard the man-thing stumbling over bodies in pursuit.

There was no need to disguise my presence in the base any longer – the creature behind me began to shout, and I adjusted my solar torch to provide a full spread of light before me as I hurtled back to the forced door. From far in front, towards the occupied part of the building, I began to hear answering calls and the sound of many men in heavy army boots running. By luck I traced a fast route through the twisting corridors and reached the external door within moments, unimpeded, just as the soldier-man-thing behind appeared around the last corner. I flung the door open and out, hopefully, to escape.

Alas, I had miscalculated. The shouts and running had come from *outside* the building, not from within. Waiting outside the door was a full patrol of men, led by a staff-sergeant – the very same who had shot Lambert in Dalby earlier that day. The pursuing soldier finally caught up with me behind.

The staff-sergeant's face transformed into a fixed grin, instantly recognisable as the inhuman leer performed by the Lambert-thing at the farmhouse. As one, the troop raised their solar rifles and, at near point blank range, took aim.

8. A Blazing Light

I WAS sure at that point that the science desk of the *Gazetteer* would be advertising for a new correspondent in the not too distant future, and closing my eyes I made what I felt was my final journalistic deduction. There was no mutiny. The army on the isle had been infiltrated by a horrific alien intelligence, using the bodies of the dead to replicate a workforce to carry out whatever foul plans of domination the evil master force – sequestered at the accident site and disturbed, it seemed, by the government scientists – required.

The sergeant barked the command to fire, and my eyelids were lit with a brilliant white-orange glow. However brave I considered my posture to be, I was unable to avoid an instinctive flinch, assuming the blazing light to be the microsecond prequel to instant death by solar ray. But instead, all in the space of one or two seconds, there were more shouts and I found myself knocked to the ground by a push of bodies. I opened my eyes to find our group caught in an intense spotlight, the soldier-creatures milling in confusion. There instantly followed a tremendous rush of air and howl of engines as a rigid dirigible airship descended swiftly towards us. Dazzled by the searchlight, I was unable to make out any features apart from a great ovoid black shape which marked out the dimensions of the craft. The

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distinctive size, together with powerful lamp, spoke of another military craft, similar to the one docked around at the base yard. This was confirmed by the ear-popping rapport of solar rifles being fired, not by the soldiers on the ground up toward the new arrival, but from the silhouettes of men dangling over the sides of the rigid; a dozen crack sharpshooters picking off the ground troops with remarkable efficiency. Seeing I was in the line of fire, I immediately rolled towards the darkened walls of the base, losing my glasses – which were quickly trampled by a booted foot – in the process. As I spun on the ground back towards the men, I saw airbourne troops descend from the airship on ropes, leaping down upon the remaining soldiers and quickly dispatching them with bayonet and black dagger.

It was then that the odd smell reached me, at once both acidic and carbonised, but possessed of a peculiar, almost spiced nature. I realised with a jolt that as each dead soldier-thing fell to the ground, the body collapsed in on itself in a puff of acrid and luminescent pink smoke – entirely as the Lambert creature at the farmhouse had when Gef launched his own frenzied attack. I was right – the entire base staff had been interloped by the alien force which meant, presumably, that the sky-raiders were the genuine military affecting a reclamation of their barracks.

The battle – loud and bright – was short, and within minutes all that remained were the landed troops, scuffing their polished, knee-high boots in the patches of pink dust that lay in the grass. The airship itself was motionless, the engines quietly purring as it maintained its level. I must have been suffering momentarily from shock, for the next thing I recall I was being lifted to my feet by two men and marched under gunpoint towards the

illuminated patch of ground.

The soldiers that escorted me were dressed entirely differently to the island-based regiment. From the high boots, double-breasted tunics and tall shakos, I recognised them as Lancers, although I was unable to identify their affiliation any further. As they were not island-based troops, they must, logically, have been the special detachment sent from the mainland to investigate the incident. One Lancer, of a higher rank than the others, indicated by a different stripe along the trouser line and white ostrich feather atop his hat, began directing others as a broad metal staircase was lowered from a hatch on the underside of the airship. As tentative touchdown was made on the pink-stained grass, a prod in the small of my back gave me every indication that I was to ascend into the craft.

In the airship's main holding bay, I was seated and strapped in between more Lancers as the troops from the ground filed inside and installed themselves back into their allocated positions. As the airship lifted slightly to achieve a safer cruising altitude, not one of the men spoke – their lack of conversation, smoking, or otherwise relaxing told me that the sortie was far from over. This was no ordinary squadron of soldiers, but a somewhat more trained and specialised force, where discipline and focus was much more refined.

No sooner had the airship set off than it slowed again. I felt the craft turn heavily at approximately ninety degrees, before coming to a halt. To my left came a whistle, the squadron commander taking up the speaking tube and blowing into it before placing it to his ear. He listened for a moment,

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murmured a single word of “Sir” back into the tube, before replacing it and unstrapping both himself and, to my surprise, me. He silently indicated I should stand and walk towards the front compartment of the ship; as I obliged, I noticed he had drawn a service revolver to train on my back as he followed.

The bridge of the airship was lit by a dull red light, serving the dual purpose of indicating they were at battle stations and allowing, in the dark of night, the flight crew to clearly see out of the curved expanse of glass that formed the entire forward wall of the room, extending in a complete half-circle to meet the bulkhead behind. The control panels and main wheel stood centrally; in front was a large open observation space, where the windows arced not only horizontally around but vertically down, so the troops stationed here with field glasses had an unimpeded view that reached directly beneath their feet.

Two such observers were in place, one scanning ahead, the other downwards. The ship had indeed come to a stop, and the area below us was once again illuminated by the vast solar searchlight, manned by an able seaman sitting in a sunken, glassed pit on the left side of the observation area. As the searchlight panned the ground below, I saw the ship’s captain, silhouetted in the dark light, move forward and crouch on one knee to witness the scene below. I followed his gaze, and momentarily ignoring my armed guard was instantly drawn forward by the amazing sight below to kneel beside the captain. The captain did not register my presence, transfixed as he was by what lay on the fields under his craft. He whispered a simple exclamation.

“Great Scott...”

We were hovering above the fields that surrounded the Irvine farmstead. The house itself was still lit, the family – hopefully – safely barricaded inside. In front stood the massed ranks of the villagers, in regular rows, all motionless and silent. A single figure was at their head. Even from our height, the leader looked different to the rest. It was a second Lambert copy.

But as the searchlight played over the neighbouring ground, it revealed a sight terrible to behold. Equal in number to the standing villagers were mounds of bodies. They were haphazardly lying upon the grass, some individually, but mostly in piles of a dozen or more. From our modest altitude, it was possible to discern clothing and other distinguishing features of the bodies that were matched by the people – the impostors – standing outside the farmhouse. The entire village had been eliminated and duplicated. It remained to be seen what their intentions were at the farm, for in the last minute not one figure had moved an inch. The craft in which we knelt was now near silent, but our approach and descent to a height of no more than twenty feet would have been clearly noticeable. But the creatures in the field creatures showed no sign that the arrival of the airship had been noticed.

The captain got to his feet, and strode swiftly around to the control panel, the bold feather in his cap throwing shadows around the bridge as he moved. I watched the actions of the crew from my kneeling position.

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“Hold this position. We shall secure this hill with the Escapement. Subaltern, prepare for barn-door landing. Captain-Lieutenant, ready your men for secondary assault. And remove this civilian. Our interview will have to wait.”

With that, the ship’s commander strode off the deck as his men busied themselves on the bridge, shouting instructions and information to each other. The soldier with the revolver – the Captain-Lieutenant – grasped me beneath the arm and hauled me to my feet, waving the gun back towards the bridge doors. In the red light it was impossible to discern any facial detail of the crew, but I knew my own countenance must have been as white as freshly laundered linen.

The Escapement. These soldiers were going to attack the creatures below with the Escapement. I didn’t know how many tickers the airship could hold – probably only four at the most – but I hoped, prayed even, that once the mobile, intelligent steam-machines of the Escapement had been deployed, the family and farmstead survived the coming assault.

9. An Introduction is Made

THE AIRSHIP hung peacefully above the farmhouse fields. We had reversed fractionally so as not to be directly above either the silent ranks of impostor-villagers nor near to the mangled piles of bodies that lay on each side. Once again I was strapped into my webbing in the troop hold, this time under the watchful eye of a regular soldier as the Captain-Lieutenant prepared his men for their second mission of the night. From elsewhere in the craft, booted feet and barked orders could be heard, but soon these drew into silence, and the men in my own compartment aligned into ranks and fell quiet too. Seconds passed, then a new sound arose. It was a rhythm – a hiss, a clockwork tick, and the clank of metal on metal. The Escapement had been activated. At their signature sound, I'm certain a few of the Lancers awaiting orders in our hold shifted in their boots.

The bay doors opened to the night as the airship almost imperceptibly descended to a proper ground landing. Elsewhere, a second bay door could be heard to open, together with a noticeable increase in the pace of the Escapement's 'heartbeat' – the tick that gave them their nickname. The ground offensive was imminent.

The squadron of Lancers snapped to attention as one, and at the drawing of

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the Captain-Lieutenant's sabre, ran down the slight slope of the airship troop bay and out onto the field, disappearing out of my line of sight as they left-wheeled around the craft. I was left in the bay with my single guard, and could do nothing but close my eyes and listen to the horrid battle outside.

The troops had stopped, various orders now being shouted about holding a line and taking aim. The 'tickers' were to attack first, with the human troops holding back as a secondary wave if needed. In my experience of the Escapement, they seldom were.

The use of the Escapement seemed, on the face of it, to be excessive force to the point of gross brutality on the part of the airship's commander. I had first-hand experience of these steam-powered infantry units myself, having seen their terrible power unleashed during my time on the subcontinent. The image of their huge red iron frames marching ceaselessly towards the enemy, enveloped in clouds of smoke and steam and always accompanied by the unerring tick-tock of their geared hearts, is a memory I have long tried to forget. Alas, the realisation that I was soon to bear witness to their use again was almost too much, and I fought down the urge to retch as I considered the fate that was about to befall a round hundred of villagers armed with nothing more than empty drink bottles and a few crudely lashed together 'ceremonial' implements.

But, of course, these were not the villagers. Such a large body of impostors may indeed have posed a considerable force to be reckoned with if each possessed the ability, as demonstrated by Gef, to transform into a large, powerful, otherworldly monster. I had no idea what the Lancers had been

doing on the island – or really how long they had been there – but the dispatch of the Escapement suggested that they had some experience of dealing with these creatures and the sheer firepower required.

My fears were confirmed presently when a terrible series of howls arose from outside the airship, followed quickly not only by the crack of solar rifles, but the *whoosh* of the Escapement opening fire. Although I had estimated only four at most of the machines were out on the field, the sound of their destructive power drowned out the inhuman screeching that also filled the air. I could only imagine that, faced with four large, mechanical soldiers, the villager-aliens had finally taken notice and transmogrified as one into a veritable army of darkness. As the Escapement continued to deliver their payload, the Captain-Lieutenant could be heard giving quick, precise orders, and soon the crack of solar rifles began to be heard among the cacophony of death. If the farmhouse was so important to both good and evil, I simply had to trust that the airbourne army had the family's welfare at heart.

Soon, the monstrous screaming and roaring began to quieten in volume while the whoosh of the Escapement fire continued unabated, and eventually with a series of heavy mechanical clicks, even the sound of their cannons ceased and their constant tick became audible again. In the distance, someone was banging on the farmhouse door.

My solitary guard was joined by two others, who unhitched me from the flight seat to which I was still strapped and, after cuffing me in heavy iron manacles, again used rifle point as a direction and motioned for me to leave

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the craft and head to the house. Ahead I could see Mr. Irvine and his wife at the door, standing to one side as several troops filed in, followed at the rear by the airship commander. Several more set up a patrol around the farmhouse perimeter, with the remainder standing at point flanking the main door and other key positions. Of the villager-things, there was no sign, just a thick red coating of sticky dust on the damp grass.

As I was walked towards the farmhouse door I heard the airship's powerful motors gun slightly as the craft tilted with the weight of the four Escapement machines returning to their bay. Looking over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of square metal shoulders through a haze of steam, lit by multiple smaller lights now shining from around the edge of the airship.

The house appeared to have escaped any major damage, the only apparent repair needed being to the front door which had splintered at some central impact. I gestured to Mr. and Mrs. Irvine, and they returned with a wave but before we were within speaking distance of each other, they were led into a different part of the house by a Lancer. I was marched down the hallway and into the kitchen, and ordered to sit at the table where I was, thankfully, uncuffed. Of Valerie and Gef there was no sign. A pair of Lancers stood to attention by the door, and another behind me.

And then the airship commander strode into the room to the salutes of his three men. Colonel-Commandant Alexander Bellamy.

10. A Cosmic Secret Revealed

“**AND THAT,**” I said, finishing the last of my army tea, “Is a full and proper account of my activities on the island, since my arrival not...” I hefted my pocket-watch in one hand. “...eighteen hours ago, to my arrest by your men.”

I concluded my statement, exhausted. All throughout, Bellamy’s eyes had been fixed on my face. Occasionally he would nod, and thoughtfully twist an end of his precisely waxed moustache. Not once did he show any sign of surprise or disbelief, but instead gave the constant expression of absorbing my tale from beginning to end, from top to bottom. It was now approaching three in the morning. All during our interview, the house and its surrounds had remained silent. Mr. Irvine had sent his wife and daughter to bed, and was himself attempting to catch a few fleeting moments of sleep in the adjoining parlour, ready should his services be required. Having dispatched the villager-monsters so forcefully with the *Escapement*, the house had not been assaulted a second time by whatever diabolical and alien forces were gathering in the pitch black outside.

Finally Bellamy spoke. Sitting back, he smoothed down his hair.

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“A fascinating tale, Dr. Clarke, and one that fills quite some gaps in the puzzle I have been building in my own mind since my squadron arrived by airship three – no, four – days ago. I think the mystery is becoming ever-clearer, thanks to your valuable data.

“We were, of course, expecting your arrival on the island, as one of the functions of the military establishment here is to monitor all civilian communication. It was most fortuitous from our perspective, as I have in my own collection of paranormal researches a number of articles and pamphlets by your good self. I had hoped – rightly, it seems – that your investigative nature would be of benefit to my mission.”

I muttered a thanks, heartened to hear that not only had my theories of the supernatural been more widely received than I had hoped, they had also been of some professional use to whom I now assumed was a full-time investigator of the esoteric.

“You will forgive the theatricality of your arrest and the threat of a charge. We were unable to offer you direct protection on the island so I had to trust to your own judgement and experience that you would carry out an independent investigation of your own before we were able to meet in person. But it looks like we reached you just in time, for things on this island have taken a turn for the worse far earlier than I had anticipated.”

Bellamy paused to bark for more tea, and extracted a brilliant silver cigarette case from inside his tunic. Inside was a neat row of black cigarillos. I declined his offer, but he lit one for himself.

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“My squadron is a quasi-independent investigative team, similar in many ways to a military police force, who have authority to move about army and naval operations without question. As you know, Prince Albert himself has taken a particular interest in the magical sciences, which while furthering the progress of the Empire, has had some untoward effects. You are familiar with the situation on the Continent?”

At the mention of Europe I feel I blanched a little. Indeed, the ‘situation’ there was widely known, but the particular details of the devastation were generally kept from public knowledge. But at the very least, most Britons were aware of the devastation that befell the Continent and the rise of the old and strange black dynasties that now ruled the majority of the land mass. I acknowledged Bellamy, who continued to smoke as he updated me with his own movements on the island.

“Our job is therefore one of security and investigation into matters related to the supernatural, magical and occult. As many enemy agents and disestablishmentarians now attempt to wield such powers against the crown, so it is prudent to employ these same techniques in its defence. That is our purpose.

“We arrived ostensibly to investigate an accident which had befallen an expedition of three scientists from the Royal Geographical Society. This group were sent to prepare groundwork for an excavation at a stone circle not one mile from the military base. It was said that Albert had heard local tales of fairies and wanted them investigated should, of course, the

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mythology have some basis in fact which may have been of material value to the crown.

“The expedition was conducted with the cooperation of the local military officials, and proceeded on schedule for nearly a week before two of the geologists vanished into thin air, the third returning to the base in a state of mindless delirium. By all accounts the base personnel took good care of the poor chap, at which point we were called in. I myself had heard some island tales many years ago as part of my reading, and was eager to sift through the data on behalf of the Prince.”

Bellamy took a long draw on his cigarillo and savoured the rich aroma of the smoke for a full ten seconds before slowly, gently exhaling it in a series of short puffs. As the fresh army tea arrived, he thanked his adjunct and set about refilling both our mugs. I urged him to continue.

“Upon arrival we secured the circle and set a guard about the marquee. You can probably see it from this very hill. But events took a peculiar course when after a day the local forces ceased instantly any cooperation they had once offered to us, and denied us access to the geologist now resident in their infirmary.

“This was coincidental with a flare-up in the activities here at the farmhouse – although the local rabble had been troubling the Irvines for some time, the reports relayed as part of standard island observations indicated that whatever supernatural shenanigans were taking place only served to add local colour and had no other impact on island life. Indeed, it was suggested

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that it may have been a headline-grabbing hoax constructed by the family itself. But when the geologists had their accident, so the mysterious entity in the house became significantly more active and began relaying details of events taking place elsewhere on the island elsewhere, including details of movements at the military base, which is when our attention to the situation became ever more acute. Unfortunately we then had to handle the apparent mutiny of the army base personnel so were unable to investigate further before you arrived, but as I had indicated I did hope you would carry out this part of the investigation quite independently.”

I wasn't sure whether to be flattered that my skills were held in such high regard, or abused that I had, completely without my knowledge, been utilised as a mere intelligence-gathering tool for the military establishment. Bellamy's cigarillo was now extinguished and his otherwise set face broke into a broad, if unhappy, grin.

“What became of your friend from the local newspaper, Lambert, we don't know, although we did ascertain that he had been up to the circle. I suspect the same fate befell him as did the two geologists who have likewise vanished. Indeed, the appearance of his doppelganger as you so describe confirms he fell under the malign influence here present.”

Bellamy stiffened. From outside the silence of the night was broken by a distant murmur, drifting in around the shuttered kitchen windows. My own hearing was not so acute but after an initial start at the officer's change in expression, I too heard the unmistakable sound of a crowd approaching.

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“What on Earth is that? A secondary assault on the hilltop? Surely the enemy doppelgangers have been overcome by your forces, Bellamy – the machine soldiers you have stored in the *Defiant*?”

Bellamy held a hand up, requesting a moment's more silence before answering. The three Lancers in the room each glanced at their commanding officer. The sound from without slowly increased in volume. A large group of people moving across the field on grass, but not speaking.

Bellamy stood, as if to hear better, then leaning across the table to me.

“Well, we know that the destruction of one interloper does not necessarily mean the evil is vanished. Look at the Lambert creature. If they still possess the original, as it were, another duplicate can be created. Lancer, open the shutter.”

The indicated soldier shouldered his rifle and clambered over the kitchen bench-top, removing the makeshift wooden bar from across the two large windows above the Belfast sink and folded the shutters back. It was dark outside with no moon, but if pressed up against the glass an angled view across the front of the farmhouse was just visible.

It was the villagers. To the right, several piles of broken bodies could be seen. To the left, approaching the house, was a massed rank of figures, marching in slow unison towards us, just as we had seen upon our arrival by air. In front of the house the patrolling Lancers from Bellamy's airship had moved to a forward position and, kneeling for stability, were taking aim,

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awaiting the order to defend the house and occupants. It seemed the resources of the enemy were limitless, and the siege apparently repeatable until one side – us, most likely – was overcome. There was only one inhabitant of the house that knew anything about the situation. The mongoose-spirit, Gef.

As if answering my unspoken call, Valerie appeared at the door, dressed in nightshirt. In her arms before her, huddled against her frame, was the curled form of her familiar. The creature sniffed the air and regarded Bellamy and the three Lancers. The whiskers twitched and the creature chirruped, as any normal small mammal might. But then it spoke. I could see Bellamy was fascinated, for this was his first meeting with the Dalby Sensation.

“Lambert is back I see. Oaf. Oh, and he’s brought his friends. They’ll keep at it, you know. Wave after wave after wave. So long as the real men and women are alive and held in limbo, the template can be used again and again and again. The best thing to do is burn the bodies in the field outside. What’s the end of one village compared to the end of the world. Although it would mean the butcher will stay closed tomorrow. Inconvenient, if there was any villager left to go shopping.”

Valerie giggled but this seemed to agitate Gef. I wondered if his frivolous commentary was again too influenced by the young mind of the girl. I motioned to Bellamy.

“Bellamy, Gef is the perhaps the only creature on this island – well, on this island and apparently on our side – that had any idea of the nature of the

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horror that has been unleashed by the geologists. Gef has some connection with the girl which is clouding his intellect – take him yourself and we may get a military appraisal.”

The officer looked blankly at me, and I realised a full explanation of Gef’s nature would take far too long in such dire circumstances. Apologising for my rudeness, I grabbed Gef away from Valerie and unceremoniously planted him in Bellamy’s arms. Valerie instinctively reached for the creature, but the hands of her father appeared from the doorway behind and he gently held her back. Mr. Irvine, ruffled from uncomfortable sleep, nodded at myself and Bellamy, clearly understanding my motives.

Gef struggled briefly in Bellamy’s grasp but quickly ceased and, suddenly, jumped up his arm and to his shoulder. Bellamy started slightly but then relaxed. Gef’s high voice became lower, and his language instantly more succinct. The spirit-creature was now linked to the soldier’s mind.

“We have not much time and it appears we three are now allied against the evil under the hill. There is no-one else to call on.

“Beneath the hill a *Loa* – a devil from a sideways world – was imprisoned in aeons past. It, and I, do not belong to this world. The cell should have remained undisturbed forever after.

“But your geologists disturbed the power conduit that kept the *Loa* in chains – the stones, man, the stones! Foolish curiosity and childish digging led them to change the alignment, allowing the power field to ebb away and

awakening the creature beneath. To ensure the balance is preserved, the Loa has two avatars – I am one, the thing that pretends to be Lambert is the other. We have slept on the island for generations, but I was awoken in part by the girl, Valerie. Such an unusual mind. But when the Loa itself was brought to life, I sensed the change in the stone’s energy and took this form so beloved by Valerie. She loved the mongooses that Jack Cain released last year to control rabbits.” Valerie smiled at the memory of the neighbouring farmer’s recent attempt at pest control. That, and Valerie’s book, was the root of Gef’s manifested form.

“But the enemy does not borrow, it steals! Lambert was key, tumbling into the tomb, providing the source. With his intelligence and curiosity the dark power could spread. The soldiers at the base had disciplined minds easy to shape and were the first, falling one by one to its influence. As each mind was wrenched from the body, so the power grew until the entire village was under sway, with the Lambert-form the perfect leader.

“They’re outside now, power growing with every step. The Loa doesn’t even need to leave the hill, the web can spread one village, one town, one island at a time. Man will be gone by dawn. Then Britain. Then the world.”

Gef’s voice increased in pitch and eventually broke into an animal twittering. Bellamy may have stood steady as a rock, but his breathing had increased. His stress at learning of apparently insurmountable odds was affecting Gef. I myself concentrated to detach our situation from danger and replace it with scientific curiosity. I felt my heart rate slow, and lifted Gef from Bellamy’s shoulder and placed him on my own. Again the mongoose-

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spirit's demeanour changed as he drew this time on my own mind.

“Thank you, sir! What the geologists did can be undone. If we can escape the house, we can realign the stones and seal the Loa back in his tomb again. Clarke, I can read your knowledge of the esoteric, and you, Bellamy, have equal and complementary experience. Can your men protect Valerie and her family? We must get to the stones, we must!”

What the Lancers made of the story I did not know, but as part of Bellamy's squadron assembled to defend Prince and country against the forces of darkness, I presumed each was absorbing the data provided and applying their military experience to the matter. Bellamy called them to attention and began issuing orders.

“Captain-Lieutenant, you will establish a forward position at the front of the house and defend the family and property with terminal force. Remember, those are not the local villagers outside, we are dealing with a far more sinister enemy force. While the perimeter is held, *The Prince Albert Defiant* will disembark the Escapement to the west side. All enemy forces are to be destroyed. Dismissed.”

Bellamy's adjunct snapped a salute and ran out of the kitchen, followed by his two men. Soon, the sound of commands issued came from outside, while the eerie hushed march of the villagers stopped. Bellamy and I both looked to the windows to assess the situation. From his position on my shoulder, Gef strained to see through the glass.

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“As before,” he chirped. “They’ve stopped. I suspect our friend the Loa is also assessing the situation through the senses of those he controls. That will give time for the ‘tickers’ to arrive in position. Come, we should go now! The Loa will be distracted by the battle ahead. Our opposition will be lessened if we can get to the stones at once!”

Bellamy and I needed no further encouragement. Mr. Irvine knelt to embrace his daughter. I wished them well as he wished us luck. I grasped Bellamy by the arm.

“This way,” I whispered, leading the soldier to the back door.

11. A Discussion of Tactics

WE RAN across the paddock, thankfully, to silence. The villager-creatures had not moved, giving the Lancers time to establish ideal positions at the front of the house, and for Bellamy's airship to make necessary manoeuvres to allow a second deployment of the terrifying steam machines held in its second bay.

The military base lay ahead, between our party and the final destination, so we checked our speed as we approached in order to observe movements and evade the perimeter if required. The base was, from all outward appearances, as we had left it some hours ago when I had the good fortune of being snatched from instant death by Bellamy's crew. The rear was in darkness, the front and yard lit, with the base's boat still moored to the airship mast. Where soldiers once patrolled, however, no movement could be seen. Bellamy stopped just ahead of myself and Gef and fell into a crouch, motioning me to do the same.

"No-one home I think. That means we can cut across the yard there, saving us some time." Bellamy unholstered his service revolver, just in case.

I strained to detect any shadow of activity at the base. It was deserted. "Your

troop only destroyed a dozen of the creatures, Bellamy, and even so the doppelgangers can be replaced. Would that not mean they should be redoubling their guard, or even engaging in our pursuit?”

Bellamy turned and in the dark I could see his face crease into a frown. Gef twittered on my shoulder to get attention.

“It has bigger fish to fry,” he squeaked. “Your men are creating a focus for the Loa up on the hill, blotting his view of the rest of the island. A perfect diversion. Look!”

Bellamy and I turned quickly, and saw in the base yard a few soldiers appear from behind a stack of boxes. They appeared to be on regular patrol. Perhaps there were more that we hadn’t seen. Bellamy cursed under his breath.

“We must go around.”

“Not around, across!” Gef’s annoyance was clear. “What did I just say, soldier boy? We’re not the problem anymore.”

And with that, the spirit-mongoose leapt from my shoulder and disappeared into the long grass. A few moments later his tail could be seen held aloft as he raced directly towards the base and yard. I suddenly saw his point, and slapped Bellamy’s shoulder.

“Come on!”

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Ahead, Gef slipped through a tiny gap in the perimeter fence and shot across the yard, directly in the path of the patrol. The soldiers did not even pause, instead maintaining their route. As we reached the fence, I overtook Bellamy and veered to the left, aiming for the main gates which stood open. I heard Bellamy stop behind me, before his footsteps swished in the dirt and followed my lead.

Gef was right. Whatever power we were about to face at the stone circle, it was focussing all attention on the farmhouse. The patrolling soldiers – duplicates of soldiers – were operating on an automatic principle. I ran across the yard and into their path, stopping only to check their blank expressions. Bellamy arrived at my side, understood, and gave me a grin before taking off after our spirit guide. I followed, heading for a gate opposite; behind us, the oblivious soldiers about-faced and resumed their march.

A quarter-hour later the hill rose before us, the ancient earthworks cut into the side providing an excellent, if meandering, staircase to the summit. The marquee stood predominantly intact, with one side blown off its metal frame, probably by the high winds which must occasionally attack the hill. Standing on-site, I could see that the marquee did not actually encompass the entire hilltop. Instead, it bisected the stone circle, enclosing just five out of perhaps fifteen of the sarsens within the white canvas walls. One of the exposed megaliths stood to the left of the marquee entrance, and my archaeological instinct was immediately sparked. As I thoughtfully ran my hand over its surface, I noticed a certain... vibration. It was subtle, and most peculiar, and reminded me of the electrical energy I had encountered while

investigating mediumistic manifestations in Manchester a year before. These were no ordinary stones.

I turned to inform my companions, and only then noticed Bellamy examining a huddled form on the ground, then a second shape a few yards away. His face was grim as he looked up – these were the bodies of two of his men left to guard the site. More fodder for the Loa’s doppelganger army.

“Time is pressing, gentlemen.” Gef sat raised on his haunches, sniffing the entrance to the tent. “The dig has moved the channelling stones out of alignment, allowing the Loa to divert the energy used to shackle him and resorb it. Bellamy, I believe you have in the inside left pocket of your tunic a zinc and silver foldable frame, which when connected to a solar battery becomes charged in either a positive or negative manner, so generating a field of magnetism within the spokes once assembled. Correct?”

If Bellamy was surprised, he didn’t show it. Gef’s connection with whomever he was closest to allowed him easy access to short term memory. The officer replaced his revolver in its thigh holster and extracted a sizeable metallic object from inside his tunic. It consisted of flat metal spokes, interlocked like a cat’s cradle, and hinged with rivets at various crossing points. A small bale of thin wire was wrapped to one side, and intermixed within the spokes I saw the glossy ovoids of miniature vacuum tubes. Partially unwrapping the wire, Bellamy flicked his wrist and the device opened into an instantly recognisable occult symbol – a metallic five-pointed star, some twelve inches across at the widest diameter.

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“You have described the principles of the electric pentacle succinctly, little chap. Unfortunately this is a small device I have been working on merely to test certain theories. To subject the stone circle to the pentacle’s field would require my full-sized apparatus, which by necessity is stored in my laboratory in London. Besides which, even if this portable device was of some use, we have no source of power. There are solar batteries aplenty on board the *Defiant*, but none about my person.”

“Bellamy, I believe I may be of assistance!” I then took from my own jacket pocket the spare solar battery from my torch. The wedge end was slightly marked from my forced entry into the military base, but the weighty object was otherwise intact. In the half-light I saw Bellamy’s waxed moustache rise above his smile.

From the ground, Gef shimmied up my trouser leg and along my arm to get a better view of Bellamy’s remarkable device. The creature appeared to cough delicately.

“I trust you would not mind if this thing was used up? An admirable test of its potential I would say, which would encourage construction of a second? There will be enough power in a single solar battery to reverse the circle’s field if this star can convert it all before going ‘poof!’”

“Certainly I intend to continue developing the device. This is just a prototype; by all means if it must perish in our endeavours tonight then it is for a worthy cause. How shall we proceed?”

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Gef dropped to the ground and darted around the circle, stopping momentarily at each stone. He then returned to a position on my left shoulder.

“Being so tiny, we shall need to use the pentacle on the Loa’s very head. Once placed, his electric crown will push the energy back into the stones. The more he tries to fight, the quicker he’ll be sucked dry. Ideal. Come.”

And with that, he ducked into the marquee and was gone. Bellamy and I each knew that Gef was the only one of our trio who had any idea of the terror that we were about to face in the bowels of the hill beneath our feet. With some resolution, we followed.

12. A Final Confrontation

THE NIGHT outside was reasonably bright; the interior of the marquee was pitch black. Neither Bellamy nor I had a solar lamp with us, and I collided into the officer's back immediately. Any further travel forwards was unwise, given that the ground between the stones here had, I assumed, become a relatively deep earthwork.

Suddenly a brilliant light illuminated us, a curious and unnatural meld of white and green. Bellamy held the electric pentacle in one hand, the solar battery in the other, and between finger and thumb pressed the bare wire ends that trailed from the star frame to the terminal end of the solar battery. The tiny vacuum tubes pulsed slowly with light of astonishing brightness, and cast Bellamy's face in shadow as he looked over shoulder at me.

“It occurs to me that the pentacle needs to be warmed anyway, and we need some light. I am at this point assuming the battery is fully charged?”

I nodded. “Just as well you had the inspiration. Our progress would have been very much slower otherwise.” I gestured to the earthworks ahead.

Five tall sarsens marked the perimeter, the marquee's sides stretched around

their backs. In the centre of the tented area the ground had been cut away in careful layers as part of an exploratory excavation. Moving forward, the base of the pit was visible just a few feet down. The top of an ancient stone arch, the portal free of soil, was visible. It was just large enough, perhaps, for a man to crawl through on all fours. Gef appeared through it from the other side.

“This way, gentlemen.”

Bellamy handed me the pentacle carefully, ensuring that the battery remained connected, before lowering himself into the pit and then through the arch. Once in, his arms reached out and I, lying across the lip of the pit, lowered our light source down to him before joining him beyond the doorway.

We were in a tunnel that sloped downwards and curved away leftwards ahead. The pentacle’s light had now calmed as the tubes heated evenly, providing a warm yellow-green glow. Although the device was held by Bellamy some two feet from my own person, I could now feel the heat coming from it. Bellamy constantly adjusted his hold as the star increased uncomfortably in temperature.

Gef had paused just at the bend, and appeared to be listening intently. Bellamy and I looked at each other, and then noticed the same brittle sound.

It was a crisp rustle, like a fresh newspaper crumpled, and very unusual to hear. But it had another, almost wet quality, a bakelite scraping. I thought I

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recognised it from my time surveying ancient, infested temples on the subcontinent twenty years ago.

“Insects?” I asked. Bellamy was deep in thought and said nothing. Gef squeaked in agreement.

“Lambert, the amateur etymologist. Valerie chose a mongoose. What, I wonder, did the Loa take from the reporter’s mind?”

Even as the mongoose spoke, there came a colossal rush and the light of the pentacle was obscured by an appalling swam of flying insects that swept out of the tunnel ahead. Bellamy cried out, raising the glowing device to protect his head and illuminating a hideous black cloud of arthropods orbiting our party. The sound had intensified immensely into an almost deafening rattle.

“Cicadas! Good lord, a plague of cicadas! These aren’t native to the British Isles at all!” I swatted the cloud from head, panic rising slightly as I felt the not insubstantial creatures settling in my hair and on my neck.

Bellamy had to shout above the swell of cicada song. “Neither, I believe, is the mongoose, yet here we are with one that talks! This manifestation must be intended to delay our progress. Gef, the pentacle is still drawing from our single battery – if we are to provide our evil friend inside a new hat, we must do it soon.”

At ground level, Gef seemed to nod, although it was difficult to see through the swirling mass of flying forms. The rhythm of the cicada call made

concentration exceedingly difficult. No doubt the intention.

Gef shot around the tunnel bend, with Bellamy and I close behind. As we continued at some speed down the sloping, curving tunnel, the cicadas continued to flow from whatever chamber lay below. Then the tunnel ended and all at once we tumbled headlong into a low rectangular chamber, identifiable perhaps as a long barrow of some description. The walls were damp-eaten stone, and although thrown with dirt, the room was free of obstruction.

All of this was the subject of but a momentary snapshot view, as Bellamy, cursing, tripped to the ground and lost hold of the pentacle's power connection, plunging us into a complete darkness. There came faint crack, and Bellamy swore again, loudly this time, as one of the pentacle's vacuum tubes connected with a stony outcrop of the wall and was shattered. Gef could be heard chattering to himself as Bellamy fumbled with the wiring in his hands in an effort to relight the electric star.

It occurred to me then that the insectoid cacophony had abated, and was replaced instead by the sound of deep laborious breaths and a slow, slate-like scraping, from the far end of the chamber. I resisted the urge to hurry Bellamy along, knowing full well that he was attempting a difficult repair in total darkness.

“Clarke. We meet at last.”

On my knees, I turned at the rasping voice. The accent was English, but

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possessed of an inorganic quality that chilled my blood.

“Aha!” This was Bellamy, suddenly illuminated by the semi-functional pentacle, revealing a muddied face with slight red gash to the forehead. He raised himself up, holding the star above his head. Two of the five points were dead, with tubes on only three now alight, and the broken tubes fizzing slightly in the damp air. Bellamy’s triumphant expression, eerie lit by the pentacle, soon turned to an expression of terrible wonder, his smiling face slackened and drained of all colour. I turned back in the direction of the rasping voice.

On a raised dais heaved a monstrosity. At the bottom half, human legs lay twisted awkwardly, clad in high-quality walking boots and tweed trousers. The legs terminated in an amorphous, almost shapeless torso, to which clung the remainder of the tweed suit, split by large chitinous plates. The plates pulsed with a heartbeat, the gaps between widening at rhythmic intervals to reveal a venous membraned skin beneath.

My eyes were drawn to the foul creature’s head, large and cuboid, consisting on the left side of arthropod mandible, compound eye, and series of ever-waving antennae, and on the right, adjoined by a creeping green border, the head of a man, one eye staring and a half-mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. Despite what little remained, he was recognisable as the shell of Richard Lambert, reporter for the *Isle of Man Examiner*.

The half-insect, half-human body was wrapped in gigantic chains of apparently great age, their entire surface red-black with centuries of

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oxidation. At the shoulder and sides, the chain cut directly into the flesh of the monster, as if the imprisoned subject had once been smaller. I suspected it indeed had been, but now fused with Lambert's cadaver it had grown as the energy from the stones above was channelled into its regeneration.

Gef sprung between Bellamy and I, every attention affixed on the terrible beast before us. As we watched, the mongoose to grew in size and transmographed once again into the fearsome bear-like form I had witnessed briefly in the farmhouse, his light, airy chitter-chatter laugh turning into a guttural growl.

“The Loa Buggane. So the devil in chains finds a host. Poor Lambert, he never knew what terror from beyond lay just beneath his feet. The reporter's curiosity led to his own downfall. Although, Bellamy, your Prince and his cronies have a lot to answer for, poking their nose into no-one's business.”

Gef approached the Lambert-Loa, circling the platform. The human eye rolled in its socket to follow. Despite horrific appearance, the creature appeared to pose no physical threat, the majority of its power now focussed on the farmhouse which was, I sincerely hoped, being stoutly defended against attack by Bellamy's crack squadron even as we confronted the true enemy here in his underground tomb.

“An intelligent, high-grade personality was exactly what the Loa needed to come alive,” Gef continued to circle the monster, gradually decreasing the distance of every pass. His now large claws pawed the dirt absently. “The geologists may have broken the circle and released you – and me – but their

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minds were a dry plain. Nothing for you there but rock and catalogues. But Lambert, what a prize! Searching, yearning, a mind of science and a breadth of knowledge far beyond the average. How he loved butterflies. The insect. A perfect form for a new body – endlessly adaptable, resilient. So Lambert was absorbed as fuel for both mind and body. Once more, the Loa takes all in the endless pursuit of self-survival. You despicable creature.”

Gef stopped before the Loa, which began to shake with a half-human laugh. An insectoid feeler reached out to smell Gef’s bear-mongoose form.

“You, Gef, the Arkan Sonney fairy of the isles. Your weakness is my strength,” the creature spat, the human voice impeded by arthropod mouthparts that could do nothing but clack together. “You could not destroy me, so I was trapped. Imprisoned forever, giving me time to find an escape. Now the stones are broken and the time is near. Soon every living cell on this island will be dead. And then the sea around. And then the land beyond. The world shall be a black shell spinning around a dead star. This universe, this time-space has so much energy to feast on. Then only the dark will remain.”

Bellamy and I could only observe this exchange between two creatures from another world, beings that existed at the opposite ends of a universe of which we knew nothing. This Loa – Buggane, as Gef had called it – was the ultimate evil. Nothing short of total extinction was the desired aim. I glanced at Bellamy, who caught my eye and nodded. The electric pentacle continued to glow, but the light thrown from the remaining tubes seemed imperceptible fainter. The battery could not last much longer, and I only prayed that the

device was functional enough to act as the energy exchanger as we had hoped.

All the while, Gef and Buggane continued to regard each other, talking of events, places, and other creatures beyond our knowledge. Occasionally, Gef seemed to throw a look at us, as if indicating that our single action, such as it was, was almost due.

“Buggane, Loa of the darkness, you shall be entombed once more. The light shall prevail. Bellamy, if you would be so kind, I will give the signal.”

The Loa twisted to see us, as if remembering we were there. It snarled, insect arms flailing, and a sound of tearing linen filled the room. Gef launched himself bodily on the creature as its torso exploded in a massive cloud of insect life. The sound came as a terrible ripping, as unnaturally large, buzzing hornet-like fliers erupted in a seemingly endless stream from the bloated body of the Loa. Bellamy fell back to his knees, pentacle raised above his head and he tried to block the hurricane of noise. I too found myself on the ground, pummelled by a thousand heavy insects rebounding from my body.

On the platform, Gef had locked his claws into the head of the Loa. The compound eye had been pierced, and oozed a heavy blue syrup. Blotting out by the noise of the hornets, the Lambert-mouth was open in a scream.

Bellamy stumbled into me, hands bleeding from fending off insect attacks. The pentacle was still lit, but the hook-like legs of many insects tugged at

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the metal struts as they flew past at tremendous speed. Voice communication was impossible; instead I nodded briskly as did Bellamy, and I grasped the dysfunctional side of the star. Bellamy mouthed a countdown from five as we struggled to our haunches and both estimated the distance from our position to the Loa's head.

On five, we both sprung into the air, pushing physically against the swirling mass of insects that flew around the room. We had both, fortunately, judged accurately, and in one exact movement managed to land on top of the Loa's burst body, forcing the electric pentacle onto its swollen head. With a pop another vacuum tube broke as the star was embedded in the creature's mutated cranium.

The Loa roared and threw Gef off, but the bear-spirit transformed in mid-air to the small familiar form of the mongoose and landed gracefully against one side of the tomb. As the Loa twisted and turned, Bellamy and I clung on for dear life. Above us, the insect swarm gathered into a single noisy ball before hurtling downwards to protect their master.

But Gef had been right. The more the monster struggled, the quicker the pentacle channelled its energy away and into the stones above. The insect ball hit us square a second later, but most of the flying monstrosities dissolved into a red powder at the collision. The cacophonous roar stopped, replaced by a weak rasping from the Loa creature, the body of which began to collapse upon itself on the platform. Soon, Bellamy and I were lying face down in a red scum, both of us clasping strongly to the glowing electric pentacle. I felt Gef leap onto my back. The mongoose let out a long, high

wail. I raised myself up, and dared to let go of the pentacle with one hand. Success! Tremendous success!

“We did it! Against all the odds, against a power unknown, your pentacle worked, Bellamy, it worked! You are a man of formidable talents!”

Bellamy lay in the red mulch, both arms outstretched to the pentacle. His slow breathing quickened into a chuckle, before turning into a most hearty laugh. He rolled onto his side, propping his head up on an elbow.

“I dare say the pentacle could use some refinement to make it altogether less fragile, but a successful field test I would say.” He flicked slime from his moustache and gave it a hesitant sniff before wipe it on his tunic. “I could use a rather stiff drink I think.”

Gef did not seem to share our pleasure. His agitated form flitted here and there amongst the mess on the dais.

“You and your pentacle. Moron! *Imbecile!*”

Bellamy had missed the signs of Gef’s annoyance. “We have destroyed the monster, Gef! The island is free of its control!”

Gef’s tiny, furred face was pressed against my own. I could feel the wet of his black nose as the mongoose looked with both eyes into one of mine.

“The creature cannot be destroyed, cannot! The pentacle was broken! So the

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fields were realigned and the stones recharged, but too much! Buggane's revolting embodiment may have been destroyed, but that has only served to free the Loa within. Imprisonment is the only method available to stop its evil. If the physical form is destroyed, the Loa is free."

Bellamy's light-headed chuckling stopped. I regarded the rapidly fading pentacle and the slowly desiccating red ichor in which we lay. We had failed?

"Then the island – the world – is in even greater danger? What can we do? If the Loa was imprisoned by your people in the first place, can it be done again? Tell us how we can assist?"

Gef growled a little. "It will take a long time for the Loa to find this world again. Years perhaps. I suppose we may at least be satisfied that it is lost elsewhere for the moment. Maybe when it returns the pentacle will actually work, Bellamy."

I wasn't sure whether Bellamy was disappointed with Gef's assessment of his device. He didn't say, anyway. I attempted to turn this to the positive.

"So the Loa is banished? That gives us ample time, I imagine, to prepare for his recapture? And the island is free, anyway. Those poor villagers, and the soldiers too." As I sat up, Gef jumped onto my lap.

"Freed? Not at all. Those whose minds the Loa tapped to create copied forms will be dead, as the power has been sucked clean out. If the power had

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been drawn enough to imprison again, then the connection would be broken. But as it is, with Buggane banished to the corner of space, the strain would be too much. They're all dead, Clarke.”

The realisation that our efforts may have extinguished an entire village hit us horribly. Our triumph – though real, while the Loa was banished – was tempered by the terrible price paid.

“The farmhouse!” Bellamy made immediately for the tunnel exit. Gef climbed to my shoulder and I followed.

13. An Invitation to Dinner

THE CLOUDS finally broke a day later, as Bellamy's Lancers completed the grim task of transferring one hundred corpses from the farmer's field into bay two of the airship, which hung reluctantly an inch above the ground, the rigid held firm by tethered steel cables. A similar scene was taking place down at the military base, with a second detachment of special Lancers making their way through the now deserted buildings, lifting carcasses out and into the base yard. As with the *Defiant*, the base's boat was being loaded with a sombre cargo. Word was *The Prince Albert Victorious* was on the way from Douglas.

The resourcefulness of Mr. Irvine and his family was something to behold. I said as much, as we sat around the kitchen table. Mr. Irvine and Bellamy each cradled a generous measure of scotch, while I and the farmer's wife were satisfied with tea – not, I was pleased to observe, delivered in tin mugs from an army thermos, but from the homely brown kettle that sat in the centre of the table. Hot, and once again sweet.

Having established a cordon, the Lancers had been able to defend the farmhouse during our confrontation with Buggane in the barrow. The villager-doppelgangers had been clumsy in their attack, perhaps as their

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remote coordination was distracted by Gef's wrestle with the master in the tomb. Thankfully, the Escapement had not been needed a second time. The Irvines had even taken part in the battle, barricading Valerie in the cellar while Mr. Irvine and his wife took an improvised sniper position from the upstairs bedroom, Mrs. Irvine feeding shells as her husband covered the ground below with an alarming elephant gun.

Although the family had survived, the village of Dalby was another question. Not all inhabitants had fallen under the sway of Buggane, although all of the local military force had. It was unlikely that the village would be repopulated – Bellamy had earlier made some intimation that the remaining villagers may be relocated to the larger town of Peel. Despite the tragic losses, the Irvines were not, however, interested.

“Oh no, Mr. Bellamy, my family fought tooth and claw to protect what's ours. We're not going anywhere – and Dalby will come back, don't worry about that. We've lost a lot but there are good folk about, don't worry about that.”

The kettle rattled. Gef appeared on the table, and Valerie at the kitchen door. Bellamy reached out to tickle the animal apparition under the chin.

“And what of you, my magic mongoose?” he asked. “If the barrow is empty, how can you still exist to protect it?”

Valerie took a seat and poured herself a mug of tea. Gef curled against her arm.

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“Fiddle to the barrow, soldier-boy.” Gef was back to his original playful – if irritating – self, reflecting the mind of his companion. “The Loa will be back one day, so it makes sense for the circle to be watched. Someone has to do it. And a mongoose is a very useful thing for spying. Besides which,” he said as he nipped to Valerie’s shoulder, “A girl needs a friend. What better than an extra, extra clever mongoose?”

Bellamy finished his tea. “And you, Dr. Clarke? What are you going to write for your *Gazetteer*?”

I laughed into my mug, almost involuntarily, then regretted instantly my light-heartedness in the face of so much death. “Much to Pemberton’s annoyance, a pleasant tale of an island holiday, I dare say. I doubt the great British public is ready to read of anything that took place over the last two days. I suppose you will have devised a suitable cover story by the time I return to my desk? But I think it is a job well done – the mystery of the ‘Dalby Sensation’ has been solved, and the Irvines can get back to normal life. Well, free of harassment at any rate. The rebuilding of the village is an admirable task.”

Bellamy nodded, tweaking his moustache absently as I had come to recognise in a sign of careful thought.

“Quite right, Dr. Clarke, quite right. You are also subject to the Official Secrets Act in this instance. However, his Royal Highness will require a full account of this island adventure. I suggest we combine our knowledge of

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occult science in the preparation of this report. What say you, Clarke?”

The matter of the devil in chains did, I felt, need to be recorded in its entirety for the historical record of the land, regardless of whose eyes ultimately saw it. I accepted his offer, and we shook hands firmly. From his silver cigarette case, Bellamy extracted a small calling card and offered it to me. There was nothing on the white rectangle save a single line address on The Mall, London.

“Dinner at my club, a week hence. White tie, I’m afraid. In the meantime, I feel I shall be occupied on the island for some days. The business of the base must be re-established as a matter of urgency, should the Northern Republic hear the island is unmanned, as it were. As such I must get back to duty. Good-bye Dr. Clarke, and thank-you for everything. Until next week.”

Bellamy stood and warmly shook my hand. As I turned his card over in my hands, he made his farewells to the Irvines and left the kitchen to take charge of the operation outside.

Dinner at the club. What intriguing circles our Colonel-Commandant Bellamy moved in.

Valerie giggled as the Dalby Sensation danced around the table. Mrs. Irvine was at my side.

“More tea, Dr. Clarke?”

The DEVIL in CHAINS

ABOUT *the* AUTHOR



ADAM CHRISTOPHER was born in Auckland, New Zealand. In 2006 he moved to the sunny North West of England, where he lives in domestic bliss with wife and cat. When not writing, Adam can be found drinking tea, reading *Green Lantern* comics, and annoying friends at his local fencing club by being incredibly bad at épée.

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The author worked hard on this story. If you enjoyed it and would like to read more like it, please visit <http://www.adamchristopher.co.uk> to purchase a copy.