

protodimension magazine



VOLUME VII JANUARY 2016

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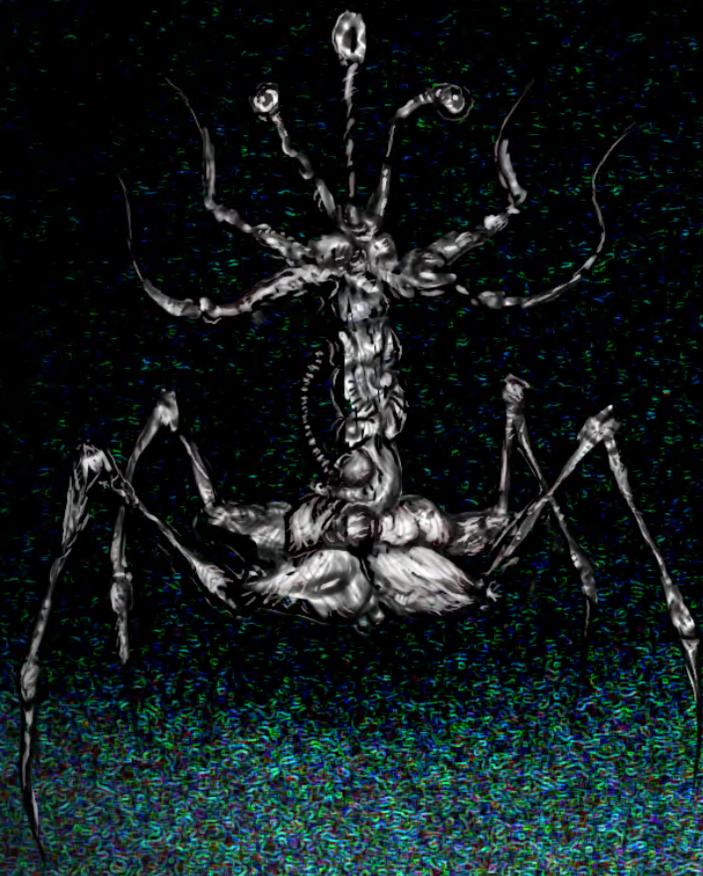
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For *Call of Cthulhu*





TO EXPLAIN IT ALL

Editorial dithering

By Tad Kelson

"He spoke about creating a mythology - about revealing the myth behind the myth."

Juxtapoz Magazine Feb '15 Pg. 92
Artist Maria Kreyn, talking about
another artist Odd Nerdrum
mariakreyn.com

When I read this quote it struck me as the basis of what we at Protodimension, what we as gamers and writers, what we as creators, are all about. Creating a mythology and then revealing it piece by piece. In your game, in your campaign, in the backstory to the setting, in the world building in your chosen genre or in a story or novel, or just an overarching theme to much of your writing (guilty to that last one here). Each and every one of us are creating or reinterpreting a sense of mythology, of story and interaction, in each of our games and sessions.

That is the essence of gaming for me: the shared world and story that is made in the gaming process. Even in the most railroaded adventure available commercially or nascent steps into the tabletop RPG world, there is the dialogue between players and game masters, between player characters and non-player characters. How it all comes together to provide a story and myth and entertainment for all involved.

So to help in the mythology of your world, be it a dark dystopia or a bright and shiny future with an underlying core of corruption and infestation, or even just regular folks in an irregular landscape, here is our latest issue. Our 24th one, first one on a new schedule, bringing joy and content to your gaming life. All of us here at PDM, the 3 hombres for the most part, are just as pleased to make this available as we were for the first issue.

So open it up and enjoy what your fellow gaming enthusiasts have created from their own febrile and fertile imagination. Please let us know if you like what you read. Share it on the FB page or send a letter to the Editors. Perhaps if we have enough they will show up in future issues.

Till Our Next Issue.
Tad Kelson: Chief Editor

GO ASK ALICE

A retro adventure

By Tim Bisailon

FOR UNKNOWN ARMIES (1ST ED.)

Go ask Alice

I think she'll know.

—Jefferson Airplane, White Rabbit.

GO ASK ALICE is an adventure scenario designed for *Unknown Armies* (1st Edition) as a one shot adventure. It could be plopped in as a side trek adventure for an ongoing campaign setting as well. It is an appropriate adventure for any type of characters, since it is a quick and dirty scenario with the sky as the limit.

To get things on the go, the players are driving through the countryside and stop at a small town for a break in the monotony of traveling. Our adventure begins in the here-and-now when a player gets a call from a relative of a death in the family, close friend or when some other thing that gets them on the road. Along the way the players get lost when a section of the highway is closed and they have to make a detour right into the twilight zone...with a little help from an **Unspeakable Servant** who uses a *major unnatural phenomenon* to cause a shift in the fabric of time.

What the players don't know is that they have traveled back in time. Any modern day devices will work as normal but cellphones won't connect since there are no towers or satellites to bounce signals from.

WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

An abominable Unspeakable Servant was summoned in 1902 by Otto Sybil, who sacrificed an eye to summon the creature and then placed it in the body of an old bull. An old bull that has been roaming the Sybil estate since then for decades now. The player's car just happened to be at that particular point when the beast hit a reset in time. Maybe an event that happened at the Sybil estate in the here-and-now triggered it and it wanted to go back to a simpler period of time? Who knows, only the creature knows and now it's gone back to this point in history: 1977.

GETTING STARTED

Tell the players that it's 6 pm in the afternoon, it's a cold and rainy day and thunder rumbles upon the horizon as the sky is a dark overcast day.

SCENE ONE: THE SET UP

Our adventure begins with the players on the highway driving from point A to point B. Have them make a hearing/notice check and if someone succeeds they can hear what sounds like a sonic boom. The sound of a sonic boom can be heard echoing overhead as if a fighter jet broke the sound barrier. The sky then clears with the sun sinking upon the horizon without a hint of it being a rainy day whatsoever.

Ask if the players have a radio on and tell them the tuned in station suddenly went to static, and if they tune the dial they pick up a classic rock station playing some "Jefferson Airplane" tune.

With their stomachs growling they see a roadside diner, time to stop and stretch their legs and grab a bite to eat. **Will's Place**—open 24 hours—is one of those little diners that sprang up in the 50's and still continues to operate to this very day.

There are two cars parked in the diner lot and as the players enter they notice they are retro looking, the kind of cars you see at a cruise night event. As they enter the diner they set off some chimes fixed to the door. There are two old fellows (Burt & Ernie) sitting at the counter playing a game of checkers, a waitress (Anna) who is walking to a table where a family of three (Mom, Dad & Child) are sitting. The waitress has a coffee pot in her hands and is going over to refill the cups. She tells the players to take a seat anywhere and she will be right there.

A jukebox set up in the corner is playing a Steve Miller tune. This is where a female biker (Judy Blue) is standing, looking at the selections, while dropping a coin or two into the slot. The players can see the dinner is not too busy at this time of day. There is a booth with four bikers; three men (Snake, Blade, and Travis) and one woman (Gogo), sitting eating burgers and having fries, they are members of the Hades Children motorcycle club. They are dressed in torn jean jackets, t-shirts and jean pants. Bikers never change their style over the years.

The Bikers are a *maguffin*. It may look like they might cause trouble but they don't. They are from 1977 and have stopped to get a bite to eat before hitting a campsite to bed down for the night. They are on their way to a big event in another county away from this place.

A Will's Place menu is sitting at the end of the table, with a glass sugar container, two condiment containers, one red (for ketchup) one yellow (for mustard). Plop the menu in front of the players. (Handout 1). Since it is 1977, the prices reflect that, and if questioned about the prices, Anna will say "They are what they are. Are you gonna order now?"

Have someone make a notice check to see the police car arriving. It seems to be swerving along the road as if the driver is drunk and is coming straight towards the diner as if the driver is focused on the light as a beacon. The police car is basically going at 40 mph. But it will miss the motorcycles and stop right at the garden with the horn blaring as the engine cuts off.

Deputy Kenny Reed is the driver of the vehicle and he is slumped forward over the steering wheel. If players rush to see they will discover Deputy Reed is non-responsive, his eyes are open in a look of shock, he is drenched in blood with half his stomach hanging out. Sitting on the dashboard is a new note pad flipped open so that he could keep notes on his day. (Handout 2)

If someone mentions Mrs. Sybil. Ernie will chime in and say it's probably Alice Sybil and her house. She hasn't left the premises in 60 years since she has an allergy to the sun.

If anyone uses the police radio to call dispatch they will get Emma Watkiss who replies that the sheriff and other deputies responded to Deputy Reed's call, but there is no word back from them. It's up to the players to take the next step and if they continue on their merry way, close the book and pack up your dice because this is what the

adventure is all about and besides they are stuck in 1977 and will not find things quite right at their destination.

Stories/Rumors will come out should the players ask. Each person in the area has something to say:

- ☠ Alice Sibyl is a lonely old woman who lives in an old Victorian house on a hill overlooking the town and has been living there for 60 maybe 70 years now.
- ☠ Her husband, Otto, who is a handyman, bought the farmland and had it converted into an estate many moons ago. Some say he left with another woman.
- ☠ Alice hasn't stepped out of her home in several decades and local citizens report that she is alive and well, since her mail is picked up and home deliveries of groceries are dropped off once every two weeks.
- ☠ Alice hasn't stepped out of her home because she's a witch.
- ☠ Alice hasn't stepped out because she suffers from photosensitivity.
- ☠ Some people think she runs a bordello.
- ☠ The police make a routine check on Alice every week by patrolling up to the house and stopping in to check on her.

SCENE TWO: SIBYL'S MANOR

As the players drive up to the manor they can see that the main gate off of the road lies open.

Sibyl Manor is a beautiful Victorian home which sits on a huge hill overlooking the town. It is surrounded by a 10-foot tall stone wall. There is a crop of pine trees in the corner of the estate, a huge pond and also a hobby barn in the northern most corner. The only animal roaming the land is a big bull grazing the grass by the pond.

As they drive up the Lane they can see two police cars in the circular driveway, one with the doors wide open and the lights flashing.

ON THE GROUND FLOOR

PORCH

Sheriff Brandt's body is sprawled out on the porch with a huge pool of blood about his body. The door to the house is open.

FOYER

Once the players enter the place they can see that it's pretty well dusty with only a set of foot prints in the center of the hall way, like a well-worn path. The smell of rotted food and the buzzing of flies can be heard coming from the kitchen.

KITCHEN

On the table in the center of the kitchen are mounds of grocery bags now rotted and covered in flies. Several years of groceries have been delivered to this home and have been piled on the table as if waiting for someone to unpack them and put them away.

PANTRY

Full of other items that have long ago perished.

DINING ROOM

A long table has been set out with three plates that have long gathered dust. Though it looks like someone has walked around the table recently.

LIVING ROOM

A huge hearth is at the far end with a throw rug in front of it, and several chairs are about. A pile of newspapers is beside one of the chairs.

DEN

Has a small table and chairs in it, as well as a piano in the corner.

LIBRARY

Two rows of shelves are here filled with books that date no later than 1905.

PROTODIMENSION MAGAZINE

SECOND FLOOR

Stairs lead up to the second floor. A set of foot prints goes to the bathroom door that is slightly ajar

BATHROOM

A huge tub, a wash basin, and a small stall for a loo. Another door exits into a small hall way and leads to the second bedroom.

BEDROOM 2

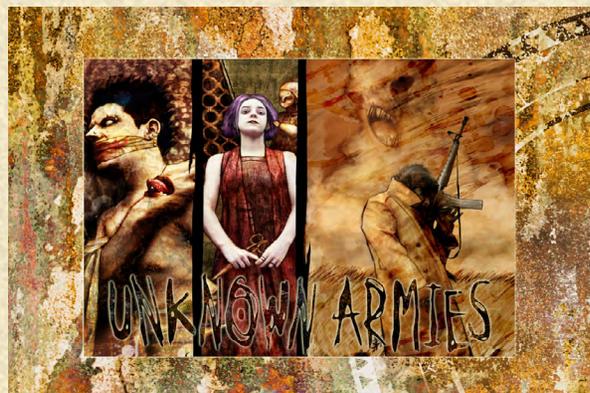
A huge double bed, a vanity closet, and a huge mirror hung on the wall. Footprints go to the double French-doors which leads to the screened porch.

THE SCREENED PORCH

A huge area with several chairs and a small table. There is another set of double doors that are open and blowing with the wind.

THE MASTER BEDROOM

The body of a deputy is ripped apart at the foot of the bed, but it looks like the deputy fired off a few rounds since the room looks shot up and there are shell casings all around the floor. The skeleton of Otto Sybil is in bed, with a patch over his left eye. Looks like he's been dead for a couple of decades. Died in his sleep? On the night table beside the bed is a key chain with three big keys



on it. The key ring is for the root cellar where his lab is located. If the characters decide to search the body that's when the Tenebrae strike. There are 4 of them in the room guarding the body of Otto Sybil.

The Master Bedroom also has a walk in closet and a private master bathroom.

BEDROOM 3

A tree branch broke the window several years ago and now wild animals live in the room. As the players approach the door they can hear something scuttling about in it. It's a raccoon.

ALICE'S ROOM

There is a chair and a workbench with tools in this room. Alice is sitting in the chair and has a childlike look about her as she looks at the players in the room.

"I am Alice," she responds.

"Are you friends of Otto?" she asks. "I haven't seen you around here before. Do you require some refreshments? Herbal tea perhaps?"

Alice is an Automata created by Otto Sybil. She is a replica of Otto's wife, Alice, who passed away in the 1890's. That's when Otto, a mechanomancer, constructed Alice Mark II. Alice looks to be a lovely woman in her late 20's, dressed in a Victorian style gown with her hair in a bun.

Alice will sit there and look expectantly at the PC's. Less than two months after she was created by Otto and he died in his sleep and has been "sleeping" since. She does not wish to disturb him and goes about her routine of going down stairs, walking to the porch, getting the paper, groceries, or whatever happens to be there. She puts groceries in the kitchen, she then takes the paper and goes to the living room and "reads" before heading back upstairs to her room to renew the process she's been doing for 72 revolutions around the sun.

Tenebrae (Minor)

Darkness With Teeth

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Points: | Percentile roll (1D100) |
| Body: | 30 |
| Speed: | 80 |
| Mind: | 10 |
| Soul: | 10 |
| Dodge: | 60% |
| Claw: | 60% |
| Claw Damage: | Roll + 1D6 |

Alice (Significant)

Perpetual Motion Automata, Tick, tock, tick, tock

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| Points: | 250 |
| Body: | 100 |
| Speed: | 100 |
| Mind: | 40 |
| Soul: | 40 |

Unspeakable Servant, Abominable (Significant) - Bull

Loathsome Slave of Sorcery

| | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| Body: | 100 (150 Wound points) |
| Speed: | 70 |
| Mind: | 70 |
| Soul: | 50 |

Since the Unspeakable Servant has used its major charge to go back in time. It has to wait another year to do so.

SANDWICHES

| | |
|--|------|
| STACKED HAM | 1.35 |
| Ham served on a bun | |
| STACKED ROAST BEEF..... | 1.30 |
| Prime Roast Beef served on a bun. | |
| FISH SANDWICH | 1.10 |
| HOAGIE..... | 1.25 |
| Sliced Cheese, Bologna, Ham, Salami | |
| HAM..... | .55 |
| HAM & CHEESE..... | .60 |
| BACON-LETTUCE-TOMATO | .75 |
| CLUB | 1.15 |
| Sliced Ham & Cheese with Bacon, Turkey Breast | |
| HAMBURGER..... | .55 |
| DELUXE..... | .65 |
| CHEESEBURGER..... | .60 |
| DELUXE..... | .70 |
| CHILI BURGER..... | .85 |
| Hamburger smothered with Homemade Chili | |
| CHILI DOG | .65 |
| 2 Hot Dogs covered with Homemade Chili | |
| HOT DOG | .25 |
| GRILLED CHEESE..... | .25 |
| The Above Sandwiches Are served with French Fries. | |
| Gravy is an additional .10 cents | |

SIDE ORDERS

| | |
|---|-----|
| FRENCH FRIES | .25 |
| ONION RINGS..... | .30 |
| HOMEMADE CHILI..... | .50 |
| SOUP OF THE DAY..... | .25 |
| CHEF SALAD..... | .30 |
| WILL'S SALAD..... | .40 |
| Chef Salad with sliced Ham, Turkey and Pork | |

SHORT ORDER

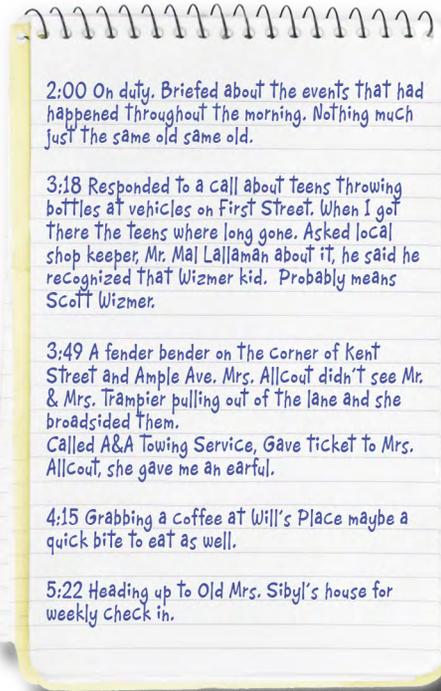
| | |
|---|------|
| CHICKEN IN A BASKET | 1.20 |
| CRISPY FRIED CHICKEN | 1.35 |
| HOT ROASTED BEEF DINNER | 1.45 |
| SOUP AND A SANDWICH | 1.30 |
| Soup of the Day served with two Ham & Cheese Sandwiches | |
| APPLE PIE | .30 |
| APPLE PIE ALA MODE..... | .40 |
| ICE CREAM | .25 |
| SUNDAE AFTER CHURCH..... | .55 |

BEVERAGES

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| COFFEE..... | .10 |
| ICE TEA..... | .10 |
| HOT TEA..... | .10 |
| SOFT DRINKS..... | .25 |
| MILK | .20 |
| CHOCOLATE MILK..... | .25 |

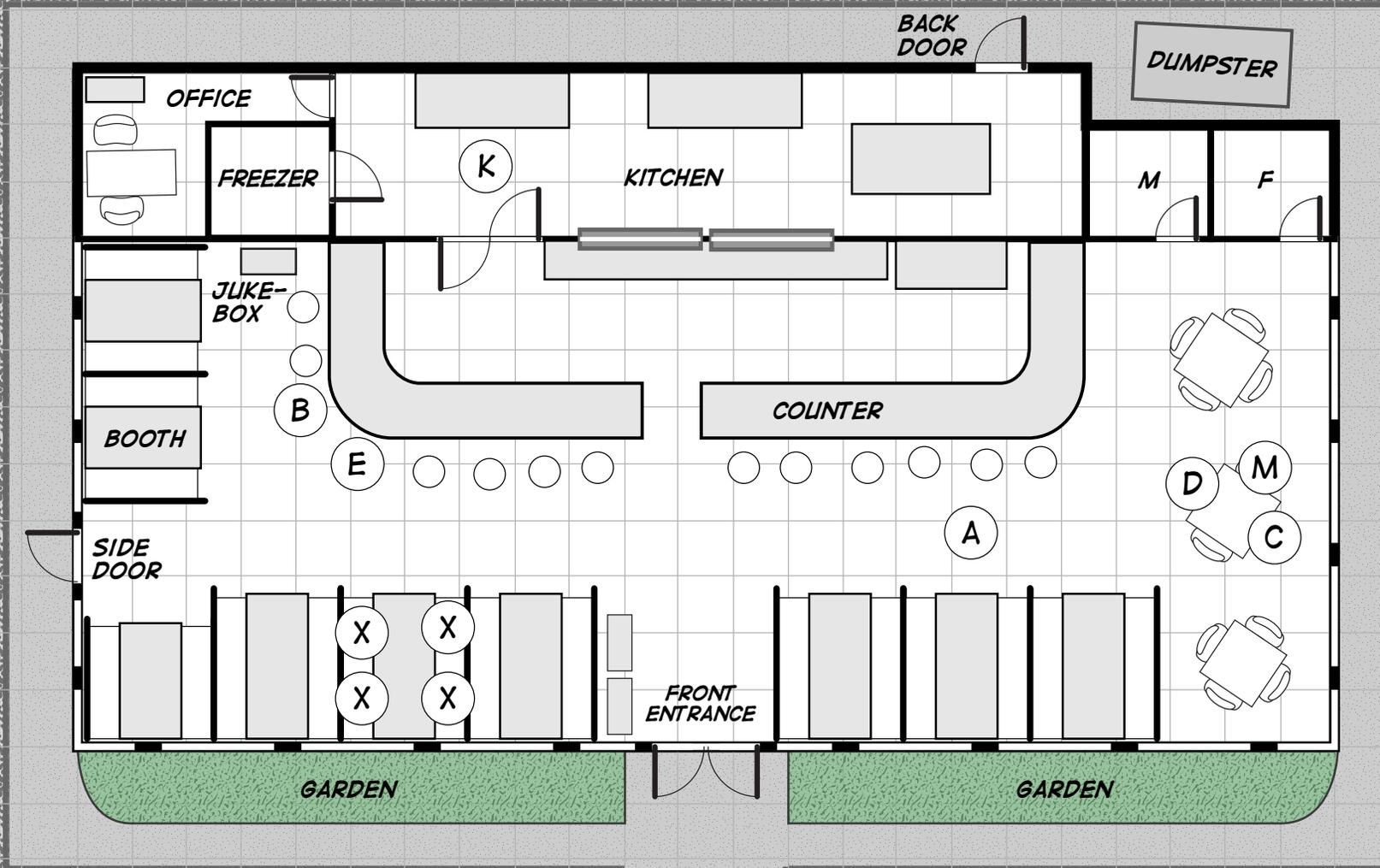


HANDOUT #1

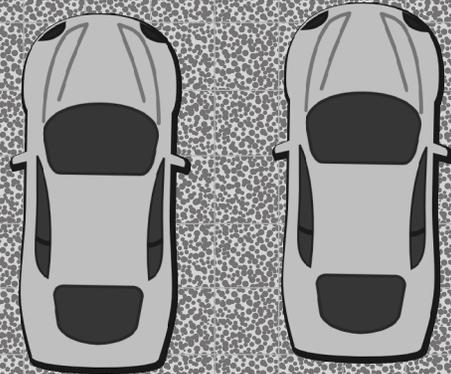
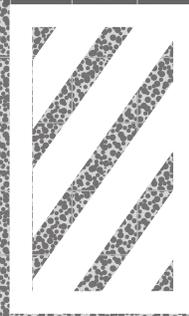
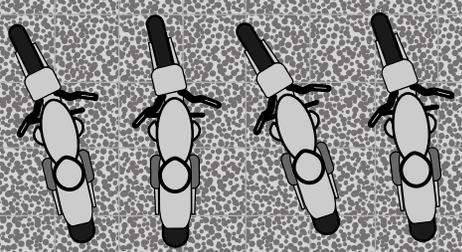


HANDOUT #2

- 2:00 On duty. Briefed about the events that had happened throughout the morning. Nothing much just the same old same old.
- 3:18 Responded to a call about teens throwing bottles at vehicles on First Street. When I got there the teens where long gone. Asked local shop keeper, Mr. Mal Lallaman about it, he said he recognized that Wizmer kid. Probably means Scott Wizmer.
- 3:49 A fender bender on the corner of Kent Street and Ample Ave. Mrs. Allcouth didn't see Mr. & Mrs. Trampier pulling out of the lane and she broadsided them. Called A&A Towing Service, Gave ticket to Mrs. Allcouth, she gave me an earful.
- 4:15 Grabbing a coffee at Will's Place maybe a quick bite to eat as well.
- 5:22 Heading up to Old Mrs. Sibyl's house for weekly check in.

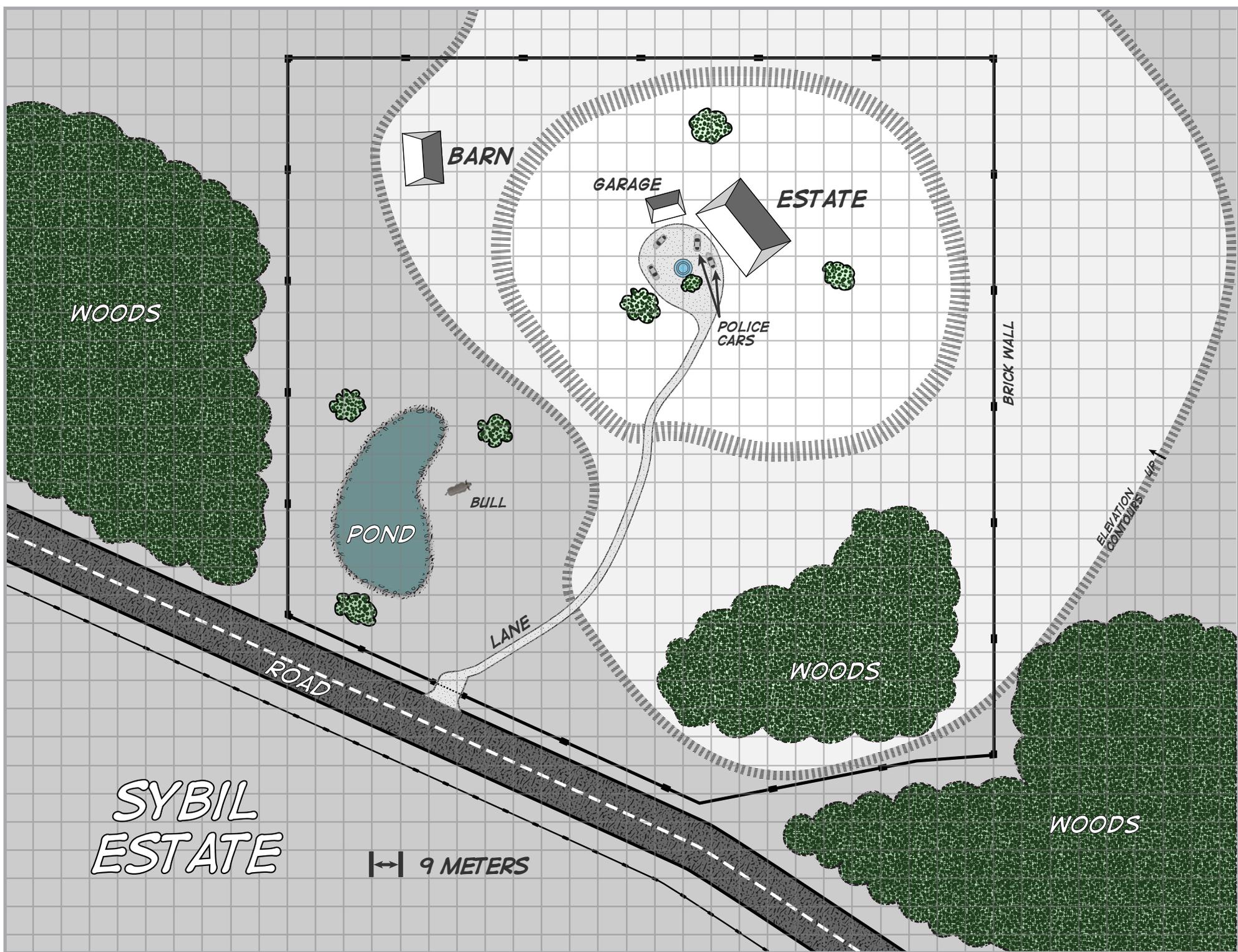


- B** BLURT
- E** ERNIE
- A** ANNA
- M** MOM
- D** DAD
- C** CHILD
- X** BIKERS
- K** CHEF



1 METER

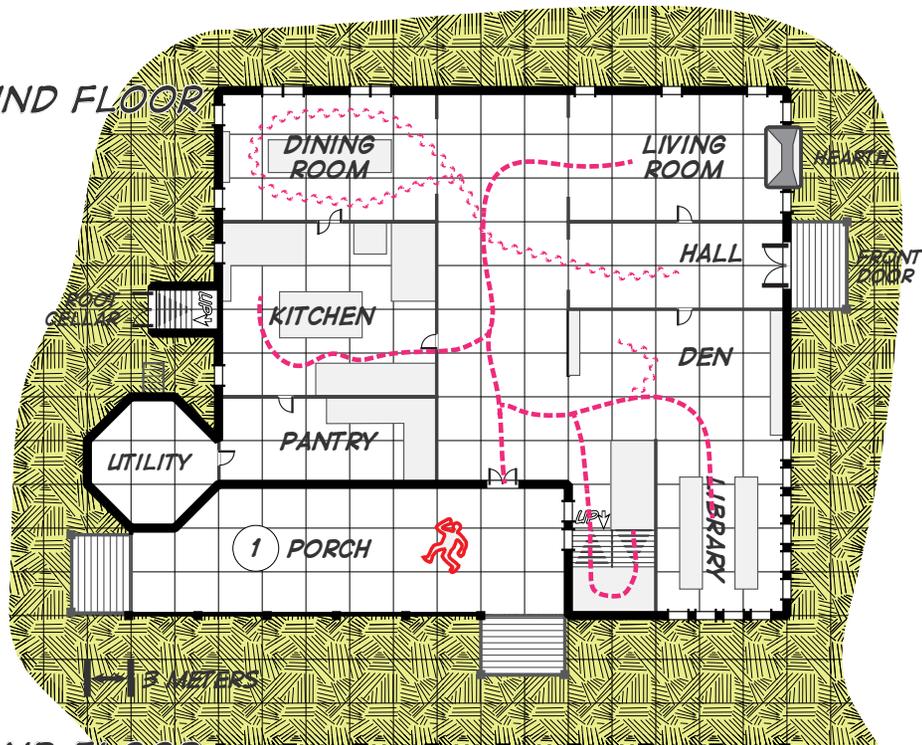
WILL'S PLACE



**SYBIL
ESTATE**

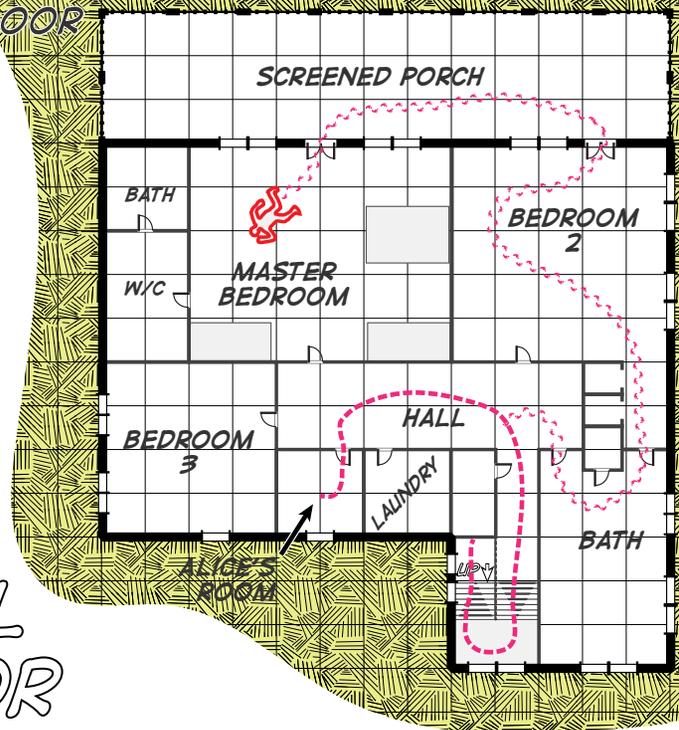
9 METERS

GROUND FLOOR

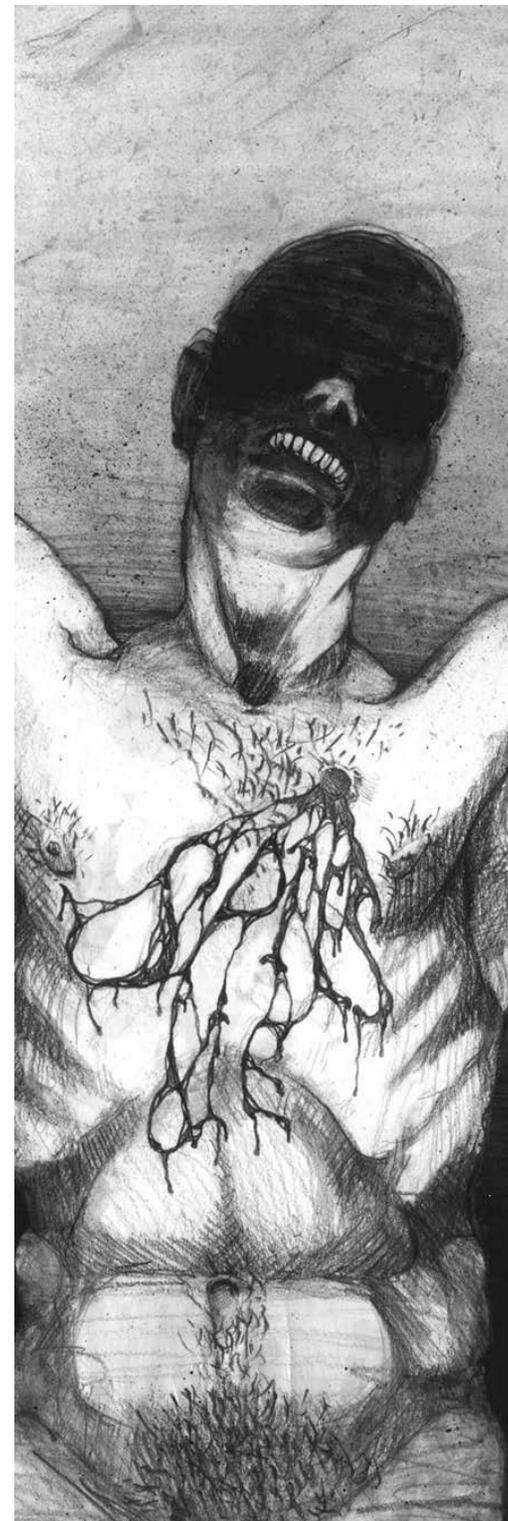


SECOND FLOOR

FOOTPRINTS
 PATH IN THE DUST



SYBIL MANOR



artwork by Thomas Manning

ANTHILL MORNING: THE SHOOTER

Dark Conspiracy short fiction

By T. Mike McCurley

FICTION

HE'S AHEAD OF me in the crowd and I ain't planning to let him get away. That stupid red shirt from last year's Decline concert marks him good and gives me a point of reference, but on the other hand the weather is not as crappy as usual and so the streets are packed. The sidewalk is like swimming through people, and when I try stepping onto the street itself I damn near get a Zil enema.

Homey's keeping up a moderate pace. Doesn't seem to be in a hurry. That makes it easier to follow someone, but to be honest I would just as soon he gets where he's going. Shooting a man on a city street ain't big on my list for today.

Witnesses are gonna be a bitch no matter what. Pop a couple caps in some monkey, even here in the upper Anthill, and folks are gonna take notice. The kick will be limiting exposure. If he'll just go into a store or something, somewhere that limits vision and blocks some of the sound, I'll splash his head all over the walls and just keep trucking. I kind of hope he goes into some clothing store. Wrap the .45 in a heavy shirt or something, and maybe that will mitigate the sound. Worked for Tyrone What's-his-name in that spy film last year.

He strolls past the big Asian market thing like he can't even hear them calling out to him. I snatch up one of those little bottled soda things and toss some aged mama-san a couple wadded notes as payment. I don't care about any change, even though I hear her call out that I have some coming. I just turn and wink at her while taking a drink. She smiles and pockets the change.

If things go the way they could, I won't need any money after today. Either I'll get back the case and be able to sell it for enough to retire, or I'll get arrested — or I'll get dead. Either one means about the same thing as far as those bits of scrip go.

He starts cutting eastbound and passes by a Night Shift. I see his eyes reflected in the glass. I'm too close. If he sees me... The .45 feels like a brick in my waistband, but if I have to I'll drill this asshole

right here. He runs a hand back across his hair, slicking it down where the wind is getting to it.

The rain starts. Not sure why it waited this long, but it's those early showers that just feel good and get you a little wet. The big storms will come later, not that this murdering sack of shit is gonna be around for any of it. That ain't the kind of wet he's gonna be. Dude comes into *my* house and ganks *my* friends, steals my cargo, and thinks I ain't coming after him, then he needs to think again.

I stop for a second at a vendor. Let him get a few extra steps. The distance will help. I hadn't realized I was getting that close until I was looking over his shoulder. A couple bucks later and I'm munching on some kind of meat on a stick. It's either really shitty myco or it's fairly tasty mouse. I ain't asking which. I see him further east, ducking behind the big grocery store. I'm actually glad he didn't go in there. They've got sec men that have good relations with the local badges. That means they remember people who do things like execute their customers. Hell, they'll probably shoot back, and they actually know what they're doing. Me, I'm running off what that Devil Bat showed me when he sold the gun to me.

I round the corner and see that he has passed the big game shop. There's a little space out beside it with some tables and benches and stuff where people used to meet for chess games and romantic talks and such. I can see him making a casual approach. There are half a dozen people there at various tables. I'm throwing out the two Dobies making out, and the dude smoking a cheap cigar while he reads the latest issue of HiTek Dreamz is a no-brainer. It's the mook in the business suit that looks entirely out of place and I figure that's his mark. He's gonna give my case to this *nome* wannabe? Not today.

As he takes another slow step forward, I make three of my own. My heart is racing faster than my steps. I reach for the metal and it fits my hand like

it was made for it. I bring it out of my waistband and look down to make sure the safety thing is off. I cock it with my thumb and make the next few steps his last.

"This is for Shank and Leo," I say as the gun comes up. He starts to turn and then it's bucking in my hand. So loud. I can see the empty shell flying up and away as I pull the trigger again. His head is pretty much gone. He's still falling but I grab the case and rip it out of his hands. It's already sticky with his blood. So is Suit Boy, and a part of me thinks that's pretty funny.

I turn and cut back up parallel to Penn in the alley. I keep seeing his head crack open. I'm gonna puke. I know I am, but I can't yet. Heading north now, putting on speed. The badges will be coming. CorpSec or HardCop, it won't matter if I get caught. Only difference there will be Corpers putting me down while the real ones do the arrest thing.

There's a mushhead sitting by the sidewalk at Mackie's, behind his coin bucket. Looks like he ate half of PharmaTech's inventory. I can hear the sirens as I kneel down by him. Jesus, he stinks. He turns and mutters something as I shove a pile of scrip in his bucket and tell him some crap about God watching over him. The .45 fits real good under the piled up coat and assorted crap he's got stacked beside him. I pat him on the head like a puppy and keep moving, though I change to the west now. Two blocks up and no pursuit. Time to change directions.

It's about two more blocks when the thought of what I did really sinks in. I grab a trash can out beside Taste of Taipei and rip off the cover. The maggots crawling over whatever is in the can make it even easier and the fried mouse comes back up in a rush of cheap Japanese soda and bile. I wipe my mouth and straighten up.

"You did good back there," I hear. I jump. Whoever they are, they got close without me hearing. I turn to see her, all slick looking and very much at ease here. Nice clothes. Heh. Nice rack. I look back up to see her smile. An eyebrow arches and she glances down at my waist. As I start to look down too, she's in motion. The foot hits me square in the balls and the world explodes into brilliant swirls of color. I reach for her but she's already inside my grasp. I can feel the knife then, in and out, in and out. Stabbing me so fast. It doesn't feel like anything at first but now it's starting to feel somehow cold and hot at the same

time. That obsessive part of me wants to count the times she put it in me but I can't. Making the thoughts stick is hard.

I can feel her pulling the case. It's mine. I need it. You can't have it. Gotta keep hold.

Cold.

Getting dark.

Why is it so dark?



SACRAMENTS OF LOVE AND HATE

Review of the novel, *Sacrament*

By Eric Fabiaschi

A SPECIAL BOOK REPORT

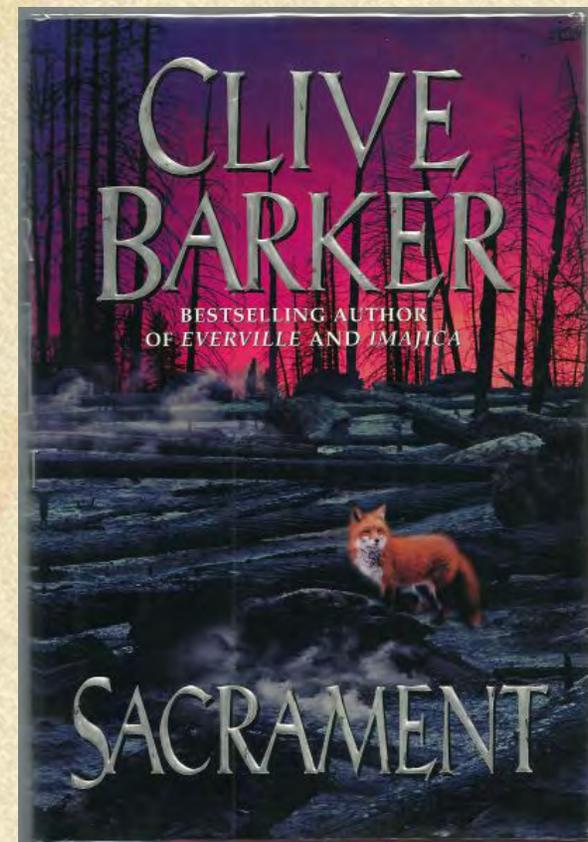
A Study In Extinction In Horror Role Playing & The Novel Sacrament By Clive Barker

I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE to pick up the novel *Sacrament* by Clive Barker since 1996, and in all these years its certainty has haunted me like a bad booze fueled dream. *Sacrament* is a very personal novel by Barker not because of its content of homosexual love and sex, complex characters, or the dark fantasy horror aspects. It is personal because of the themes of mass extinction, the well being of our planet, and its deep treatment of a world of its own making--drawn from the imagination of Clive Barker--making its own horrors from within. This marks it as one of the new school-books of horror. The book concerns, Will Rabjohns, perhaps the most famous wildlife photographer in the world, who has made his reputation chronicling the fates of endangered species. But after a terrible accident, Will is left in a coma. And in its depths, he revisits the wildernesses of his youth and relives his life with a mysterious couple who have influenced his life as an artist and a man. When Will awakens, he sets out on a journey of self-discovery—one where he will penetrate the ultimate mystery and finally unlock the secret of his destiny. Which brings me to Jacob Steep, a creature that is not a man but has learned to play a man by watching men. He has a mission to kill every last species on Earth and by playing God brings himself closer to an understanding of God.

And that ultimately is the perfect dynamic of *Sacrament* two or more forces of the supernatural shaping the destiny of the world around them both supernaturally and mundanely with equal bravo and style. This goes against every single convention of horror role playing out there. It's one of the many things that makes adapting Barker's novels to role playing and even video games so difficult. Another thing is the personally woven supernatural mythologies of the various novels that Clive Barker creates. These weirdly wonderful mythologies have their own internal logic and sense to them as they weave and waver back and forth throughout Barker's

novels. In books like *Weaveworld* and *Imajica*, Clive Barker created new a new mythology and reinvented the religious parable, respectively. But the real horror central to *Sacrament* is the theme of mass extinction of the entire planet of Earth and this includes us as well. This is something that we see ultimately as a cosmic truth in horror fiction, games, comic books, graphic novels, etc. And it scares the living shit out of every person on Earth down to their very soul.

For the novel *Sacrament* this was brought home for me by the parade of extinct species of animals. The novel isn't preachy or devaluing its





CHRIS BUTLER/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY/Science Photo Library

audience. The best horror novels disturb on a much more fundamental level of weirdness, some part of our back lizard brain. The only part of my soul that really accompanies the rage, anger, sorrow, and howling passion that mass extinction brings has been in a few tabletop role-playing games like *Werewolf-The Apocalypse* and *The Kult RPG* maybe some of the more depressing *Cyberpunk 2020* game adventures I've been involved with. The novel takes its characters on a dark journey of discovery and supernatural wisdom.

This isn't an easy balance and the characters are deeply and forever changed. One thing I've learned from Clive Barker's writing is that the mundane and the supernatural are not separate parts of our lives but are wound together tighter and ever more tightly. The supernatural events of his various books

happen to the ordinary person on the street, not the Hollywood heroes of the silver screen, and so it might be with your PC's in your campaigns. One of the reasons why I'm glad *Sacrament* hasn't made it to the silver screen.

This brings up *Dark Conspiracy* or *Conspiracy Rules*, where the world is howling at the edge of the void and alien powers are lining up to take us down the final plunge into the abyss of whatever year your campaign is set. The fact is that we've done a damn good job of bringing our own extinction of Earth onto ourselves and the alien powers out in the solar system are only too happy to help us along into that final tomb marked for the human race. Sorry but this is a horror themed tabletop role-playing game. Heroes are doomed, the world as we know it is fracked, and ultimately we all die or do we? Hope was the last thing to escape from Pandora's Box and here's where the heroes have a chance to shine. I'm going to start getting into the hate part of the article because I hate no win situations, the dark Kobayashi Maru, that in life keeps coming over and over again.

Another thing that comes echoing through this novel again and again that we need to do, no have to do, something about is the speeding train from Hell that has become our planet and the bounds of the novel. Well you'll have to read it for yourself. But in the flip-flop world of tabletop rpg's we've got plenty of options on the table and that is one thing about *Dark Conspiracy* that I've learned over and over again. The ordinary person is pushed beyond their limits and they either are wrecked or broken by the world or they adapt and become heroes in their own right. That of course is the delicate dance we play with role-playing games and our players.

Another thing that *Sacrament* does well is how it paints complex and complicated relationships between its characters and the supernatural powers that are in it. That is something that can be put into the background of a PC or NPC's character sheet



and pulled right out in the middle of play with little regard to the events around the adventure. Done correctly this will shock players as well as mirror the complex relationships between the protagonist and antagonist of the novel and of our adventures.

At its heart and soul *Sacrament* is a novel that touches Shamanism, religious parables, and the mystic with equal abandon, all of the while worming its way into your guts and churning the horrors of mass extinction. Showing PC's a dust filled silenced Earth as part and parcel of a proto-dimensional location is one option that I've used in the past but overdoing the spiritual abandonment imagery is dangerous both because it can bore players and many role players are jaded to begin with. Another option is to place them center stage for events or NPC personalities that were a part of the mass extinction; future ghosts of existing NPC's are always fun to warn them of the coming events. That trick I've used many times in the past and one that works on the whole for short adventures, and one I learned from early science fiction or science fictional romances, but that's another article for another time.

The novel presents a dark journey into trying to understand the horror and ideas of the world of its characters, the supernatural tapestry, and the incredible journey of Will Rabjohns. And this is one possible journey that can appear at your tables, not so much that the same journey is taken by your player characters but that you can ultimately create your own supernatural tapestry to plant the seeds that the novel seeks to grow within the minds of its readers.

Clive Barker's *Sacrament* is a novel that is like many of his other books, it's something that has become a part of my life; I've had to make peace with it. But this is a novel that pulls, pushes, and can be brutal, but like all of Barker's creations it's beautiful and barbaric in its story. And it's one that will not seem to let go.

WASTE PICKERS IN DARK CONSPIRACY

Background and a new career

By Richard Hayden

FOR DARK CONSPIRACY III

Who Picks Through Your Trash?

RECYCLING IS JUST a fact of life. It rarely has anything to do with the environment, regardless of what various company's Corporate Social Responsibility teams or politician's spokespeople say, and everything to do with recovering resources on the cheap, eliminating production and storage overhead, and espionage.

While producing new goods can involve a lot of moving parts in the form of securing contracts, purchasing raw materials, bribing local officials, and any number of other expenses, reusing material is often cheaper. This is not always true and markets can influence these costs on a daily basis, but generally, the cheaper the finished product, the more likely it will be produced with recycled materials.

It is not uncommon for either public or private employees to cut corners and smart companies and governments (as well as independent operators ranging from terrorists to minion hunters) take advantage of humanity's inherent laziness and greed. Hardcopy and electronic files can sometimes be recovered from trash destined for a landfill or stolen by the shredding company's disgruntled worker.

Waste is also an excellent source of biomass for fuel production or composting. Why grow fields of corn on your agro-factory when you can simply use leftovers to create substandard fuel. For that matter, why should a company pay for expensive fertilizer when they can simply use a Prole's waste on a field?

trash hot spot



WHO PICKS THROUGH YOUR TRASH?

Waste pickers are generally from the lowest rungs of society, often occupying a space in their local culture just barely above the homeless. Typical waste pickers are young adults, often in small or extended family groups, but any age group can attempt to make a living by picking through the refuse of society. Male pickers tend to outnumber females by a two-to-one ratio. They can be found just about anywhere, though they tend to be most concentrated in urban areas. Most of these pickers tend to specialize. Some work exclusively with recovering copper, for example, while others locate reusable plastics.

In some cases, small businesses are formed to perform contract work for a company. The bidding for a lucrative contract can become cut-throat

and claim jumping often results in violence. This is often the case in the oceans, where the Pacific Trash Vortex and Atlantic Plastic Sargasso have both been divided for plastic mining. It also occurs when small population centers contract trash collection to local enterprises. Larger conglomerates may also become involved in disputes, but typically resolve them in the boardroom or golf courses.

Labor organizes on occasion to seek healthier conditions for waste pickers. These unions fail early due to a combination of social stigma for their members and their patrons being unwilling to negotiate. They simply cannot muster enough power, and do not hold enough sway, to affect change.

Organized crime sometimes becomes involved with garbage poaching. Poaching in this case refers

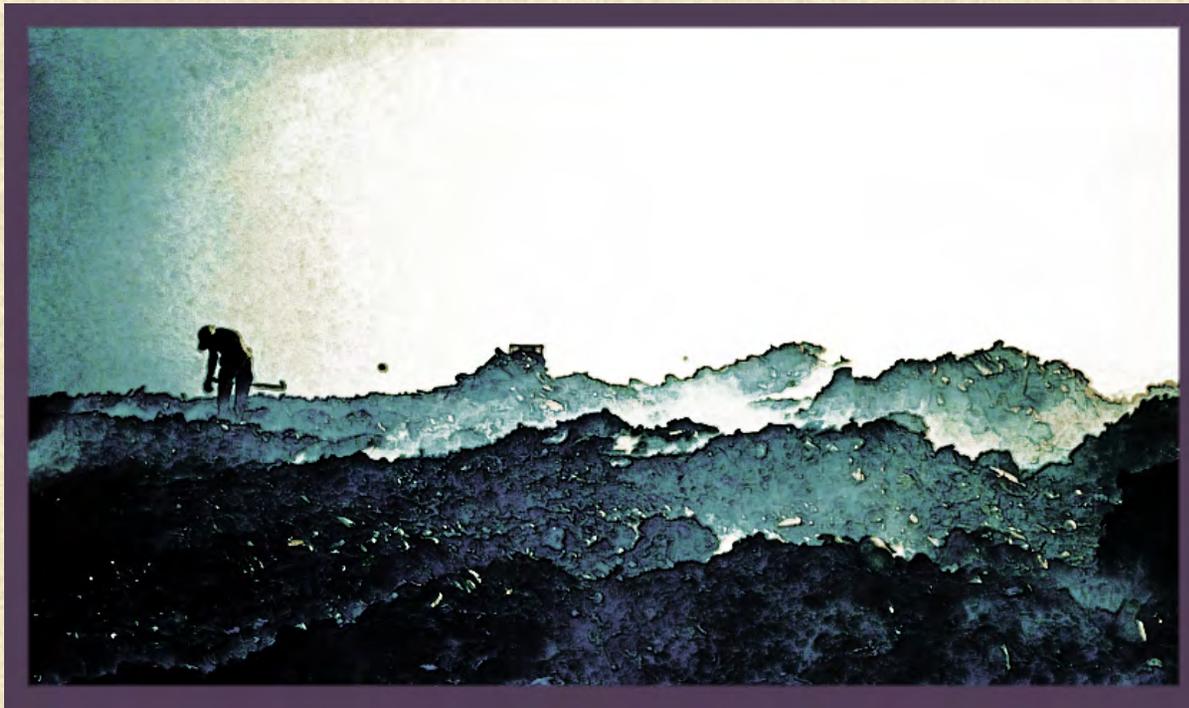
to the act of illegally gaining access to Nome garbage. The wealthy often consider their trash to be their property, despite the fact that they disposed of it. Criminals are usually targeting technology which is still new to the general population, even though the wealthy have picked up this year's model of the latest gizmo. Sometimes they are seeking evidence to use for extortion schemes.

FAMOUS TRASH HOT SPOTS

The Rumpke Mine—Outside of Dayton, OH—is the site of one of the nation's former largest landfills. The company which ran it divested the landfill during the Greater Depression and since then it has changed hands multiple times. Now an abandoned site, locals mine the site for anything of value. Temperature extremes and toxic gases are one of the principle dangers of the mine, though not the only one. Landslides and sinkholes have also claimed the lives of many waste pickers. As if those dangers weren't enough, rumors persist that the site is haunted by ghosts. Most of the pickers explain these sightings as tricks of the light from off-gassing or hallucinations from the toxic atmosphere.

The Pacific Trash Vortex a.k.a Pacific Gyre – This floating continent of trash in the Pacific is a product of air and water currents. Divided into four quarters and contracted out by the U.N., the PTV is a high-class plastic recovery operation. Shipments of recovered materials are the frequent target of pirates and vessels hauling plastic frequently disappear.

The Johannesburg Municipal Sewer Treatment Plant – A frequent target of unsanctioned pickers, the JMSTP is skimmed for broken jewelry and biological waste by a gang who employs pickers under indentured servitude. This shadowy gang rules with an iron fist and defends its turf with antique military-grade weapons.



waste picker at work

Waste Picker

It is a dirty job, literally, and if you don't do it, someone else will. Waste pickers go through trash in search of small trinkets and valuables, large concentrations of recyclable plastics, biomass, or even repurposed art supplies.

PREREQUISITES: None.

ALL TERMS

COMMISSION: None

PROMOTION: None.

SKILLS: Armed Martial Arts, Bargain, Climbing, Excavation, Intrusion, Scrounging, Stealth, Willpower.

SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT: 7+, DM +1 for CON 8+ for Empathy, Crime, Perception.

CONTACTS: One per term from criminal, law enforcement, or specialist (Civil Engineer) contact types. On a 1D10 roll of 10, the contact is foreign.

SPECIAL: When calculating starting money, use CON times \$250 for each term as a waste picker.



picking treasure in others' trash

Somber Words
A Dark Rondeau by Norm Fenlason

Somberly spoken a tale for my kin,
Sipping quick now where to begin,
It was a lonely night when darkness arose,
Grim horror I met with an issue to close,
The struggle was hard, I thought never to win.

The horror emerged dripping of sin,
Gore and violence without, and also within,
It mewled with a hiss its temptation in prose,
Somberly spoken.

Sealing hard the portal and locking it in,
Its words were stifled, not heard again,
But feeling the tremor from my top to my toes,
The seed it had planted in my head now grows,
Actions as words from my being now spin,
Somberly spoken.

Somberly spoken



THE OUTER PRESENCE

A capsule review

By Tad Kelson

HORROR RPG SYSTEM/ADVENTURE

The Outer Presence
by Venger As'Nas Satanis
Published by **Kort'thalis Publishing**

THE OUTER PRESENCE is a new storytelling-styled horror-oriented Roleplaying Game from Venger As'nas Satanis. Originally a Kickstarted project, it is now available through major online RPG retailers for purchase.

Coming in as a 45 page PDF (including covers and title pages) it has a complete, very lite system along with an adventure suitable for conversion to most any horror RPG system available. More suited to lite or narrative driven systems such as FATE or Cthulhu Dark, it still can be fleshed up and statted out for the big hitters and used to set the stage for ongoing adventures.

CORE SYSTEM

System wise this is a minimalist (in the creator's words) dice pool system. Using up to 3d6 for tests based essentially on what a given career (profession) would know. 2d6 is average or what is commonly known. 3d6 for tests in your field, or where you have some sort of advantage, and 1d6 for the outside of the field, or at some sort of disadvantage. In example (my own) if you are a Librarian then tasks related to normal life like driving a car, shopping, online browsing, daily tasks are all a 2d6, things deep in your field (specialized) could be 3d6 and trying to stop that runaway train is a 1d6.

So the sum of the mechanics is to roll the dice in your pool (2d6 in an average case) and look at the highest number. That determines the success or not of the action. Essentially a 1 or 2 is a failure, 3 is a partial failure and 4 is a partial success, with 5 and 6 being greater levels of success.

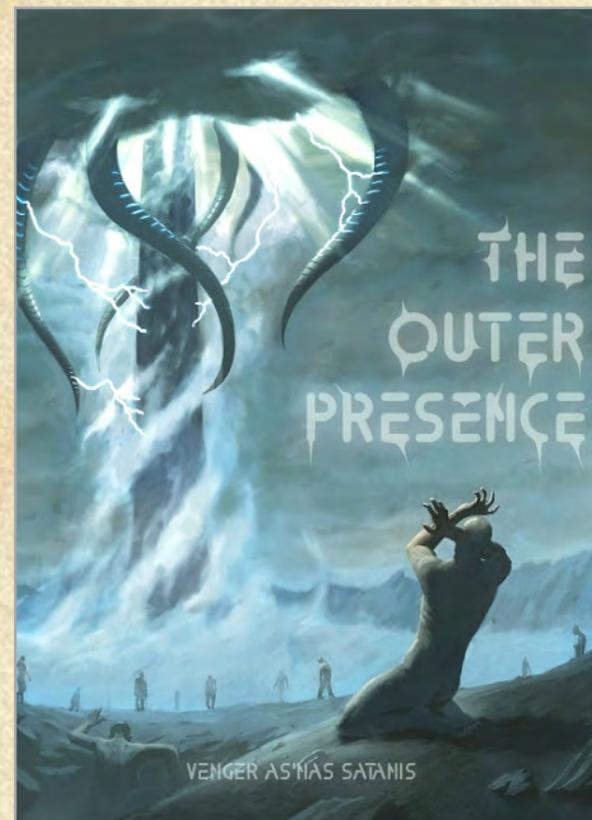
Combat is as simple as it could be. Roll the dice pool, essentially 4 or better results in a hit and damage. No initiative, who says what they are doing first goes first, or common sense in ambush and surprise situations, with a round being effective 20 seconds long. Damage consists of taking a wound, another makes a character

either unconscious or incapacitated, and essentially the next one kills a character. In combat if using like a knife or a gun and a 6 is rolled, instant death (barring immediate medical attention per the rules). This is about as deadly as it can get in an RPG.

Onto character creation.

So character creation consists of choosing the following defining characteristics

- ☒ Career
- ☒ Organization
- ☒ Drive
- ☒ Flaws
- ☒ Finishing Touches



Once that is done, there are a few options such as taking more flaws and a roll on the Exceptional Table. But that is pretty much it. Under Careers there are 20 suggestions, all suitable for Pulp or Horror such as Criminal, Law Enforcement, Student, etc. Organization refers to an affiliation that the characters can have such as to Government, Secret Societies, etc. Drive is a motivation while Flaws are just what might be expected. Finishing touches are not elaborated on, just flesh it out is what seems to be the intent there.

There are very simple rules for Insanity as well in this section. Just enough to let your character know they just went insane and not much more than that. Which suits the intent well.

That finishes off the RPG portion of the PDF file.

The rest of the document is an adventure, leading to jungle locations, massive mountains, cannibals and ancient things, along with a chance to either save or destroy the entire world.

It starts off fairly investigative, turns into a journey, some adult topics and off to save the world, in essence. Lots of flavor in this adventure, suitable to be run in several sessions and with some open ends to allow for GM created sequels and follow on adventures. Per the creator it was originally intended as a con game, which shows. There is still room to expand along the way with minimal effort, and the creator does give some ideas how to continue past the ending.

PROS

What a ton of artwork for a 45 page PDF. Art on almost every page. I like the nice clean physical layout as well. The cartography, typography (a little variable in spots but overall Thumbs Up), art, all are top notch.

There are two pages set up at the end for Notes. A different thing to find in an adventure

and an idea I may very well use in a future presentation.

The system is a simple, streamlined, barebones as anyone could ask for. For those that desire a lot of freedom in narrative this is a great example of a lite system.

CONS

This is one of the most barebones systems I have come across. While this is in the Pros section, for me it is also a Con. Personally this reviewer likes a bit more crunch and definitely it would be fleshed out for my own use.

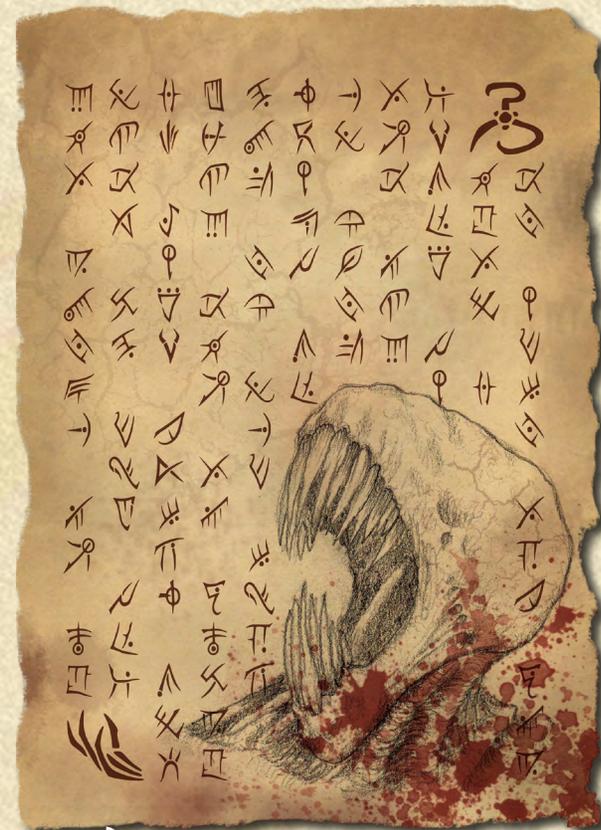
One criticism I have of the system / layout / presentation is how long the random tables are. The system is d6 based and yet the various tables are not based on a 1-6 variable (or multiple of). A personal pet gripe and one I would hack to conform to what I would prefer to see.

Also as mentioned in the Pros is some differences in the artwork. In some of the illustrations the characters depicted have '50s styled Space Helmets. While they would fit into a more Pulp Feel, it is just a little jarring is all. Not a real detractor, just noticeable.

The largest con is a very Adult / NSFW vibe that runs through the adventure. Some off color language (not an issue for the reviewer but YMMV), depictions of cannibalism, and so on. If things that that are not your cup of tea then consider this somewhat of a warning. Under the surface is a very Lamentations of The Flame Princess mentality in the adventure. Caveat Emptor if appropriate.

FINAL CONCLUSION

Pick this one up for the adventure. Definitely worth it for ideas, details, plot directions, along with the artwork. If you do not have Call of Cthulhu or want something uberlite for a system, this will work as well. But go get it, worth picking up.



THE MYTHOS GUIDE TO NEW ENGLAND

A quick review

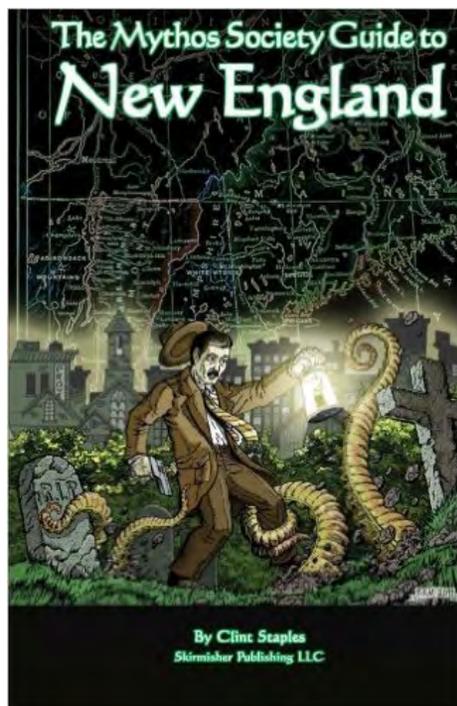
By Eric Fabiaschi

FOR CALL OF CTHULHU AND OSR

The Mythos Society Guide to New England

By Clint Staples

From *Skirmisher Publishing LLC*



This is a massive 142 page tomb of knowledge and New England lore for essentially the heart of Lovecraft country. Writing and designing this sort of supplement is tricky business because Lovecraft wove both the imaginary and factual into his material. The Clint Staples did a great job with this one but for the *Call of Cthulhu* DM this book is really a nicely done book. The design and layout is easy on the eyes and the author knows his material very well. I love Bradley MC Durmett's cover art as well. Clint draws from both New England folklore and the well stocked Lovecraftian lore to create a unique blend of material that a DM can draw a ton of campaign and adventure ideas. I really don't think that the *Call of Cthulhu* crowd has given these books or product line a second glance. That's too bad because they're missing out on a very well done piece of Cthulhu rpg reference that includes not only the Mythos but a large chunk of New England lore as well. This book is a really bold stroke by *Skirmisher* and Mr. Staples does a great job capturing the flavor and feel of New England in these pages. We're given a nice overview of the history, horrors, and facts all in one hundred and forty pages with additional monsters and mayhem. The material here is very well balanced and the author is a veteran rpg designer and writer who knows the material. He's carefully researched his subject but put his own thumb print and ideas into this product as well. This is a product though with a bit of utility at the table top as we'll see.

There is a lot of old school horror action going on under the hood in this product. New England is a vast subject and while not every aspect can be covered all of the Mythos highlights are hit here and some other traditional subjects are hit upon as well. This is a volume that will spark a DM's imagination and add the thread of the weird and depraved to their imaginations. This book provides a DM with plenty of opportunities to enmesh the PC's into the machinations of cults, high weirdness,

and plenty of Lovecraftian hijinks deep in the New England venue. A good example of one of the nasties that are found in this tome but was an overflow creature is the *Misshipesha*. Misshipesha is sinister water spirit and horror of turbulent waters, which has deep meaning for those of us who have been to the Great Lakes. This is a monster rife with adventure possibilities deep with the fabric of the New England region. This is a monster which has plenty of utility across the horror rpg spectrum and any DM worth his salt could easily build an entire adventure around such a creature which really is about the essence of this book. This title enables a Keeper the ability to build an adventure and campaign around the backdrop of New England and its lands. New England held deep echoes for Lovecraft and his contemporaries, and this volume allows a DM to use this material as a handy horror candy sampler picking and choosing what he or she needs or wants for their old school campaigns. But this does not have to be simply *Call of Cthulhu*, any contemporary horror rpg can benefit from this material and that's really one of the strengths of this book. Many of the DM's I know who use *Realms of Chaos* and other Lovecraftian OSR material can easily create their own stats and draw from the plethora of horror material within these pages. There is a ton of monsters, cults, and nasties to bedevil your PC's with. The advantage here is that these monsters have been here for a long time. At least two hundred or more years and this is rout out within this book's pages. Could this material be used in a game like *Chill* or one of the other great horror games on the market currently including some of the OSR retroclones? Sure it could.

This is the first updated exclusively New England book that I've seen *Chill* had their own New England Guide book many years ago and its very well done! Pick this one up and get going on your investigations into one of Lovecraft's back yards!

THE COLD MEN

Close encounters of the nth kind

By Jeff Deischer

FICTION

PART 1: THE COLD MEN

THE BRIGHTLY-COLORED BIPLANE fell straight down in a lazy spiral towards the earth, spinning out of control. Nothing, it seemed, could stop it from crashing into the ground below. People watching from below gasped and squealed at the sight, believing they were about to witness the fiery death of a man.

But at the last moment, the plane pulled up and whizzed along the ground, grazing treetops. The plane's propellers shredded branches and leaves as it skimmed the tree line.

The crowd roared with applause. This was the type of spectacle citizens of small towns across the southwestern U.S. came to Hugo Pender's Travelling Aerobatic Circus to witness. Nobody hoped any of the daredevil pilots would crash—but if one did, they wanted to be there to see it.

Antonio Cavallo's name was not on the marquee, but it should have been. He was the undisputed star of the show. Antonio was equal parts skill and fearlessness, which made him the perfect barnstormer. He dressed the part, with fur-lined leather jacket and white scarf that was visible from the ground. It fluttered behind him like a plume of white smoke as he flew.

Antonio was a first-generation Italian immigrant and proud of it. He was also something of a fanatic about his patriotism: When he was sixteen years old, Antonio ran away from home and, lying about his age, enlisted in the Army to serve in the World War. And he was something of an artist in the cockpit, it turned out. After the war, he'd stayed in the new field of aviation, becoming a barnstormer.

Antonio Cavallo was a compact man, with swarthy skin and the pleasant good looks of a dashing Romantic hero. He wore a neat little moustache on his upper lip. Between his occupation and his

handsome good looks, Antonio was the focus of the attention of the unmarried women at every air show.

Antonio's plane—painted yellow and black to look like a bee—buzzed the crowd once before landing. The people ducked and squealed, afraid he might actually graze them as he passed overhead. Antonio landed down the county road which now served as a makeshift runway and taxied back in front of the bleachers, as, to thunderous applause, the machine rolled to a gentle stop. Standing in the pilot's compartment, he bowed deeply. The crowd went wild; they had never seen anything like Antonio's performance.

Just before the applause began to dwindle, Antonio gunned the motor and taxied away, to return his ship to the large tent that served as a hangar for the show's planes. Ever the showman, he knew when to get off stage; always leave them wanting more—that was the way to do it. The children of this hick town would be talking about him until the day they died. Antonio took pride in that, not that you'd ever know it by watching him. He was not one to speak of his flying skill; that was for others to do. And they were doing it now.

A pair of steely gray eyes watched the colorful plane taxi to the tent, itself an orgy of bright hues. These belonged to a great slab of a man, with sandy hair and formidable jaw. He stood six and a half feet tall. Large and wide, there was no spare skin on the man's frame. He looked as though he'd been stuffed into his fleshy covering. The big man was dressed in the sheriff's uniform for the town of Cactus Gulch. Joe Banks looked comfortable in it.

Joe carried a pistol, a Colt Peacemaker that he liked to say was a family heirloom -- but that wasn't the truth. Joseph Edward Banks had been named by his Irish Catholic mother and raised in the tenements of New York City. He had grown up on William Henry Hart western silent films and,

as a kid, thought “I wish I could do that”. One day, as a young man, he said, “I bet I could do that.” So he’d gone west and never looked back, eventually becoming the sheriff of Cactus Gulch, Texas. Instead of a fedora or porkpie hat, he wore a ten-gallon hat.

The honking of an automobile horn interrupted the show. Joe saw the noise was being made by a vehicle carrying his deputy, a lanky young man named Rusty Taub. Rusty—who resembled nothing so much as a scarecrow—pulled the auto up to the bleachers. “Sheriff!” he exclaimed. “They’re robbing the bank!”



Cactus Gulch was a one-horse town. Consequently, its sheriff department possessed one vehicle. Joe Banks had taken that to the air show. So Rusty had commandeered a citizen’s conveyance and rushed to get the sheriff.

Without hesitation, the big man jumped down from the bleachers, and, yanking the automobile’s door open, growled at Rusty, “Scoot over, kid.”

Putting the car in gear, Joe rasped, “Tell me what happened.”

Rusty began his tale as the vehicle sped out of the parking lot. “An airship,” the bony deputy began breathlessly—he was breathless despite having driven to find the sheriff; that’s the sort of young man Rusty Taub was—“a giant airship. It came out of nowhere.”

Joe Banks knew this was nonsense—giant airships didn’t appear out of thin air -- but did not interrupt his deputy. There would be time enough later, after the situation had been dealt with, to go back over the “facts”. But still, an airship...

Now headed in the direction of Cactus Gulch, Joe saw a shape hanging low in the sky over the small town. The sheriff could hardly believe his eyes. By God, it was an airship!

“It dropped men in gray uniforms down into the street. When they started for the bank, I came to get you.” Rusty Taub looked at his boss hopefully.

The big man did not scold his deputy for not intervening. About the only crime Cactus Gulch ever saw was an occasional traffic violation. Nothing like a bank robbery—and certainly not one conducted from an airship! And Rusty, though only a few years younger than Joe, often seemed young enough to be from another generation. He wasn’t even allowed to carry a gun.

As Rusty kept speaking, basically only repeating what little he’d already told, Joe suddenly remembered the air show. Air show ... airship. Coincidence?

And then the car arrived at the city limits.

Bereft of siren, big Joe Banks honked the car’s horn vigorously as the vehicle sped through town towards the single bank, weaving its way through sparse traffic.



As Rusty had said, there were men in gray uniforms. These resembled workmen’s denim coveralls. Carrying bags of money from the bank, the men formed a disorderly line from the entrance of the building to the rope ladder that hung suspended from the airship. One by one, they climbed up the ladder.

They did not move with the haste one normally associated with such a crime. The men did not precisely saunter, either. They walked with a stumbling gait, as if half-awake. The men looked like a line of ants carrying their bounty back to the anthill. Sheriff Joe Banks had never seen anything like it.

The big Irishman brought the commandeered vehicle to a screeching halt in the town square, on one side of which the bank was situated. Joe practically leaped from the automobile. Pulling his

old pistol quick-draw style, he shouted, “All right, you men: Stop where you are.”

But the gray-clad men did not stop. They did not even flinch at the sound of Joe’s booming voice. They continued about their way, ignoring their surroundings. The big Irishman noticed the odd men did not appear to be armed.

Joe Banks was not a man opposed to violence. He had killed men, in the past, when necessary. But he did not like shooting an unarmed individual.

Joe approached the line of moving men, his revolver at the ready. Again, he yelled to them. Again, they ignored him. It was unnerving.

Holstering his pistol, the big man took up a position at the bottom of the hanging ladder. He stood in the way of one of the men in gray. Joe got a good look at the fellow as he moved towards the ladder.

The man appeared to be about half dead. His skin was sallow, and gray around the eyes and mouth. His thin lips were almost blue. There was no life in his dull eyes, which seemed not see Joe. He looked like the walking dead.

Curious, the sheriff watched the strange-looking man. Finally, the fellow reached the ladder. Still, he seemed not to notice big Joe Banks—who was not an easy thing to miss.

The sheriff was puzzled by the man’s behavior. He did not, as one would expect, make any motion to attack Joe. Instead, he tried to make it past the big Irishman. But every time the weird man tried to work his way around him, Joe moved. The man in gray gave no conscious indication that he was aware of the sheriff; he seemed to consider him just another obstacle in nature, like a rock or a tree. After three tries trying to get around Joe, the gray-clad man gave up. Instead, he pushed Joe. Joe pushed back.

The big Irishman felt as though he was trying to push a brick wall over. The weird man did

not budge. Joe outweighed him by a good fifty pounds, maybe more, but against the odd gray-clad man, he stood about as much chance as a child.

Where the Irishman's flesh met that of the bank robber, he felt cold. The odd man exuded no body heat. Besides looking dead, he felt the part, as well.

After a few seconds, the weird, cold man in the gray uniform seemed to realize Joe would not be easily moved, so he pushed him again.

Joe flew backwards as if he'd been struck by a car. He landed painfully some feet distant. From the ground, he yelled through clenched teeth, "Rusty, go get the shotgun!"

The lanky young deputy, who had been watching the tableau from the commandeered vehicle, ran to do as he'd been told.



Joe Banks had made a mistake. He didn't do that often, but when he did, they were apt to be doozies. Because the men hadn't looked like a threat, Joe hadn't treated them as such. Now he knew better.

Getting to his feet, he drew his pistol.

"This is your last chance," Joe yelled out, not really expecting to be heeded. When the weird men kept moving—there were only three left on the ground now, the others having already ascended into the airship—the big man fired once. The bullet struck its mark—the leg of one of the gray-clad men. But the weird fellow kept moving, seemingly not feeling the injury.

Joe let out a surprised grunt. What he was seeing was impossible; no man could shrug off such a wound to the leg. Yet this man did. He shuffled along towards the rope ladder.

The big sheriff glanced at the injury: No blood flowed from the wound.

But Joe knew he'd hit his mark. Besides being an expert marksman, he saw the wounded man's uniform had been ripped by the bullet.

Big Joe Banks fired again, this time aiming for the chest. He hit his target; a plume of dust flew up as the bullet struck. The weird man paused from the impact. He staggered back a pace. Then he continued on his way.

The big Irishman glanced across the town square: Where was Rusty with the shotgun?

Joe dropped his pistol into its holster and charged the weird fellow. He was not going to let the bank be robbed while he was sheriff.

The gray-clad man staggered but a little when Joe Banks' mass slammed into him. The Irishman swung a large fist, connected with a sawtooth jaw. The pale man seemed not to feel it; he didn't react to the blow. As if the big man was a too-playful puppy who was pestering its master, the bank robber shoved Joe away. The sheriff hit the pavement hard.

When Joe got back to his feet, the last of the gray men was ascending the rope ladder. The big man climbed after him. He caught up to the odd fellow about halfway up the ladder, some twenty feet off the ground.

The big man grabbed a pant leg, tried to halt the weird robber's progress into the airship. But Joe's efforts were too feeble. He merely delayed the inevitable.

Then the weird man kicked at Joe. It was a forceful blow, but slow. As when they walked, the men's limbs moved slowly while throwing punches or kicking. The big Irishman caught the foot in mid-air. He pushed back, trying to throw the gray-clad robber off-balance. Joe thought, perhaps with the odd way the men moved, their balance was impaired. Perhaps he could dislodge the strange-looking fellow from his perch.

But the foot did not budge. Down, it inexorably came. Joe could not stop it, despite his great

strength. He had met men in his short life who sought to do him harm, many of them strong men -- but the big Irishman had never met one who so hopelessly outclassed him in raw, physical might.

The foot pressed down. Joe's large hand was forced against his stony face by the appendage. Still, the foot kept pushing. Maybe the bank robber hadn't intended to kick him at all, Joe wondered as his hand mashed against his face; maybe it had been his intention all along to push Joe off the ladder.

The big sheriff retreated a step down the rope ladder, looking for respite from the irresistible force of the weird bank robber's foot. But there was no escape. The gray man followed Joe, keeping the pressure on the sheriff's face.

Suddenly the big Irishman felt force on a shoulder—the gray-clad bank robber was using his other foot. He was still holding the bag of money from the bank, Joe knew—that meant he was hanging onto the ladder with only one hand!

The sheriff of Cactus Gulch did not have much time to ponder this startling realization: It was taking all his strength to maintain his grip on the rope ladder's rungs. He was now supporting the entire weight of the weird bank robber. It was a desperate situation. As his large hand was slowly forced off the rung it grasped, Joe had to transfer the hand protecting his face to a rung—or fall.

With the bottom of a workman's boot pressed hard on his face, Joe could not see what was going on above him. He no longer had a plan for stopping the strange robbers. He was holding on for dear life, and that was all.

Suddenly, something struck Joe's solo hand on the rung. The surprise force of it caused the big man to flinch. He lost his grip on the rung. Joe Banks fell off the ladder, plunging headlong to the pavement below. Blackness swallowed him when he hit.



Abednego Edsel's old Model T bounced violently as it rumbled across the prairie. The sturdy vehicle followed the uneven, washed out arroyo, a dry creek bed created by centuries of flash floods. This was a road, of sorts, to where the old man wanted to go—towards the hills in the distance. Abe was in the area because he was a spelunker—an individual who found pleasure in exploring caves. He had grown up west Texas and had always been fascinated by them. As a child, he had played in them, perhaps somewhat unwisely. It was easy to get injured, and, being all alone, that could mean a slow, painful death.

Abe was, in many ways, a man out of time. He had been born in the last century and probably belonged there. He remembered a time before electricity and airplanes. His life had spanned gas lights and horse and buggy to telephones and automobiles, and not to his betterment, to hear him tell it. He preferred the simple life—which was why, whenever he could arrange it, he left so-called civilization behind and struck out for the untamed territory of his youth. For days at a stretch, he lived off the land, until the time came he had to return to his job of teaching geology at the University of Southwest Texas, in San Angelo.



Abe's interest in the subject had started as a child, finding arrowheads and bones in the prairie around his family's ranch. He became intrigued by history and archaeology, looking for evidence of past societies in the ground, and then at the strata in which this was hidden.

Abednego Edsel had had a lonesome childhood, having no siblings, and no neighbors to speak of. He had been raised by a hellfire and brimstone evangelical Protestant mother who believed naming her only son after a person in the Bible was the right thing to do. This upbringing went a long ways towards explaining Abe's interest in other lands and other times.

Right now, Abe Edsel looked as though he had never seen civilization: He was deep into one of his forays into the wilds of west Texas, and had not shaved for days. He had not bathed in that length of time, either. This was the third day he had spent in his clothing. A dirty red bandana was tied around his scrawny neck. He was a small man, looked as though he wouldn't last a day under the blazing Texas sun. But appearances were deceiving. Under rawhide skin lay whipcord muscle. The old man was as tough as any two "city slickers". He had proved this, on occasion.

Abe's eyes reflected the blue sky overhead, standing out starkly against the brown of his leathery skin. They were as blue as a robin's egg. His nose was something of a beak. His gray, nearly white hair was cut close to his scalp.

Abe stopped the old automobile suddenly. Ahead lay a fence where there shouldn't have been one. Attached to the fence was a sign. Letting the vehicle idle in neutral, the old man got out to inspect this.

Printed in bold letters across the sign were the words **NO TRESPASSING**.

Abe removed his worn fedora and scratched his head. He looked first one way along the barrier, and then the other. It went as far as the eye could see in both directions.

The leathery old man pondered this for a minute. He was puzzled. He had been this way dozens of times before, and there had never been a fence. He knew the owner of the land—Shelby Gray—personally, albeit not closely. Abe had the man's permission to explore the land whenever the mood struck him, with the understanding that if Abe turned up anything profitable, the two would split the windfall.

Being somewhat wealthy despite the stock market crash, Shelby Gray had quite a different idea of "profit" than did old Abe. If the geologist could carry it out in one arm load, Gray did not want to hear about it. That suited the old Abednego; he was there for pleasure, not profit. Not that he'd pass up a fortune if it fell into his lap. Thus far, it had not.

As Abe turned to leave—despite his verbal agreement with Shelby Gray, he had no intention of crossing the fence line—he saw two men in the distance. He waved his arms, called out to them—but got no response. The old man hoped they would explain what was going on, perhaps let him through the fence once they knew who he was. But the pair ignored him, if they had seen or heard him. They gave no indication of either.

Abe Edsel got in his automobile and re-traced his path back down the rocky arroyo.



Seeing him the next day, a person might not have recognized Abe, if their only previous encounter with him had been on the range. He was freshly shaved and wearing a loose-fitting salt-and-pepper suit. A red bow tie completed the outfit; he liked red adornments. Otherwise, he normally dressed rather colorlessly.

It was mid-morning when Abe Edsel arrived at the business offices of Shelby Gray. He told the secretary, a middle-aged plump woman, "I don't have an appointment, but I'd like to speak to Mr. Gray,

please. Tell him Professor Abednego Edsel is here to see him. I can wait.”

The secretary disappeared down a short hallway and returned with man Abe had never seen before: A raven-haired fellow who wore spectacles. His hair was parted on one side and slicked back with a pomade. He looked to be about forty years old and was physically unremarkable. His suit, of a dark blue tone, was well-tailored, but not inordinately expensive-looking.

“My name is Martin Berma,” the man said in a gentle voice. “I’m Mr. Gray’s assistant.”

The old geologist extended his hand. “I’m Abe Edsel. I need to speak to Mr. Gray about his land. We know one another.”

“Oh? Please come into my office.” Gesturing with an arm, Berma escorted the old man down the short corridor, and into a room that lay across the hallway from Gray’s office, the door to which was shut.

Once Abe had seated himself, Berma asked, “Now what’s this about some problem with Mr. Gray’s land?”

The old man explained what he had seen, then added, “I’m sure Shelby can clear this up. I’ve been going out there for years.”

“I’m sorry to say that we’ve had some problems with trespassers recently” said Berma. “That’s why we had to put up the fence.”

“I understand.”

“Let me see if Mr. Gray can see you,” Martin Berma offered, getting up from his desk. “Please wait a moment.”

From where he sat, Abe heard Shelby Gray’s assistant knock on the office door, and go inside, closing the door behind him. He returned a moment later.

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Gray cannot be disturbed right now,” Martin Berma explained apologetically. “But he’s aware of the situation—I mentioned your name to him and he knows who you are—and he will give it due attention as soon as he is able.”

“He doesn’t have a moment for me?” Abe asked wonderingly.

Martin Berma gave him a sad smile. “I’m sorry, he does not.” Reaching onto his desk, the assistant took a business card from a small, ornate holder there, and handed it to Abe. “Please don’t hesitate to call me if there’s anything else I can help you with.”

Conscious that Gray’s assistant had been of no help on this occasion, Abe left the office, followed by Martin Berma. Standing by the secretary’s desk, he watched as the old professor walked out the door of the building. Once Abe was out of earshot, Martin

Berma said to the secretary, “If that man returns or tries to telephone Mr. Gray, he is unavailable.”

The matronly secretary nodded her understanding. “Yes, Mr. Berma.”



Big Joe Banks did not know how long he’d been unconscious, but when he came to, he saw his deputy Rusty standing over him, shotgun in hand. Beside him was a thin little man who was the town’s doctor, Avery. “I don’t think we’ll need that now,” Joe said in a gravelly tone, indicating the weapon. “They get away?”

“Yes, sir,” nodded the lanky young man. “By the time I got back here with the shotgun, the airship was on its way.”

“Which way did it go?” asked Joe, slowly getting to his feet. He ached all over but nothing seemed broken. Luckily his head was hard and he had not landed on it.

“Uh, I don’t know,” Rusty said slowly. “I saw you and rushed to get the doc.”

“Take it easy, sheriff,” said Avery. “You’ve had quite a fall.”

For the first time, Joe noticed a money bag in his deputy’s hand. That was what had been dropped on his hand, causing him to lose his grip and precipitating his fall. As the big Irishman limped towards the vehicle Rusty had commandeered, the lanky deputy asked, “What happened, sheriff?”

“They manhandled me and stole our town’s money, that’s what,” Joe said ruefully. He hated saying it out loud, like that, but the truth was the truth. Sugar-coating it wouldn’t help anybody.

“I mean,” Rusty ventured, “who were those guys? I saw you pushed around by one of them. I couldn’t believe it.”

“I don’t know, Rusty,” the big sheriff admitted. “Come on.”

“Where are we going, sheriff?” the young deputy queried.

“To get my patrol car,” said Joe, climbing behind the wheel of the commandeered automobile. It being a somewhat small vehicle, the big man had a bit of trouble doing so. “It’s still out at the air show.”



When Joe Banks saw the colorful tent that housed the air show’s planes, an idea came to him. Sending Rusty to return the borrowed auto, Joe went into the tent. “I’m looking for Hugo

Pender,” he called out. That was the proprietor of the air show.

Presently the man came forward. He was overweight, bald and wall-eyed. That explained why he was merely the owner and not one of the flyers, Joe thought. “Could one of your pilots take me up to look around? It’s official business.”

Hugo nodded his pudgy head. Everything about him was pudgy, it seemed. “Little Italy!” he yelled out loudly.

“Little Italy?” queried the sheriff.

“That’s where he was born—Little Italy, New York City,” Hugo explained.

“Oh.”

A swarthy pilot about Joe Banks’ age just then approached the pair. He was small, and had a thin moustache. The big sheriff eyed the little Italian.

“Is he the best you’ve got?” Joe asked skeptically as Antonio Cavallo joined the pair. Like many an Easterner, Joe had no great love of Italians. As was often the case with immigrants, the big Irishman had apparently forgotten how his own ancestors had come to America. It was one of those imponderable mysteries of life that each successive wave of immigrants looked down upon the next.

“Si, boss?” Little Italy Cavallo asked with a thick accent.

Hugo explained the situation. The Italian nodded several times as his pudgy boss spoke, finally saying, “Si, si. I-a understand. Take-a him up and-a bring-a him down.”

Hugo’s fat face broke into a wide smile, as if he was amused by his employee’s broken English. “He’ll take good care of you,” the pudgy owner assured Joe. Minutes later, they were in the air.

“What-a we lookin-a for?” asked Little Italy as he guided the bi-plane out over the Texas prairie. They could see for miles in every direction.

“An airship,” grated Joe. He had never flown before. He didn’t like it. “It robbed the bank in town less than an hour ago.”

If “Little Italy” Cavallo was surprised by this news, he gave no sign of it. “And you wanna catch-a the bad guys, eh?”

“I’m the sheriff,” the big Irishman said. To him, that was all that need be said. It explained everything.

After an hour of searching, they had not found anything. The airship, Joe deduced, was long gone. While the little bi-plane was capable of catching an airship, time had been lost and Joe had not known what direction in which to begin his search.

“We-a gotta turn-a back now,” Little Italy said. “We-a almost-a outta gas.” Without waiting for an okay from his passenger, he banked the plane and directed it back towards the air show.

The field was in sight when the engine began sputtering.

“What’s wrong?” Joe Banks demanded, his voice sounding alarmed.

“I-a think-a we outta gas,” said Little Italy. “Hang on. I try not-a crash too bad.”

The colorful bi-plane dipped suddenly, causing Joe’s knuckles to turn white as he gripped the rim of the passenger compartment. He silently swore that if he made it safely back to the ground, he would never leave it again.

The plane bucked and stalled and it was all the big Irishman could do to keep from vomiting. He felt as though his stomach was going through a clothes wringer. The bi-plane hit the ground once, bounced, hit again. It did this a couple more times before rolling to a bumpy stop.

Big Joe Banks jumped to the ground before the machine had stopped moving. He angrily stormed into the big tent and confronted Hugo, who was talking to another of his pilots.

“I thought you said he was your best pilot!” Joe spat.

“He is,” the pudgy man assured him.

Before Joe Banks could continue, Little Italy Cavallo’s voice came from behind him. “It was just

a little joke, sheriff,” it said in perfect English. “You were never in any danger.”

The big Irishman turned to see the little Italian pilot in the portal of the tent, grinning. He was tugging playfully at his moustache.

As the sheriff marched for the opening, Little Italy stepped aside. He was unprepared when one of Joe’s large bony fists swung up and caught him in the nose. The pilot dropped to the ground, landing on his backside. Without speaking, big Joe Banks stormed out to his patrol car and drove away, tires kicking up dust.

Sitting on the grass, gingerly holding his bleeding nose, Little Italy Cavallo laughed heartily.

PART 2: PERIL IN PAINESVILLE

BIG JOE BANKS sat at his desk staring at the map of Texas on the wall of the sheriff’s office. He was feeling better now, after the short rest he’d gotten and a hot lunch, courtesy of the local diner. After finishing it, he had returned to his office to work on the bank robbery. He had some ideas on the subject.

Joe knew the mystery airship’s base was nearby. Visibility over the open range was excellent; one could see for miles in every direction. Still, there had been no sign of the airship when Little Italy Cavallo had taken him up to look for it, less than hour after the airship had hovered over Cactus Gulch. That meant the base was within an hour’s travel of the town.

Joe drew an irregular circle around the dot that specified the township of Cactus Gulch. This represented the area in which the airship’s base must lay, if the big Irishman was right. Knowing an airship’s top speed, he could estimate the distance it could travel in an hour. Just to be sure,

he allowed no time for landing, which took some minutes normally. The radius of the circle was Joe's best calculation of one hour of air travel, nearly one hundred miles.

Big Joe studied the map. The area he had proscribed cut a small swath across west Texas. But he had two further clues to the location of the airship's base: It could not be seen while the residents of the area were going about their daily activities, and; possibly, it could not be seen from the air.

This latter was a guess on Joe's part. Air travel was not a popular thing in the wilds of west Texas. But would the mastermind behind the bank robbery—Joe felt certain there must be one, as the weird bank robbers themselves did not seem capable of planning such a crime—take the chance of having his base spotted by a chance overhead flight? A ship from something like Pender's barnstormers might spot it, if that was the case. No, Joe felt certain the base was well hidden.

With a pencil, Joe Banks began blacking out populated areas in the region, places where an airship could not land without being noticed. He started with wide borders along the state highway and county roads, and moved outward to encompass ranches in the area that he knew. When he was done, Joe had eliminated a significant portion of the original circle.

Running a hand through sandy hair, the big Irishman gazed at his handiwork. Satisfied, he smiled a grim smile as he went to the town's telegraph office. After sending half a dozen telegrams, the big sheriff drove back out to the air show. He had decided to test his theory that the airship could not be seen from the air.



If Little Italy Cavallo was surprised to see Joe Banks again, he did not show it. He smiled with sly amusement as the big Irishman approached him.

His sparkling black eyes fairly grinned. "Back for another ride, sheriff?"

Joe nodded. "No funny business this time. I've got some ideas where that airship could have gone. I'd like you to help me check them out."

The little Italian nodded. Joe pulled a crumpled ten dollar bill from a pant pocket and thrust it in the direction of the pilot. "For gas," he explained. "And I may need you on short notice. Can you stick around for a few days?"

"I think it can be arranged," Little Italy nodded. "All the equipment is driven from town to town, and I can stay in the area while that is done, then fly over when they're set up." The show normally performed on two consecutive days before moving on. That meant the little pilot would be at Joe's disposal for at least two more days. "I'm glad to see you don't hold a grudge."

"I didn't say I wasn't holding a grudge," gritted Sheriff Joe Banks, "I said I needed your help and I'm willing to pay for it."

Little Italy shrugged. "I'm curious about this airship myself."

Then Joe related the entire affair from beginning to end, showing the pilot the map he had made as he explained his deductions.

"It's quite puzzling," Little Italy said quietly as he tugged at his little moustache. Looking directly into the sheriff's eyes, he said, "You know, this is really quite a brilliant scheme. Your bank had, what, a hundred thousand dollars in it? Not very much compared to the big banks in cities like New York or Los Angeles, but the payoff against the odds of getting caught is enormous. They swoop in, get their business done and are gone. It's nearly impossible to follow them.

"But what worries me is your description of the robbers ... half-dead powerhouses that bullets don't stop. What do you intend to do if we do find them?"

"Call in the Army," Joe said bluntly. "They've got balloon busters for the airship and enough

firepower to stop anyone, dead or alive. All I need to do is find the base. Maybe we can do that."

After a moment, the pilot spoke. "Have you considered this gang may try to strike more banks in the area?" Little Italy asked quietly. "Cactus Gulch may have only been the beginning."

Big Joe nodded his head. "I've already telegraphed neighboring towns." That was what he had done at Cactus Gulch's telegraph office before coming to see the little pilot; he had warned fellow lawmen to be on guard for a bank robbery -- not that that would do much good, Joe thought. They'd need a small army to stop the weird, cold men. But he had done for his fellow lawmen what he'd have wanted them to do if the circumstances had been reversed.

With that, the two men climbed into the bee-colored bi-plane and were off.



If Sheriff Joe Banks' first two deductions about the location of the airship base were correct, then so was his third: It was not visible from above. He and Little Italy had spent the remainder of the afternoon flying over the open ground marked on his map, and found nothing. Despite this, Joe felt all his calculations were right: The airship and its hidden base were somewhere in that circle.

There were not many natural places to hide an airship in that area. Barring an unknown cavern in the hills, the only other obvious place were the big buildings of Shelby Gray's mining operation. Joe pondered this as he drove out to the Gray Mining Corporation's mines.

"Camp" did not do the busy place justice. It was not a handful of independent prospectors, living in tents, hoping to strike it rich. That was the stuff of Hollywood and dime novels—of days long gone. This was a business operation, pure and simple. It was run like a business. While the

miners shared a certain camaraderie, there was no place for lollygagging here. The men worked hard.

Much of the work was done outside—the mining, of course; the breaking down of the rock. But the processing was done indoors; the site had a smelting operation on site. That was the building Joe was interested in seeing.

The sun was a furious-looking red ball on the horizon as Joe Banks arrived at the mining site. The orb matched the turmoil in Joe's Irish soul. He was determined to find the stolen money. Joe Banks was one of those fellows who possessed standards. His were impossibly high—for others, and for himself. There was right, and there was wrong. Between them lay the weak-willed, the selfish, the people who made excuses why society's mores didn't apply to them.

For Joe, there was no reward for doing the right thing—you just did it because it was the right thing to do. That was the code of the west, a code he believed in, however outdated it might seem these days. He could not rest until the money had been recovered—preferably by himself.

As the Irishman drove into the main area, he realized this was probably a wild goose chase: The big building didn't look large enough to hold an airship of any size, and even it had been, where would the smelting equipment have gone to? The building could not have contained both its intended contents and an airship, in any case. Joe was disappointed, but since he was already there, he decided to check it out anyway. He intended to leave no stone unturned in finding the airship.

The normally busy place was quiet now, the work day having ended some time ago. The only lights visible in the camp were those in the bunkhouse. Joe looked at his watch; it was about supper time. He grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment as he climbed out his automobile, and headed for the big building.

Joe Banks did not think it necessary to go inside the refining structure. Accordingly, he moved along the perimeter of the building, shining his light in one window after another. He saw nothing out of the ordinary. This was, unfortunately, as he had expected it.

"Can I help you?" said a voice from behind Joe. The sheriff turned to find a man with a shotgun standing behind him. He was of average height, but solidly built, with unruly black hair. Maybe he had shaved that morning. "What are you doing? Oh ... you're the law."

The big Irishman straightened up. "Sheriff Joe Banks of Cactus Gulch. Just poking around," he said without apology. "You are ...?"

"Harry Diltz," the stocky man said, "Mine foreman. If you'd, eh, called ahead, Sheriff, we could have arranged for someone to show you around. Everything's shut down now."

"It was spur of the moment," said Joe. "Sorry for not letting you know."

Harry Diltz glanced at the smelting building. "Er, what are you looking for?"

"Just satisfying a curiosity."

"Do you, eh, want to go inside?" Harry asked, nodding towards the small smelting plant.

The big Irishman gazed along the long wall of the building. "No, I guess not." As Joe started back towards his vehicle, Harry Diltz walked alongside him.

"Sorry to trouble you," Joe said as he climbed into his vehicle.

"No trouble," replied the foreman as he watched as Joe drove away. When the sheriff was out of sight, Harry Diltz went into his office, picked up the telephone and dialed a number. "The sheriff of Cactus Gulch was just here," he said into the device. "He said he was just looking around, but he wouldn't tell me what he was looking for."

Harry Diltz listened to the voice on the line. After a few moments, he said, "All right. If you say so, boss."



It was after dark when Joe Banks arrived back at his office in Cactus Gulch. It had been an exhausting day. He wanted to go home and go to bed—after stopping by the saloon for a shot of whiskey. When he had first come west, Joe had schooled himself in all things western—horse riding, shooting, and drinking. Not that he had much call to any of three. The west, it had turned out, was not much like the way you saw it in the movies.

Joe found the mayor waiting for him in the sheriff's office. He was a pudgy, florid fellow named Nelson Caylor. A sparse ring of dark hair adorned his head, like a crown. "Where've you been all day, Joe?" he erupted excitedly. Nelson was the excitable type.

Removing his hat and putting on his desk, the big Irishman said, "I've been looking for your money. I have some ideas about finding it."

Nelson Caylor flushed an even deeper shade of red. "Er, that makes this doubly awkward."

Joe's gray-green eyes narrowed. "Makes what awkward, Nelson?"

"The city council has decided to remove you as sheriff," Nelson Caylor said, blushing.

Former sheriff Joe Banks was speechless.



"You have to admit you've had it pretty easy these years you've been sheriff, Joe," said Caylor apologetically. "This was your first real crime and you failed to stop it."

Joe Banks flushed. "That's true," he admitted. "But this was no ordinary crime."

"I know that, Joe. I tried to fight them but I was outnumbered." The florid little man mopped his brow with a handkerchief, as if he'd work up a sweat in a physical confrontation. That, combined with his manner, said, I was lucky to get out of there alive.

If the big Irishman hadn't been so disgusted, he'd have laughed. Nelson Caylor was one of those politicians who bent whichever way the political wind blew and now it had blown against Joe. Caylor had gone with it, offering no resistance. Joe knew the rotund man had put up no fight.

The big man removed his sheriff's star and dropped in on the desk. Without saying another word, he turned and walked towards the saloon. He intended to be its final patron that night.

But Joe was not much of a drinker, despite his love of westerly ways, and it wasn't long before he had to be helped home. He lived in a small house on the outskirts of town.

Normally an early riser, Joe usually welcomed the morning sunlight streaming in through his bedroom window. The morning after being fired, he did not. It was a painful reminder of the events of the day before. With nothing better to do, the big Irishman pulled a pillow over his head to shield him from the bright rays of the morning sun.

This same shining orb was causing Abe Edsel some trouble, as well. He had to squint in its light as he climbed east on the hills of west Texas. Though considerably cleaner than when he had been out there days earlier, he was garbed similarly, ready for action. Equipped with canteen, lengths of jerky, compass, matches, pocket knife, flashlight, rock hammer, rope, and a couple of other things, he was on another expedition. Provisions for a campsite resided in the old geologist's automobile; he returned to it every evening.

Undeterred by the words of Martin Berma, Abe returned to the area. Adjunct to Shelby Gray's land was open range, usable by any visitor. Authorities frowned on long-term campers, however; these could become squatters and attempt to lay claim to the public land.

Abe eventually came upon a cave of which he had only explored the vestibule. Denied the area he wished to explore, the geologist had decided to return to this spot for a closer look.

Before descending, he glanced up, and saw a nearby crest of a high hill. The old man realized from that vantage point, he could look out over Shelby Gray's land. The temptation was too great to resist; he clambered up the hill, and quickly gained its summit.

Abe Edsel looked down over the hills. These formed a border, of sorts, between Gray's land and the open range. Rather, the rocky

ridge straddled the two properties, rising up from the prairie like the backbone of a dinosaur. On the other side of the rocky patch of land lay the tycoon's mining operation. It was situated some miles away. At this height, Abe had no trouble spying it—or the road leading into it, anyway; the buildings themselves were hidden from view. But he was more interested in the area to the south, where he had been turned back by a fence three days earlier.

The old man saw a collection of a half-dozen men out in the prairie grass. These stood in a loose group, many yards apart. The way they were positioned, they could easily confront anyone who happened along the length of the fence. These were the guards he had seen earlier. But there was something odd about the way the men were standing. Abe did not immediately realize what it was. Then it hit him: They were standing rather far apart, too far to even yell to one another comfortably. Normally men on such lonesome duty would naturally congregate together, to commiserate, if nothing else. These men did not. Old Abe found this unusual.

In every group, you might find an individual who was a loner, who preferred his own company. He might stand apart from his fellow guards. But all of these men shunning each other? That intrigued Abednego, though he did not exactly know why.

Abe Edsel fancied himself something of a detective. He liked reading dime novels. Geology, Abe's passion, was like a mystery, looking at the evidence of time and deducing what had happened eons ago to cause what had been left for all to see. He decided to investigate.

Glancing at the men one last time, Abe began to make his way across the small, rocky hills, and onto Shelby Gray's land. No fence straddled the congregation of outcroppings.



The old spelunker clambered across the rocks as if he were part mountain goat. Considering Abe's often anti-social behavior, you wouldn't find many to argue against that possibility. He did his best to stay out of sight, although the men guarding the fence never looked up into the hills. Every so often, Abe would glance down at them, just to be sure.

He eventually noticed that the men did not move, did not shift position in the field. One would expect them to patrol,

and if not that, at least keep moving so as not to become either stiff or bored. But these men did not do that. They stood as still as pillars. It appeared very unnatural to the wizened spelunker.

Curiouser and curiouser, Abednego Edsel thought to himself, recalling the phrase from Alice in Wonderland.

The old geologist kept moving. Presently he saw something out of place: A large, dark blob situated in a small crescent-shaped niche in the rocks. At this distance, he could not discern what it was. But whatever it was, it did not belong there. Seeing a few men standing near the spot, Abe cautiously moved closer.

This area was completely hidden from where he had started his climb, Abe observed, located back in a break in a hill. It was also shielded from the fence line by an outcropping on the other side. It was a natural hiding place—but for what?

Abe proceeded until he got a good look at it; he saw it was a manmade shed, of sorts, but huge. A makeshift roof had been built over this area—a gully at the bottom of a rock face that had split in two, making a V shape—and covered with rocks and brush, to give the appearance from overhead of normalcy. The “niche” was much deeper than it had first appeared, an illusion caused by the camouflage.

What on earth was such hiding place doing out here in the middle of nowhere, and what was it being used to hide? Abe wondered. The camouflaged shed was enormous, over a hundred yards long. Shelby Gray had to know about it; it—or rather, what it had been built to hide—was what the men were guarding, not the land, as Gray’s assistant had claimed.

Abednego was pondering these questions when he heard a scuffling sound from behind him. Turning to look at the cause of the noise, he saw one of the men climbing up towards him.



“Sheriff!” came Rusty Taub’s voice. With his hangover, it seemed disembodied to Joe Banks. Slowly opening one eye, he looked at the clock—still early, half past nine. Dragging himself out of bed, Joe drew on an old robe and went to the door.

Rusty, he saw, was wearing the sheriff’s badge. Sleepily, Joe said, “Congratulations on the promotion.”

The lanky you man blushed. “Uh”

“Rusty, what do you want?”

“Oh, sheriff,” the youth drawled, “a telegram came for you. Urgent.”

Suddenly alert, Joe Banks snatched the paper from Rusty’s hand, scanned it quickly. The bank in Painesville was being robbed!

Painesville State Bank was a hole in the wall institution. Everyone in west Texas knew that. It was out of the way and had little money in it, the meager savings of hard working ranchers and merchants. No Morgans or Vanderbilts lived in this wild region.

Like the bank in Cactus Gulch, it had no more than a hundred thousand dollars in it at any time. Like the bank in Cactus Gulch, it was an unlikely target for bank robbers. Like the bank in Cactus Gulch, it was robbed by the weird, cold men.

They dropped from the sky—actually came down the rope ladder from the airship, but it was, of course, very dramatic, like something from pulp novel—at just after nine A.M. That was when the bank opened, as did every bank in the nation.

The cold men garbed in gray denim marched in a somewhat orderly fashion towards the bank’s entrance. Shuffling along in that odd gait of theirs, they gave the appearance of convicts, wearing chains. But the weird pale men did not wear chains.

The cold men moved along diligently, ignoring the citizens of the town. These had scattered and

fled when the first man in gray touched down. They did not know their small town was about to become the victim of a bold bank robbery, but they knew that men dropping from an airship in the middle of town could not be good. It signaled that trouble had just arrived.

Painesville was a peaceful, contented town. One might say complacent. The bank employed no guard. At this time of day, there was but a small line of patrons waiting to conduct business.

The sight of the pale, dead-looking men caused a furor inside the bank. Their weird appearance drew gasps from the women therein. One faint-hearted matron collapsed.

The gray-clad men shuffled along towards the vault. They did not, as most bank robbers did, carry guns. They did not demand money. They went straight towards the vault, planted explosives and dynamited it.

The bank patrons and staff had scurried away at the sight of the dynamite, fearing for their lives. The gray men paid them no heed. Their only concern was getting the money. None of those fleeing the bank stopped to wonder, what did such men want with money? Did corpses use currency? Desire goods?

The dynamite thundered. If the town of Painesville did not know it was being robbed before, it did now. The noise of the explosion ripped through Painesville, waking anyone who had been sleeping.

The purpose of the mystery airship hovering over the town became clear.

The cold men stood in a loose congregation around the bank’s vault. They were moved by the blast the dynamite gave off. But they seemed not to feel it. Some staggered, taking a step or two back, but otherwise gave no indication that there had been explosion.

The blast was oddly powerful for a bank job. Some of the contents of the vault had been

destroyed in it. Burnt bills shot out through the opening in the portal, past the bent metal shreds of the door. The cold men did not concern themselves with these. They calmly went into the vault and began pushing stacks of money into canvas containers that resembled carpet bags.

The sheriff of Painesville arrived about the time the first of the cold, gray men began filing out of the bank's entrance. He reacted much as Joe Banks had; he called out to the bank robbers to halt, and when they did not, he opened fire on them. Lacking the big Irishman's physique, he forewent trying to stop them by hand.

But his shots had as little effect on the cold men as Joe's had. The sheriff emptied his pistol on the men. When he had done this, he switched to a rifle—hunting model he kept in the patrol car—and began firing it.

It had some effect but not much. The bank robber who was hit stepped a pace back, dropped to one knee. Then, unbelievably, he stood back up and continued on his way.

The sheriff blinked once. Frankly, he had thought Joe Banks' warning a joke of some kind, even when the gray men had arrived as Joe had predicted. It had been too much to believe.

The sheriff raised his rifle and shot the weird fellow again, this time as close to the heart as he could. The wounded man dropped. This time, he did not get up.

The cold men could be stopped, after all.

The sheriff moved in closer. Again, he yelled at the weird men to halt. A reasonable man, knowing that he could be shot and killed, would stop when confronted by an armed man. The cold, gray-clad men were not reasonable. They continued on their way toward the airship's ladder, ignoring the fact one of their number was dead, ignoring the sheriff and his gun that had caused it.

The sheriff of Painesville had no choice but to fire again. He kept doing this until he had exhausted his ammo. He then returned to his vehicle and grabbed some more. He took up shooting again. Every shot did not bring a cold man down. Only a bullet to a vital organ seemed to stop them.

When it was all over, the sheriff had killed half a dozen of the weird bank robbers. The remainder had gotten away with the majority of the bank's money.

Watching the airship fly away, the sheriff shook his head skeptically. He had witnessed everything Joe Banks had predicted and still could barely believe it had occurred.

PART 3: MINIONS OF THE GRAY MASTER

ABEDNEGO EDSSEL GOT his first good look at the strange guards when one of them climbed up toward where the old geologist had perched himself overlooking the camouflaged shed. He didn't like what he saw; the man appeared to be dead, cold and pale, a corpse crawling up after him across the rocks.

"Sorry for trespassing," old Abe said as casually as he could. He did not like the looks of this man; they unnerved him. His skin was sallow, the areas around his eyes and mouth tinged with gray. The weird fellow did not blink. He only gazed at the old geologist as he climbed towards him, feeling his way along the rocks. These, Abe noticed, he gripped with inhuman strength.

"I'll move along now," Abe added, as he began to climb away. Without saying a word, the cold man followed. Rightly or wrongly, the old geologist read murderous intent in those cold gray eyes, and quickened his pace. He fairly flew over the stony outcroppings.

The slow-moving human automaton could not keep up with old Abe. The geologist quickly outpaced the cold man—too quickly. He had run into a blind rock face, high above the prairie. Standing on a narrow ledge, on one side of Abe lay a near-vertical stone wall reaching up into the sky and on the other it continued to the ground, some fifty feet below.

Abednego reversed his course and ran as fast as safely possible back along the ledge. He hoped to reach a point that was climbable before the odd, cadaverous fellow boxed him in.

Too late! The cold man stood before the geologist, advancing slowly.

It was plainly irrational for the gray-clad pursuer to approach Abe under these circumstances—so the old spelunker acted just as irrationally. He crawled onto the rock face, using his rock hammer to find purchase where his hand could not. With all the might in his sinewy limb that he could muster, Abe jammed the sharp end of the hammer into a crack. It held. He hauled himself up, a foot flung out searching for a foothold. The geologist hoped the use of the hammer would get him to a climbable point on the face. At the very least, out of the reach of his weird

pursuer. But too late—he felt a hand clamp down on his boot. The cold man had an iron grip on Abe’s ankle!

Inexorably, he began to drag the geologist down. Abe’s hand shot out, found purchase on a small outcropping above his head. He held onto it with every ounce of strength he could muster. That stopped his downward movement for a moment. His free leg flailed out, caught a ledge. The old geologist put his weight on it, began to haul himself up the face of the rock cliff. But he couldn’t get loose from the cold man’s grasp.

Abe kicked and twisted, to no avail. His skeletal fingers began to go numb. His arms felt as though they were being pulled out of their sockets. Maybe they were. The strength of the weird, pale man was enormous.

Feeling his grasp slipping due to perspiration swaddling his fingers, Abe called out desperately, “I’ll come along quietly!”

The cold man gave no sign he had heard the geologist.

“You fool!” spat Abednego. “You’ll kill us both!” The old man realized that there was every chance of him taking the cadaverous fellow with him when he went over. Not that that comforted Abe much.

The man’s tugging did not slacken, and Abednego knew then that he was about to die, killed by a man who did not care about living himself. A chill ran down his bony spine. The old geologist had never been so frightened in his sixty years. So he did the only thing he believed would save himself: He struck the cold man with his rock hammer.

It was an awkward, slight blow; Abe could not put much strength into it, precariously balanced as he was. The pointed end of the hammer glanced off the cold man’s beefy shoulder and caromed into an eye.

It drove deep into soft tissue. When Abe extracted it, the tip was covered in blood and gore.

The cadaverous man did not cry out. But Abednego felt the cold man’s grip slowly loosen about his ankle. And then nothing; Abe was free.

He heard the scrape of the weird, pale man’s denim clothing against the bare rock face as he fell away. The cold man scraped and bumped a couple of times as he plummeted to the earth below. He landed with a thump that the old geologist could hear. And then he made no more noise.

Slowly, sweating heavily, Abe crawled back to the ledge, where he began shaking uncontrollably.



“Did you read the telegram?” Big Joe Banks asked Rusty as the lanky youth drove him out to the air show. The Irishman possessed no vehicle other than that of the sheriff’s office.

“Yep,” Rusty said, nodding his long head affirmatively.

“Why didn’t you go after them?” Joe scolded his former deputy.

“I figured if you couldn’t handle them, what chance would I have?” the young redhead said simply, without being defensive. He knew his limitations. “And anyway it’s out of our jurisdiction.”

Rusty had a point, so the Irishman shut up and remained that way until the big, colorful tent of Hugo Pender’s air show came into view. After the lanky young man dropped him off, Joe went into the tent and found Little Italy Cavallo. Within a few minutes, the black and yellow bi-plane took off and headed for Painesville.

Not many minutes later, the mystery airship came into view, beyond the small prairie town, heading into the distance. The sheriff of Painesville had been diligent about contacting Joe, and the airship hadn’t made a complete getaway.

“We found them!” big Joe Banks exclaimed in a low voice. “Now all we have to do is follow them back to their base and we’ve got them!”

This, as it turned out, was not as easy as it seemed. The big ship slowed and began to turn as the biplane gained on it. By the time Little Italy’s plane had closed the distance to it, the airship was facing them.

The little black and yellow ship whizzed by the airship.

“I think they plan to wait us out,” Little Italy yelled over the drone of the motor. “We’ll run out of gas before they do, and when we leave to land, they’ll go about their business, no one the wiser.”

“Get in close,” Joe yelled back, yanking his ancient pistol from its holster. “I have an idea.”



It had not been many minutes after the weird, cold man had fallen to his death before Abe saw the two ships in the sky. He immediately realized the hidden shed could house the airship, and knew that must have been the purpose for which it had been built.

The old geologist had intended on confronting Shelby Gray just as soon as he had reported the odd, gray man’s death to the local law. It had been self-defense and Abe had every reason to think the sheriff would see it that way. If he had not acted as he had, the geologist would now be dead -- and possibly the other man, as well.

After he had regained safe purchase in the hills, Abednego had taken shelter among the short crags, out of sight of those below. He had watched for more pursuers. There were none.

The whole thing was odd: Cadaverous men who did not speak, did not feel pain—but could be killed. One of their number disappeared—it was unclear if the others knew their colleague had been killed—and none came to investigate.

Abednego had been on his way back over the hills when he heard the drone of the two ships. He paused, looked out into the morning sky, and then,

seeing the ships, ensconced himself in a spot where he could keep an eye on goings-on in both the sky and on the ground. Fascinated by the sight of two aircraft, knowing they were connected to the cold men below but not knowing how, the bony geology professor settled in to watch what would happen.



Joe Banks knew his revolver stood no chance against the big gas bag of the airship; it was like using a pea-shooter to stop a rampaging elephant. The monster would take no notice of the attack. But the gondola of the mystery ship, which held its passengers, was another matter.

Joe fired at it, hoping, if nothing else, to scare the pilot into landing. Under normal circumstances, the big Irishman was an excellent shot. These were far from ideal conditions.

Little Italy hopped in his seat at the sound of the gun as it thundered behind him. Hey!" he exclaimed. "How about a little warning?"

"Now we're even for the ride you gave me yesterday," the Irishman gritted, too low for the compact pilot to hear. "Almost."

The little ship whizzed past the airship gondola. Little Italy wheeled the bi-plane around for another pass. Joe fired again. This time he cracked a window in the ship, he observed. No one seemed to be hurt by the shot. He couldn't tell if he hit anyone—the cold men wouldn't register it if he had.

"I can't tell if you're doing any good," the little pilot yelled over the drone of the motor.

"I've got plenty of ammo," Joe yelled back; he still possessed his gun belt, which held many bullets. "I bet I can get their attention before I run out. Make another pass."

Little Italy did as he was instructed. As the plane came alongside the airship, a stub nose of metal poked out of the gondola.

"Machine gun!" yelled Joe.

Little Italy sent the plane into a dive at the words just as the weapon began spewing fire and lead. He guided the bi-plane under the airship for cover. As the little craft plummeted below the airship's underbelly, Joe got over his initial surprise at seeing the machine gun; he was shocked the cold men possessed one. He had, as he had predicted, gotten their attention.

"That's it, sheriff," shouted Little Italy. "Time to go home. There's —" This was interrupted by the bark of machine gun fire—either the cold men had two of the weapons or its shooter had scrambled to the opposite side of the gondola to keep the little bi-plane in sight.

Lead stitched its way along the side of the black and yellow ship. Canvas ripped, wood splintered. Shrapnel flew at Joe, scraping his flesh. Little Italy banked the plane in order to escape the hail of lead. Another few seconds and they would be out of range of the airship. At top speed, it could not keep up with the little stunt plane.

The motor sputtered, coughed. Black smoke erupted from it. Joe knew enough about engines to know this one was shot. They'd never make it back to Cactus Gulch.

"I'll try to make this as gentle as possible," Little Italy yelled as he brought the plane down toward the ground.

That wasn't so gentle, it turned out. The motor gave out completely on the way down. Little Italy had to make a dead-stick landing. Planes with engines in them aren't designed to glide. As good as he was, the little Italian pilot couldn't keep the plane level as it touched down. It was nose heavy. The landing was complicated by the brush below; it was a far cry from a smooth runway.

The bi-plane cracked upon impact, breaking the craft in two. Joe was thrown clear as the tail section broke loose. He landed hard in the rocky prairie, dazed, some yards away from the moving vehicle. He twitched, limbs moving purposelessly.

Little Italy was knocked unconscious upon impact. Scarlet fluid trickled from a nostril as the plane rolled along, masterless. He stayed with it as it rolled and bounced along. Dragging its broken back end, the plane created a rut as it tore through the brush. It came to a sudden stop with a crash when it went over the small embankment of dry creek bed. Little Italy was thrown free from the cockpit and landed limply in the water-worn soil.



Abe, perched on a hill above the tableau, thought the two men in the bi-plane must surely be dead. He had never witnessed an air crash before, but this one was horrendous. The geologist's eyes panned from the wreckage of the plane to the big airship, wondering what it would do. It turned and moved toward the hidden shed, which was its hangar.

Abednego watched as a short stream of men filed from the airship, once it had been taken into the hangar, towards the crash site. With inhuman efficiency, they picked up the two unmoving men -- Abe couldn't tell if they were dead or alive from this distance -- and bodily carried them back to the hangar as if they were no more than children.

The remaining cold men dismantled the remains of the plane with their bare hands, tearing it into pieces small enough to take with them, either by carrying or dragging. They seemed to want to leave no evidence of the presence of the little bi-plane in the wild brush. They gathered the colored pieces of the plane, those that would attract attention. The plane's engine the cold men left where it lay, in the creek bed, as well as other metal parts.

Oddly, the men already stationed out in the field—those acting as sentries—did not move to help their comrades. It puzzled the old bony geologist. He decided to have a closer look, and

began making his way across the rocks towards the hangar. He was careful to take a different route than the one that had caused him to be spotted earlier. His mind churned as he clambered over the rocky outcroppings, somewhat graciously referred to as “hills”.

Thus, Abe came up the back of the dome-shaped rock that abutted the makeshift hangar, and not toward it from the east side, as he had done earlier. This kept him well out of sight of all the sentries he had seen. He about lost his footing and fell when he heard a voice nearby, so surprised was he. But no one was in sight.

Exploring the area, the geologist found this emanated from a crack in the dome, a vent from a cavern within. Making sure his shadow would not fall across the opening—thus giving his presence away—Abe peered down into the cavern. He saw several cold men congregated there, standing idly, stiff as pillars. They did not appear to ever relax. The geology professor did not see the speaker but could hear the voice clearly, though its tone was muffled for some reason.

“Michaels, Grub, Daley,” it said, “it is time for your rejuvenation. And take those two with you. They will become my newest slaves.”

The old geologist watched as three of the cold, gray men shuffled away, out of sight. He did not see the two flyers, who must have been elsewhere in the cavern—which Abe now realized the mouth of which must lay at the back of the shed.

Rejuvenation? wondered Abednego. What was that? What was going to happen to the two flyers? They seemed to be alive, after all.

Abe had no time for pondering these things, for the speaker, moving about the cavern, came into view below: He was dressed in a gray suit, with a gray hat and gray gloves. A gray bandana covered his face; two holes had been cut in it for his eyes. This, old Abe realized, was the gray master of the cold men!

PART 4: MINERAL MADNESS

ABEDNEGO EDSSEL DID not consider himself a brave man. But he considered himself a righteous one, and he knew that unless he acted, the two flyers would be turned into mindless zombies, by some process unknown to him. Part of him knew it was already too late—perched on the dome of rock, it would take Abe some time to get to the cavern, even if he knew what to do once he got there. As yet, he did not.

Lacking a gun, the old geologist wracked his brain for a weapon to use against the cold men. He stood no chance fighting them with his rock hammer. They seemed to possess no fear. Then an idea struck him: What do all living creatures fear? What is the most devastating force in nature? Fire!

Abe clambered down the rocks as quickly as he could, putting his plan into action.

Inside the cavern, Joe Banks and Little Italy Cavallo were beginning to regain consciousness. Neither, as it turned out, were seriously injured. No broken bones, anyway. Each had their share of scrapes and bruises. Blood oozed from half a dozen gashes on either of the pair.

Joe opened his eyes just as one of the cold men came for him. He lashed out, grabbing a gray denim sleeve. The cold man took no notice. He dragged Joe to his feet, propelled him forward with a push. The Irishman turned and drove a big fist into the cold man’s face. The cadaverous fellow staggered back, just a step. Joe pressed his advantage.

He knew, deep in his heart, that he stood no chance against a single cold man. There were many gathered here. But the instinct to survive is stronger than any other. Joe fought as if his life depended on it, for it did.

It was all over in less than a minute. Weakened by his wounds, Joe did not put up much of a fight. He collapsed after being struck once by the mighty zombie-like man. As he was being manhandled back to his feet, Joe heard a voice say, “Not yet.”

For the first time, Joe Banks realized there was one other in the cavern who was not a cadaverous zombie. He saw the speaker wore a gray suit and accouterments. A large gray bandana was drawn across the man’s face to conceal his identity. Joe did not recognize the voice, which was muffled by the cloth. He half-expected it would be Harry Diltz, the mine foreman who had acted suspiciously—but it was not his voice.

The gray master of the cold men spoke again: “Leave him for later. Take the little one first. There must be no disruption in the re-birth chamber. We’ve never converted anyone against their will before, and don’t know what will happen.”

Joe watched as Little Italy was taken away, struggling feebly in the grip of a cold man. He seemed only half-conscious of what was taking place. He possessed no inkling of the fate in store for him. Grimly, Joe Banks pondered, it was probably better that way.

“You are wondering,” said the gray master, “what is going to happen to your friend, eh? Very well, I’ll tell you—while we wait.”

The Irishman turned to look at the gray master, and saw the glitter of madness in the man’s eyes.

“Some weeks ago, my miners found an unusual vein in these rocks. They came out of the mine dazed, easily suggestible. But they had been turned into human dynamos who could not be stopped. The vein of mineral had caused a physiological change in them, affecting their nervous systems.

“The mine foreman—whom you met last night—naturally telephoned me, and I came out here to see it for myself. I immediately saw possibilities in having an army of mindless slaves, one comprised of men who could not, for all practical purposes, be hurt. I

began conscripting workers from the mine, and soon I had my legion of 'zombies', as popular fiction would call them. The workers did not what awaited them.

"I devised a test for them—the robbing of several local banks—to determine their loyalty and their invulnerability. Both are unmatched. But this was only a small test.

"I started with only two dozen men. Can you imagine what an army of a hundred could do? Two hundred? A thousand? Running the Gray Mining Corporation, I control only a few dozen employees. Soon, I'll control the entire United States!"

"You're insane, Gray," gritted Joe. "You can't take on the U.S. government with only a handful of soldiers."

"I would pit one of mine against a dozen of theirs," the gray master said, laughing derisively. "I could take over any military base in the country. My soldiers are invincible. They do not feel pain. Oh, they can be killed, by a blow to the head or the heart, but they are extremely resistant to damage, as you know." The man behind the mask chortled. "The man you shot in Cactus Gulch died, eventually. And we lost four this morning, in Painesville."

Joe Banks looked around him: He saw half a dozen of the cold men around him. Three had taken Little Italy away. That left another half-dozen, somewhere.

"Soon," said the gray master, "you will help replenish the ranks."



With considerable caution, Abe had made his way along the ravine until it became a dry creek bed, where the wreckage of the flyers' plane lay. Keeping an eye out for the weird sentries, he knew that if he could not see them, they could not see him.

The geologist crawled on his belly through the brush, searching for the little ship's gasoline tank.

There had been no fire, the old man had recalled, when the plane crashed, which meant there was a fair chance that the tank still contained some of its contents.

Eventually he found it. Abe took a long swig from his canteen, then emptied the rest of the cool liquid into the dry earth. This was not something he would normally do, but it would all be over—one way or another—in half an hour, and a canteen of water wouldn't make any difference. A canteen full of gasoline was another matter.

Abe wished he had more time, wished he could summon authorities, but he felt compelled to act as quickly as he could. He filled the canteen as best he could. Most of the gasoline had been drained from the tank. A bit had collected in one corner that was lower than the rest of the tank. Abednego ended up with perhaps half a canteen. Not much, he knew, but better than nothing.

When the old geologist turned—or rather, slithered—around to leave, a glint caught his eye—the glint of sunlight off metal.

Whatever it was, it was too small to discern at this distance, with the sun reflecting off it. But Abe was intrigued. He crawled through the brush toward it. The old man nearly cried out for joy when he saw what it was—a revolver! One of the flyers had dropped it when the plane had crashed.

Abe slid this into a pocket and began slinking back for the ravine.



Little Italy Cavallo emerged from the "re-birth" chamber a different man. Joe had heard it in his footsteps first. They were slow, clumsy, shuffling. He was now one of the cold men, with pale skin and vacant stare.

Joe Banks tore himself loose from his guard and rushed the compact pilot. "Little Italy!" he exclaimed.

For the first time since entering the large cavern, the little Italian looked at Joe. But it was with dull, lifeless eyes.

"It's your turn, sheriff," came the gray master's voice. But before he could say another word, a loud fwoosh sound flooded the cavern.

The gray master spun at the noise, gazed back along the mine shaft that led outside. "Little Italy," he directed the pilot, "hold the sheriff here. The rest of you—find out what caused that noise and deal with it!"

The cold men slowly shuffled out of the room as if they had not detected the urgency in their master's voice. The shaft ahead broke off into a V shape. To the left led toward the mining operation, and to the right, to the makeshift airship hangar. This latter was filled with light and heat. The cold men did not comprehend the airship was on fire!

Abednego Edsel, hidden around the corner in the other shaft, began moving forward as soon as the last of the cold men had passed. As he had snuck along the rocky hills towards the camouflaged shed, he had found no sentries. They had all gone inside after the airship had landed, leaving only the handful of guards out in the fields, some distance from the cavern.

Abe had used the gasoline to get the laminated canvas skin of the airship lit, and then had hurried inside himself. It wouldn't take much of a fire to set the hydrogen in the gas bag—the most flammable element know to man—burning.

After finding that the shaft branched off toward the mining camp, Abe had hidden himself, playing it by ear. When he reached the cavern, he heard voices.

"You'll never get away with this, Gray," said one voice. Of course, Abe thought—that was why he had not seen the old geologist when he'd visited the day before. Shelby Gray was the man behind this evil!

That thought saddened the old man. He and the mining tycoon were not close, but shared the bond of love of the land. But Abe's short reverie was soon interrupted.

Another voice—that of the man in the gray clothing—said, “You won't be so disagreeable in a very short time.”

Abe peeked around the corner. He saw the gray master of the cold men and the two flyers—one of whom was now a zombie himself! He—the pilot of the bi-plane by his clothing—had hold of his partner. Abe knew what that grip was like.

Suddenly, the gray master looked up, through the vent in the top of the cavern. Black smoke wafted past it in thick ropes, blotting out the blue Texas sky above. The mastermind knew what it meant.

“The airship!” he exclaimed. “Little Italy, keep the sheriff here!”

Turning toward the mine shaft leading outside, the gray master saw Abednego. “Edsel!” he exclaimed.

The old geologist had Joe's revolver pointed at the gray master. “That's right, Shelby. And don't speak. I've seen enough to know your zombies only do what you tell them.” Gesturing with the pistol, Abe said, “The four of us are going to walk back to the mining camp.”

“Little –” began the gray master.

“Shut up, Shelby!” shouted old Abe. “Don't make me shoot you.”

“– Italy, get –”

Blam! Abednego shot the gray master in the chest. Wordlessly, he collapsed. He clawed, feebly, at the pant leg of the unmoving Little Italy Cavallo as he died. Although his lips moved, no sound issued forth. And then the gray master was dead.

Keeping a watchful eye on the zombie pilot—just in case he had deduced wrongly—Abe knelt before his old friend, and pulled the bandana from his face. “Martin Berma!”

“Who's that?” Joe asked, still in the grip of the compact pilot. Still weak, he had decided not to test his colleague's resolve.

“Shelby Gray's assistant,” the old geologist said slowly, turning over the possibilities in his mind. “I wonder if Shelby even knew about any of this.”

“He said the mine foreman telephoned him,” offered the Irishman. “Maybe you're right. Let's get out of here before the others get back.”

Old Abe hauled himself to his feet. “I'm afraid not, sheriff.”

Chafing at being held by Little Italy, Joe stuck out his formidable jaw and asked, “Oh? Why not?”

“The last thing he told the others to do was go investigate the fire. They'll likely stay out there until it's over. We can try your friend here . . .

“Little Italy, let go of the sheriff,” Abe commanded. But the pilot did not react to the geologist's voice.

“You're . . . going to have to kill him?” Joe asked, his voice tinged with regret.

“I don't think so,” answered the old man. “I heard Martin Berma say something about ‘rejuvenation’. I think that means the effects will wear off of their own accord after a time; they need to be renewed every so often by re-exposure to the mineral. We don't know how long that will be.”

It took another four days for the last of the cold men to return to normal, with no memory of the sins they'd committed at the behest of their gray master. Shelby Gray, it turned out, had been out of town for more than a week, and knew nothing of the discovery of the mystery mineral. When he heard what had happened, he had the section dynamited, so it could pose no threat in the future.

And Joe Banks got his job as sheriff of Cactus Gulch back.



ET DISC GUN

Alien weapons of death

By Lee Williams

FOR DARK CONSPIRACY

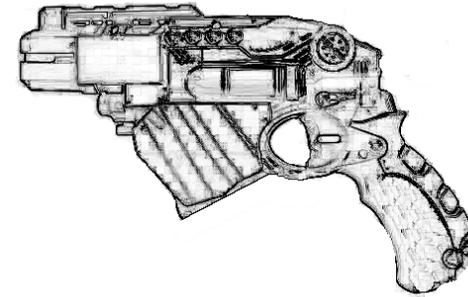
Author's note: *This article was inspired partly by posts on the Dark Conspiracy Facebook group, partly by those toy guns that shoot plastic flying saucers, and partly by the Dolph Lundgren movie Dark Angel aka I Come In Peace.*

ACCORDING TO INTERVIEWS held with the Grey ETs before the *Io Event*, their home world did not have armies or police as we know them. However, they did maintain a special security force for dealing with unexpected threats, both foreign and domestic. The modern Disc Gun is derived from this force's standard sidearm. To human eyes it looks much like a normal handgun, with no alien-looking exterior features. In operation it is a coil gun, using electromagnetism to fire the projectiles. However, its advanced features take things a step further.

The weapon uses wafer-thin metallic discs as ammunition. These are extremely sharp; calling them "razor-sharp" would be an understatement. The discs are spun at high speed which adds to their penetration and lethality. Indeed, the first slash of a flying disc against an opponent's flesh is often painful enough to make them submit. (Difficult [Willpower] task to continue if slashed)

Though the Disc Gun can be used as a normal point and shoot weapon, it also has a special targeting system. Each disc is imprinted with a "guidance chip", which the user can select when firing. This interacts with a magnetic field sensor built into the weapon, which can sense the energy given off by living beings and home in to them. To alter course, the disc uses tiny fluctuations in the local magnetic field. This means a single disc can engage multiple targets within a few meters of each other. A skilled operator can even ruin body armor worn by an opponent without harming them, thereby removing their protection.

Disc Guns are very rare items, currently believed to be used only by special (Insane Grey) ET strike units and the very best grade cyborg assassins.



ET Disc Gun

| ROF | Damage | Pen | Bulk | Mag | Recoil | | Range |
|-----|--------|---------|------|-----|--------|------|-------|
| | | | | | SS | Brst | |
| SA | 4 | 1-1-Nil | 1 | 20 | 2 | - | 15 |

Special: When engaging the multiple hit capability, any subsequent hits after the first must be separately rolled at the original Difficulty level. If the first attack misses no subsequent attacks are possible. The possible effects of any discs that fly wild are up to the referee.

Weight: 1.1 kg

Availability: -/-

REMNANTS

H.G. Wells comes to Call of Cthulhu

By Eric Fabiaschi

FOR CALL OF CTHULHU

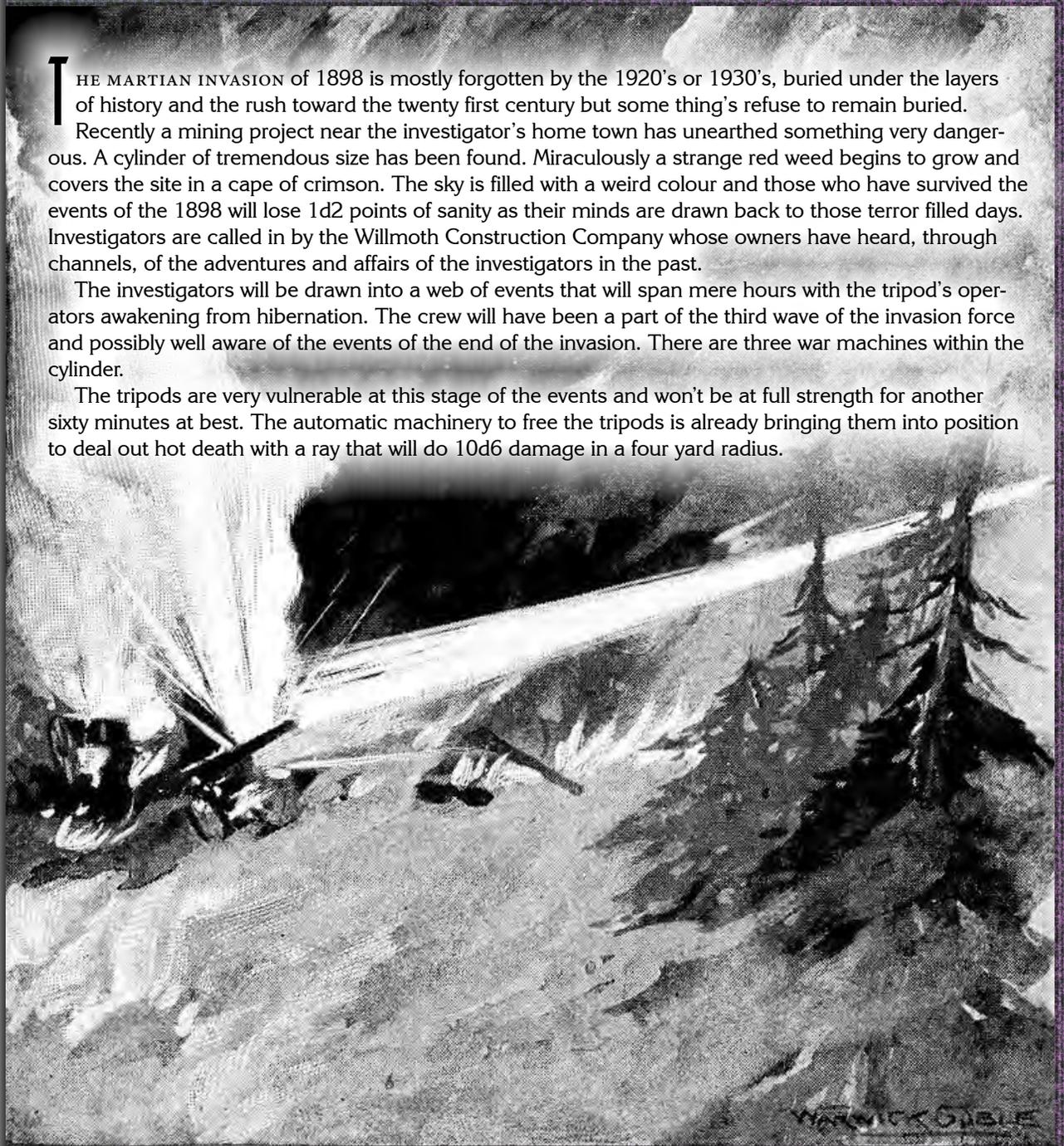
Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.

— H. G. Wells,
The War of the Worlds (1898)

THE MARTIAN INVASION of 1898 is mostly forgotten by the 1920's or 1930's, buried under the layers of history and the rush toward the twenty first century but some things refuse to remain buried. Recently a mining project near the investigator's home town has unearthed something very dangerous. A cylinder of tremendous size has been found. Miraculously a strange red weed begins to grow and covers the site in a cape of crimson. The sky is filled with a weird colour and those who have survived the events of the 1898 will lose 1d2 points of sanity as their minds are drawn back to those terror filled days. Investigators are called in by the Willmoth Construction Company whose owners have heard, through channels, of the adventures and affairs of the investigators in the past.

The investigators will be drawn into a web of events that will span mere hours with the tripod's operators awakening from hibernation. The crew will have been a part of the third wave of the invasion force and possibly well aware of the events of the end of the invasion. There are three war machines within the cylinder.

The tripods are very vulnerable at this stage of the events and won't be at full strength for another sixty minutes at best. The automatic machinery to free the tripods is already bringing them into position to deal out hot death with a ray that will do 10d6 damage in a four yard radius.



MARTIAN WAR MACHINES

| | |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| STR: | 80 |
| SIZ: | 100 |
| DEX: | as per operator |
| Move: | 30 |
| HP: | 120 body, 40 each leg |

Weapons: *Tentacle* 30%, damage 10d3 or grapple; *Heat Ray* 80% 10d6 in a four yard radius; *Black Smoke* 100% POT 25 poison damage death or 1d6

Armor: 30 points. Each point of damage which penetrates the machine's hull gives the device a cumulative 5% chance that it breaks down. The operator takes full damage from any attacks penetrating the outer armor. If one of the tripod legs is reduced to zero hit points then the whole machine topples over and is no longer operational.

Sanity Loss: On first seeing a Tripod is 1d4 points.

The Martian tripods will begin making their way up the side of the pit and become a problem when they reach the top. There are several steam shovels that can be used to trip or destroy the tripods before they leave the pit area. A successful drive roll is needed to move the steam shovel into position and stop the menace from another world.

The operator of the shovel is taking a huge risk as life and limb are going to be under a slowly falling Martian tripod. And should the operator survive they'll be taking on some damage from the alien power source of the tripod. 1d6 points of weird radiation will wash over the steam shovel.

Those Martians that remain in the area will be very aggressive and dangerous, fighting for their lives.



MARTIANS (9)

| | |
|-------|----|
| STR: | 16 |
| CON: | 7 |
| SIZ: | 26 |
| INT: | 16 |
| POW: | 11 |
| DEX: | 16 |
| Move: | 1 |
| HP: | 16 |

Damage Bonus : +2d6

Weapons: *Grapple* 50%, damage special

Armor: None, but all physical weapons do half damage

Sanity Loss: 1/1d8 points for seeing a Martian

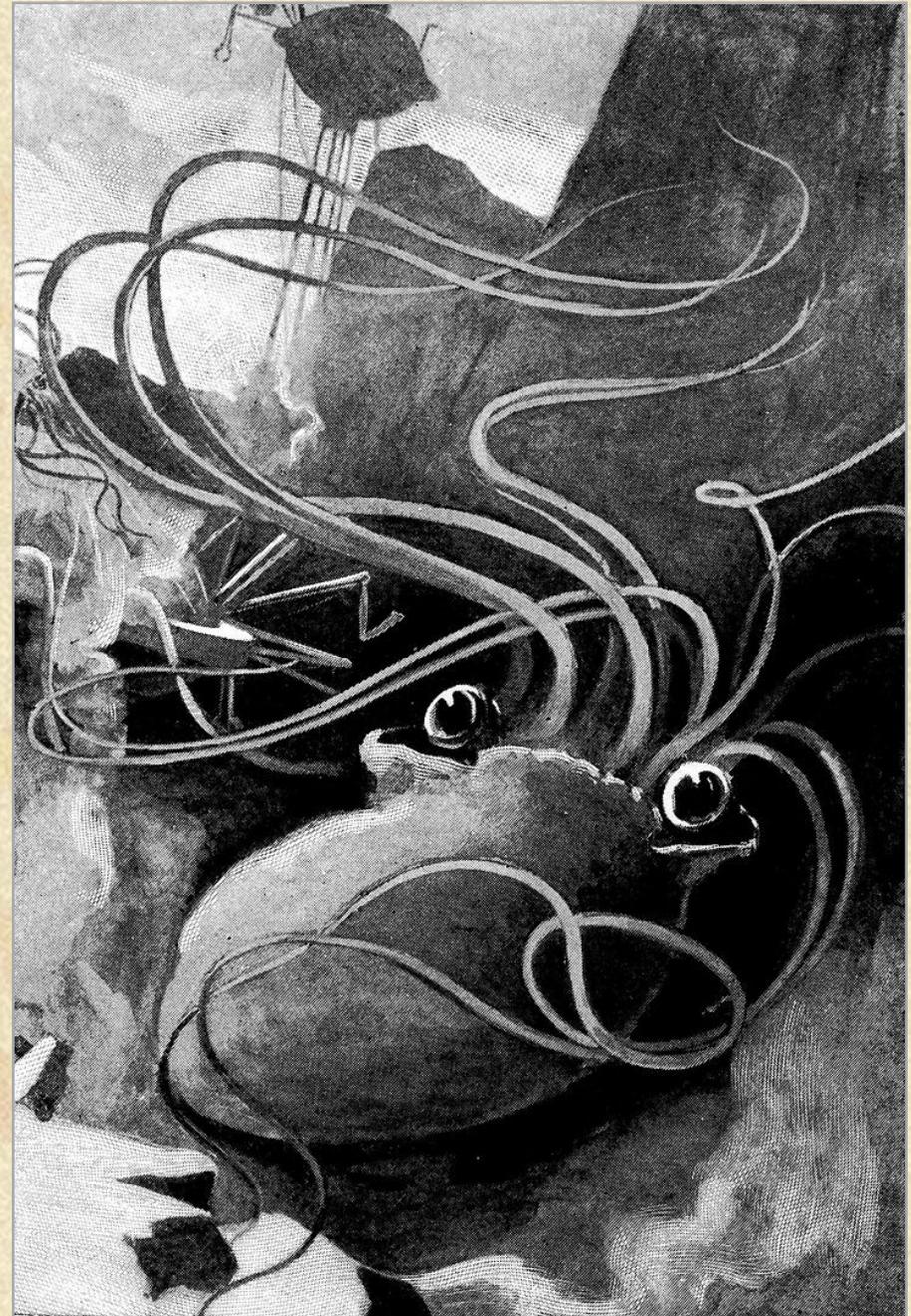
Should the Martians succeed in escaping from the mining pit, they will rampage across the countryside and then in 1d10 days begin the process of trying to contact one of the remaining pyramids that house their twisted kind in suspended animation upon Mars. They will head to capturing the nearest radio station and begin the process of adapting the transmitting equipment to their own needs using the alien science of their kind. This will start the cycle of invasion all over again even though it will take the better part of two years and even if this process means their own deaths . Sacrifice in the face of conquest means little to these horrors from the world of the war god.

Should the investigators succeed in stopping the Martians they will gain 1d8 points of sanity back each. The local military authorities will hush up the entire affair and a cover up will begin under the pretense of a local gas pocket explosion, the gas of course has hallucinogenic properties.

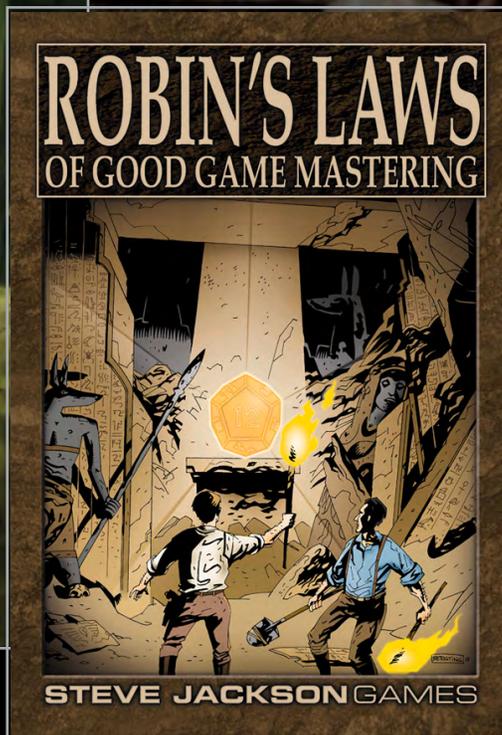
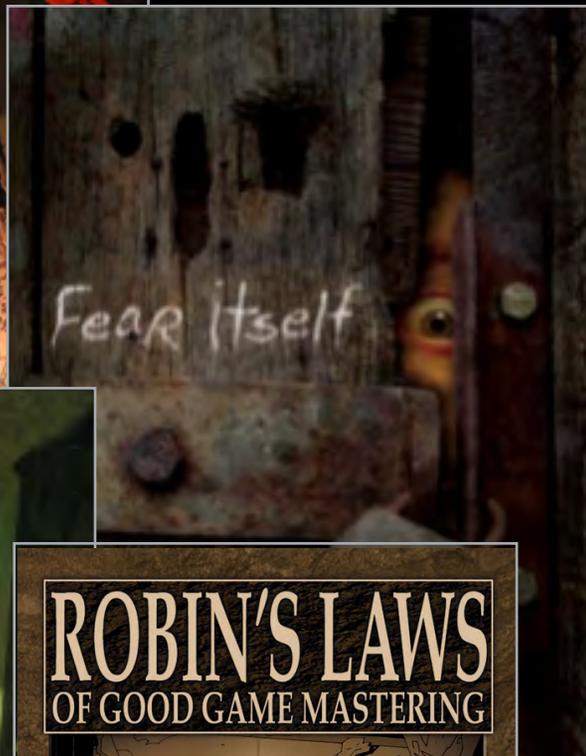
All illustrations come from the War of The Worlds 1898 edition, these can be found here:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:War_of_the_Worlds_%281898%29

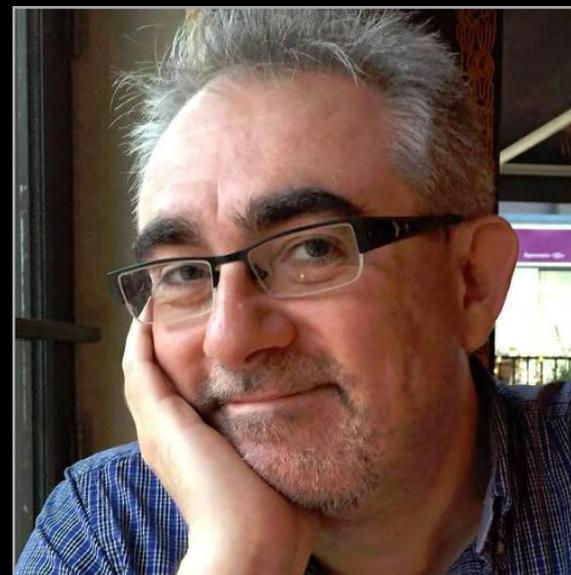
The steam-shovel Image is in the Public Domain



protodimension magazine



ROBIN LAWS



| | |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>Born</i> | Robin D. Laws October 14, 1964 (age 51) Orillia, Ontario, Canada |
| <i>Occupation</i> | Writer, game designer |
| <i>Nationality</i> | Canadian |
| <i>Genre</i> | Horror, fantasy, science fiction |
| <i>Known for</i> | Role playing games, game settings, and novels |
| <i>Website</i> | www.robin-d-laws.blogspot.com/ |

Source: [Wikipedia](#)