

AGAINST THE DARKNESS

JOHN LLEWELLYN PROBERT



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Screaming Dreams

FIRST PPC EDITION

- 2010 -

Published by

Screaming Dreams

25 Heol Evan Wynne, Pontlottyn, Bargoed
Mid Glamorgan, CF81 9PQ, South Wales, UK

www.screamingdreams.com

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ISBN : 978-1-906652-08-1

Printed in Great Britain by the
MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all my thanks to Steve Upham of Screaming Dreams Press for his enthusiasm as regards my plan to expand and revise previously published adventures, write quite a few new ones, and put them all together in the book you are about to read.

The first few stories in this volume first saw print elsewhere and I'm grateful to the editors who accepted them for publication. Thanks therefore go to Terry Fountain (for 'Bother in the Belfry' in *Thriller UK* No.16), Jenny Barber (for 'A Fear of Fitness' in *Here & Now* No. 5&6), Paul Calvin Wilson (for 'Bloodsucking in Berkshire' in *Maelstrom* Volume 1 and 'Horror in the Heavens' in *Lighthouse* No.6) and Gary Fry (for 'The States of the Art' in 'The Faculty of Terror').

As well as the above, I'd also like to thank all the individuals who have shown enthusiasm for the Henderson stories over the years, in particular Alison LR Davies, Paul Finch, Joel Lane, Adriana Capozzi and Gary McMahon.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my Dad, who throughout my life has always been an unending source of bizarre and fascinating bits of information as well as making sure that as he grew up his son received a thorough grounding in British situation comedies and the 'Carry On' films. He also happens to be a mine of quotes and literary miscellany, and when I needed copies of the poems 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God' and Coleridge's 'Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner' he was the one who came up with the goods.

Thanks go as always to Lesley my secretary who reads everything I write, listens to all my ideas, and somehow still seems to enjoy working with me.

Finally, and most important of all, my gratitude to you the reader who, if you have been kind enough to read this list of thank yous, I now reward with the knowledge that anyone reading the notes at the back of this book before they've finished all the stories will set in motion an aeons-old curse that will result in both themselves and all their kin meeting a ghastly fate. You may not believe me but can you honestly afford to take the risk?

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INTRODUCTION: NEW READERS START HERE

(OLD READERS WILL ALREADY KNOW
THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO READ THIS BIT)

A bit of fun. That's all it was, to begin with. A few scribbles on a single sheet of A4, just to pass the time. I never thought it would go as far as this, or that the characters I ended up developing would endear themselves to me sufficiently that I would end up producing an entire book's worth of their adventures, but that's what happened. How is another story entirely.

One weekend a few years ago now I was the on-call surgeon at a hospital in Cornwall and was woken at about 2am with a call to tell me that some young chap had decided to consume the better part of an off licence and then take a trip on his motorbike, which had turned out to be rather shorter than he had presumably intended. The ambulance had just picked as much of him up as it could and was on its way, but because it was quite a distance it would be another hour or so before they got to the hospital.

At a loss as to what to do to pass the time before I would need to go over to casualty my mind began to wander, and for some reason it settled on this thought.

I had always wanted to write a television series.

There was still a fair bit of time to go before I would need to make a move and so I started to play with the idea. What sort of show would I write? How many episodes? Where would it be set? At the time the US TV show 'The X Files' was coming to the end of its run but it was still very popular. I had always thought that a British version of such a programme would work well. I wasn't so interested in the overly-complicated extra-terrestrial government conspiracy plotlines that were eventually the programme's downfall, but with the stand-alone episodes where bizarre goings-on around the country were

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investigated by a personable duo. And for my show to succeed the one thing it could not afford to be was a pale imitation of its US counterpart. Its very Britishness would have to be part of its selling point – something that would make it stand out from the host of poor imitations that were already starting to glut the market.

So that was it – two people who kind of knew what they were doing would find themselves investigating weird goings-on in a different part of the United Kingdom every week. Thirteen episodes, thirteen locations. Something like ‘The Avengers’ meets ‘The X-Files’.
Written by me.

Now bear in mind that at this point in my life I had absolutely no intention of becoming a writer – that all happened a few years later when I realised that it was something I had to do, if only for my own amusement – frustrating, perplexing, sometimes exhilarating occupation that it is. As to what I’ve just told you – the piece of A4 with the thirteen episode locations and the series title went into the bin when I got the phone call from casualty. As to how I came back to that idea, and how all the stories in this book came to be written you can read about in the notes at the back of the book. But that’s how it all started. And in cases you’re wondering why there are only eleven stories here it’s because both ‘Within the Walls’ and ‘An Element of Emotion’ were conceived as two-parters. So now you know.

The stories you are about to read were written over a period of about three years, often providing a little light respite in between lots of other rather more serious stuff. There was never really any conscious effort involved in coming up with new adventures – I never had to force myself to sit down and ‘write another Henderson’. In fact some of these stories were the easiest I have ever committed to paper, each scenario lending itself to the characters. Out of all the stories here only one made it to being about half-finished with two entirely different leads until I realised that my detectives would make a much better job of it.

Oh, and for the record, the character of Mr Henderson is not based on, or meant to be me, although we do share certain characteristics and affectations which are described in more detail in the ‘About the Author’ section at the back of the book. Samantha, on the other hand, is I am sure influenced by a number of women I have had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of during my life, some of whom I know

for a fact will be reading this. Because the stories were originally planned as a TV series a number of friends and colleagues have made suggestions as to who might be suitable to play them on the small screen. Of course I have my own ideas but I'm not telling, at least not at the moment. If anyone reading this would like to make their own suggestions let me know through www.johnlprobert.com and if the responses are sufficiently interesting I'll post them on the page devoted to this book.

Anyway, a train is just leaving a tiny railway station in North Wales, bound for the home of a quite extraordinary individual, and I don't want you missing it so it's time to wind up this little preamble with a rather more formal introduction, one of which Mr Henderson my paranormal investigator would approve, and one which would cause his beautiful assistant Miss Samantha Jephcott to raise her eyes heavenwards.

Ladies and gentlemen, presented here for your delectation and amusement are eleven mysteries, eleven extraordinary cases that will be investigated by a girl dressed in black and a man who has far too many boating blazers and velvet smoking jackets in his wardrobe. They will tackle the tasks set them with panache, perspicacity, occasional perplexity, and a fair bit of running away very quickly, but be assured that they are better suited than anyone else to deal with all the sea monsters, vampires, zombies, soul suckers, monstrous brides and ghouls that they are about to encounter, even if one of them doesn't know it yet.

But enough of this alliteration. I sincerely hope that the stories you are about to read will scare you, thrill you, but most of all entertain you because, like I said at the start of this introduction,

It's all a bit of fun.

“In case you’re wondering, I certainly wouldn’t consider myself to be what you might term one of those ‘hardboiled’ detectives”

M Henderson

“But quite often he’s slightly scrambled”

S Jephcott

BOTHER IN THE BELFRY

The world is full of unbelievable things. Some are wondrous, some so terrible that were the inexperienced to learn of them they would never be able to cope with the knowledge, much less view the world in the same way ever again. Most of us are fortunate enough to live out our lives without ever encountering what one might consider to be true evil. Then there are those who have dedicated themselves to trying to prevent that evil from harming others. And almost all the battles between the forces of light and the forces of darkness take place, almost all of the time, without the world at large being any the wiser.

The little steam engine puffed and wheezed as it made its laborious way up the steep incline towards the summit of the mountain. The sole occupant of its single carriage had a secret, one that played upon his mind as he gazed out over the bleak, gloomy, swiftly darkening Welsh landscape. Even though the windows were coated with grime and spattered with raindrops, Henry Walters could still discern the lights from the tiny station halt at which he had left his car following the three hour drive from Bristol to North Wales. Realising he was clutching the handle of his leather briefcase so tightly that the knuckles of his right hand were white, he tried to relax. He shifted his position on the bare boards that passed for a seat and was rewarded with a worrying creaking noise that put a stop to any further fidgeting. To pass the time he flipped open the brass clasp of his hand luggage and took out the letter which had led to his current situation. The crest at the top of the paper consisted of a complicated symbol incorporating a dark blue dragon, a scimitar, and something which looked like the nib of a fountain pen. Below this, written in green ink

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which had doubtless flowed from an expensive fountain pen, were the following words:

My Dear Mr Walters,

Your request for assistance has been brought to my attention and I feel that your particular problem may be of interest to me. You are therefore required to present yourself to the railway station of the village of Llanbedwr in North Wales at 8:00pm precisely on July 14th. From there transport will be arranged, such that all being well we should meet face to face within an hour of your departure from the station. I would be most grateful if you could bring with you all documents pertaining to your problem. I shall also be requiring a detailed account of events leading up to your present predicament, and you may find it useful to have made a few notes as an aide mémoire before you come to see me.

*I remain (the funds in your account permitting),
Your most obedient servant,
M Henderson.*

The signature was surprisingly neat and legible. Walters refolded the letter and replaced it in his briefcase by the side of a written account of his 'present predicament' and various items of evidence which he thought would be useful in backing up his story. These included a black-and-white photograph of a pretty-looking little church, an envelope full of coarse black hair and a corked test-tube full of cloudy amber fluid.

A further fifteen minutes passed during which the sky grew darker and the rain began to hammer against the glass. Finally the slow jerking and bouncing which passed for forward motion ceased, the door to the carriage opened and a voice called out in a thick guttural Welsh accent,

"End of the line, Mr Walters."

Walters gathered his things together and stepped out of the carriage onto the rocky path that served as a platform. The engine

driver, a stocky man of Celtic build in his early forties who presumably acted as both guard and conductor, gestured to a small winding path that led away into the darkness.

"Am I supposed to walk?" shouted Walters above the wind.

"It's not far," came the reply from the driver, who had already climbed back aboard his stubby little steam engine. "But don't leave the path - it took us a couple of weeks to find the last one who went wandering off on his own."

"What do you mean a couple of weeks?" cried Walters. But the train was already making its way, at a considerably greater speed than it had come, back down the mountain.

Walters, who normally didn't swear, mentally let fly a string of expletives before making his way along what amounted to little more than a sheep track, his only source of light being the rather feeble torch the engine driver had thrust into his hand as he had stepped down from the train.

He had only been walking for two or three minutes when the path made a sharp right hand turn and he found himself ascending a steep incline. At the top he got his first view of the house that he presumed was his destination.

The mansion was vast, almost a castle, and looked to Henry as if it had been built into the mountainside before him. The little path on which he was standing led to an open gate set into a fence of iron railings ten feet high and crowned with serrated metals spikes presumably intended to act as a deterrent to all but the most perseverant of intruders. Beyond the gate the path continued, paved and lit, along the right hand boundary wall that bordered the vast acreage of the mansion's overgrown front garden. Before he entered, Walters glanced to his left. Further along the fence he could just make out a much larger pair of wrought iron gates which opened onto a broad road that must have gone on to wind down the opposite side of the mountain. He made his way down the path, making a left turn so that he skirted the front of the house and eventually found himself standing before a huge oak door. The centrally-placed brass knocker was fashioned in the same shape as the crest on the letter. On the second knock the door swung open and Henry was greeted by a slightly tousled man of medium build dressed in a black suit and open-collar white shirt on which a few drops of something brown had

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been spilled.

"Mr Walters?" Henry nodded. "If you would be good enough to step this way, Mr Henderson is expecting you."

The drawing room was to the right of the candlelit entrance hall, its walls panelled in oak similar to that from which the front door had been fashioned. Opposite the doorway through which Henry had been shown, thick red curtains had been drawn across the windows that overlooked the grounds at the front of the house. To Walters' left was a fireplace in which a few logs smouldered, keeping the room at a comfortable temperature.

"Please take a seat, sir, and I'll let Mr Henderson know that you're here."

Walters sat in one of the two richly-upholstered red velvet-covered armchairs facing the fire. He leaned closer, and was so engrossed in warming himself that twenty minutes later he failed to notice a figure make its silent entrance behind him.

"So, Mr Walters," said the man who had entered the room, "I'm glad to see that you are making yourself comfortable!"

Henry turned to see the same individual who had answered the door, although now he was dressed rather more smartly.

"Is Mr Henderson not here?" Henry asked.

The man's smile was warm, his expression mischievous.

"I *am* Mr Henderson, investigator of paranormal occurrences, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Henry felt confused as he half-heartedly shook the man's outstretched hand.

"But you're the butler!"

"No," was the reply. "Despite the fact that this house is rather grand the part I actually use is quite small and the staff required for its maintenance minimal. Certainly I have no need of them during the hours of darkness, and on past experience I have found it to be safer for all concerned if they are gone before sundown. You will, I hope, forgive my indulgence of posing as my own butler, but it does give me the opportunity to turn away those to whom I cannot offer help without offending them."

"You mean those completely without hope?"

The man claiming to be Henderson shook his head.

"No-one is entirely without hope, Mr Walters, and I would never

dream of turning someone away simply on the grounds that their predicament appeared to be hopeless. Such circumstances seldom are anyway. No, what I mean is that from time to time I find myself in the curious and really quite inappropriate position of being asked to locate lost kittens, misplaced items of jewellery and other minor tasks best suited to individuals with greater experience in that area than I."

Now satisfied that this was indeed the man he had come to see, Henry Walters took the opportunity to study him more closely. The self-proclaimed 'investigator of paranormal occurrences' was of medium height, probably in his late thirties, and was dressed in a blue serge single breasted suit (unbuttoned) and navy blue shirt, the cuffs of which were held together with sapphire-tipped cufflinks. Around his neck was a silver tie, the knot of which was immaculate and precisely central. The neatness of his apparel was offset by a shock of brown hair which looked as if neither hairbrush nor comb could tame it. His blue eyes sparkled in the light from the flickering flames.

"I do hope you're feeling a little warmer now," he said.

"Oh yes, thank you," said Henry. "I was rather chilly after that walk in the rain and—"

"Yes, I must apologise for that. I usually pick people up in the car from Llanbedwr station but unfortunately it's been giving us a bit of trouble and has had to go off to the menders. Luckily Meillir Jenkins runs the local mountain railway tourist trips and he's owed me a favour ever since I sorted out a case of steam possession for him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"One of the nastier elements to live in one of the submerged caves a fair way up on the other side of the mountain decided to take up residence in the boiler of his steam engine. As I'm sure you can understand this caused untold problems when he tried to conduct his normal business, particularly as once these things get warm enough they tend to grow at an exponential rate. The creature in question was disposed of in due course by my good self using a special mixture of herbs, a passage from an ancient Welsh text, and the use of my car as a battering ram. Would you like a glass of port?"

Walters shook his head with all the caution of someone very worried that the person with whom he is conversing is suddenly going to become even more manic.

"Ah, well. There's some in the decanter on the sideboard behind

you should you care for some. I would offer you some tea but I can't find the kettle at the moment. Anyway, I thought that this would be an ideal opportunity for Mr Jenkins to repay, at least in part, my little favour."

Henderson motioned for Walters to sit and then took up a position in the remaining vacant chair. Walters looked uncomfortable as the detective spoke again.

"I received your letter regarding the problem you've been having down in the village of...what was it again?"

"Porchesbury."

"That's right. Near Bristol if I'm not mistaken? Take the Aust road off the M48 just after you've gone across the old Severn Bridge? Good. I thought it would be more appropriate if we had a face to face consultation. Telephone calls and emails are all very well but I find them so impersonal and not always that private. Now, what is it that's bothering you?"

"Bats," Mr Walters ejaculated, looking glum.

"Bats, eh?"

"Well, probably. At least one, that's for certain."

Henderson took a gold-plated fountain pen from his inside pocket and began to tap it against his front teeth.

"I presume you are not referring to any species commonly found within the confines of these isles?"

"Oh no," Mr Walters cleared his throat. "This one's much bigger than any that one might, er, commonly encounter."

Henderson got to his feet and poured himself a glass of port from the crystal decanter.

"Are you sure you won't have one?" he asked.

"Could I possibly have some milk?" said Henry, whose indigestion had been playing up ever since he had boarded that bus/train. Henderson shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but unfortunately we had a nasty episode once where it was misused by a black magician who came to me pretending to be a client in search of his lost cat. I therefore now make it a rule that anything with magical properties be kept under lock and key."

It transpired that over the last few weeks the village of Porchesbury, where Henry Walters had lived all his life, had been terrorised by a series of peculiar attacks. Sheep had disappeared, a

cow had been discovered disembowelled one morning, and while no human beings had been harmed, there had been several sightings of a large winged creature on clear nights.

"And what exactly makes you think that a bat is responsible?"

Walters looked pained.

"Well...what else could it be?"

"An owl," said Henderson, "or some other nocturnal bird of prey."

"Well whatever it is we think it's decided to take up residence at St Bartholomew's church."

It appeared that the congregation had recently been subjected to several strange interruptions during Sunday service. Twittering, rustling noises had been heard, particularly after the bell was rung. Walters showed Henderson the photograph he had brought with him.

"Charming," said the investigator. "So that's it is it? You think you have a bat living in your local church?"

Henry looked even more uncomfortable.

"Well, things are not quite as straightforward as you might think."

Henderson took another sip from his glass.

"They seldom are, Mr Walters, they seldom are."

Henry had volunteered to come up to North Wales because he was concerned that his brother, Martin, might be involved in what had been happening. Martin Walters worked for Phellanbrine Industries, at their plant five miles from Porchesbury. Henry knew that his brother had been involved in research, but of exactly what kind he didn't know. What mattered now was that he had not heard from Martin in three months. Usually they communicated every four weeks or so, and when it transpired that their parents in Southampton had not heard from him either, Henry had visited Martin's flat. He had a key because when his brother had to go abroad to conferences Henry would pop in and feed his animals, a collection of hamsters and rabbits of which there seemed to be more every time Henry visited. A fine coating of dust over the usually highly polished surfaces had betrayed the fact that Martin had not been there for some time. With trepidation Henry had checked the back room where Martin kept his pets. They had all been removed, along with their cages. The only evidence that they had ever been there was the faint odour of rodent in the air. Henry had conducted a thorough search before calling the police. The only thing he had found was the collection of coarse hairs

he had brought with him.

The tube of amber fluid had been the result of a small expedition into the roof of the church. He, the Reverend Norman Parslow, and Stanford Waterman, the verger, had climbed up into the bell tower following one particularly noisy ceremony. They had found nothing untoward except for a large collection of torn-up newspapers in one corner.

"No-one said outright that it was a nest," he said, "but that was what we were all thinking."

The torn up newspapers were soaked. Henry had pulled on a pair of stout rubber gloves before attempting to wring out the sodden newspapers, and had managed to half fill the container he had brought with him. Unsurprisingly, he lacked the facilities to analyse what it was but had brought it with him anyway in the hope that it might be of some help. Henderson held the tube up to the light.

"What do you think it is?"

"Bat urine, of course," said Walters without hesitation. "What else could it be?"

"A hundred and one things. Chemistry is a hobby of mine, one which due to my financial situation I have been able to indulge such that I have a fairly well-equipped laboratory at the rear of the house. If you leave this with me I'll see if I can find out what it is, if I may."

Walters looked hopeful.

"Then you'll take on the case?"

Henderson made a pyramid from the tips of his fingers.

"Let's just say that I'm interested. But before I commit myself I ought to let you know that my rates are quite high and don't include expenses."

Walters produced an envelope from his inside jacket pocket.

"Well, the members of our parish have made a small collection which, of course, would normally go towards our Third World project in the village of Ktumbo in Kenya."

Henderson grinned and waved him away.

"Please, Mr Walters, you don't need to worry about that. After I have made an assessment of the potential expenses on this case, I promise to make a charge which will not overly inconvenience your funds."

It was three days before Henry Walters heard from the paranormal detective again and when he did it was in the unexpected form of a telephone call from Bristol Parkway station, asking if he wouldn't very much mind picking Henderson up as it would seem his car was going to take a little longer to repair than he had previously thought. Due to its use in the case he had mentioned to Henry, the engine needed to be replaced and several parts of the bodywork were still having the scorch marks attended to. As they drove back to Porchesbury Henderson explained that the fluid had turned out to be urine from a species of rodent but couldn't be narrowed down any further than that. As for the hairs, they were simply human.

"Presumably your brother had his hair cut at home before he left," he said as they passed the vast complex of steel cylinders and pipes which Walters identified as the Phellanbrine research plant. Once they had left the heavily industrialised area they found themselves driving down a pleasant country lane and were soon in the village. Walters explained that he had very little room at his own house, and so he had booked Henderson a room at the village pub.

The Rose and Crown's free licence meant that it served a variety of real ales, and from the smell it seemed that most of them had ended up on the floor at some point or other. Henderson was led upstairs by a tubby, uncommunicative landlord to a tiny room overlooking the main street. There was barely room for his suitcase, which he squeezed next to the lopsided wardrobe. He found the bathroom at the other end of the corridor. It consisted of lavatory, basin, and a cramped shower cubicle with a healthy growth of mildew around the base. Henderson paused only to lock his room before rejoining Walters outside. Their next stop was St Bartholomew's church, for which they had to drive the length of the village's main street and back out into the countryside for two minutes before coming across the little stone building. As Henderson got out of the car he could hear the sound of waves crashing against rocks. Waiting for them at the lichgate was Norman Parslow, who introduced himself and with a beaming smile led Henderson into the churchyard.

"We are very grateful to you for consenting to help us with our little problem, Mr Henderson."

"Not at all, vicar. After all, you and I try and achieve the same aim, albeit through different modus operandi. I must say I had no idea that

this village was so near the sea."

The vicar nodded.

"Oh yes, indeed. Would you care to, uh, see, as it were?"

A path led from a gate in the rear wall through a small copse of trees and out onto a promontory approximately fifty feet long and covered with short well-kept grass. Henderson walked to the far end and found himself looking over a substantial drop to the sea below.

"It's not really the sea, of course," explained Parslow, who had followed him. "It's still the estuary. The sea proper is a little further out. It's at least a hundred feet down to those rocks down there."

Henderson took a step back.

"Don't you worry that children might come here to play and venture over the edge?" he asked.

Another smile.

"The few children we have in Porchesbury know better than to go wandering about behind the church. But anyway, I mustn't keep you here chatting. Presumably you would like to see inside?"

They returned to the front of the building where Parslow opened the heavy oak door with a large iron key. The vicar gave Henderson a short tour of the unremarkable building, explaining the absence of altar decorations as being due to the persistent efforts of local vandals.

"Anything they can't take, they destroy," he said. "I have to keep anything of value locked up in the vestry. Now – you'll be wanting to have a look inside the bell tower."

The belfry was accessed by a stone spiral staircase at the back of the church which quickly opened out onto a wooden platform above which the church's solitary bell hung.

"We have no bell ringers here and the expense of maintaining more than one is sadly outside our means," said Parslow apologetically. Henderson's attention, meanwhile, had been distracted by what was lying in the corner.

It was, as Walters had described to him, a mass of torn up newspaper, damp, with an evil-smelling yellow fluid seeping from its underside.

"Most interesting," said Henderson, stroking his chin.

"What do you think could have made it?" asked Walters.

"Well," said Henderson scratching his head. "This is all going to sound a little difficult to believe, but it's just possible that your

brother, Mr Walters, may have carried his experiments a little too far. So far, in fact, that he may have experimented on himself."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said the Reverend.

"Really?" said Henderson, looking surprised. Usually he had a terrible problem convincing people that there were more things in heaven and earth than ever made it into the daily tabloid newspapers.

"Absolutely," said Henry. "After all, it's exactly what we wanted you to think."

In fact their deception had been so successful that the detective failed to anticipate the Reverend Norman Parslow hit him over the back of the head with a large-print version of the 'New English Hymnal'.

Henderson awoke to find himself lying on the grassy promontory. A light breeze was blowing and night had fallen. He craned his head to look around him and saw that he was surrounded by nearly forty people. He pulled himself to his feet, and as he did so he became aware of an appalling smell coming from the estuary. Those who were standing at the cliff's edge slowly parted to give access to the thing that was making its way out of the water. A cluster of long, thick tentacles snaked their way onto the grass where they were being held onto tightly by some of the villagers, allowing the creature sufficient purchase to heave its oily black body up onto the promontory. It regarded Henderson through a myriad tiny black eyes. Thick blubbery lips retracted over three rows of pointed teeth and there was a horrid gurgling noise as the creature drew breath to speak. But Henderson got in before it.

"Hello, Aldiazon," he said in as disinterested a voice as he could manage.

"Henderson," rasped the thing. Its voice sounded like a foghorn in serious need of repair.

"I suppose you've arranged all of this for my benefit?"

"Not your benefit," said the creature. "Mine."

"I see. Still smarting after that little encounter with my car I suppose?"

"To employ such a device was mundane. To drive it straight through me was unforgivable."

Henderson rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I even made sure that I embedded writings from the fourth book

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of Arrandorf into the bodywork. Which makes me wonder why you're here at all."

"That is of no concern to you. All you need be aware of is that it is time for you to die."

Henderson began to walk backwards, his eyes never leaving the elephantine creature.

"I have to say I'm quite impressed," he said. "How did you manage to get all these people to go along with you? It must have taken a tremendous effort on your part."

The creature made a belching noise which presumably passed for laughter.

"The control of the minds of a few paltry villagers is easily within my power, as you well know. I have been cultivating those gathered here to serve my will for many years for just such an occasion as this."

Henderson could not resist giving a little bow.

"Well I must say that I'm flattered, even if I don't understand why you couldn't have just crawled back out of that submerged cave where I left you in North Wales and come knocking on my door."

The beast belched again and Henderson was almost knocked over by the overwhelming rancid odour of its breath.

"You are too powerful there. Underground currents took me from that cave to the coast. From there I was able to make my way to this place, where the forces on which you might call are so much weaker. I then had to contrive a means of getting you here."

"Yes, I suppose I should have guessed that such a clichéd story couldn't possibly be true. But you see I'm such a kind-hearted individual that I just had to come."

"You are a gullible individual, Mr Henderson," wheezed the creature. "And you will never leave."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Henderson, and signalled to the trees. The headlights of his old roadster beamed bright as Meillir Jenkins accelerated forwards. The creature was furious.

"Full speed ahead, Mr Jenkins, if you don't mind!" shouted Henderson. The Welsh train driver who felt he had now more than repaid the debt he owed the detective drove at full speed towards the mass of jelly. The creature barely had time to roar its disappointment as the fender struck one of its tentacles. There was a blinding flash of light and an appalling fishy smell. When the smoke had cleared so had

the villagers, and the promontory was host to just two men and one classic car. The motor was still running as Henderson approached.

"I really must apologise for imposing on you Mr Jenkins, but at least it would appear that this time I was right. I knew that either one or the other incantation was required to vanquish the beastie but unfortunately I got it wrong last time. However, that looks as if it's done the trick. After all the car's untouched, just like the book said any weapon covered in the right words would be."

"It's a bloody long way down here, you know," Jenkins grumbled. "And the road works on the M5 were terrible. I suppose you want me to drive us back now."

"Oh no," said Henderson. "It's a lovely evening and it's only a few hours to get back home. You just relax and let me take the wheel."

Very much later the following morning a breakdown truck dropped them off at Henderson's mansion before taking the car back to Price's auto repairs. Barry Price, son of Wilfred Price who had started the business many years ago, was amazed they had managed to drive even a few miles, seeing as the new engine he had fitted was filled with what he could only describe as fish paste.

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