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Black Marlin

A Novel By Ben R. Williams

Chapter XI: He and His Chimney

We approached the great house with no small amount of trepidation. The immensity of the home, coupled with its mystery, called to mind an occasion when I visited a small Southern town and rented a room at a boarding house. The rent was quite affordable, owing, no doubt, to the enormous water-tower positioned directly behind the home. The leaky tower blotted out the western sun, and while I attempted to frequently join my fellow boarders (the friendliest dipsomaniac widowers you would ever care to meet!) in idle back-porch evening chatter, my tongue was often stayed by a sense of impending doom caused by the vertigo-inducing effect of imagining that vast quantity of water, suspended by the frailest of structures, waiting patiently to come crashing down and wash us all away. The island manor instilled that same anxiety within me, though to an even more frightening extent: while the condemnable tower-cistern promised "death by water," there was no way of knowing what danger lay in wait inside the peeling walls of that mysterious, isolated spook-house.

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Our Exploratory Team stood before the home's door, painted an unappealing shade of green reminiscent of the scum-foam that washes up on a beach. We glanced from one man to the next, waiting to see who would make the first move. Nary a bird sang nor cricket chirruped.

"The question, I suppose," Mr. Pincus said, "Is which man among us be bold enough to knock upon yon door, and, in doing so, summon the home's owner."

"This is the question," Captain Bill agreed.

"We could select the knocker by rank, the lowest ranked man, of course, being the knocker. In this case, Nine would surely be given the job. We could also choose by age; again, Nine would be our ordained knock-smith. For purposes of fairness, we might also choose by name, though a vote would have to be cast to determine whether first or last name would be utilized, and also whether the man who comes first alphabetically would be appointed, or whether the last-

"Jesus, you pussies," Mulligan said, and strode up to the door, and rapped thrice with the butt of his pistol.

The knocks hung in the air like thistle-puffs. Five seconds passed; ten; fifteen.

"Mayhap the feller ain't home," Nine gargled.

It was at this point that two things happened simultaneously. The first, a third-story window swung open, and out leaned a boy, no more than twelve, dark-complected and hollow-eyed, with a Peabody rifle gripped tight in his hands, the rifle's barrel trained on Captain Bill's head. The second, a small shutter slid open on the front door, and through that shutter came the barrel of a large shotgun, perhaps a ten-gauge, aimed squarely at Mulligan.

"What's your purpose here?" asked a creaky voice from behind the door.

Mr. Pincus approached the door slowly, hands raised above his head in supplication. "Good sir," he said, "I assure you our intentions are wholly noble and Christian, and I can further assure you, by the power vested within me as a certified barrister, notary public, and, most importantly, United States consul, that neither I nor my associates mean you any harm. We are men of peace, and all we seek is information."

"Some might argue," the dusty voice replied, "That information is the most valuable commodity there is."

"And they would be right to do so; the trading of information buys my 'bread and butter,' as they say, not to mention the bone china under it."

"Are you a Jew?"

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A long pause.

"Say 'no,'" Weems muttered.

"I am an honest man," Mr. Pincus said, a bead of sweat glinting at his receding hairline, "And in the interest of honesty, I will confirm your suspicions: yes, good sir, I am a Semite, though my associates are all gentiles, and I hope that, depending upon your personal beliefs, their willing association with me will speak to my good character while not detracting from theirs."

From behind the door came a sharp whistling, and the boy with the Peabody retreated back inside the home, shuttering the window as he went. The shotgun, meanwhile, slid back through the opening in the door.

"Come in," the old voice said, and the click of a lock greeted my ears. Mulligan opened the door and stepped inside, and the rest of the Exploratory Team morosely followed his lead.

If one were to observe a blueprint of that odd island home, it might resemble a square wheel, the great cylinder of the chimney being the hub and the interior walls representing spokes. This strange architectural combination—the right angles of the exterior walls and the 45 degree angles of those on the interior—created the

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sensation that the walls were closing in, grinding the home's inhabitants together as the walls of a bovine stomach digest sweet grass. An additional consequence of this design was that there was not a single room in the house where the chimney could not be seen, and the acute nature of the interior angles drew the eye directly towards said chimney. Indeed, my earlier observation regarding the home built as an afterthought to the chimney was made more pointed: the home seemed to be, in fact, a celebration of the chimney, as a museum celebrates the art within it.

The home's décor was less odd, though perhaps its milder impression was a result of its Spartan nature. The floors were bare wood; the furniture antique; the paintings bland landscapes (all depicting various views seen from the island). There were lanterns hung at intervals, but these were cob-webbed, likely due to a dearth of oil; home-made candles dotted the tables, the wax likely supplied by an apiary somewhere on the island. The overall effect was one of profound asceticism.

We found the old man in the great room, a cavernous den which overlooked the home's back yard. He was seated in an overstuffed wingback chair next to the chimney's hearth. He was quite old, perhaps in his eighties, though clearly still cogent and sprightly, as is the good fate of all too

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few lucky old souls. His head was either bald or shaved; the dome gleamed in the afternoon light. A white beard hung down to his belly. His clothes were simple and clearly home-made, dyed a regal purple the shade of polk-berries (which was, I suppose, the most likely source of the dye). The dark boy stood at his side (I suspected him to be Spanish or Portuguese, but his true race remained elusive barring further phrenological study), arms dangling limply, though his hollow eyes studied us intelligently and territorially, as a well-trained Mastiff will never look away from an intruder in his master's home.

"Be seated, please," the old man said, and as we seated ourselves in the ragged overstuffed couches which surrounded the hearth, the old man looked squarely at me, and it was at this moment I saw the yellow cataracts which obscured his pupils. My God, he's blind as a bat, I thought, or so I thought, because in my startlement I actually said it aloud.

"Indeed," the old man said, his voice quite nearly muffled by the creaking springs as our group of six settled into his furniture. "But it is no matter; my world is small, and I know it by heart. You could name any stone on this island, describe to me its texture, I'd find it in a flash. But at the moment, I need not find stones; I must

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find my manners. I am Abram Graber by name, though I hear it uttered so often it means little to me these days. I apologize for your cold reception; an old blind man cannot be too careful."

Pincus eased forward in his seat next to the Captain, hands propped on the silver head of his cane. "Of course, Mr. Graber. It is quite understandable, and we take no offense. I could easily imagine that many unsavory types might attempt to find a berth at your doorstep, which is, in fact, what brings us here—"

I heard the wet pop of a cork exiting the neck of a bottle, and turned to see the good Captain imbibing a bit of liquor from one of the many bottles concealed in his tattered coat.

"Dear sir," Mr. Graber said, his blank eyes locked on Captain Bill, "Must you drink demon rum in my home?"

The Captain swallowed guiltily, staring at the humped floorboards. "Respectfully, sir, I find that my poor old soul is so lonesome that it requires constant companionship, and the company of a demon is better than no company at all."

"Tell me, do you suffer the delirium tremens? Do your hands shake after a few hours without drink?"

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"The moment I go a few hours without drink," the Captain said, "I will report back, sir."

Graber tilted back his head and chuckled mirthlessly. "This corrupt new world," he said, "I can smell it all over you fellows. Liquor. Whores. Tobacco. Money. I expect hell smells quite similar. I don't judge you fellows, no; I pity you, but I do not judge. By all means, indulge in your vices inside my home. I know all too well how much you must need their support."

Captain Bill passed the bottle around and rolled a cigarette; Mulligan packed his pipe.

"I suppose you wonder how the boy and I came to live on this island. I suppose you wonder what we do here. Before we go further, I shall reveal all."

Mulligan slid his briar from between his teeth. "That isn't necess--"

"It was sixty years ago," Graber said. "I was but a young man, just twenty-two. I made my living in New York City. New York City! The words taste like a mouthful of sour milk. What a hideous den of grotesqueries! The factories stretched to the horizon; the smoke blotted out the sun. No one was well; we were all dying slowly, our only respite being the filth and drink and dark pleasures available at every corner. A penny could buy any man a



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night's worth of sin; a nickel could buy enough entertainment to kill him. Perhaps it was better that way. For some. But not for me, fellows, not for me. I was no whore-monger, no village drunkard; I was a Christian.

"It was a bleak time, friends, but it is during our bleakest times when fortune most often smiles upon us. One day, as I left my job at the shirt-waist factory, I passed a small building, quite unassuming, not church-like in the least, yet I heard echoing from within the sounds of worship. I passed through the doorway and saw a man, a great bearded fellow, seven feet tall if an inch, riding the pulpit. He spoke to his congregation with force and assuredness, the supreme confidence of a gentleman who has found the true path. He spoke not of Christ, but of the old times, the prediluvian days, of simplification and asceticism. And as I sat down in the back of that simple church, I had a moment of grace. I understood his message, down to my bones. It was the message I had hunted for fruitlessly, the message that I had always known in my heart yet been afraid to speak aloud. The true believer could not co-exist with the tainted masses of New York City. The only path to spiritual enlightenment was a rejection of the new world and a return to the ways of old.

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"The church met five times weekly. I missed nary a gathering. There were twelve of us, the preacher included. Our immediate goal was to leave the city. Our order could not survive there, any more than a flower can grow in a snow-bank. One member of the congregation was quite affluent; he found this island, purchased it, and emptied his coffers building this home upon it. Our twelve moved in immediately. I have not seen the main land since; for the last ten years, I've seen nothing at all.

"Of course, you notice that there are not twelve remaining here. The preacher was the first to pass, the cause nothing more than old age. Our benefactor, the home's builder, died shortly thereafter. A few others passed over the subsequent years; some simply grew tired of the simple life and sailed away. Yet I remained, always remained, studying the ancient texts, worshipping in the old ways. For many years, I lived here alone. And then, just a year ago, the boy washed up on the island. He was clinging to the smallest piece of driftwood, all but dead. I took him in, warmed him by the fire, fed him rabbit stew. Perhaps you saw my rabbit-hutch; the rabbits have grown a bit odd over time, yet the meat has thankfully not suffered. At any rate, I nursed the boy back to health, and he has since become my right hand. He does not speak; I do not even know

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his name. Yet he is a good soul, and I trust he will guard this paradise long after I'm gone.

"This is my story, gentlemen. I am nothing more than an old anchorite trying to keep the spark of the past alive while the present occasionally arrives to rap upon my door with pistols drawn."

"Sorry about that," Captain Bill said, grinding out his cigarette beneath his boot.

"A wonderful tale, Mr. Graber," Pincus said. "And we do apologize for disturbing you. We will leave you to your studies forthwith, yet before we depart, we must ask you a question-"

"Boy!" Graber barked, "To the kitchen! Eight bowls of stew!"

The boy strode from the room wordlessly. Graber smiled.

"All will be revealed in due time. I make it a policy to never discuss business matters prior to the breaking of bread. When men share a meal together, they ascend to a new level of friendship, wouldn't you agree?"

"Certainly," Pincus said, his brow gently furrowed, "Yet we are in a great hurry, and I'm certain you're quite busy with your, ah, obligations, so-"

"All in due time," Graber said, "All in due time."

The boy re-entered with a tray bearing eight steaming stew-bowls. Two were painted with a rough flowery-pattern; these were set aside for Graber and the boy himself. The remaining six were of simple carved wood; these the boy handed to our Exploratory Team. I gazed into my own bowl with horror. I was not certain who had prepared the stew, but it was clear that either the boy was a terrible cook or Graber was severely limited by his blindness. The gruel was thin and watery; bones and bits of fur floated within it, along with a bright eye-ball. I felt my gorge begin to rise.

"Mmm," Mulligan said, placing his untouched bowl on the floor, "It's delicious."

Graber chuckled. "Do not attempt to fool me, sir; I've heard nary a slurp. Nothing escapes old Graber. Please, break bread with me. Only then will I answer your questions."

With this, Graber and the boy lifted their bowls to their lips and drank deeply of the repulsive stew, bits of grease dribbling down their chins.

"Thankee for the vittles, sar!" Nine said, grinning idiotically, and followed their example. The rest of us glanced from one man to the next. Captain Bill, driven, no doubt, by his monomaniacal pursuit of any knowledge

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regarding the Black Marlin, nodded somberly towards us and drank from his bowl. Mulligan sighed heavily, lifted his own bowl from the floor, and followed his Captain's example. Pincus followed Mulligan; Weems followed Pincus; and I, with no small amount of trepidation, drank as well, nearly choking on the rancid flavor, and struggled to fight off a fit of apoplexy.

"There's the sound that's music to these old ears!" Graber said merrily. "How is it?"

"It's delicious, sar!" Nine said. "You should share the recipe with-"

Nine paused in mid-sentence. Slowly, his eyes crossed and his jaw dropped slack. He keeled head-first into the floor with a thud, slumped like a cast-aside marionette.

"Aw, shit," Captain Bill muttered, and then slid from his own chair.

I attempted to speak, but it was no use. My vision blurred and skewed, Graber transforming in my fading sight from a kindly old hermit into a hunched, laughing imp.

"Welcome to the church of the old ways," Graber muttered, and though I knew I should feel frightened, all emotion was washed away by the wave of blackness which crashed over me and dragged me to a strange silent depth unlike any I'd previously known.