

No doubt you have heard of Caskian Manor and the prominent family residing there -- respectable people, by all accounts ... well, all accounts except this one.

And if you live in the county of Yorkshire, you are surely aware of the sisters Geggelkek, and perhaps you entertain kindly thoughts about them as well. But your illusions will be dashed once you read this book.

If you read it.

But take care. Do not proceed beyond this point unless you possess a strong will and even stronger faith. For this manuscript contains enough perversion and lust, depravity and wickedness, blasphemy and sacrilege to drive a person mad. I wish I had never learned the facts contained in this narrative, but now it is my duty to share those facts, and chronicle the dreadful events that occurred within Caskian Manor not so very long ago. I present to you my full and uncensored manuscript, exactly as I wrote it -- except for three chapters I was forced to destroy, for reasons I shall not explain. But before you begin, I warn you one last time: Only proceed if you are stout of heart and firm of mind, for this is, without doubt, one of the most dangerous books in the world.

It was at the stroke of midnight on the 13th day of March in the year before last when Elexabith Geggelkek burst into her sister's room. Jemafer lay upon her four-poster bed, her minty skin coated with a thin sheen of sweat. Yes, I said minty, for she and her sister were grunhalbas - half-human, half-goblin. Some would say Jemafer was the more comely of the two, with a cute and innocent countenance and a more fulsome body, while Elexabith possessed a subtler, more sophisticated beauty and a slimmer physique. Both girls wore scandalously skimpy nightgowns made of faeriespun, a diaphanous material that clung to their curves, but Jemafer's gown was a lurid shade of pink, while Elexabith's was a sedate, rosy shade.

There was a third 'person' in the room that night, and he was, perhaps, the most remarkable of all, for his skin was made of tin, his innards of brass, his face rubber (it was supposed to resemble Rudolph Valentino), his eyes brown marbles. And inside his head was a primitive clockwork guidance mechanism containing a cardboard disk full of holes.

Jemafer had put him together from a kit she'd ordered through the mail from a company specializing in such contraptions. Originally he had been a soldier, complete with blue uniform

and imitation black-fur hat and tin saber, and he was programmed to march around and salute and raise his weapon. But Jemafer had made some modifications, using a soldering iron and a screwdriver and parts derived from an Erector Set, plus some putty and latex, all purchased from a hobby store in Harrogate.

Her first modification, after shucking off his uniform, had been to coat his skin with latex, after which she'd added the Valentino face atop his nondescript soldier's countenance -- taking special care with the soft and pliant lips -- and placed rubber fingertips upon his bland hands. And she'd installed one anatomical feature the original designer had left out entirely, spending much time shaping its width and firmness and angle of elevation till it was exactly to her liking. Then she made a new programming disk, commanding the robot to carry out actions of a romantic rather than military nature.

And now all her hard work was being put to the test, for the revamped robot lay on top of her, introducing its hand-crafted organ into her squirming body with great rapidity.

I'm sure you're wondering, dear reader, why I have chosen to describe this scene in such disgusting detail. Trust me, I am just as repulsed as you are. But such details must be included, because glossing over the truth and speaking in euphemisms can often dull the blade of truth until it no longer cuts to the heart of the matter. And so, with a heavy heart, I continue:

Elexabith had knocked several times before entering the room, but the love-bot's clicks and clanks and whirrs and boings, and the squeaking of the mattress, and Jemafer's own groans of ecstasy, not to mention a certain squishing noise, all these combined to drown out the knocking. And so Elexabith had burst into the room, and gasped as she beheld the mechanical man, nearly dropping her glowstone torch as her free hand flew to her mouth to stifle a cry of astonishment. Only then did Jemafer become aware of her sister's presence.

"Go away!" she groaned.

"This is important," Elexabith said.

"Go away!"

Elexabith shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She spun on her heel and walked toward the door, but as she touched the knob she heard odd sounds behind her -- a loud pop, followed by an even louder "spronnnng!" and a raucous "ticketa-tacketa-tocketa-bangaga!"

She wheeled around. The love-bot's back had ruptured, a big spring protruding, jiggling frenetically back and forth as several gears hurtled out of his innards, still spinning. They caromed off the ceiling and clattered to the floor, yet the robot's hips continued to rise and fall several times until he finally collapsed, making an odd sound: "Uh, uh, uh, uhhh."

Jemafer glared up at her tin lover, letting out a frustrated sigh, then grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him off of her. He rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with a loud "ti-boing!"

Jemafer sat up and swung around, glaring at her sister, who was standing by the side of the bed, doubled over with laughter.

"What's so damn funny?" Jemafer demanded.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Then quit laughing!"

After struggling to regain her composure, Elexabith finally said: "Where on earth did you get that thing?"

"From Humpmacher Schnogger."

"They sell things like that?"

"No, it was a soldier. But I made some ... modifications."

"So this is what arrived in the parcel post last Friday? You said it was a closet organizer."

"Well I couldn't very well say it was a mechanical man, now could I? Not in front of Miss Dyre and Drieves. In ten minutes everybody in the bloody house would've known about it, and they'd all wonder why I wanted such a thing."

"You could have told them it was a Christmas decoration. You know, inspired by 'The Nutcracker,' or something. You could make it march around the Christmas tree."

"They'd never believe I went to all that trouble for Christmas. Besides, now that I've modified him, he doesn't really look like a soldier."

"I suppose not."

Jemafer got off the bed, glancing ruefully down at her private region. She grabbed a tissue from the box on her nightstand and stuck it into her soggy recesses.

"So what's so all-fired important you had to barge into my room in the middle of the night?" she said.

"I didn't barge. I knocked first. You didn't answer."

"I didn't hear you. What's up?"

"I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Huh?"

"I can't explain. You'll just have to see. But put on your boots first. And your robe. We have to go outside."

"Outside? At this time of night?"

"Yep."

"What for?"

"Like I said. I'm not sure. We've got to investigate. But I don't want to go out there all by myself."

Sigh. "This better be good, sister dear."

Jemafer picked up a corner of the blanket and ran it over her naked body, wiping away the sheen of sweat, then grabbed her gown off the floor and slipped it over her head. She went to a nearby chair, snatched the long black stockings draped over the back, and pulled them on, then reached for her boots.

She hated her boots. They were black clunky things made of gargoyle leather, but her slippers and high heels and sandals were inappropriate attire for traipsing about the moors; they'd be sucked off her feet in seconds.

Once she was properly shod, she went to the closet and grabbed a pink terrycloth robe and slipped it on, then took a glowstone torch from her nightstand and followed her sister out into the hall. They made a brief stop at Elexabith's room, so she could put on her own robe and boots, then they started downstairs.

Caskian Manor was a very large place, a dark and brooding abode full of maple paneling and thick, wine red carpets and yeti-fur rugs. Chandeliers made of faerie glass hung from vaulted ceilings coffered in mahogany, while gargoyles leered from the cherrywood pendentives. Oil paintings in thickly gilded frames hung from the walls, bearing the austere likenesses of men and women clad in somber attire. Many of the rooms contained hearths ablaze with fire, for the manor was drafty, especially at this kind of year when chill breezes scurried through the halls

like ghosts. But these were far from cheery blazes, the flames glowering rather than shining brightly -- tainted, perhaps, by the dank Moorish atmosphere.

The sisters passed swiftly through these murky corridors, and soon were on the second floor. They went to the back of the house, where Elexabith slid open a set of double doors and entered Uncle Siram's study. The sisters' torchlight glowed lustrously off the walls, which were covered with amber panels carved with a vine and thistle motif, and their feet sank into thick, sea-green carpeting. The melancholy hearth was flanked by floor-to-ceiling walnut shelves filled with books on a wide variety of topics, collected over the years by various members of the Caskian household. Here were serious works of history and science and politics, as well as classic fiction by the great masters, done in fine bindings of horse and dragon leather, hand tooled and gilt edged. And there were modern works as well, some of them possessing little literary value, bound in paper covers adorned with lurid illustrations.

As Elexabith approached the windows at the back of the room she twisted the lens on her lamp, dousing its magical light and plunging the room into shadow. Pale moonlight streamed through the window, giving the amber panels a honeyish glimmer.

"I was in here grabbing a book to read," Elexabith said, "when I chanced to glance out the window and saw the strangest thing."

Jemafer turned and stared out the window. The back yard contained two large weeping willow trees that were nearly dead, plus a few exotic shrubs, some unusual birdbaths and bizarre sundials, and in the center of it all, the family crypt, glowing ghostlike in the moonlight. Nothing unusual there. Her eyes traveled farther, noting the black wrought-iron fence at the back of the property, bordered by a strip of tall sawgrass. Beyond that lay the moors, a vast rolling expanse of glistening black bogs and scrub-bristled serpentine trails.

Far to the left, nearly a mile away, lay the ghost nets, sagging strands of witch hair and wormwood, which -- according to the superstitious peasants who had erected them in earlier times -- formed a barrier against the shades of the roaming dead. The nets were set in an irregular circle, a half mile in diameter, encompassing an alleged "boogeyman bog." According to an ancient inscription on a stone lying near the site, the hole was "an orafess threw wich the divil spews his droppings," although modern scientists insisted the sounds and luminous clouds that occasionally issued from the hole were caused by swamp gas, nothing more. To the right of these

nets rested the petrified hulks of prehistoric beasts, frozen in their death throes, as if still trying to escape the bogs that had ensnared them.

But it was something much closer and less spectacular that Elexabith was pointing at now, something only a hundred yards away from the back fence.

"See that dark lump on the nearest trail?" she said.

Jemafer peered. The moors were full of dark lumps -- clumps of vegetation, stunted trees, the aforementioned prehistoric beasts, plus more modern corpses, cows and horses struck down in the middle of the night by fanged predators of one kind or another.

"What lump?" Jemafer said.

"That one. Right there."

"Oh, that one. What about it?"

"I think it's a man."

Jemafer's ear tips curled. "A man? You're sure?"

"No, but I saw *something* running across the moors, some humanoid shape, and it didn't look like a woman. It had shoulder-length hair, but the shoulders were too broad and the hips too narrow and it had no boobs."

"Heh. Sounds like Aunt Phee."

"Funny. But I doubt she'd be running across the moors, especially at midnight."

"So why is he lying on the path like that? Was he attacked by something?"

"No. He just tripped and fell. And he hasn't moved since."

"He's lucky he didn't fall into a bog."

"Very lucky. But he won't stay lucky if some creature gets hold of him."

"Well don't just stand there yakking, let's go get him!"

Elexabith turned toward the study door, activating her lamp once more. "Come on, we'll need to visit Uncle Percivole's study first. Just to be safe."

They made their way down to the first floor, scurried into the east wing and entered Uncle Percivole's study. The drapes were closed, with not a particle of moonlight penetrating the pitch black room, so the sisters widened the lenses on their tin lamps, spreading out the circles of light. The room was full of animal heads, mounted on the wall on oak and maple plaques -- an impressive collection of exotic and dangerous beasts taken on safaris around the world. Along with the obligatory lion and tiger and moose and elephant, there were the rarities -- the

dragocorn, the tigeraffe, the pachydary, the buffalobo and the hippopuma. Many of the animals' faces were frozen in their final, defiant death-snarls, while others had a more prosaic deer-in-the-headlights look.

Jemafer stared at the heads in fascination, as she usually did when she visited the study, imagining the magnificent beasts with their bodies intact, charging across a purple-grassed veldt, or meandering down a vine-choked jungle path, or shushing through the undulating, frozen wastes of some far off tundra. And she imagined Percivole Caskian standing in these locales, a burly man with a red handlebar mustache and gray eyes, his fine physique clad in tight khaki and harpy-leather boots, his powerful hands holding his Weatherby Mark 5, his steely eye fixed to the telescopic sight as he awaited the right moment to pull the trigger and dispatch yet another beast to the hereafter.

Unfortunately, she'd only seen him in photographs and paintings. For Uncle Percivole, the one member of the Caskian clan who seemed even remotely interesting, had failed to return from his last safari, long before the Geggelkek sisters came to live at the mansion. He had been in the jungles of Brazil seeking a portal to Atlantis and had sent home a letter containing a photograph of himself holding an oddly shaped crystal skull. "Hot on the trail," he had written in the last line of the letter. "The next time I write you, I may very well possess an artifact that shall bring the archeological world to its knees!"

And that was the last anyone ever heard from him.

His wife, Esmegrelka, was never quite the same after he disappeared, and these days she spent most of her time in her room, reading her Bible and staring out the window and brewing tea she rarely got around to drinking.

Jemafer's ruminations ended as she heard Elexabith open the door of the gun cabinet. Refocusing her mind on the business at hand, she trotted to her older sister's side and gazed hungrily at the firearms on display -- all those highly polished woods and glossy metals; so artistic, so deadly. She reached for Uncle Percivole's Weatherby but Elexabith grabbed her wrist and said, "We're not going on a big game hunt."

Elexabith pulled open a drawer at the bottom of the cabinet that contained a selection of pistols and picked up a Tokarev TT-30 7.62-millimeter with glossy black finish, which she handed to her sister. Jemafer checked the ammo clip, then dropped the pistol into the pocket of

her robe. Elexabith selected a nickel plated Colt Model 1911 .45-caliber automatic with walnut checkered grips.

"How come you get the shiny one?" Jemafer pouted.

Elexabith rolled her eyes and handed Jemafer the Colt, then took the Tokarev (which she secretly preferred because it fit better in her hand).

But before the sisters left the study, they had one more weapon to prepare -- the amulets hanging from their necks. For there were some things out on the moors that were not afraid of bullets, or so the peasants said. The amulets were heirlooms, crafted by a friend of the family over a hundred years ago, a full-blooded goblin sorceress whose name has been carefully lost to history. Elexabith's amulet was a cabochon melded from moonstone, witch-eye and sardonyx, and it resembled a bloodshot eye. Jemafer's was fashioned from gnomestone, amethyst and starshine, and looked like a foam-flecked ocean wave. But different as they were, each amulet bore an identical carving: the Circle Within the Square, a protective rune as old as time, sacred to the goblin race.

After intoning a brief empowerment spell to invoke the moon's energy and draw it down into their gems, the sisters left the study and headed for the nearest exit.

A perceptive reader might wonder at the foolhardiness of these two grunhalba girls. What would possess them to venture out onto the moors at night, especially during a full moon? But the sisters could not help themselves, for there was a man out there -- perhaps a young one, and maybe handsome. And for such a prize these hot-blooded wenches would risk anything -- even the fires of hell itself.