

Perquampi

by Andrew Edwards

Of the storm that blew down the high fencing at the Perquampi compound I would rather say little, as it was both tragic for several families in the district and much the subject of news coverage itself. But of the monstrosities observed "escaping" from the accursed tract once the storm had passed, and pertaining to the further discovery of hell-deep fissures and those that nest all too naturally therein, I shall record for it to be remembered. Finally of the once-successful "George Clay", for reasons that will become obvious, I shall, out of respect, say only what is needed to describe his unhappy condition.

Many now conjecture that atom blasts have created an opportunity for the mutant growth of beasts. I do not subscribe to sophomoric pablum. But if anyone should wonder whether a purveyor of weekly ghost tales on television ("A World Beyond", which I host, was rated number six in fall of '55), might come to feel undone by a case of extradimensional foulness, they shall herein find their answer.

There was never a question but that the facts could not have been molded into an episode for the show. For one, they were too recent in their references. For another, we could not have accomplished the effects needed to duplicate what sprang forth that day from Perquampi's madness.

Locals, as George relayed it, had known Charlie Perquampi to experiment in odd ways on beetles and worms, but his role in human disappearances and his wife's sullen compliance had not been much suspected. This all changed irrevocably after the storm allowed those riders and their "steeds" to run from the grounds and off up into the high hills of Taconic where the Taconics in a dense tangle commingle with the mounts of Graylock and Bash Bish.

Of the handful of ultra-strange actors in the Hudson Valley I had heard as much as the next. Among us weekend homeowners there

was a smug assumption that only in the unfluoridated hinterland could true queerness be manifested. And it is true that the extent of the Perquampi holding made for much greater ease in hiding outsized underbugs and their surgically altered riders such as we saw that morning after the storm broke.

These are old, worn mountains and the old timers say the hills were anciently haunted. The tribes that met the first Patroons told of devilish buzzing and rustling in the hills and they painted on deerskin of unbelievable creatures not related to the lore of surrounding cultures. Of a "lost tribe" of conjurers and their demonic insect consorts in the mountain there were only the most veiled of references. That a modern day dabbler like Perquampi might cultivate the same unlikely deities seemed not so impossible to credit.

For several years in the hills between the Hudson River and the Berkshires to its east there had been dark mention of kidnappings and unexplained disappearances. Too often they involved young, healthy men and women, hiking in the canopied wood or at labor in some remote field; and the inexcusable singularity pertaining to each was that they seemed not to have simply disappeared, but to have been vertically snatched as if by the claws of some fantastical high-stepping predator. Human shoe prints would seem to stop and there would be weeds and branches down. Most peculiar were the disturbing pattern of depressions often found at the sites, some of these well enough preserved in mud that a casual observer might see the implications: we had been visited by a hoax, perhaps. But it was as likely the disappearances may have involved a type of large, heavy beast not like any living animal known to science.

Let me say only that I was in the Perquampi neighborhood to help my friend George, now sadly diminished in many capacities, in the planning of a renovation project on the afternoon before the storm. The storm came after dinnertime with tornadoes that knocked down a ski lift at Catamount and some stones as far west as the old Gansevoort Cemetery. My own place is closer to town than my friend's in a less bucolic setting, but George, a producer at the

network and a trusted colleague, wanted advice about a matter and I was happy to oblige. I liked it not more than he did that his country hounds had for two days bayed mournfully. Recently he had inherited by nineteenth century deed (via the passing of a widowed mother) the rights and responsibilities associated with a goodly portion of Perquampi's adjacent forest. The parcel had been leased by George's family to the Perquampi ancestors for a period of 99 years. This lease had now drawn to a close with the land reverting to George. What bothered the hounds had begun to bother them immediately he came home from the closing.

Late that night we had rum and reports of limbs down and I stayed until dawn. Downing strong coffee, I stood with George on his front deck surveying the windswept damage. What had screamed all night now gave way to a ragged golden sky framed with the claw-like reaches of large broken tree limbs. I noted with some concern that the adjoining Perquampi fence, several hundred feet distant, not less than twelve feet high and in some places reinforced with chain link, had crumpled and separated in more than one location.

Out with us now on the deck were George's well-born, well-coutured wife and two spindly boys. We all reacted to what I thought a wheezy buzz that grew more distinct with the advancing thrash of underbrush under assault by an unknown force. The boys went inside with their mother and I could see their little faces pressed against the screen door struggling between boyish wonder and severe perturbation.

From between bastions of the broken perimeter appeared three terrible silhouettes as they picked a path out and upward. Quickly they mounted a ridge and became gray flat shapes of madness-inducing clarity. Their size was near-elephantine and they gleamed as if lacquered; of legs they had more in number than anything that size ought; and those long legs bent sharply and seemed to "feel about" with a frenzied persistence. And what can be meaningfully related of the whipping, snarling masters bestride them and their sinewy, flailing arms! Their whips reported like gunshots and the

underbugs with their contorted humanoid riders crawled away behind the dawning ridge.

We had seen them come from behind the broken fences, but I understood by their progress they were not in the business of escaping. They were headed back into the Perquampi compound through other storm-rended fencing.

George and I chose in a glance to pursue. We took my car and headed over that same ridge. In the distance there were sirens and George, losing brave anger, seemed inwardly to crimp—as if the realization of his ownership of this disturbed patch had begun only now to manifest.

Our first stop was the Perquampi homesite, a disarray of old farmhouse and shack and other crude shelter, inside of which we knew would be the tarpaper laboratory where the crank would deploy his calibration tools and likely be found with damning evidence. He had a county commission to measure the accuracy of retail scales and was known to be not cheaply for sale. Excepting the laboratory, all of his homely constructions were set well in front of what high and sturdy fences had survived the havoc of the storm.

We saw the wife first. In a field of storm-tossed debris, she sat on an overturned bucket dragging on a cigarette--acknowledging our presence not at all until I peered reluctantly at her hard, small-nosed, glinting face. After a moment of regal repose she pointed a narrow, inarticulate hand towards the laboratory and said: "I told him to watch it. Now Thogg'n's got 'im." I noted that three of her fingers seemed fused together and their skin had taken on a brittle, stiff appearance.

For the moment not acting upon hearing the dread name of old Thogg'n, I found myself following her gaze. We made for the laboratory and I noted how in the back it adjoined the bottom of a stony cliff. Immediately inside its crude narrow portal we were choked by an effulgence of brimstone. In dark dampness the only light came flickering from a fluorescent rod above a slapdash-looking bookshelf.

Upon sagging shelves were certain books I had come to know in my studies of the occult. The dread Phenokrike of the Siberian Shamans caught my eye in its gaudy leatherwork folio. Present also was that rare grimoire the Nan-quo, which told of such as the Mohicans had relayed of chitinous mountain monsters when first they had congress with the Dutch south of Fort Orange.

Here was evidence that Perquampi had gone well beyond calibration in his studies. For the Nan-quo was in part a guide to utilizing sound, vibration, and counterposition of exacting weights in order to induce physical changes in organic life forms. It was said that the master of Nan-quo could "with help from Thogg'n" combine beasts and bugs into multi-corpulated units and bind them by high-frequency chatter to his will. And yet it was said too that the master must take care to damp the random whistle of the wind.

Thogg'n, well known to those in touch with outlandish lore, represented a branch of elder earth deities closely related to insects. And if the howling wind last night were not damped we had now some clue as to how Perquampi's plans might have been put well off course.

For we saw what he had bookmarked in the Nan-quo. Inscribed upon yellowed parchment were passages describing the manner in which insect chatter, especially at night, had an hypnotic effect on animals and men the results of which chiefly were strife and fatigue. There was more about how certain mindless and much-enlarged creatures of the hive could be controlled such that their chatter and other "guided intercessions" might induce more peculiar and advantageous effects in the higher mammals. And it was diagrammed in most unsavory strokes the manner in which a mere bug, "vibrated up" to untenable proportion and lacking the volition of a higher creature, must be paired with a human to become an effective hybrid; further, it recorded of towns laid waste by the man-bug hybrids. Coarsely printed woodcuts demonstrated of travelers rent and dying after an onslaught of arthropod monsters surmounted by cruel, angry men.

This type of monster was a favorite of Thogg'n's, according to the grim guidelines in the Nan-quo. It was built with the top half of a human surgically implanted upon the thorax of a super-inflated locust so as to make the attached human appear as a passable equestrian (excepting, as we had occasion to observe, the facial contortions of the rider as he writhed in extremities of anger).

In a bad way it also went towards explaining the disappearances. Clearly the enterprise required human subjects, and where were they to come from?

Moans of a sepulchral timbre drifted out of the dark, and we advanced into the pitchy recess. George had a flashlight that he shot downward. We flashed on an iron grated "sewer" I thought, until the moans were therein found to be sourced. This oubliette had at its bottom a haggard, young male face and therein a pair of eyes rimmed red and searching. Further playing the light, we saw the muscled torso thrashing in muck but could not locate the victim's bottom half. I surmised this expiring unfortunate was being readied for implantation onto the thorax of an ultra-large arthropod, and so his eyes seemed to suggest as he went down in struggle.

We saw now the rest. Not two or six but up to fifty or more of these individual wells showed their serried gratings in the half-light. From some we heard cries and from others clicks and croaks. At the darkest recess of the room there seemed a crack or fissure leading down and away into dirt; and from within that shadowed hole faintly visible were a pair of twitchy branchlike probes. In a paroxysm I realized these were giant living antennae.

Faintly came a steady hum or wheeze. This, I surmised, would be the controlling wavelength. A theatrically outsized speaker emitted the wavering, sickly thin sound. Upon a vibrating brass and copper apparatus that resembled a scale of weights a microphone was trained. We heard the trembling sufferers and the nervous chattering and we knew where the young runners and hikers had gone, and how they were being prepared for enjoinder to create the outsized six-legged combatants we'd seen ridden into the hills.

Of Charlie himself we can say little but that he seems to have disappeared. It is possible he has retired with his hybrids up to the back-country. Nor can I relate much more of what we saw in the shed and inside the hill, as we were there only a short time longer.

A remnant of the storm seemed to wind up one more punch, and we braced ourselves in the shed. As the wind kicked up, the whistling between walls increased and a ruckus came. With the timbre of that whistling, a number of the wretched holes seemed almost to shake. After a jolting rumble came an eruption of sorts, and several floor-grates burst.

From one crawled screechingly an inchoate thing that gimped on incomplete legs while upon its back a fully aware man, or the top half of one, gripped and tore and pummeled the creature to which it was attached with suicidal violence. Through a flimsy wall it crashed and went out of sight. Farther to the rear another fabulism crept from its hole, hoisting on its back a cruel-looking rider taking up his whip to crack. I do think we saw also a gnarled, dilapidated human figure crawl out of the ground and stagger away into the howling storm.

George fell to his knees and I had to stand him up. The wind passed. I backed out into the air holding George. Looking towards the house, I saw the Perquampi woman.

She waved a scrawny limb at me as if to mock. "Find Thogg'n?"

Sirens came closer. In white Chryslers, County Sheriffs now took control of the compound. Seeing us, the first pair of deputies rushed to the enclosure abutting the cliff side. From inside came gunfire. At once a dozen official cars were in the compound and there was noise and chaos as I took George to hide behind a police car. The fusillade ended but the police remained on alert. George had taken on a vacant-minded visage. Spittle was upon his mouth and his hands seemed to wander in search of something to hold. With the Sheriffs' leave I brought George to my car and, tramping the gas, made for County Hospital.

Passing us in the direction of the compound a convoy of dun vehicles drove with soldiers and heavy arms on flatbeds. Later that

day there was indeed devilish noise in the hills, but I recognized it as no hell-bonded buzz. Instead it was the crump and whomp of the howitzer as those hills were blasted out. George at the hospital stabilized but was kept for observation.

It was impossible to say at first if the Battle of the Taconic were any kind of success. The local periodicals carried mention of Army deployment, and of the arrest of the Perquampi woman; but soon the tale disappeared from the public eye.

Winter came and in the spring I was up at the house again in Gansevoort. George had recovered generally but his stamina was compromised and I know he went back to work in a haunted, weakened condition. His wife had taken the children to Kennebunkport.

Spring now harbors full summer when the bugs come out. One recent night in a parking lot far on the woodsy reach of the populated district, I glanced up at a moonlit ridge and saw in distant miniature a crazy-legged silhouette I had hoped never again to witness. By this I knew the hills were still mad, and deeply fissured, and that nesting within remained the contumacious hybrids. I got home and called George. The phone rang many times and at last

someone picked up. "He is not available." It sounded like the Perquampi

woman.

