The Shreds of Flame

by Jackelope Random

"Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream"
--Ernest Dowson, *They Are Not Long*

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Penrod woke. His butler stood serene and doglike, at the foot of his bed with a whiskey. Yawning, he stretched his arms out. Grasping, bear, the alcohol, he looked out the window, where once the homeless paraded kingly through alleyways. New ordinance booted through their playing, and they scattered outwards, leaving Penrod so soft alone.

No friends, puppetstringpulled, he wept through the day and went from room to room. He took books down from the shelves, set them back on the shelves. He openedshut a book each few minutes, took down whole shelves, and rearranged them the same alphabetical way as before he brought them down.

Then the Officer arrived, some strange device out of a story. With purple-blue badge, and wide yellowish eyes, fishy feeling, he knocked on the door, pounded. The Butler fetched his master, like he would to fetch a newspaper.

“Sir, there is a policeman at the door.”

“Why thank you.”

“Would sir like me to show him in?”

“Very well, draw him to the sitting room, and sit him in the drawing room,” said Penrod. He looked at the doors, the windows, the walls. Moths flittered about from flower to flower design. These he kept throughout the house, in experimentation, to enliven conversation and let the furniture fauna come true alive.

The Officer continued knocking, black bushy Scotsman mustache bristling with each thorned, treeknocking, hallow thump.

The butler, stiff, in his proper manner, went to the door. He turned

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the knob. Opened it. The Officer fumbled in, in the right orderly fashionable correct procedural manner. He sniffed, pulled out and took some snuff, and sniffed again.

“Hmm,” said the Officer. He sat down in the drawing room, to which the butler led him, past and through the sitting room, which he didn't like the look of at all. He said again, “Hmm.”

The butler went. And called Penrod.

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Winter comes, my friends are gone
I cannot remember right from calm
The graveyard sings too happy psalms
It's time to drown in drink.

For years I watched behind the glass
While merry parties purpled past
But now the world's a Solemn Mass
And I can only think.

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Penrod sat in his room, half dead, licking butterflies on the wall. He before once thought them moths, but knew them now butterflies. When through came they then? Vaguely, thumping pounding downstairs and snuffling drifted to him. Someone wanted to kill the butterflies! He snapped upwards his head. His Butler came in.

“Sir... Penrod Sir... the inspector is downstairs.” The Butler looked around, and noticed that the moths had gone butterfly again. He shook his head. “Really sir, at a time like this, to be off like you are, in some sadness? There's an inspector or Officer downstairs, and he's really in a snuff.”

“Who asked him in?”

“I did sir, after you said to sit him in the drawing room.”

“That seems wrong me to again.” He could not remember clearly.

The butterflies formed a large face on the wall behind him, coughed, spat blood. They told him what to do and what to expect. Some thump fumbling seemed to come from downstairs.

“You must come down, sir. It is very serious, an inspector calling--”

“Tell him to go away. The butterflies have faced again.”

“Then lick them again, to set them down to moths,” suggested the butler, who walked away, stiffly. When he left, Penrod licked the small insects again and in a minute the moths all fluttered away to the corner of the room where nectar dripped along the banana apple and sweet wallpaper.

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Limes drip from the windows,
Set by painted women;
A painter spies it from the breeze.
And paints them rotting, all diseased.

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The Officer, he fumbled in the still seat set him by the butler. Official, roaming, his eyes cataloged the room. He sniffed and snuffed himself again, and stretched. He sat down hurried, hearing steps, as the butler returned.

“Penrod Willington the Forty Seventh will be down with you shortly sir. In the meantime, if I may offer you something to drink?”

“I can't, I'm on duty,” says the Officer, patting his badge, and pointing to the whiskey. The butler pours the Officer a drink.

Penrod stepped gallantly down the stairs, in his finest suit, a gray tuxedo, and an elegant top hat. He surveyed the scene, and grabbed a whiskey as well. He sat, shaking off a shiver and longing for the moths again.

“I am Penrod, Officer.”

“I am an Officer of the law, and I have reason to believe that there

is a dead body on this premises. As you have kindly let me in, would you be also so kind as to let me take a look?”

“Yes,” Penrod said. Then he crossed the room, and poured himself another whiskey. The Officer finished his, and handed it to the butler.

“You are drinking an awful lot, sir, for this time of day.”

“This is an awful time of day, and awful needs awful,” Penrod explained, finishing his drink. “But I will lead you from place to place through this place, and show you all the bodies I have not hidden.” He let out a small laugh. The Officer stood.

“Let's at it then,” he said. And so Penrod took the Officer through each room. And in each carefully inspected, no body was found. From cellar bottom to top attic, the Officer found no body. At the attic, looking down into the square where once before but now no homeless, vagrant, sad, pathetic, societal microcosm of people gathered, the Officer apologized.

“Well, sir, it looks like there is no body. My information is completely wrong. It is a terrible thing, and I will be shamed in front of the entire force. But I will be on my way. Good day, sir.”

“No Officer, it is not yet good day. And your information is correct,” said Penrod. “There is a body. It is right in this room.”

“Such a terrible plain plot,” the Officer said, recognition dawning on his face, “too obvious for me to realize.”

And then with a grimace, the Officer fell to the floor. Penrod holds a gun. The butler enters the room, with a tray of whiskey. The moths crawl around a small cloth napkin on the tray. Penrod picks up the Whiskey, takes a drink. Then he licks a moth.

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He dabbed the wound, and wrote a page
And died and lived in the next age.

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So ends the story of Penrod, the Officer, and the Butler. But that is not the end of the story told here. “This, in truth, is that.”

There is a small village in a large country. The country once believed in honoring ancestors, and that the order on earth reflected the order in heaven. But times changed, and with them came modernization, and hardship for the people.

In this small village, despite all the goings on of the state at large, a man in horn rimmed glasses bicycles to the town book shop. The place is a thatched cottage in front, but stairs spiraling downwards lead to an underground labyrinth of stacks of books after books after books. In the middle of the strong, tall stacks, sits a wizened old man with a long beard wrapped around his head like a turban and still hanging down to the floor. Next to his small frame is another tall stack of books, and besides that a jar full of moths.

The man in the horn rims enters the cottage, and walks down the stairs. He sits down across from the bearded man and stares. Then, from a satchel, he takes out a book.

“It is a strange story.”

“But was it worth reading.”

“No. I shall never read another book again.”

“Strange that you should pick a book you dislike to be your last.” The bearded man takes the book, and places it among a pile of others. The man with the horn rimmed glasses leaves.

After he is gone, the bearded man removes the book from the stack. He opens it, and finds the pages blank. Dipping a quill pen with ink, in strong bu feathery strokes, he starts to write.

The moths in his jar turn to butterflies.