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opening extract from

Nod's Limbs

written by

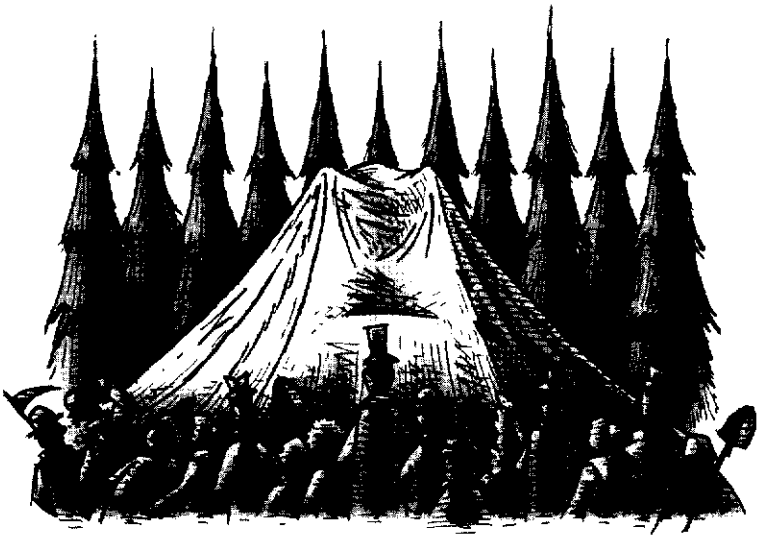
Charles Ogden

published by

Edgar and Ellen

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Nod's Lands

For the most part, Nod's Lands was a lovely place to live. It wasn't a big town, but it wasn't small either. It was, quite simply, an upstanding community of charming cottages and cheerful settlers, most of whom lived uneventful lives, making candles in the town's Waxworks.

Nestled as it was amid the lush Black Tree Forest and upon the banks of the Running River, Nod's Lands provided a comfortable, quiet place for its citizens to prosper. The days usually skipped along in a comforting sameness. But on this particular day, the

town was atwitter. Augustus Nod, the odd, reclusive man who had founded the town many years earlier, had written a proclamation:

All citizens are advised that
a most exquisite and splendorous sight
shall be revealed henceforth in the
park of our founder, this May 8, 1792,
at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

All who come will be enthralled.

The citizens rarely saw the father of their town. He lived on the outskirts in a tall, grey house topped by a cupola ringed with spikes. Not even the postman dared approach the mansion.

"Do you suppose he'll be here?" whispered the baker Opal Buffington. She and the rest of the townspeople waited patiently in Founder's Park before a twenty-foot-tall object covered by a tarp.

"Can't be sure, can we?" replied Millard Matterhorn, the managerial manager for the Waxworks. "He hardly shows his face at the 'Works anymore."

At the edge of the park, Nod's Lands' corpulent

mayor, Thaddeus Knightleigh, paced, huffing and grousing.

"I can't *believe* Nod held this ridiculous event without consulting me. I'm only *mayor of the town. I* should know what's under that tarp!"

"Quite, sir," said his footman, Robbins.

"*I* build the landmarks around here," said the mayor. "The clock tower, Town Hall . . . not *one* covered bridge, but *seven*! These stately public works fill the populace with awe! And whose idea was it to paint cheery messages on the bridges?"

"Yours," said Robbins.

"Of course! I give daily inspiration to my citizens. All Nod has given us is his name, and that is quite *enough.*"

"Right as ever, sir."

Gonggg. Gonggg. Gonggg.

The crowd's murmurings ceased as the clock tower struck three. As the last gong faded into the warm afternoon, Thaddeus shifted his feet uneasily.

"Where is he?" the mayor whispered to himself.

A tall figure stepped from behind the tarped object. Faces fell when the townspeople saw that it was not the mysterious Augustus, but instead Mr Hatfield Herringbottle, Esquire.

The gentleman cleared his throat.

"Good citizens of Nod's Lands! Our illustrious forefather was saddened that he could not join us today, but he has asked me, as his legal counsel, to host in his place the unveiling of a glorious monument for the eternal enjoyment of our town. Mr Smithy, if you please."

Town builder Silas Smithy came forward, and, with a *whoosh,* removed the tarp.

The crowd gasped. There loomed a shining statue of Augustus Nod, seated on an imposing throne – and it appeared to be made of pure gold.

The dour-faced monolith seemed the exact likeness of the man they knew, down to the spider-shaped birthmark above his left eyebrow. But something else was unmistakably amiss. *He had no limbs.* No arms. No legs. No ringed fingers or buckled shoes.

"Silas! Where are the limbs?" demanded Hatfield Herringbottle.

"I know not, Mr Herringbottle," said Silas Smithy, equally shocked. "Mr Nod just had me cast the pieces – I didn't put the thing together. But as sure as you were born, I made arms and legs for that statue. A thief must have *stolen* the golden limbs!"

"Mr Mayor," said Hatfield Herringbottle, "shall we form a search party?"

Thaddeus Knightleigh sized up the limbless statue and stifled a laugh. "Oh, I rather like it this way, don't you?"

But when he saw the concerned faces of his citizens, the mayor assumed a more serious expression. "Oh, very well. We shall fan out and search for these arms and legs ourselves. Perhaps they've only been misplaced." Thaddeus couldn't suppress a chuckle. "Hurry though! Before people start to call us Nod's *Limbs*."



1. Woe and Despair

"Nod's bods!" cried Edgar, throwing down his shovel. "We can't dig all this ourselves. We'll never reach the balm spring!"

His twin sister, Ellen, who had long since tossed her shovel aside, was clawing the dirt with her bare hands.

"We must . . . keep digging . . . or Pet . . . dies."

Edgar turned to look at the one-eyed hairball sitting on a nearby pile of rock. A hazy film coated its yellow eye, and its hair, though greasy and tangled as ever, now showed strands of grey. A poisonous bite from Ellen's carnivorous plant, Morella, and the

subsequent destruction of the remaining balm (the mysterious, earthy goop Pet needed to survive) had left the creature hovering near death. The only cure lay in finding the source of the balm, which was beneath layers and layers of dirt.

"Sorry, Pet," said Edgar, plopping down beside the ailing creature. "This is all our fault."

Ellen glanced back at her brother. "We can't quit," she muttered. "We never quit."

But in the faint light of the lantern, Ellen could see the torn fingernails, scrapes, and blisters that told of their vain effort so far: Despite hours of digging, the twins had managed only a six-foot deep hole. Before the cave-in, the tunnel had dropped at least thirty feet.

"Bite your tongue, Sister." Edgar sighed. "No quitting. Just better planning."

"Planning?"

"Yes!" Edgar sat up a little. "Time to take advantage of our strategic strengths."

Ellen faced her brother and crossed her arms. "Shall we recap our *strategic strengths,* Brother? Hmm. Let's see. First, we plotted to collapse the Knightlorian Hotel and ended up securing its eternal purple existence."

"A minor setback."

"Then, we blew up Augustus Nod's laboratory and burned his journal to ashes."

"Words, words, words."

"And if memory serves," Ellen remarked, pointing to the mountain of dirt, "*I* caused this little cave-in."

"Now, Ellen, the ground was already unstable when you stomped your foot."

"And then when that crazy circus blew into town," Ellen continued, leaning into her sibling, "*you* got us suckered out of our own house!"

"It was a lousy sham," growled Edgar.

"Oh! Let's don't forget that we betrayed Heimertz and Dahlia and they've been imprisoned in a gorilla cage for life!"

The ever-smiling Ronan Heimertz, the former caretaker of the twins' house and grounds, had lived in a shed in the backyard. For years he had been the only person the twins feared, and they were relieved when his circus family had carted him and his girlfriend away on charges of attempted murder. Edgar and Ellen had discovered too late that Heimertz was innocent – the one person protecting both them and Pet.

At the mention of their loyal groundskeeper, Pet slipped off its perch and slunk dolefully towards the twins.

"We've spent years scheming against that vile Stephanie Knightleigh and her crooked family . . . and in the end, *they're* going to get the last laugh!"

Edgar stood up and took a deep breath. "So we regroup. We go back up to our house—"

"*Their* house, Edgar," Ellen interrupted. "The Knightleighs own it, remember? And by this time tomorrow, Eugenia Smithy and her crew will be swinging a wrecking ball at it. That's where our *strengths* have got us." Ellen plopped down on a pile of earth and scowled. Pet snuggled against her, and Ellen reached down to stroke its thinning hair. She winced as a few strands fell away but didn't say anything.

Edgar stared for a long moment at the rubble. Then he narrowed his eyes and cracked his knuckles.

"Don't say it, Brother. Don't you dare . . ."

"I have a plan, Sister."

"I knew you were going to say that."

2. Hugs and Kisses

"Operation: Jail Bail, ready for delivery."

Ellen sat at the large writing desk in the second-floor map room, placing a stamp on the letter she had just written.

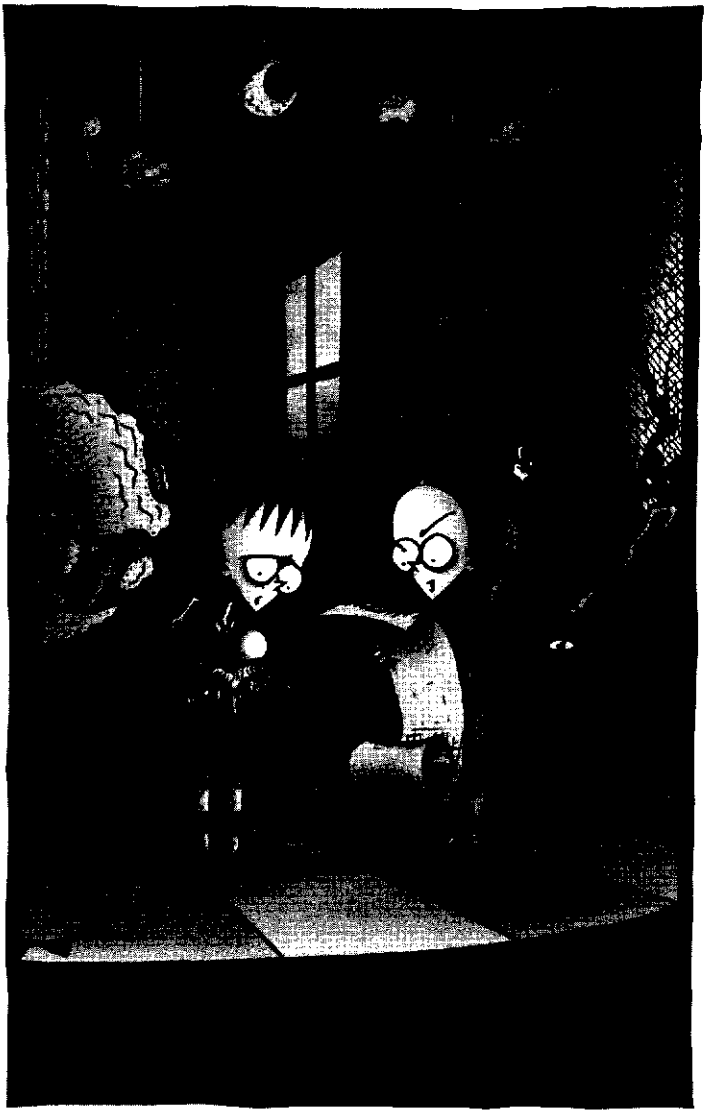
"A rather clever scheme on such short notice," said Edgar. Out of pure habit, he tossed Pet in the

air, then remembered too late the patient's delicate state. He caught the creature as gingerly as he could. "Heh, sorry there, Pet. But this two-pronged plan will give us time and muscle, the two things we need to unearth the balm spring and get you healthy."

Pet gamely waved a few hairs in encouragement, but then winced as if it had strained something.

Ellen read her letter aloud to Edgar:

> *Dear Heimertz (Ronan, that is – not any of you other Heimertzes who may be reading this),*
>
> *Sorry we got you in trouble with your family – especially the part when they chained you up and threw you in the cage. We thought you'd like to know that Edgar and I have a new home improvement project, and we are really digging into it with gusto. Also the Knightleighs are coming over soon for a big party, and I bet they're really going to bring the house down. Well, we hope your restraints aren't too tight. You sure know how to pick them, don't you?*
>
> *Hugs and kisses,*
> *Ellen*



"Hugs and kisses?" Edgar sneered. *"Blech."*

"It has to sound natural," said Ellen. "If someone is screening his mail, they can't suspect anything."

Pet nodded its eyeball.

"If you say so," said Edgar with a shrug, then gave one of the many map-room globes a spin. "So how do we send mail to a travelling circus?"

"They were heading west when they left town, right?" said Ellen. She consulted a tattered map on the wall marked NOD'S LANDS AND ENVIRONS, 1799. "Here's Nod's Limbs . . . and the next town west is . . . hmm."

On the outside of the envelope, she wrote:

To Ronan Heimertz
In custody of the Heimertz Family Circus
Greater Peaseblossom, or other points west
(Please forward. Don't make us come after you.)

As Ellen heated a glob of red wax to seal the envelope, Edgar produced a metal sliver no thicker than a pine needle from his satchel: a lock pick, his favourite escapist's tool. He placed it on the envelope, and Ellen dripped the wax onto it. She then stamped the wax with a seal, thus securing the little pick to the letter even while concealing it.

"Now for the second stage of our plan, Brother," said Ellen.

Edgar twirled a spark-plug wrench with his nimble fingers.

"To the Smithy & Sons Construction yard!"

"Let's hope it buys us time," said Ellen, and as the twins set out, they sang:

The seconds mock – tick, tock, tick, tock—
So goes the heartless beating clock.
Tick away till Knightleighs knock
Our dwelling down to rubbled rock.
Can Heimertz free us from this fate?
Oh, if only time would wait!
But never does the tock abate,
Ticking towards Pet's deathly date.
Somehow, some way we must defend
Our home, our friend from dreary end.

3. The Waxworks Beckons

After their visit to the Smithy & Sons construction yard, the twins took an alternate route home to throw potential snoops and sneaks off their tail.

Edgar grinned as he wiped olive paste off his footie pyjamas.

"When Eugenia turns the key on her bulldozer tomorrow, she'll discover that olive paste does wonders for an ignition system," he said as they neared the old Waxworks. "Why can't every scheme go so smoothly, eh, Pet?" He gently lifted Pet out from his satchel, and placed it on his shoulder. The creature made a small noise, but Edgar couldn't tell if it was a snigger or a cough.

Ellen didn't reply; she had stopped in midstride and was pointing to the abandoned factory.

The grounds around the dilapidated building had, until recently, been host to the garish colours and boisterous sounds of the Heimertz Family Circus. But the carnival had left town after the big top's collapse, and neither Edgar nor Ellen had anticipated finding anything but darkness and quiet around the old factory.

Instead a fleet of unmarked white trucks clustered at the entrance to the Waxworks and a large crowd peered through the factory windows. Searing lights shone through the windows and the cracks in the walls.

"It can't be the circus, can it?" asked Edgar. "They wouldn't return so soon after what happened."

"Even if they did," said Ellen, "that showboating Heimertz family would sooner travel on broken pogo sticks than in plain white trucks. Something else is going on."

"Less talking, more stalking," said Edgar, already slipping through the grass towards the building.

In its heyday the Waxworks had been a majestic building bustling with hardworking citizens making candles from dawn to dinnertime. But when Edgar and Ellen had previously explored the factory, they had seen no hint of its former glory. All that remained were decaying worktables; rusty candle-dipping contraptions; cobwebbed cogs and pulleys; and enormous vats of cooled, caked, crusty wax.

Edgar, Ellen, and Pet slipped past a handful of familiar locals: Executive Business Executive Marvin Matterhorn, Hotel Motel owners Mr and Mrs Elines, Buffy (proprietress of Buffy's Muffins), Sirs Malvolio and Geoffrey of the Renaissance re-enacting Gallant Paintsmen, and several other of the siblings' former prank victims.

All of them jockeyed for position in front of the windows, eyes fixed on whatever was going on inside.

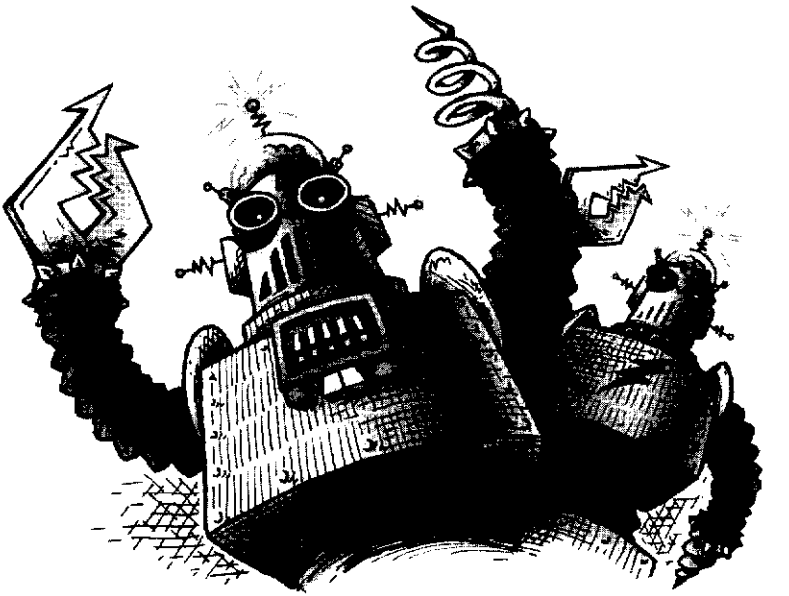
The twins ducked under a tape barrier marked DO NOT ENTER and sidestepped Nathan Ruby, rookie for

the local yard maintenance squad, Lawn and Order, who was busy gulping down a chocolate muffin.

Another dodge or two brought the twins to a hiding spot behind an old, crusty vat.

"Brother, look!"

A handsome man with perfectly tousled hair raced across the factory floor on roller skates. He kept looking behind him at a pair of eight-foot-tall metal robots on wheels chasing him. Despite his too-thick make-up, the man's features were immediately recognizable.



"Edgar," hissed Ellen. "It's, it's—"

"Blake Glide!"

4. Disquiet on the Set

Krshh-krshh-krshh-krshh.

Blake Glide skated as fast as his legs could go. The machines gained on him, their sharp pincers clacking with menace.

"Rarrrr!" hollered the robots through speakers on their heads. "Rarrr! Rarrr!"

"Submit now to . . . the Rollerbots!" called their leader.

"Never!" shouted Blake Glide. He *krshh*ed to the far side and reached the enormous, ten-foot vats marked WAX DIP. He backed against a vat as the Rollerbots drew closer.

"You've rolled your last, Earth Man!" burbled the lead monster through his tinny speaker.

Blake Glide turned a steely eye on his foes.

"That's what you think, you tanking tower of titan – er, titanic tank of – uh . . ."

"Cut!"

Famous film director Otto Ottoman threw his