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Opening extract from

The Secret of the Black Moon Moth

Written by

John Fardell

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The Secret of the Black Moon Moth



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Prologue



Port of Genoa, Italy

The man crawled across the moonlit roof towards the boarded-up skylight, his face concealed by a black balaclava. He reached the skylight and, working as quietly as possible, prised it open using a short metal crowbar. He looked down into the space beneath him, but could make out nothing. Could this really be the place – the home of the man he had followed earlier? Could anyone really be living up here in the loft of this old warehouse? Or had his precarious climb up the rusting iron ladder and crumbling brickwork been a waste of time?

After checking there were no sounds of breathing or snoring below, the man took a slim black torch from his jacket, and sent a narrow beam of light down into the loft room, scanning what was there. A wooden table. A few chairs. A threadbare rug on unvarnished floorboards. He spotted a newspaper lying open on the table. A recent newspaper.

Someone *was* living here. This was the right place.

He lowered himself through the skylight until his feet reached the table. From there, it was easy to clamber down to the floor. The table creaked slightly, and the man glanced nervously towards the closed door at the far end of the room. He had no way of knowing where the inhabitant of this loft apartment had his bedroom, but it could be just next door.

Fortunately, this looked like the room he wanted. The two side walls were lined with bookshelves, and a book was what he was looking for. Systematically, he swept his torch beam along each shelf, checking every spine. There were hundreds of books: books in Italian, books in English, books in dozens of other languages.

The book he was seeking was old. Most of the books on the shelves were old, but he couldn't spot anything that looked like the one he was after. Damn!

A thought occurred to him. The book had only recently been purchased. Would its new owner have shelved it away already? Surely it was more likely that he would still be reading it and studying it. In which case, he might well have put it beside his bed.

The man started creeping towards the door. He had hoped to avoid any contact with the book's owner, and he would avoid waking him if possible. But he was determined to get what he had come for.

Just before he reached the door, something in the corner of the room caught his eye. A small writing desk. Worth checking out first. He went over to it and tried to open its sloping top. It was locked, but his crowbar soon solved that problem, opening it with a dull crack and the crunch of splintering wood. The man glanced at the door, but heard no one stirring.

He shone his torch down into the desk. There! A slim vol-

ume with an age-cracked brown leather cover. No writing on the front, just a strange design, hand-drawn in black ink – a silhouette of some sort of tropical butterfly or moth. He opened the book. Pages of faded inked handwriting, elaborately styled and all in some sort of cipher, written on ancient yellowed and mottled paper. Result! This had to be it.



Suddenly, the door began to creak open. The man instantly switched off his torch and pocketed it, at the same time grabbing the book. He rushed at the person entering the room, pulling a narrow flat object from his jacket pocket and pressing a button on it with his thumb. *Flick*. The object's slender blade sprang out from the front end and clicked into place. The man could just make out the form of the newcomer in the darkness of the room, and he lunged forward with his flick-knife. But the other person dodged and somehow managed to grasp one side of the book.

For a second or two, they had the book between them, stretched open with one holding the front half and one holding the back half, neither letting go. The owner of the book cried out. The man thrust with his knife again, this time managing to plunge it into the other's ribs, turning his cry into a deathly choking rasp.

The man's victim fell back, but his fingers still clung to the book. The man felt the antique leather spine tear apart, and heard the half-book hit the floor just after the body of the person he had stabbed.

Cursing, the man retracted his knife blade, swapped the weapon for his torch, and started to scan the floor. Damn! The pages had scattered everywhere. As he stepped over the body to get to them, he looked down and saw, in the torchlight, the

face of his victim. And he gasped, startled by whom he saw.

Then, before he could start to gather the strewn pages, he heard footsteps pounding along floorboards from another part of the loft. Footsteps of more than one person. Too many to risk fighting, and getting nearer fast. Stuffing the half of the book he'd retained into his largest pocket, he jumped onto the table and sprang for the skylight.

Fifteen minutes later, after a recklessly speedy descent from the warehouse roof and a hell-for-leather sprint through the dockside alleyways, the man was back in one of the city's brightly lit tourist areas, ambling back to his hotel as if he were simply returning from a nightclub.

His mind was racing. If only he'd realised who was living there, realised whom he'd been following, he could have gone in better prepared. Could have saved himself a lot of trouble. But he couldn't have known.

There was nothing more he could do here in Genoa. He knew that the others who lived in the warehouse loft would be gone by the morning, along with the other half of the book and the body of his victim. He was sure that the stab wound he'd inflicted had been fatal, but he was equally sure that the killing would never be reported to the police. He was quite safe on that score.

And at least he'd got half of the book. Maybe it would be enough. It would have to be enough. He had a good feeling. And from now on, he would make sure he was fully prepared and fully equipped. He was on the trail now, and nothing was going to stop him.



1



'The world', declared Professor Garrulous Gadling, 'contains more mysteries than we can imagine.' He was standing behind an antique wooden lectern on the lecture hall stage of the Royal Westminster Institute of Natural History, an imposing historic building in Parlington Square, in the heart of London. He had just started giving an early evening talk, entitled 'Little-Known Animal Species of Our Planet'.

Professor Gadling was a pear-shaped man in his late sixties. His large beaky nose and double chin gave him a rather pelican-like appearance, an impression enhanced by the crumpled cream suit he was wearing. The outfit was embellished by a polka-dotted red bow tie and a matching handkerchief stuffed loosely into his top jacket pocket, and topped off with a well-travelled panama hat.

'Some people may think', he continued, 'that modern science has more or less pinned down all there is to know, but such a view would be piffle. Science is not about merely listing what we know, but about making a never-ending journey into what we *don't* know. And *that*, of course, is the fun of it.' He bestowed a wide-mouthed

beam on his audience.

Sam Carnabie, an eleven-year-old boy sitting in the front row, grinned back. He'd been looking forward to this evening for ages – looking forward to Professor Gadling's lecture and, most of all, to being with the friends who were seated along the row to either side of him.



To Sam's right were a twelve-year-old girl called Zara, her eleven-year-old brother Ben, and a gangly man with a pink bald head fringed by wiry white hair – Professor Alexander Ampersand. Professor Ampersand, an inventor by profession, was Zara and Ben's great-uncle. He had adopted them as babies when their Tanzanian father and Scottish mother had been killed in a car crash. Sam's parents had once been students of Professor Ampersand, and had arranged for Sam to spend his last two school holidays at the Ampersands' amazing, invention-filled house in Edinburgh.

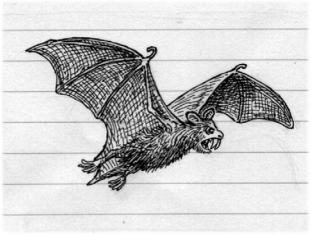
To Sam's left were a brown-haired thirteen-year-old girl called Marcia, and a woman in her sixties called Professor Petunia Hartleigh-Broadbeam. She was also an inventor, based in London, and had recently become Marcia's legal guardian. (Marcia's sophisticated, glamorous, but thoroughly repulsive parents were in prison.)

To the far side of Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam sat a tall, sinewy man called Professor Eric Gauntraker. He was an explorer, and of a similar age to Professors Gadling, Ampersand and Hartleigh-Broadbeam; the four of them were all old friends and one-time colleagues.

In the short time that Sam had known Zara, Ben and Marcia they'd been through two extraordinary adventures together, and had become the best of friends. It had been a few weeks since they'd last seen one another, and Professor Gadling's lecture this Saturday evening in mid-September had provided the perfect opportunity for a get-together in London. Sam lived in Hertfordshire, and that afternoon he'd made the short train journey into King's Cross Station by himself, where he'd met Zara, Ben and Professor Ampersand off their train from Edinburgh. The plan was for everyone to go to a restaurant after the lecture, before going back to Marcia and Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam's flat, where they were all staying for the weekend.

'In my own career as a naturalist and explorer,' continued Professor Gadling, 'I have specialised particularly in the study of unusual and little-known creatures, and I thought it might be entertaining to tell you about some of them this evening.'

Zara glanced round at the rest of the audience, which seemed to consist entirely of rather serious-looking adults, who she guessed must be members of the Institute. Zara knew that this was the first time Professor Gadling had been given the opportunity to deliver a lecture to this prestigious and influential organisation, and she knew how important it was to him that his talk went down well. So far, however, the members' faces seemed as unresponsive to Professor Gadling's breezy good humour as the stately stone architecture of the hall.



'I shall begin', said Professor Gadling, 'with the African hunting bat.' He switched on a slide projector, and, as the lights dimmed, a picture of a bat became visible on a screen at

the back of the stage – not a photograph, but a pen-and-ink sketch on lined notepaper.

'Like many bats,' continued Professor Gadling, 'the African hunting bat is small; but *unlike* other bats, it hunts creatures that are a great many times its own size. It does this by working collectively. African hunting bats live in vast colonies. As night falls, the bats leave their roosting cave together and fly low across the savannah, sweeping the ground with their high-pitched sonar waves. As soon as one of the bats detects a potential prey – typically a sleeping wildebeest – it signals to the others, and the whole group closes in. The wildebeest may be startled by the wing-beats and begin to run, but to no avail. Using sophisticated vocal signals and highly skilled formation flying, the bats box in the fleeing animal. Then, as one, they strike. Several thousand tiny flying bats sink their teeth into every part of the wildebeest's body, lift it forty feet into the air, then drop it, killing it instantly. Then the bats swarm onto the carcass and devour it with the ferocity of piranha fish, stripping it to the bare bones within minutes.'

'Professor Gadling!' A dry, displeased voice interrupted Professor Gadling's flow. The children turned to see the speaker, a waspish-looking man who had risen to his feet at one end of the front row.

'Professor Gadling,' he said, 'as president of the Institute, I must inform you that this establishment is dedicated to the serious study of the biological sciences. We assumed that you wished to present us with factual research into genuine species, not ludicrous tales of non-existent creatures. Perhaps you thought it acceptable to begin your lecture with a piece of fanciful nonsense in order to amuse these children' – he looked along the front row disapprovingly – 'who I assume are acquaintances of yours, but I

must ask you to restrict yourself to subject matter suitable for an educated adult audience.'

'*Fanciful nonsense?*' cried Professor Gadling, indignantly. 'I assure you that I would never dream of patronising *anyone* with fanciful nonsense, children or adults. If these young people *are* more entertained by my lecture than you are, it is because they possess an open-mindedness that you clearly lack.'

'There is a difference between open-mindedness and credulity!' retorted the president. 'You surely can't be expecting a room full of world-renowned experts such as us to believe that this—this African hunting bat actually exists?'

'Of course it exists!' insisted Professor Gadling. 'As do all the creatures that I am planning to talk about this evening: the great Alaskan snow toad, the parasitic puffer sprat, the sand-snorkelling shrew of the Western Sahara, to name but a few. Just because an animal has yet to be officially recorded and catalogued by Western scientists doesn't mean it doesn't exist. There are dozens of species whose existence is now beyond dispute – the electric eel, the duckbilled platypus, the giant squid – that were once dismissed as "travellers' tales" or "native myths" by the self-appointed experts of the time. Now, if I may be allowed to return to the subject of the African hunting bat—'

'Enough!' snapped the president. He turned to the audience. 'I declare this fiasco of a lecture terminated. I am sorry that we have all had our evening wasted. I *knew* it was a mistake to start allowing non-members to give talks to the Institute. Well, never again!' Putting on his overcoat, he strode towards the doors at the back of the hall. Tuts, mutters and the scraping of chair legs on marble echoed around the hall as the collected members of the Royal

Westminster Institute of Natural History rose to their feet and followed him.