

WEIRD HORROR TALES

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CORNERSTONE BOOK PUBLISHERS



Weird Horror Tales
An Airship 27 Production
www.airship27.com

Published by
Cornerstone Book Publishers
New Orleans, LA
www.cornerstonepublishers.com

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Interior illustrations © 2009 Earl Geier
Cover illustration © 2009 Keith Birdsong

Editor: Ron Fortier
Associate Editor: John C. Bruening
Production and design by Rob Davis.

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ISBN 1-934935-39-5
978-1-934935-39-2

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PICKED CLEAN

“What would have happened if Jonah had still run away from God even after the whale threw him up?” asked the little boy.

His father closed his Bible and laid it on the nightstand next to his son’s bed.

“That would make a wonderful story, Bobbie, but now it’s time to sleep.”

If the issue of human and god is always a monster, was Caleb Elliott that child?

Those who hated Caleb said that the son of a wealthy fish monger fled to the New World in 1652 after his adulterous wife, Psmathe, spat on the dwarf and abandoned him because he was scarred by smallpox as a boy and brutishly ugly. In particular, she hated his eyes; his left was his wandering eye. Caleb accepted, because he loved her, the truth that Psmathe married him for the inheritance he’d won at his parents’ deaths. She was murdered on Bread Street in London by a lover, and of anything valued by men, Caleb Elliott was picked clean.

Those who knew him believed the Lord then told Caleb to go to France as a missionary because Paris' wickedness disgusted God. Caleb was twenty-two and utterly alone and afraid of the wrath of men, so he fled west, instead, from God to the New World on Captain Jake Uring's ship, the *Palatine*.

Sixty-seven days out and in sight of landfall, the curdling, oppressive clouds moaned and churned and lay like a suffocating weight on the sailors. Dolphins that had silently followed the ship for some distance fled just before the Lord hurled a hurricane on the black, turbulent sea that rose up like a monstrous, avenging fist to smash the ship.

The *Palatine* shuddered from the fierce blows, and her superstitious crew threw cargo overboard to lighten her, but the sea still raged against Caleb. The sailors hated and feared him because of his brutishly ugly face, and because he called out to God day and night, so Captain Jake Uring demanded he pray to his god to save himself, the crew and Captain Uring from violent death.

"I'm a Jew from th' slums of London," Caleb sobbed, clutching the black leather Bible that was his life, "and I fear th' Lord God of heaven who made th' sea and th' dry land. But I've sinned, and He'll not hear my prayers."

"We stand at light's end," yelled Jake Uring against the shriek of the storm, his face twisted with anger and fear and streaked with hard-driven rain. "By Satan's beard, how do we stop this madness before it rips us to shreds?"

"Throw me into th' sea," wept Caleb, his left eye twitching.

The *Palatine* shuddered and the sea wailed in unabated fury like a siren. Captain Jake looked into Caleb's cold, dead eyes, and waved his crew forward. "God have mercy on this abomination and on our innocent souls," he whispered, and they lifted Caleb and threw him like a corpse overboard. The crew saw too late the black jagged reef beneath the screaming ocean, ravenous for their dirty souls.

The *Palatine* smashed in an explosion of timber and human flesh against the savage black stone of the abomination. Hungry for human blood, the clammy ocean sucked Caleb, thrashing and clutching at the diminishing light above, down, down, down into her silent,

ebony, briny tomb. Caleb screamed and his lungs filled with salt water. The black ocean stained blood red as his eyes ballooned from the unutterable pressure. As Caleb Elliott faced death and judgment and hell with unspeakable shame and repentance, God answered from the fathomless depths of Caleb's sin.

And tender and tearful, in a dance of soundless, rising bubbles, Caleb's adulterous, dead Psmathe placed her mouth over Caleb's nose and blew life into him. The pain was exquisite. Psmathe carried him up to the growing light above, out of the ocean's silent womb into life. And Caleb and Psmathe lay together as man and woman on the reef.

No bodies washed up on the yellow beach.

A smear of yellow on a blue slate, the sun hung low on the edge of the sky half below the somber trees of the Memphremagog forest which lay between the Gihon river to the north and the Pishon river to the south. An unseen mourning dove cooed forlornly as dusk fell like a muffled sigh. Red Snake looked up from the bloody scalp in his hands and smiled nervously at the dirty flatlander and his half-breed son. The Abnakis Indian glanced furtively around the isolated, heavy tangle of underbrush that hid the three from prying eyes, and flicked dried blood from the scalp with a ragged, yellow fingernail.

"This dog will never again lie with my bitch," he sneered in broken English and rolled up the scalp and stuck it in the waist of his buckskin breeches. "Now we know what whites are good for," he added in Abnakis, smiling, knowing the white man's limited grasp of his language. "It is right that my people fear and loathe you, Ezekiel Azreal."

"And we each carry the seed of our own destruction, you stupid, red savage," said Ezekiel in English, smiling, knowing the savage's limited grasp of his tongue. "Yours is your big mouth."

He held out his dirt-blackened hand, its scarred palm empty. Red Snake furrowed his brow and cocked his head as if improved hearing would teach him the unknown words of Ezekiel's language. He looked at the extended arm and opened palm.

"Ah," he acknowledged, nodding slightly. "Yes." He reached into

his breeches pocket and pulled out a piece of doeskin rolled into a cone and tied with a rawhide string. Red Snake knelt in the grass, untied the string, and rolled the doeskin open. "The white godman likes these, so you will want these white man things."

"What godman?" said Ezekiel in Abnakis, showing no emotion as he looked at the four brine-encrusted, ancient coins, three crosses carved from seashells and seven white stones that lay on the doeskin.

"The mad white man who lives in the dead place where fish will not swim," answered Red Snake without rising. "He comes in to trade for enough meat for two, and for wood, and to tell us stories about the Only God."

"He lives with another man?" asked Ezekiel.

"He lives in a wood hut over a cave. In the cave is a crevice that leads to the ocean and in the crevice lives Psmathe, the undine who saved him from the ocean. He buys the wood to build fires every night on the black reef of the dead place. When sailors come to the light, they die, and the godman feeds their bodies to his undine."

"What's an undine, Papa," asked Hiram.

Red Snake rose. "The fish people who live under the ocean by the black reef. It is they who eat all of the fish in the dead place. When there is no fish and no sailors, Caleb trades these for meat. When we have no meat, Psmathe eats Caleb. She has already eaten his nose, the points of his fingers, and his toes." Red Snake sneered with the dirty adult knowledge of perversion. "After the children, Psmathe will eat his privates and his eyes. It is their way"

"You are a fool, Red Snake," said Ezekiel.

"I am a fool," scowled the Abnakis, a cloud of fury and naked loathing in his eyes, "and worse, Ezekiel, but I followed Caleb and heard the deep sobbing like a woman whose lover has been swallowed by the ocean, like music from the cliff. It is a beautiful moaning, rising and falling in the air. No man could live with himself and not look. When the godman rowed to the reef, I stole inside and found the well Caleb built around the crevice, and I looked, white man."

"You were mad with jealousy because your squaw lay with another," said Ezekiel. He bent on one knee by the doeskin and picked up one of the crosses.

“The green-gold water inside was still,” said Red Snake, ignoring Ezekiel and talking to Hiram Percy, “and weird plants danced around a golden palace where lay Psmathe, her long golden hair floating. From her waist down, there was fin, but above, she was naked,” leered the Indian at the fifteen year old boy.

“There are no undine and no god, and you are a liar, Red Snake,” said Ezekiel, rising from the doeskin.

“I am, but I have seen the fire and the godman rowing out to the Abomination reef where the mer have lived forever. And you,” he sneered, pointing at the godman’s treasures on the doeskin at his feet, “you, Ezekiel Azreal, see the fish woman’s gifts to her lover.”

“I’m not sure I believe you,” said Ezekiel, scratching the stubble on his chin with his left hand as his right moved to the small of his back. “But I sure don’t want nobody else believing you neither.”

Ezekiel stabbed his knife into Red Snake’s chest. The Abnakis, his face frozen in surprise and fear, slumped to his knees with a muffled thud, then fell over in the weeds. Ezekiel wiped the blood from his retrieved knife on his breeches, and sheathed it again at the small of his back, watching the Indian’s body jerk and twist into death.

“I wish I could see Caleb’s undine,” said Hiram, looking unemotionally at Red Snake’s corpse. An unseen mourning dove cooed forlornly in the still of the forest.

“It’s eat or be eaten,” Ezekiel said to no one. “Get the scalp, boy.”

Hiram did not move. Ezekiel slapped the boy hard, knocking him off his feet.

“Get the scalp, you stupid bastard. He got no need of it where he’s agoin’.”

Ezekiel opened his dirt-blackened hand. In its scarred palm lay one of Red Snake’s white stones — a perfect, white pearl. “We’re agoin’ to gut a mermaid.”

In the fifth year of Caleb’s salvation, God sent Ezekiel and Hiram Percy to the godman of the dead place. A barren, frozen, crazy throw of slate gray stone fell away and tumbled motionless down the cliff above Caleb’s shack on the yellow, dirty beach. No gulls or snakebird soared overhead, no crab on insect legs scuttled by the tidal pools, and the sand dunes were spotted with bunch grass, greaseweed,

dead kelp and hackberry bushes. Just beyond his hovel built from the wreckage of the *Palatine*, crouched the black Abomination reef in the ebony winter ocean, barely visible in the light of day.

Outside the opened door of the shack, the ground was hoary with frost and a light dusting of snow. An incredible mountain of wood was stacked against its left wall. The sky was muffled by the heavy, dirty sullen clouds of a frigid October evening, and the air tasted of salt. The ebon sea, flecked with foam, souged against the beach.

“Ahoy there, th’ shore!!” yelled Caleb, his emaciated body unbalanced by the motion as he waved. The godman stood before his door stirring the rank, boiling contents of a black iron pot as they approached from inland. Hiram noted the tips of every finger on Caleb’s left hand were gone. A rawhide strap secured a seashell carved to replace Caleb’s nose, and his left was a wandering eye.

“Is that cod I smell?” asked Ezekiel, knowing it was not.

“Squirrel.” Caleb waved them forward, grinning like an idiot. “Come in. What God has given me is also yours.”

Caleb moved about the shanty with an unbalanced shambling gait and the nervous energy of a woman anxious to please important guests. He spread a poorly cured skin on the carefully swept floor and moved a rectangular stool next to it. Ezekiel cataloged the sparse, ineptly made furnishings and the heavy door that closed off the mouth of a cave, barely large enough for easy egress by a normal-sized man. An oversized, rusted lock hung from the door. “Please, my friends,” Caleb said, triumphantly, and gestured at his furnishings, “please sit.” He rubbed his left temple with his left hand.

“I’m Ezekiel Azreal,” said the flatlander, looking down at Caleb. He involuntarily wrinkled his nose at the strange, lewd animal smell in the shack. “This here’s my bastard, Hiram Percy, gotten by an Abnakis squaw when I was in a drunken stupor.”

“Hallow,” said Hiram, and he rubbed his left temple with his left hand. An odd pressure like an invisible open palm against his chest seemed to fill the room.

“My name is Caleb Elliott, shipwrecked and disfigured from th’ ship *Palatine* five years ago.” Caleb sat on the floor, crossing his legs and leaning eagerly forward. “And alone on this beach for every day

of it. Why has God sent you, my friends?"

"We've come to see Psmathe, your mermaid in the well in the cave, and the gold and pearls she lays at your feet, Caleb Elliott," said Ezekiel, looking down for the dwarf's reaction. The idiot smile froze on Caleb's face, and his left eye twitched. An odd feeling of violation crept into every crevice of Hiram Percy and left him very dirty.

"You have spoken with my Abnakis brothers," sighed Caleb, an expression of calm assurance replacing his initial shock. "Psmathe was my wife and is with th' Lord. The Abnakis Indians are children, and believe spirits live in rocks and trees. As surely you know, Mr. Azreal, mermaids and rock spirits are just pagan heresy. I tell them of th' One God because I would not have them or any man perish in the eternal lake of fire. Someday they will stand, guilty as are you and I, before the judgment seat of God."

"I think I'll just sit, myself, Caleb Elliott. You build fires every night on the reef to lure sailors to their death to feed Psmathe? Red Snake said he followed you and heard the fish woman moaning in your cave."

"I build th' fires to thank God for sparing me from death, and to warn ships off th' black reef. The cave cries when th' wind blows through its crevices, and I built this doghole from wood from th' *Palatine* for dry storage of what I salvaged from th' ship."

"As I told my idiot bastard, here, Caleb Elliott. And this?" asked Ezekiel, looking down and extending his open palm. A perfect pearl lay there.

Caleb Elliott looked up fearlessly from Ezekiel's palm into the flatlander's dead eyes and saw that Ezekiel had come to slit his throat. It was at that moment that the godman had chosen Ezekiel Azreal for salvation.

"I carve th' crosses from sea shells I find, and give them as gifts to the Abnakis squaws. Th' handful of gold coins and pearls I salvaged from th' *Palatine* and traded to th' savages for meat. They have no value to them or me in this dead place.

"My life had always seemed to be empty before I gave myself to th' Lord, Ezekiel. Can I give less to any man than God has given

to me? You need not fear me. I would die before I would harm a fly. And all that I have is yours or anyone's who has need." Caleb rubbed his left temple with his hand.

In the seventh month of the fifth year, the worst hard freeze in two centuries struck, and with a crack that reverberated like thunder across the harbor, the frozen overhang above Caleb's shack split and roared down the cliff and into the sea, blocking the crevice that ran from the cave to open beneath the ocean. Caleb began to pray.

On the second day, Caleb's supply of meat ran out and Ezekiel and Hiram found most of the Abnakis frozen or starving. On the fifth day the clouds parted for the sun, and Hiram stood before the door of Caleb's shanty stirring the boiling contents of his black iron pot. The pressure was a physical presence now, almost like the faint, deep sobbing of a woman, and Hiram's stomach was twisted in knots from hunger.

Over the course of dozens of frustrating visits to Caleb's hovel, that pressure had become almost as deplorable as Caleb's endless preaching, praying and exhortation, and Hiram's growing hatred of the deformed dwarf had boiled down to a single obsession.

If it were true, as Caleb nagged, that God can forgive any sin, but man still must suffer its earthly consequences, Hiram was more than willing to suffer Caleb's murder beneath his bludgeoning fists. Hiram rubbed his left temple.

It had taken animal cunning, patience and feigned friendship for Ezekiel and Hiram to win Caleb's trust. All had been grudgingly necessary because they had failed to find the key to the door or the secret that lay behind it, and to kill Caleb outright would destroy their chance of doing so. He looked at the gaunt madman and his father in Caleb's makeshift boat, distant yet and just emerging from the fog that lay on the harbor. The morning was snap with cold. Caleb and Ezekiel, rowing, looked like gull droppings on the Stygian surface of the still ocean.

"Ahoy there, th' shore!!" yelled Caleb, his crippled body half rising from the crude boat and framed by the gibbous waning moon as he

waved. "Is that cod I smell?!?"

"No, you simpering idiot," muttered Hiram under his breath. "We starve, and 'tis seaweed, as well you know..." Hiram's words died on his cold lips. As he saw Ezekiel's face, he knew the inlander had found nothing on the black reef but the burning passion of a madman and the last dying coals of a fire; not gold nor pearls, not cabalistic rituals nor half-naked, salacious nymphs. And Hiram knew no sailor ignorant of the black Abomination reef ever need fear the bloody hand of Oannes or Neptune again. For Ezekiel carried death in his eyes back from the reef to the foul shore.

"I'd die for a taste of plum pudding," said Caleb, rubbing his hands together as he stepped from the beached skiff. His eyes were sunken with hunger.

"You'll die for less than that," growled Ezekiel behind him. Caleb turned around, grinning like an idiot, into Ezekiel's drawn knife.

"Hiram," said Ezekiel looking down at Caleb. "Did you find the key?"

"I tore the place to pieces, Pa. It isn't there."

"Then it's on him. Move into the shack, you nauseating fool."

"Ezekiel, in God's na—"

"Shut up!!" screamed Ezekiel, his face moldering with hatred. "The time for games is over, Caleb. We're going to go in and you're going to open the door to the cave. I'm going to steal the gold and pearls you salvaged from the *Palatine*. Now," he said, waving the knife at the shack.

"I would have died for you," implored Caleb, turning to Ezekiel in supplication as they walked inside the shack.

"You will." Ezekiel hit Caleb in the face with the knife handle in his balled fist.

The seashell and its rawhide strap were knocked away, revealing the raw, ugly holes in the center of his face where Psmathe had breathed life into Caleb. He staggered back against a wall, one hand at his jaw and with tears in his eyes.

"God forgive me and thee for my sin and your ignorance," he whispered, and reaching inside his coat, he pulled out a flintlock and fired. The ball struck Ezekiel in the right shoulder, spun the

flatlander around, and Ezekiel collapsed on the floor, clutching his right shoulder with his left hand.

“Papa!!” yelled Hiram, “Papa!!” and turned in fury to face the muzzle of Caleb’s flintlock leveled at his chest.

“God chastens those he loves, Hiram. If you love your papa,” said Caleb, sobbing like an idiot, “you’ll lock th’ door behind me and drag your daddy out.” Caleb tossed the key suddenly in his left hand and the flintlock in his right on the floor next to Ezekiel. The door behind him was open. He turned, stepped inside and pulled it closed behind him. The faint, deep sobbing like a woman stopped, but the pressure in Hiram’s head intensified. Ezekiel opened his eyes and struggled to rise.

“G-get me up,” he barked. There’s p-probably a dozen ways out of that cave, and I’ll be damned if he gets outta there with the booty.”

“But the undine...!”

“It’s a lie!! The moanin’ is jest wind in the cave. You’d know that if you’d half a brain! Now get me up!!” Cursing, Ezekiel struggled to his unsteady feet with Hiram’s supporting hands at his left wrist and elbow. His right shoulder bled through his fingers and Ezekiel’s breath came in short, pain-filled gasps.

“Listen, you bastard.” Ezekiel staggered to the door, pulled it open and turned to face Hiram. Death sweltered in his eyes. “Reload the flintlock. Wait. He could double back.” And, turning, Ezekiel stooped and entered the cave, closing the door behind him.

Hiram stood for several minutes, looking first at the door, and then at the empty flintlock lying on the floor. He walked to the key lying on the floor, picked it and the flintlock near it up, and locked the door.

Hiram walked to the wall where a small keg of gunpowder and ball were stored, and reloaded the flintlock. The pressure was screaming behind his left temple, a living presence. He waited, and the deep sobbing like a woman whose lover has been swallowed by the ocean rose faintly behind the door.

Hiram unlocked the door, the flintlock leveled at his waist.

The cave inside was cool, and cluttered with materials salvaged from the *Palatine*. It was no more than fifteen yards deep. Against its north wall, a crude, semicircular well of unmortered stone skirted a

large crevice that ran from the wall to the floor. Stones had toppled to the floor as if pushed out from the inside.

Caleb lay there; no scrap of flesh held two bones together. Of anything valued by men, Caleb Elliott had been picked clean.

Hiram yelled, "Papa?" There was no echo and no answer.

There was no answer except a scratching and a deep sobbing like a woman rising, and a chittering from the well. And abhorrent and reeking, in a dance of soundless, rising bubbles, Caleb's shame rose up to the lip of the well, out of the well's silent womb, and spit Ezekiel's tattered body, eaten from the waist down, out onto the floor.

Hiram fired the flintlock and fled.

Ezekiel's bastard sat on the yellow beach among the meager furnishings of Caleb's life that Hiram had salvaged as the fuse on the keg of gun powder inside the shanty burned. The deep sobbing rose like eldritch music from the cliff, a moaning, a pressure rising in the air. Hiram covered his head and ears with both arms. He knew the abomination from the reef gnashed its teeth in rage as it battered against the door he'd locked to the mouth of the cave, ravenous for dirty souls. Hiram shuddered as the thing wailed in unabated fury like a siren.

The explosion rose up like a monstrous, avenging fist and smashed the shack. The air stained blood red as the timber ballooned into fire, and Hiram screamed as his lungs filled with smoke. The horror of what he'd seen sucked him, clutching at sanity, down, down, down into a silent, black fear. And as he faced death and eternal judgment at the hand of God, a voice spoke to the depths of his soul.

And quietly and tearful, in profound repentance, Hiram approached and pulled a timber from the wreckage of the burning hovel.

He built a fire on the beach.

Hiram had been igniting a bonfire each night on the cliff that rose above the ruins of Caleb's shack for months when the *Buddha* anchored safely in the harbor of the dead place. It anchored twenty-seven days after he lay the last stone of his own building over the



collapsed, charred mouth of Caleb's cave. The *Buddha* was but the first ship of hundreds to eventually lay anchor in the bay of what would become Hiram's trading post.

In the eighth year after Caleb's salvation, Hiram married Red Snake's squaw, Yellow Dove, but there was no issue. The love of children had died in Hiram with what had died in Psmathe's cave.

Caleb's legend grew with each retelling of the story until he had escaped with his mermaid Psmathe through a hidden crevice and both immigrated to France where Caleb preached with fire and passion until the day he died. France was saved. But it was the *Buddha's* captain who read the truth to the illiterate from the disjointed diary that Hiram had found among Caleb's possessions.

It was written on the remaining blank pages of the *Palatine* log, and the insufferable narrative affirmed what Ezekiel had known; Red Snake had been a liar and fool. Caleb's coins, crosses and pearls were not the gifts of a mermaid, but had been salvaged from the shipwreck. Caleb fed the thing in the cave not from love, but from overwhelming guilt and shame. He sacrificed his own flesh when there was no other because Caleb was dirty with an inexplicable sin, a blasphemy greater than running from the voice of God.

The teeth. The blood. The horror that had risen from the well was not Caleb's dead wife Psmathe. And no seductive, bare-breasted mermaid had risen from Caleb's well to moan for her lover.

Hiram had fled screaming from a monstrous obscenity of spider's legs writhing around the bloated head and gnashing razor teeth of a gigantic pustulant maggot.

And its left was its wandering eye.

THE END