

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

Chapter 9

Twelve miles due west of the smoldering Abbey ruins, a lone figure strode deliberately under the last glows of early morning moonlight. Hunched over and burdened to the hilt with yesterday eve's ill~begotten gifts from the abbey kitchen, Friar Nicholas carried an over~stuffed monk's robe, slung over his shoulder and filled with provisions.

Nicholas struggled up the crest of a stony ridge and leaned on his knee, his breath quick and fogging in the chilly night air. There, in the distance, across the broad expanse of an ancient long~dry riverbed, stood the opening of the cave he had discovered many years since ~ Mountain Mouth, he called it. He side~stepped down the ridge, walked through the valley of stones and entered the massive black hole.

An echoing voice emanated from deep within the cave, "Friar Odino?" A boy's chuckle followed. "I knew you would come! I did!"

Nicholas replied, walking deeper into the darkness "No Lazarus; `tis I ~"

And before the monk could introduce himself, Lazarus blazed around the corner and collided sharply with him. Both monk and squire tumbled to the ground. Provisions scattered and a wheel of cheese rolled across the cave floor.

"Dear God! Lazarus," Nicholas huffed, "You frightened the ~ oh, no!" The monk scrambled across the floor, feeling his way through the dark as he rummaged through the makeshift sack. Within, he found the flask of blood still intact and sealed. "Thanks to God," he mumbled, kissed the bottle and gently returned it.

"Friar Nicholas? Forgive me, friar." Lazarus rose to his feet and fetched the cheese wheel. "But where is Friar Odino?"

"Help me gather the supplies. Feel around for them."

Lazarus slid the cheese into the sack and a waft of smells poured out of it. "I shall gather them friar," Lazarus replied, the tone of his voice changed, seemingly

deflated and heavy.

Nicholas pondered aloud. "If I recall, a grove of trees stands behind this mountain." The monk stood upright, "Fire, first. We need fire." Nicholas walked toward the entrance of the cave. Lazarus stood still as a statue, staring down at the sack.

"Lazarus, come out!"

"Yes, friar." Lazarus followed him out of the cave and alongside the mountain face.

Nicholas rubbed his hands briskly, "I'm cold to the bones. Oh, I brought you an oil lamp and a tinderbox with flints as well."

"Yes, friar."

In short order, deep within the cave, Lazarus and Nicholas were sitting on boulders with a crackling fire between them. Its orange glow chased away the chill while revealing the cavern's vastly irregular subterranean dimensions. "Fire, at last," Nicholas worshiped the climbing flames, warming his hands. He glanced at the heap of fuel beside him and thoughtfully selected several sticks to add to the blaze.

Lazarus peered through the fire, inspecting Nicholas' finely crafted, calf~high boots. "Where are your sandals, Friar?"

Nicholas chuckled. "Gone. Do you like my boots?" Nicholas turned them to and fro against the firelight.

"I do," Lazarus replied.

I made them myself. I bet you didn't know I was once a cobbler ~ did you?"

"I did not, friar."

"Please call me `Nicholas', Lazarus."

"You can make shoes ~ Nicholas?"

"Indeed ~ and the finest even. This is the last pair I ever made before coming to the abbey." Nicholas looked over his boots. "Would you like to hear of my old cobbler days?"

"I would," Lazarus replied, glancing down at his own dirty foot mittens.

"Then I should tell you." Nicholas shifted himself on the boulder and leaned toward the flames, arms on knees. "When I was much younger, I lived with my Father and elder brother in Ephraim ~ a quaint little village in the southern edges of Burgundy. My father was the village cobbler ~ he learned from my grandfather.

We all worked in the shop, making and mending shoes. It was my father's hope that my brother and I would continue the trade."

"But to the point, my father grew sickly and he could no longer oversee the shop. So, he relied on us to keep it going. It was horrible ~ most all the work fell on me." Lazarus asked, "Your brother didn't want to make them?"

Nicholas shook his head, "Oh, he did ~ with all his heart he wanted to walk in father's footsteps. And he was eager to learn. But God never meant for him to be a cobbler ~ try after try, he could never make it right. And nearly always, I had to follow behind him and rework the shoes he attempted to fix. This carried on for the longest time; and most days, I worked well into the night.

"Did you tell your father?" Lazarus questioned.

"No." Nicholas cleared his throat. "Father was dying, my brother and I were like wolves at each other's throats and the shop was failing. In his worsened condition, I couldn't bring myself to trouble him."

Lazarus spotted the swelling tears over Nicholas' forced grin. "I have often wondered why I did what I did. You see, as every morning, I walked to the shop, however, on my last trek, instead of entering the door, I walked passed the shop and just kept walking ~ away from the shop and out of the village, and eventually out of Burgundy." Nicholas looked down, "I left everything behind but these boots."

"I moved about for a time, working for several cobbler shops to earn my keep. Yet, not long afterward, the Lord touched my heart in a dream; He stirred my soul. He called upon me and led my feet to the *Abbaye des Gardiens* ~ to seek a solitary life in His service. And in a strange way, I felt more freedom within the confines of those abbey walls than did I ever outside of them." Nicholas shook his head, sporting a quaint smile. "Strange."

"But what about your family?" Lazarus asked.

"Well, not long after arriving, I wrote to my brother. I didn't expect him to reply, yet he did; telling me that our father died shortly after I left. I also learned that, afterward, my brother sold the shop for debts owed and ~ well, he asked that I never again write him. He blames me for our father's death ~ for all of it."

Nicholas leaned over and stoked the fire. "Odino told me everything, Lazarus. I

know why you wear the hood." Lazarus' head immediately snapped backward; and behind the lifeless eyeholes in the hood, Nicholas discerned a pair of deep, searching blue eyes, glistening in the firelight and looking directly into his own. "Don't concern yourself over me, Lazarus. As with Odino, and with your father; your secret is safe with me." Lazarus turned back to the flames, saying nothing.

"You can speak to me, Lazarus. Consider me more as a friend than a friar."

Nicholas shoved a stick in the fire and leaned back on his boulder.

"Both your father and Odino told me that you were abandoned at the abbey gates shortly before I arrived. And that you had an illness of the air which required that you never leave the catacombs. None of that was truth, was it?"

A moment passed before Lazarus confessed. "No. But father forbade me to speak the truth. He said that the other friars would kill me if I told them the truth about me."

"The illness was never the open air ~ it was sunlight, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And the physician that Ivan summoned to the abbey to record your illness for the Abbot?"

"I never saw a physician."

"Now I see. Lazarus, your father spoke the truth ~ they would have killed you. Looking back on it now, I can see it clearly. Your father loved you deeply, Lazarus."

"Yes, he did. And I love him."

"Where did your father hide you since your birth."

"He found me in the cathedral and hid me in the catacombs ~ in the Baston Crypt."

"In the abbey?! But how did he keep anyone from finding you?"

"He told me to remain silent ~ and to keep the door locked. So, I did."

"What?! You knew how to speak since birth?"

"No. But father taught me quickly."

"And perhaps you learned quickly. Tell me, how long did you hide in the crypt?"

"Nearly a year. Then father sewed a mask and robe for me and pretended to find me outside the North abbey gate ~ and I pretended to be sick." Nicholas stoked the fire again, considering everything Lazarus told him.

"You don't appear like the rest of them ~ I mean, from what I see of you. All the others I've seen appear as beasts. You seem so ~ well, like a young boy. If I might ask, how old are you, Lazarus ~ in actual years?

Are you really thirteen? "

"I am seven."

Nicholas shook his head, a hint of a smile tucked in the corner of his mouth, "Amazing. I also know that is not a hunch on your back, Lazarus. They are wings."

Lazarus rose. "I don't wish to speak of it anymore, Nicholas."

Nicholas calmed him, "Forgive me. No, sit! Sit! I will say no more of it." Lazarus sat.

"I must say that I've long admired you, Lazarus. You were never like the other squire boys ~ questioning their faith and duty as most of them so often did ~ and squabbling over unimportant matters. You were always calm, knew your duties, and considered your words before speaking them."

Lazarus turned his head to the sack of provisions sprawled on the cave floor.

"Friar Odino said he would come for me, but you came in his stead. Why did you bring his blood in a flask?"

"How did you know?"

"I smell him. What does he mean by shedding his blood?"

Nicholas shifted nervously, his eyes darting back and forth between the sack and Lazarus. He took a deep breath and straightened up on the rock. "There is something I must tell you, Lazarus."

"Friar Odino is dead?" Lazarus asked.

"Yes he is, Lazarus."

Lazarus choked. "But, how?"

"That captain ~ the same man who killed your father."

"Why did he kill them?"

"Because Ivan and Odino protected you."

A silence fell over the cave, both of them staring into the flames. Lazarus spoke,

"Then I should kill this captain in turn."

"No, Lazarus. Thou shalt not kill."

"An eye for an eye!" Lazarus spat.

"You don't really mean that, do you?"

Lazarus dropped his shoulders. "No, but I feel it."

"I feel the same ~ Odino was a father to me. And that is why I am here now. There is something very important that you must do."

"Do what?"

Nicholas rose, strode over to the sack and rummaged through it. "Do you know how to read a map?"

"I do. My father taught me."

"Maps of the catacombs?"

"I've seen the maps in the scriptorium. I remember them."

Nicholas pulled a folded parchment from the sack.

"And what maps do you remember seeing from there."

"All of them."

"All? How many?"

"Once, I asked Father for another map and he said that he had already shown me all the maps from the scriptorium."

Nicholas rose, scratching his head. "Then tell me, Lazarus. Do you recall a place called Italy?"

Lazarus pointed southeast. "It lies in that direction, across the Gulf of Leon and Tyrrhenian Sea and east of the Isle of Sardinia. The land is shaped as your boot and nearly surrounded by water."

Nicholas raised his brow, seemingly impressed. He tested Lazarus again; "And the Kingdom of Scotland?"

Lazarus pointed in the opposite direction, northwest. "That way ~ over the channel and north of England."

"And where is my home, Lazarus?"

"The village of Ephraim is in the south of Burgundy," Lazarus pointed somewhat east, "It is that way."

Nicholas shook his head. "Amazing. The Lord has blessed you with a gift."

"He blesses all. Why do ask me about maps?" Lazarus questioned him.

Nicholas stole a deep breath, returned to his boulder and gave Lazarus the folded parchment. Lazarus opened and looked it over. The page bore an illustration of

France, Italy, and their surrounding countries and seas. "I remember this map."

"It came from the abbey scriptorium. Listen to me Lazarus. I came not only to bring you provisions, but to fulfill Friar Odino's final request. He wants you to go to Italy, to the Monastery del Cancellio. There, you are to summon a Friar ~ Friar Salvitino, an elderly monk; he very learned about matters concerning the gatesone." Lazarus recalled his conversation with Ivan ~ and the letter and a favor owed.

"Go to Italy?!" Lazarus interrupted.

"Let me speak, Lazarus. You are to tell him that the gatestone at the Abbey has been opened. Friar Odino said that he is the only friar versed enough in its translations to close it again. Tell him that you are Friar Ivan's son. Then the friar will know who you are. Also, I brought a flask of blood. You are to give it to Salvitino and tell him that it is Odino's blood. Then he will know what to do with it."

"No. No, I cannot," Lazarus sputtered, shaking his head.

Nicholas continued, "You are to fetch Friar Salvitino, tell him these things, and bring him back to the Abbey to close the gatestone. He is the only monk of the two abbeys who can close it."

Lazarus stood abruptly, threw the map on the cave floor, and stepped away from the fire. He turned back to Nicholas. "Italy is too far away. Father said the sun ~ why can't you go fetch him?"

"I cannot. A lady waits for me."

"A lady?"

"My, soon to be, wife ~ Martha. Come. Sit now Lazarus. Please. I will tell you about her."

"But you are a man of God. You have vows." Lazarus returned to the fire and sat.

Nicholas ignored Lazarus' lecture. "She lives in Murat ~ a widow of the late village cobbler, rest his soul.

Would you like to hear of her?"

"I would." Lazarus sighed.

"I met Martha in the strangest mishap." Nicholas attempted a chuckle before continuing, "Well, not entirely. I always found myself drawn to the local cobbler shops when Abbot Vonig sent me to a new village church ~ the steadfast cobbler

in me, you see."

"About a year ago, the Abbot sent me to Murat to help oversee repairs to the local church. And as usual, the cobbler in me stirred and I walked to the local cobbler shop. No sooner had I opened the door, a boot struck me in the face. That's the last I remember ~ until I awoke."

"When I came too, my eyes fell upon a most beautiful sight." He chuckled and stroked his chin. "I first gathered I was dead, as above me loomed the face of an angel ~ it was Martha, wiping my brow with a damp cloth. She nursed my head and we spoke for a time."

"I learned that she intended to throw the boot at the door, but my face got in the way. After her husband died, she struggled to keep the shop going. She informed her patrons that she had another man come in at night and work on the shoes, when in fact she worked on them herself. But rumor spread through village prayer congregations and several of the ladies secretly watched for this man to show. I learned that shortly before I arrived at her shop, several of the women had left her shop, accusing her of being the true shoemaker, telling her that they would inform all of her patrons that a woman worked on their shoes."

"The next day, the wives had their husbands bring in shoes in need of repair. Then they kept a close eye on her. Women can be like that ~ spiteful even, if set in their ways. Anyway, the cobbler in me rescued her. I told her to open the door wide and I went to work while she stepped outside. I made a lot of noise ~ beating, banging, and the like."

Nicholas laughed. "You should have seen their faces. The shop filled with nosey women, their mouths open. I pretended not to notice them as I fixed one shoe after the other ~ I thought I had lost the touch, yet I moved like a quick steed, every mend made perfect. One of them was so bold as to ask me if I had always worked on Martha's shoes. 'Well of course, woman' I said. 'Or did you gather that shoes fixed themselves?' She wouldn't dare question a monk any further." He laughed again. "Martha asked them if they had more shoes for her 'cobbler priest.' Oh, the look on their faces as they left the shop. I turned my back on them to hide my laughter."

"Thou shalt not bare false witness, Nicholas." Lazarus broke in. The smile fell off of Nicholas' face. "Well, I wasn't going to stand idle while Martha fell to the wolves. Sometimes we must measure when a truth destroys more than a lie can fix. Yes, I lied, Lazarus. And, I must confess that it was the sweetest lie I was ever forced to tell."

"How so?"

"Martha and I grew close over the past year. I helped her in the shop. She has promised me her hand in marriage. She will sell the shop and has agreed to return with me to my former village in Burgundy. I am finally returning home. I hope to make amends with my brother and propose for the three of us to open a cobbler shop ~ perhaps purchase my father's old shop, if we can."

"Then, you will have broken your priestly vows, yes?"

"No, Lazarus. I will have fixed what I broke by first becoming a priest. The Lord never intended me to remain a monk. I see that now. He has told me to stop hiding ~ to leave the abbey walls ~ to go home and right my past wrongs."

"I don't understand," Lazarus replied.

"The Lord works in peculiar ways, Lazarus. Even I didn't understand His calling until Martha hit me with that boot. And He's since opened my eyes to my true calling."

Nicholas dropped his head, "I only wish my father was still alive to welcome my return. He would love Martha."

"Perhaps you believe the Lord guides you now only because you love Martha, Nicholas ~ and that you wish it so strongly that you are convinced it is the will of God that leads you? Why would the Lord lead you to be a monk only to lead you back home again?"

"To find myself, Lazarus. I've often wondered the same, yet I heard Him speak to me ~ in my heart I know He guides me."

"And did He also tell you to lie to the women in Murat, friar?"

Nicholas frowned. "No." He shifted his posture in growing frustration. "Tell me, Lazarus ~ do you feel that you try to obey the will of God?"

"I do."

"And were you obeying His will when you lied to the abbey, pretending to have an illness of the air?"

"I did as I was told." Lazarus dropped his head.

"I respected your father deeply, Lazarus. I do not question his judgment where you are concerned, but I must ask this: Why do you gather he lied to everyone about you?"

"To keep me safe from harm. He's my father."

"As I lied to keep Martha from harm."

"But they would not have killed Martha, had they learned the truth about her."

"Is a lie not a lie by any measure? Under those circumstances, I did what I thought was right, and the deed, however wrong it seemed, was for the greater good.

You're still a ~ you've much to learn, Lazarus."

"Perhaps," Lazarus was curt. He stared into the dancing flames, recalling his past exchange with a prisoner that swore by Truth; and who gave his name only as: `poor man in Christ.` He mused that by now the man confessed all of his truth and was `burned to the bones` for it.

"So what is this gatestone, Lazarus?"

"Odino didn't tell you."

"He never did ~ I was not a Lower Council Friar ~ merely a typical friar, like most in the Abbey."

"It is a gate to another place, beneath the earth."

"Hell, you mean?"

"Yes."

"So the 'woman spirit' who haunts the abbey; she is connected with it, yes?"

"She is ~ yes she does. Nicholas, you will not tell the soldiers I am here, will you?"

"No need to concern yourself, Lazarus. I have no intentions of going back to the abbey – most of it is destroyed."

Lazarus interjected, "But you must tell someone to go fetch Friar Salvitino ~ to close the gatestone!"

Nicholas, shook his head. "I shall never step another foot inside the scorched walls of the Abbey. Knowing what I know now, I have no business with Hell or Hell's gate or a legion of ruthless soldiers from whom I barely managed to escape in the first place. No, I'm going to Murat, to fetch Martha instead. And we shall leave the

abbey far behind."

"How can you not care if the gatestone is open?"

"I do care. The fact that I do is a great part of the reason I gave my word to Odino that I would come to the cave and deliver your provisions. And as a man of my word, I carried out his wish and told you everything he wanted you to know ~ well, almost everything. There is more. Friar Odino made me swear that I would ask you that you give your word that you will fetch Friar Salvitino and bring him back to the open Abbey gatestone so that he may attempt to seal it closed once more."

"My word?" Lazarus eased off the boulder and stood up. "I cannot give my word to that! I cannot do it!"

"Odino said that he hoped you would answer as your father would answer. Those were the last words he whispered to me, Lazarus ~ that you would be your father and more."

"It is too much."

"I understand," Nicholas dropped his head and stared into the flames. Lazarus stood frozen.

"Understand what?" Lazarus finally asked.

"I couldn't do it either, if Odino asked me ~ Martha and all."

"So that's it? The gatestone stays open?" Lazarus asked.

"I did all that Odino expected of me. The rest he expected from you. As you have made your choice, yes, I would gather the gatestone remains open."

"But you know that I cannot, Nicholas. I cannot walk in the light. I cannot walk to Italy ~ it is too far. Friar Odino asks of me what I cannot do."

Nicholas raised his head and locked eyes with Lazarus, "He never intended that you walk to Italy." A hush fell over the cave.

Lazarus finally spoke, "I cannot do what you believe I can."

"Cannot or will not?"

"I cannot fly," Lazarus replied.

"Have you ever tried?" Lazarus said nothing. Nicholas grabbed a fresh stick from the fuel heap and thrust its end into the heart of the fire, turning it carefully till it flamed up brightly. "Perhaps I can convince you otherwise." Nicholas raised the

burning torch and rose to his feet. "Come." He turned and headed deep into the cave and toward a narrow pitch opening of a grotto. Lazarus followed.

"You know, I discovered this cave not long after I arrived at the abbey."

"Mountain Mouth," Lazarus added."

"You saw it too ~ the face in the rocks?"

"I did. But Nicholas, why were you traveling so far from the abbey."

"Wondering; considering things. Searching for myself, I suppose. I like to walk and wonder of things."

"And did you find yourself?" Lazarus questioned him. Nicholas heard the sarcasm in his words.

"I found Mountain Mouth instead." Nicholas laughed. They entered through the grotto passage. Nicholas stooped and continued forward with the torch as Lazarus trailed behind him.

"Where are we going?"

"Forward. Come."

"I gathered that much," Lazarus grumbled. Nicholas chuckled. The two of them wormed through the passage. Its walls eventually fell away, revealing a vast cavern, its damp air thick with a pungent odor. With a circle of light illuminating the floor about them, they walked to its centermost part. "What is this smell?"

Lazarus questioned. "Something is in here." Lazarus searched the darkness.

"Yes, your teachers. They can teach you to fly, Lazarus." Nicholas stopped and turned around.

"Who? How?"

"The best way." Nicholas thrust the torch on high, revealing a high cavern ceiling completely filled with Greater Horseshoe bats. Lazarus stood in awe, looking over the upper cave formations as ten thousand shiny black eyes stared down at him.

"Rats?" Lazarus questioned. Several bats dropped from the ceiling and circled the cave.

"Look!" Lazarus pointed to them, "They're flying!"

"Yes, they are. They're bats. And bats fly. They leave the cave when the sun sets. They eat and return before dawn. They rest now. I've always been fascinated with bats."

"Bats ~ like birds," Lazarus mumbled to himself, hypnotized and staring at the ceiling.

"But bats are different than birds. Bats fly at night, when birds rest. And during the day, bats rest when birds fly. By the rise and fall of the sun, they take turns commanding the skies."

"Friar Odino once gave me a bird. It fell apart."

"A dead crow?" Nicholas asked.

"How did you know?"

Nicholas laughed. "I was the one who found it. I recalled Odino telling me that you wanted to see a bird, so I brought it to him." Nicholas stared at the ceiling.

"Was it already dead?"

"Yes, lying among some rocks along the abbey road. I walked that road a lot ~ found many things."

"May I have the torch?" Lazarus asked. Nicholas looked down to see Lazarus with his hand extended.

"I can hold it higher for you, Lazarus." Nicholas raised it as high as he could to better illuminate the ceiling.

"But may I hold it?" Lazarus questioned again. Nicholas looked down.

"If you wish." Nicholas gave him the burning stick. Lazarus held it high and walked around the grotto, inspecting the ceiling while Nicholas stayed put.

"And they only fly at night?" Lazarus called back at him, his words echoing through the cavern.

"Only then," Nicholas replied.

After a time, Lazarus and Nicholas made their way back to the exterior cave and stoked the fire.

"I ask you again, Lazarus ~ for Odino ~ will you?"

"I am not a bat," Lazarus replied.

"And Odino would never ask it of a bat," Nicholas replied.

"If I say I shall and cannot fulfill it?"

"When I told Odino of Martha and of my plans to leave the abbey, he told me this:

'Tis better to have committed and failed than to have failed in commitment lacking.' You see, Lazarus, honor is based on deeds ~ not words alone. What he asked of you is that, at most, you give your word that you will try. Answer me once more and I shall not trouble you with it again."

"Italy is so far away ~ and the sun?" Lazarus glanced at the grotto's opening.

"Will you?" Silence followed.

Lazarus replied, "I ~ yes." From the cave floor, beside his foot mitten, Lazarus picked up the map and looked it over, "I give my word ~ only that I shall *try* to bring the friar back ~ only that."

Nicholas grinned. "Ivan would be proud of you." Lazarus sniffed ~ only then did Nicholas realize that beneath the boy's mask, Lazarus wept.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked.

"Nothing. I shall do it." Lazarus collected himself. "I will fetch Friar Salvitino."

"Well spoken, Lazarus. You are your father and more." Lazarus dried his eyes against the inside of his mask. "Are you hungry, Lazarus? I brought plenty."

"I am," Lazarus admitted. Nicholas walked to the sack and pulled out cloth rolls of meat and bread. He grabbed a water bladder and served up a dinner on Lazarus' lap before returning empty~handed to his seat.

"You shall not eat with me?" Lazarus asked.

"These provisions are yours ~ I would gather about a month's worth for a single boy, if you make it last." Lazarus only stared at him. "Well, go on! Eat!" The boy tore into his food.

And so Lazarus supped while Nicholas entertained him with more conversation ~ and time wore on. Finally, Lazarus washed down his food and affixed a cork back on the water bladder. Nicholas took it back to the sack.

"Remember to eat sparingly ~ and drink lots of water with your food ~ fills the stomach," Nicholas instructed, calling over his shoulder.

Lazarus followed. "I shall."

"Well, Lazarus. It is time for me to be on my way to Murat. You will be safe in Mountain Mouth. No one travels these parts. You have a month to prepare for your journey. Practice using those wings God gave you. Learn from the bats."

"You don't wish to stay the eve?" Lazarus asked him. "You could sleep and be fresh for ~"

"No, Lazarus ~ I must go. Martha waits for me. And you will do fine. I'm certain of it." Lazarus dropped his head and shoulders.

They hugged once last and Lazarus stared out of the cave as Nicholas disappeared over the ridge. He returned to the fire and threw on a few more sticks of gray

wood. He sat down and warmed himself while wondering over the bats and the commitment; the promise he gave. His eyes fixed on the flames, Lazarus found Ivan's wooden prayer cross about his neck and he rolled it in his fingers.

Inside the fire, he spotted a black beetle as it crawled from a crack in the wood and zigzagged gingerly among the dancing flames, scurrying down a burning branch. Lazarus' eyes followed the bug as it leapt to the floor of the cave and scrambled to safer distance. Then it stopped, threw out its wings, and buzzed out of the mouth of the cave. For several hours more, he peered into the fire; for Lazarus it seemed to burn with memories of his past. In time, he left its warm glow and crawled inside a tight nook in the wall and drifted into his dreams.

For most of the following day, Lazarus explored his new home ~ a black catacomb of twisting corridors, uneven surfaces and interconnecting caverns. The smell and sound of dripping water lured him and he ascended through a narrow passage that wormed its way high into the mountainside. The passage swelled into a small cavern where most of its floor consisted of a shallow pool of water fed by a dripping ceiling.

Many times in the course of the day, Lazarus peered out of the cave mouth with squinted eyes, surveying a landscape that screamed in sunlight, and even through his robes, he felt the intense heat radiating from the parched valley of stones. Lazarus moved his provisions deeper into the mountain, through the narrow passage and into the bats' grotto.

Dusk came. Lazarus built a fresh fire inside the grotto; its light illuminated the ceiling and its thousands of bats. As the cavern warmed and the fire's smoke rose against its ceiling, the cave's roof came alive. And by the hundreds, bats dropped from their perches and circled the cave. More and more of them filled the air until the cavern swarmed with them.

Lazarus chuckled. He stood and held out his arms as the whirlwind of wings consumed him. And they lit on his robe and climbed over him before taking off again. Lazarus ripped off his hood, exposing a wide grin. He tucked the mask in his rope belt as bats crawled through his hair. Lazarus walked in circles with raised bat~covered arms. And his chuckles rose to laughter that echoed through the

cavern. In a tornado of fluttering wings, Lazarus waltzed around the grotto, laughing hysterically and stumbling about like a drunken Odino.

Outside the cave, and of all the mountains in France, the dawning moon seemed to smile down on only one ~ an outwardly strange mountain with a mouth agape and laughing hysterically whilst belching a cloud of bats that swarmed its rock face. But soon, the bats were gone and its once echoing laughter blended into wails of sorrow ~ horrible cries of pain and loneliness ~ and perhaps sounds choking enough even to make the moon look down and weep for the yowling Mountain Mouth.

[End Chapter 9]