

DEVIL'S ACRE

It's "ALIENS" VS VICTORIANS VS ZOMBIES!

Adrian Baldwin

Also by Adrian Baldwin

Novels:

BARNACLE BRAT
STANLEY McCLOUD MUST DIE!
THE SNOWMAN AND THE SCARECROW

Shorts:

PIED!
EGOR'S EMPORIUM
BLOWN
ONE SMALL STEP FOR (A) MAN
THE AMAZING XANDRA LEE vs NED SWANN
FREAKSHOW (A SHOW FOR FREAKS)
TREACHERY



Copyright © Adrian Baldwin 2021

Published by Bad Penny Publishing in 2021

All characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and any resemblance to actual events or real persons– living or dead – is purely coincidental.

The right of Adrian Baldwin to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the copyright holder, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 979-8500294531

This one's for Adrian 'Oscar' Wyld
- a true friend who always had my back

Acknowledgements

I'd like to gratefully recognise the help of Bronwen Burgess, Maggie Fitzpatrick-Reeves, Trevor Kennedy, and, of course, Dean M. Drinkel, who played, and continues to play, a big part in developing the Devil's Acre series.

Cover Art/Design by Adrian Baldwin
adrianbaldwin.info

DEVIL'S ACRE

It's "ALIENS" VS VICTORIANS VS ZOMBIES!

Episode 1: THE GREAT STINK

‘Turn and face the strange.’

– David Bowie

Episode 1 THE GREAT STINK

Picture a Victorian London in the distance; blackened rooftops underlining countless smoky chimney stacks - a foggy city, its river, bridges, docks and cobbled streets illuminated by gas lamps and fire braziers. It's a cold night and feels as if it might rain at any moment.

We drift in closer to the east side, settling eventually on Mary loitering in a dimly lit alleyway. This is the 1840s so she'd be in her late twenties on this early Tuesday morning. Other than the double tolling of bells from St Mary-le-Bow church, the area is eerily quiet but after a while our lady of the night hears someone lurking in shadow.

'Looking for a bit of fun, dearie?' she asks. 'Come on out then, I won't bite.'

Mary has many missing teeth but hopes to distract from the condition of the remaining pegs with her overt cleavage and forward manner; most blokes couldn't give a tinker's cuss for the visual so long as the physical is immediate and gratifying. Indeed, the toffs often prefer an earthier wench; let's face it, that's usually why they trawl this side of the river to begin with - the grubbier, more foulmouthed the harlot the better in their eyes.

And speaking of toffs, a well-dressed gent in his mid-fifties now steps his top hat into the faint light.

'How much?' the toff wants to know.

'Well now, seeing as you're obviously a gentleman,' replies Mary, 'how about a shilling?'

'Sixpence,' counters the toff.

'Alright, ducks,' agrees Mary, 'that'll get you a quick knee-trembler. Why don't we step into my office?'

Mary leads the man up a ginnel and into a small walled-off yard. She hitches her skirt and leans back against the blackened bricks. The toff looks her up and down then whips out a vicious blade. He quickly slices three or four times through her clothes; one slash cuts through her petticoat and deep into her fleshy thighs.

'Here, what's your fucking game?'

But as quickly as he'd started the toff stops for something has caught his eye; he takes a slow step back, anxious, afraid, slack-jawed and spooked.

'What sort of an abomination---?' mutters the stymied aristocrat.

And with that, a projectile hits the toff's waistcoat and he instantly turns into a steaming pile of jellified flesh laced with shattered bones, his fine clothing now ash and floating dust.

Terrified, frozen in place, Mary watches as a seven-foot tall creature turns off its hi-tech bio-suit's camouflaging and becomes clearly visible: the being appears part-crustacean part-man; atop his bio-suit, a glass-fronted helmet and an 'alien' prawn-like face surrounded by clear water.

'He got what he deserved if you ask me,' offers Mary. 'So, I won't be saying nothin' to nobody. Now, if it's alright with you, dearie, I'm gonna get straight off home to me nipper.'

The subterranean, for that is what he is, steps forward, small canister in hand, as if to spray Mary's face, but she passes out before he is able.

Moments later the subterranean creature, a biped, walks away, down an alleyway toward the river, with Mary slung over a shoulder.

Partway he stops, and slowly turns ... to face an urchin, in rags, huddled by some boxes.

'Spare a penny, mister?' sniffs the urchin.

The creature whips out a handgun and zaps the boy. Much like the toff, the urchin is instantly turned into a small vaporous heap of gelatinous sludge and pieces of bone; his threadbare hand-me-downs now dust and drifting embers.

The gun, futuristic-looking cutting-edge technology even now, let alone then, is expertly and smoothly holstered.

As the subterranean moves on, toward the lapping of the river, we see a shaky drunk hidden behind a cart, frozen in silent fear. This is Bill, forties but booze-aged beyond his years - and we will get to know him within a day or two.

* * * * *

Imagine a gleaming panoramic spectacle of the Atlantic Ocean, a space so wide that the curve of the earth is clearly visible at the horizon.

Alone in this nautical diorama sails *The Nantucket*: a filthy, blood-soaked whaling ship under the Stars & Stripes, a factory vessel belching black smoke.

From our bird's-eye view let us now swoop down to within earshot of the crew who, as you can see, are donned in traditional mid-19th century sailing garb.

'What's the first thing you're gonna do when we get back?' asks sailor Jacob of a mate.

'Beer and a bit of Strange,' is Gilbert's reply.

Their unfinished conversation is curtailed by a loud call from the lookout, high in the crow's nest:

'Thar she blows, Captain!'

'To your harpoons, boys!' orders Captain Fitzroy.

Sailors scramble, grab rocket harpoon guns and stand ready.

From deep water, the silhouette of a whale passes above us; followed by the outline of the ship and its wake.

Back up top, the captain demands, 'More steam! More steam!'

'Aye, captain,' shouts a midshipman.

And down in *The Nantucket's* engine room, sweaty grubby men in blackened vests shovel coal at breakneck speed into roaring furnaces as above them cries of 'Step lively down there!' continue to ring out from the midshipman above.

Back below the surface of the ocean we race toward the ship's dark hull at great speed. Closer and closer, the black shape widens.

On deck again, the plume of black smoke lengthens astern as the ship picks up speed; the harpoonists brace themselves and prepare to fire - then the whaling ship explodes from an enormous blast under its keel.

As we depart the scene a passing albatross soars on high and far below screaming, burning men jump from the broken, sinking ship.

* * * * *

At the bottom of a boat ramp in an East End dock, the sun settling down beyond the roof tops in the West of London, soot-faced workers wash their grimy bodies in the filthy brown Thames.

'The Nantucket; it was in the paper this morning,' Albert, an older man with white whiskers and a shiny dome hidden under his cap, addresses a fellow labourer. 'They lost all the cargo and every last man.'

'Wonder if Polly was aboard; servicing the crew,' muses Lester. 'She's been missing for weeks.'

'Yeah, her and a few others I could name,' adds Arthur.

'Well, don't tell my Trouble and Strife whatever you do,' laughs Lester. 'Don't want her thinking I take an interest in the comings and goings of the local streetwalkers.'

As Albert and Lester discuss the pros and cons of the high number of working girls manning every street corner and pub front, Tom, a tanner's apprentice in a leather apron, staggers down the ramp carrying a heavy tin bath.

'Christ, Tom, what a pen and ink,' notes Arthur.

'Want your leather soft, don't you?' replies Tom.

'Cor, it reeks and no mistake,' adds Lester. 'What have you got in there?'

'Pigeon shit, dog shit, horse piss, sodium sulphide, ammonium chloride - oh, and a hint of lime,' advises Tom dumping the contents of the tin bath into the river.

'Couldn't you have held off till we'd finished?' asks Lester.

'We've all got our jobs to do,' replies Tom.

'Just be thankful he's dumping it down river from us,' remarks Arthur.

'Yeah, very thoughtful I'm sure,' sniffs Lester.

Unseen, on the other side of the river, a subterranean, head semi-submerged, watches the men. As before, the water inside its bio-suit helmet is crystal clear, in stark contrast to the polluted river water of the Thames.

* * * * *

An East End Victorian police station is a busy place at the quietest of times and Limehouse cop shop is no exception. Here, holding cells to the right, the office of a newly formed detective branch to the left, and front and centre an imposing chest-high counter. A wooden bench accommodates several people waiting their turn: a man with a bandaged head, two street kids arrested for suspected pick-pocketing, an old woman sleeping one off, and a male and female dressed all in black, members of The Rooks gang - we'll meet their sort soon enough.

A fresh-faced young constable, PC Beale, escorts Bill, still somewhat stewed from the night before, to the counter.

'Eight foot tall he was, at least,' recounts Bill. 'Woman over a shoulder like she was nothing - headed towards the river as casual as you please.'

'Sarge!' calls the constable. 'Sarge!'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm coming,' calls a voice from the back.

'You didn't see him,' Bill tells the constable. 'You'd be crying blue murder if you had.'

Sergeant Credge, all mutton chops and red cheeks, a bulldog in uniform, finally appears through a door that leads to a back office and onto an enclosed yard. He fastens the last two fly buttons and tightens his leather belt.

'Honestly, a man can't take a gypsy's these days.'

'Blighted a ragamuffin right before my eyes,' continues Bill.

'Well, if it isn't the proverbial bad penny,' notes Credge. 'Hello Bill. What is it today, another golem?'

'This one was even taller than the last one,' insists Bill.

'Did he have a funny walk again?'

'He did,' says Bill. 'Like this.'

'Yeah, yeah, you showed me last time.' Credge passively taps a pencil on the log book as Bill walks around, hunched over, knees akimbo - until he's suddenly tripped by one of the alleged pickpockets who deliberately extends a leg.

'Here, watch it you,' warns the sergeant, 'or we'll be adding aggravated assault to your collar.'

Bill, back on his unsteady feet, makes as if to fistfight the tyke but it's all for show.

‘Go on; sit him down, Constable - that’s it, no need to get all agitated. You wait right there and we’ll see if we can get a detective on the job.’

‘Well over eight foot tall he was,’ insists Bill. ‘Poor Mary over his shoulder like she was no heavier than a sack of goose-feathers.’

‘Constable, why don’t you send a runner to fetch *Sam*,’ advises Sergeant Credge. ‘I think *he’d* like to take this one.’

‘Sam?’ the constable frowns.

‘Sammy Torium,’ explains Credge under his breath.

‘Oh right, Sarge, of course; *Sam*,’ clicks PC Beale.

* * * * *

Subterranea, a sprawling city of lights, domes and tubular access routes lies at the bottom of a deep, dark oceanic trench; it is a busy, futuristic metropolis surrounded by marine craft ‘flying’ around, some arriving and some departing.

Inside the domes and tubes, various types of bio-suited creatures traverse walkways: many on foot, others in small vehicles; Subterranea is as heavily populated as Victorian London it seems - perhaps more so.

Let us venture inside, to one of the underwater city’s military testing areas, where several naked humans are shackled by neck-collars to the back walls of tiny, individual glass-sided cells.

Two ‘prawn soldiers’, much like the subterranean Bill saw, strip a freshly arrived foppish gent then secure him in a cell. Once done, the soldiers leave the cell, pass two door guards (shorter, shrimp-faced individuals) and exit through an automated door into a cylindrical walkway.

A point to mention: all the Subterraneans, with their distinct oceanic roots, have evolved into technically advanced bipeds who wear bio-suits all the time, whether in the sea or in the dry, up on the land or here inside the city.

Up in a mezzanine area, surrounded by computer servers, informative screens and a multitude of lab technicians, two scientists, Qeib, a male, and Oemskx, a

female, (flat-faced ‘dolphin’ types) look down at the cells, to the fop in particular.

The dandy has been scanning his surroundings; in the cell next to his, a naked Mary, also secured by a collar.

‘Hello in there, can you hear me? My name is Aubrey, Aubrey Atherton-Smyth. What is this place, do you know?’

Aubrey has a posh accent as you might expect, but from inside the next cell Mary can only see the man’s lips moving, she cannot hear a word he says.

On the mezzanine, Qeib places a hand on a section of touch-screen keyboard (the hand comprises a large thumb and three large fingers, plus a stubby vestige of what was once, long ago, the ‘little finger’) and in a cell farther along the row, Terry Morris, a large, broad-shouldered man, also collared, looks up and blinks as something above him whirrs mechanically.

A robotic arm holding a glass canister of yellow liquid drops down and positions itself before his face.

‘No, no,’ pleads Terry. ‘What’s this now, you aquatic devils?!’

But Terry’s pleas fall upon deaf ears and a nozzle sprays a liquid mist into his face. He coughs, splutters, and his red eyes stream relentlessly.

Qeib presses another screen icon; Terry’s collar retracts and he drops heavily to the floor of his cell. As the scientists look down, watching, studying, a large, prominent screen displaying vital signs updates those signs of life to flat-lines.

The scientists appear disappointed.

Another icon is pressed and the floor of Terry’s cell opens in two, a giant trapdoor, and his body drops out of sight. After a beat, there’s a splash and the trapdoor closes.

The scientists turn now to regard the test subject with the long blonde hair.

In Mary’s cell, the robot arm (now with a glass canister of *green* liquid) drops down and positions itself.

‘No! No! NO!’ begs Mary. ‘Please, God, no!’

But the nozzle sprays a liquid mist into her face.

Qeib hits another touch-screen icon and Mary’s collar retracts - she drops to the floor of her cell.

The scientists look down, waiting, scrutinizing.

Aubrey also looks on, helpless, troubled.

‘Good grief, what have they done to you? Are you okay? What on earth is this place?’

Mary appears extremely sick, coughing and convulsing; sores erupt all over her skin and she quickly grows a terrible colour from head to foot.

‘What madness is this? I demand to speak to whoever’s in charge!’

Down from the gallery, the scientists move to Mary’s cell and study her through the front glass wall. They seem disillusioned.

‘Let her go, you brutes. What sort of godless creatures, are you? Do you hear me? Yes, I’m talking to you. Answer me, damn you!’

* * * * *

A horse-drawn carriage clip-clops through open gates, winds up the driveway and pulls up outside the entrance to a large, foreboding asylum built in the gothic architectural style. A sign reads HIGHGATE HOUSE.

Inside the sanatorium, two orderlies in white housecoats - Fred, a skinny, weasel-faced individual, and Earnest, a bear of a man, but a gentle giant type - escort Bill, straitjacketed, to a large reception desk. A no-nonsense, draconian-looking nurse greets them with a long, fixed stare.

‘And who do we have here?’ asks Nurse Gray.

‘Says his name’s Bill Carter,’ replies Fred. ‘Been seeing things it sounds like.’

Fred makes a ‘boozier’ sign and it does appear that Bill is still slightly stewed.

‘Well, fear not, Mr Carter,’ advises Nurse Gray. ‘We have a great deal of experience in treating all sorts of mania here at Highgate: visions, delusions, hallucinations---’

‘Horseshit!’ barks Bill. ‘This was real, I tell you - as real as I’m standing here: nine foot tall he was, walked into the river with a woman on his shoulder casual as you like; right into the Thames, never even looked back.’

‘I’m sure we’ll get it all straightened out once you’ve been examined by Dr. Thomas,’ smiles nurse Gray.

‘Who’s he when he’s at home?’ Bill wants to know.

~~~~~

A female inmate, strapped to a treatment room table, thrashes around as Dr. Thomas, thirties, thin, tall in his white lab coat, and seemingly indifferent to a patient’s fervent pleadings, applies electrodes to the sides of her shaved head.

‘Now, now, this will go a lot more smoothly for you, Mrs Archer, if you could just settle down.’ The doctor has a German accent. ‘A few jolts of the healing current and you’ll be as right as the rain by sun-up.’

~~~~~

Bill appears distraught. ‘Here, I ain’t no lunatic,’ he urges.

‘That’s what they all say,’ laughs Fred.

‘Alright, Fred, that will do thank you,’ chides Nurse Gray. ‘Now if you’ll kindly escort Bill to the holding room I’m sure Dr. Thomas will be along to examine him presently.’

The orderlies do as instructed and escort Bill, panicky now, down a brightly lit corridor.

‘Blighted a poor urchin lad, too, he did; turned him to jelly just for the hell of it,’ Bill cautions. ‘*All he wanted was a penny!*’

* * * * *

Meanwhile, back in the subterranean testing area, a high ranking military officer, General Bew, flanked by Elite Guards is now in attendance. Bew, a muscular brute, has something of the starfish about his orange-hued face; his personal guards are, by the look of them, probably evolved from king prawns.

With some trepidation the scientists Qeib and Oemskx lend Bew their attention as, clearly agitated, he briskly

scans the many empty cells - then studies Mary, on the floor, coughing and groaning.

'How long has it been like that?' asks General Bew. He communicates, as do the scientists, via a series of whistles and pulses.

'About four hours,' replies Qeib.

'Leave her alone, you bastards,' shouts Aubrey. 'What have you done to her?!'

'Not good enough,' rules Bew.

The General hits a button at the side of the cell door and Mary disappears through the opened floor.

'No!!!' wails Aubrey.

'Step up the testing,' orders Bew. 'We'll get you more subjects.'

'It's not a case of more subjects,' explains Qeib. 'We need more time.'

The General draws his pistol and shoots Qeib in the face. The glass in the scientist's helmet shatters, the inner liquid pours out and he drops to the ground, choking.

'You're in charge now,' Bew informs Oemskx.

Oemskx nods that she understands.

'See they get more,' Bew tells one of his Elite Guards.

'Yes, General,' replies the guard.

The General moves for the exit and Oemskx bows. The dying scientist clutches at her leg but she steps aside.

* * * * *

Thanks for reading the sample.

'DEVIL'S ACRE' (Episode #1 The Great Stink) is available on Amazon in print and eBook.