

DO YOU BELIEVE?

By: C.J. Henderson

"Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe. If you believe, clap your hands." J.M. Barrie

"Com'on, fellas," the newsman shouted pitifully, "Gimme a break!"

It was the horrible sincerity the figure before him could muster, with his pitifully outstretched arms and quickly moistening eyes, that made the balding man grin so. Turning to his friends, he shuddered in mock horror, then asked;

"Well, what'daya think? Can we tolerate his presence?"

"I don't know," added another at the table, a tall, thin gentleman with intense blue eyes, "I do hate it so when his lower lip starts quivering."

"Did I mention," offered the newsman with practiced timing, "that the next round is, of course, on the network?"

"Now I could be seein' my way to forgivin' the lad his indiscretions," offered an aromatic type of extremely disreputable note. "Considerin' his warm proposal of a proper makin' of penance, as it were."

"Oh, good," chuckled the balding man, "now I'm in the dubious position of not only supportin' the local pariah, but also havin' it known that I agreed with Darby on somethin'."

Most who were gathered there that night got the joke. The newsman was Marv Richards, head anchor and main producer of Challenge of the Unknown, the only network news show dedicated to covering the strange and the supernatural. He was also one of the only media personalities ever to be allowed within the walls of the Narkane. On every world, there was one spot where all dimensions met. In some it appeared to be a marketplace. In some a temple, some a school. Often it was a library. Whatever the shade of a particular reality, however, that same set of square footage was always a place where people gathered, reverently, to engage in social discourse.

In the reality where they called the third planet from the yellow sun in their Sol system "the Earth," that spot was the Narkane, Manhattan's most exclusive nite spot, and a focusing point for all manner of things. It was known across the widest band of the dimensional spanway as quite possibly the most interesting club experience in the "Hip" universe. Within its walls, any two creatures, entities or semi-mobilized philosophies could bump up against each other.

The Narkane was, of course, a natural haven for scoundrels determined on transporting illicit goods across inter-dimensional boundaries. Which meant on any night there you might be rubbing elbows with smugglers bent on moving anything from Romulan ale to the square eggs of the Andes. In a nutshell, it was the ultimate

Spe'keasy--a place where on any night anyone and anything could take to the dance floor. Which was more than proved by the crew at table 15.q who were finally waving Richards over.

The oldest was Professor Zackery Goward. Doctor of philosophy and theology, he had spent the better part of his life in the search for the strange and the bizarre. Paul Morcey, the balding man next to him, was not nearly as cultured as "the Doc," but, as a detective working out of the London Agency, he had come across enough of the strange and the bizarre to last most men several lifetimes. And, completing the trio, was one of the least reputable beings for miles around wherever he went. A storyteller known simply as Darby, he was the last word in "odious," the kind of person that made those rare strains of sentient toilet scum feel good about themselves.

As Richards turned the threesome into a quartet, he indicated to one of the bartenders that the table should be hit once all around by pointing to the claw hammer hanging above it. Sliding into one of the table's two vacant seats, his ears leaped into the conversation as Darby growled;

"Oh, auk now--it t'weren't so bad."

"Not so bad," sputtered Goward. "You had sex with a blind nun by telling her you were Jesus."

"Well and sure, now hasn't every young scamp played a merry prank or two in his time?"

"Yeah," drawled Morcey, grimacing as anyone would who had to admit to knowing Darby, "but you made a tape of the evenin' and sent it in to 'America's Most Embarrassing Videos.'"

"That was you?" All heads turned toward Richards. His eyes filling with admiration, he said, "they won Sweeps hands-down with that. Forced ad revenues up for their network three points. Nice work, dude."

"Sweet bride of the night," groaned Morcey. "Now we got two of 'em." The detective's mouth actually hung open for a moment, as he listened to a chuckling Richards say;

"I'm telling you, oh, when you told her 'this is my body, take therefore of it and eat,' oh, oh my God ..."

The anchorman broke down into hysterics at that point, first at the memory of Darby's carnal comedy, then at the pun of his own calling on the Almighty during that story. Pounding the table with his fist, waving his other hand, he choked out a few words--

"And then, then ... oh, and then, when ... when you blessed her with your 'holy water' ... ahahhahahaha ..."

And then fell into a tittering fit that left the professor and Morcey looking at each other askance, and Darby simply sitting back, enjoying his pipe. Richards was saved from death-by-fluster, however, in a timely fashion by the arrival of a medium-sized carnivore of some sort or another management had somehow stuffed into a tuxedo which had brought the new round of drinks, including a Scotch for Richards, his usual, and a complementary bowl of house mix--a random mangerful of goodies in which one could find anything from Rasinettes and Crunchy Frog to golden apple chips or bits of the True Cross.

"So," said Goward, tossing a noncommittal fragment of conversation into the air, "It seems the theme tonight is something of an Art Deco by way of Kate Hepburn/Flash Gordon."

The others agreed. It was one of the more fascinating, yet subtle things about the club, the fact that the decor and design changed on an almost nightly basis. For instance, if Monday the band was blowing big band cool, Tuesday was just as likely to be a combination of jitterbugging and hip hop as it was to be superheroic polkas. The management had long before decided that the easiest way to keep any one faction from dominating the clientele policies was to maintain an ever-changing atmosphere. Thus, if Wednesday the universe's best Klezmer band was on stage, then Thursday might be Jazz James Bond Night, Geeks-Rule Eve, Barbie Nite, or who knew what.

"All right, fine--the decor is swell," responded Richards, never one to let an interesting conversational opener interfere with his primary objective of self-promotion, "but who's got something good for me?"

"Hey, Marv," answered Morcey, setting down his bourbon, "give it a rest, will you?"

"Com'on, you guys," the anchor pleaded, "it's a cold, cruel world out there. I've got my third season justification pitch coming up. I need something new. Something with a little pizzazz. Some kind of shambling creepie, or slinky hell babe--"

"Well, responded Morcey, grinning, "Truth told, I could go for a slinky hell babe myself."

"Yes, quite," said Goward. His fourth Rob Roy firmly in hand, he added, "what a provocative idea. Make that two, would you?"

"Go on, yuk it up," groaned Richards. "I'm still desperate here. Doesn't a finders fee interest anyone anymore?"

"By the by," said Darby drily, "I might have a tale you could spin them." Goward and Morcey turned with interest. Foul and repugnant and just downright cootie-a-fied as Darby was, there was no doubting that when it came to storytelling, he was the king of kings. Richards also flashed his interest at the lumpy Irishman, but his was powered by a need far more powerful than the desire to be entertained. Turning the full intensity of his personality upon the storyteller, Richards signaled for a waiter while saying;

"Do tell? What kind of story?"

"Well now," answered Darby. "Have you ever heard tell of ... the cockroach fairies?"

"Hey, that sounds grea--" the anchorman cut his cheer short as his hearing caught up with his enthusiasm. "What?"

"You heard me ... the cockroach fairies. Do you know of them?"

"I've heard of fairies," said Morcey. "And bein' a New Yorker, it's obvious I know about roaches. But what do the two of them have to do with each other?"

"Let me pose a question," said Darby. Draining his glass as the waiter approached, he indicated he would like three more of the same, then said, "you're all men of substance. All of you

over a hundred and fifty pounds, at least. Now, you tell me--is there a man among you who, in his time, that hasn't stepped on a roach, tryin' your best to eradicate the wee beastie's mortal existence?" All three of the others affirmed that they had.

"Of course you have. Now, tell me, how many times have you done so, to then lift your foot and watch the blessed thing run off with nary a harm done to it?" Again, all three affirmed that such was the case.

"I thought so," answered Darby. "That's because there are roaches in this world, and there are fairies==true is true. But the thing most have nary a clue over is the secret of the cockroach fairies."

As Darby downed a full-throated swig of his Baggins Brew Dark Ale, Harry Hausen, a skeleton in a tuxedo complete with top hat and spats, ambled out onto the Narkane stage to introduce the members of the band. Realizing this meant it was time to order last rounds of drinks for the moment, the club's clientele went into an uproar calling for everything from Pan-Galactic Gargle Fizzes to Cherry Rolling Rocks. Once the commotion died down, and the Narkane's All Cephalopod Dancers had taken to the stage, to mambo to the haunting strains of Kip Bisseldorf and his Elegant Lads, Darby returned to his story.

"Now, as I was sayin' ... the cockroach fairies ... well, first you have to understand, I'm not tryin' to tell you that all cockroaches are fairies, or that all fairies are cockroaches. No. You see, a long time back, there was a group of fairies, the

Kel'derna, that, well, I hate to cast aspersions, but they were, shall we say, not appreciated amongst their own kind."

"Why's that?"

"They had what some judged to be, bad habits. They weren't as interested in helpin' kindly cobblers or paintin' rainbows as they were stealin' the milk from cows and runnin' away with human babies and the such."

"Fairies from the wrong side of town, like?"

"Oh, aye, Mr. Richards, that they were. And they caused the rest of the fairy community no end of trubble--that they did. Well now, it wasn't long before they weren't welcomed in any neighborhood, district or region by any type of pixie, sprite or other winged imp. Their brand was as unwelcome as an undertaker at a wedding. Why, they made the traveling Jews of the fourteen century look like the Prodigal Son, they did."

Darby drained one of the various mugs before him, then hoisted another with a wonderfully smooth motion, as he continued.

"Now, it was around about the time of the Greeks, I mean, when they were the big kahunas, philosophically speaking, that things came to a boil for the Kel'derna. Gettin' a bit full of themselves, don't cha'know, they managed to upset just about every branch of the magical world. I mean, if you think the fairies were mad at them, oh and now, I'm tellin' you true as dew in the mornin', there wasn't a harpy, hydra or demi-god that wouldn't swat one as soon as give 'em a glance at their sun dial. They were in it, sure'nd true."

"So that's when they turned into cockroaches?"

"Don't interrupt him," cautioned Morcey. "That'll just cost you more drinks."

And, indeed, the balding man was correct. Darby had the anchor signal another waiter who was given the order to simply start bringing random drinks of any type in any quantity to the table. Morcey smiled, saying;

"This ought to be good. I want to see you drink a mint julep right after a Coconut Pepper Zombie."

The storyteller's only response was to instruct the waiter to combine the drinks just mentioned in one pitcher, add a can of Foster's Lager, a raw egg and two chicken bouillon cubes and to then bring it to the table with a stalk of celery he could use as a stirrer. As Goward turned a touch green, Darby continued telling the history of the cockroach fairies. And fascinating it turned out to be.

Over roughly the next forty-five minutes, while consuming an Eclipse, a Dubonnet Fizz, a Thunder, two Ninitchkas, a Bulldog, a Bronx Terrace, three Fallen Angels, two Pink Whiskers and a small tub of Pousse Café, along of course with his initial special order, Darby told those assembled the remaining history of the Kel'derna.

Gathering all their remaining clansprites in the forests of Gaul, the outcast pixies debated as to how best protect themselves from a hostile world. It was decided that the simplest way for them to survive was to disappear. The Kel'derna would be no more. It was decided they would retreat back into the most

inaccessible reaches of Gaul, and create a society for themselves alone. Impossible thoughts such as "hard work" and "moral responsibility" were bandied about, but the clan had brought such down upon themselves, and there was no getting around it.

Now at the time, the common cockroach was not the fearsome and hated creature it is today. A simple, sturdy survivor from prehistoric times, the Kel'derna began to breed them along specific lines. One thing, Darby emphasized, was the importance that they become both delicious and indestructible. If the creatures were to be the cows as well as the horses of the race, they would have to become tasty as well as sturdy.

The Kel'derna bred the race of cockroaches in secrecy for centuries, for both size and speed for when they would be used as steeds, as well as for their further applications after life. The clan increasingly enjoyed the taste of the cockroach, of that there was no denying, but they also found myriad other uses for them, as well. Their wings, especially, became not only shields, but the basic building blocks of Kel'dernian industry.

Homes were made from them, as well as boats, umbrellas, cutting edged tools, serving bowls, et cetera. The roach became marvelously useful to the Kel'dernian community, but their greatest use was yet to be discovered.

"Indeed," said Darby, his voice low and eyes glistening, "that moment dinna come until the Kel'derna had been breeding roaches for nearly a thousand years. By then, Gaul had been overrun with people, and as the Kel'dernian population was finally startin' to show a bit of an explosion, itself, it was

decided that some of the younger, more adventurous of the clan might set out on their own. And, dinna they have the marvelous luck then that the Pope, in his infinite greed and deviltry, called at that time for the first of the Crusades."

Richards' hands flew through page after page of notes as the storyteller related how the movement of people out of the cold and damp north into the southlands and back again, over and over for the next few hundred years became the catalyst for the spread of roaches across the face of the world. Morcey and Goward looked at each other a trifle askance, but did not interrupt, wanting to see just where Darby was going with his tale.

And where he wanted to go proved interesting to both of them. As he told it, wanting to see the rest of the world, or at least some of its drier segments, the Kel'dernians decided to venture out from the protection of the dark wood. It was then, as they began to move about in the world at large once more, that they noticed the greater aversion humans had to their friends, the cockroaches, than they did other insects.

The reason, it was assumed, was the roaches habit of invading the homes of man on a far more permanent basis than the occasional fly or bee that might wander in. Even ants always went home after they found what they wanted. But, the human reaction to roaches was so much greater than these it was soon decided the Kel'derna would become as closely associated with their livestock as possible. Soon cloaks were added to the utilitarian function to which their cattle were put. The clan also soon began

experimenting with a form of rudimentary genetics, breeding themselves to darker and darker shades.

Over the hundreds of years of the Crusades, the clan became more and more adept at mimicking their mounts. They learned to run across floors like them, run in wild circles to avoid destruction, and to vibrate at just the right frequency while standing still in a sudden burst of light so as to appear to be insects. Truth to tell, the secret the Kel'derna learned was the more they pushed their way into the homes of the aristocracy, the less people bothered to look at them.

"It's a sad commentary on folk, but it's true," Darby sighed, stirring a half keg of General Harrison's Egg Nog with his celery stalk, "We live in an age now where Kel'dernian magic has the world completely under its spell. You know as well as I do, some folks, as soon as they see a roach, why they grow completely irrational, slammin' and bangin' away at the poor dears with anything at hand, while others go completely in the other direction and will turn the lights back out and just tip toe away."

"But, I don't get it," said Richards. His face showing his puzzlement clearly, he said, "when there aren't any fairies around, why do people get so upset over just simple roaches?"

"It's the magic--the magic that the Kel'dernians used to breed their roaches, it's in all of them now. The clan is in every city in the world; they still find it easier to live off what they can steal from human society. Even after spending near an entire millennia on their own, as soon as they came out into

the world again ... well, sigh--I guess it's just in their blood, the little devils. But as I was sayin', the magic they used to breed their roaches has infected the entire species. Now, people can't be around them without reactin' far different than they do with any other bug."

Darby sat back, taking a long swig of no one knew what. Morcey hooded his eyes and gave Goward a what-do-you-think look. The professor smiled, not quite knowing how to answer. Not noticing the non-verbal conversation on the other side of the table, Richards jerked his head back involuntarily once he realized the storyteller had finished his tale, and barked;

"That's it? That's the big story? I shelled out ..." he did a quick bit of mental calculating, then shrieked, "nine hundred and eighty-five dollars just for that?"

"Did you be wanting' more?" As the anchorman's glare blasted its way across the table, Darby moved a bit in his seat, reaching inside his coat, saying;

"Auck, you TV people and your visuals. Well, mayhap this might be of some assistance."

Darby withdrew his hand from the moldering tatters of his overcoat, bits of thread and other debris clinging to it. Then, putting his loosely-closed fist down in the center of the table, he opened his fingers to reveal a large number of roaches. Everyone else's immediate reactions was to grab their drinks and move back a bit. Then, the previous conversation sinking in, they all leaned forward again to find they were not looking at roaches at all--or, at least, not merely roaches.

Several of the figures Darby had set to rest next to the table's candle and the wicker basket of half-eaten house mix were indeed roaches, but two were not. Richards leaned in even closer, at first not believing his eyes, then not believing his good fortune. Morcey and Goward leaned in as well, joining him in his former disbelief if not his latter joyfulness, for there on the table were two miniature human beings, fairies if either had ever seen one, but of a type they had never previously beheld.

Tall and thin, one male and one female, the pair were as brown as mahogany and as spiteful as an old testament deity. They wore helmets adorned with long antenna, vests and cloaks made of cockroach wings, and leggings and boots fashioned from some other part of roachian anatomy no one wished to question. Two of the roaches which had been set down along with them stood calmly aside their masters, obviously outfitted with saddles and reigns. Rubbing his eyes, Richards stammered;

"But, but ... I can see everything so clearly. When they're in my kitchen, I only see ... I mean--"

"Ah, an' that's easy to explain," answered Darby casually. "When you snap on a light and you see one of these fellows, your mind thinks 'roach,' and so that's what you see. But, now that you know what you're looking at, well, you see what you know. You know?"

The anchorman nodded absently, his eyes studying the two figures on the table with a growing fascination. He asked a score more questions, but everything Darby told him about the Kel'derna only made him more and more desperate to take the two pixies away

with him that night. Finally they made a deal for a figure that choked the working stiff at the table. After the storyteller and Richards shook hands, however, Darby added;

"Of course, this is all moot if the Kel'derna won't go with you."

"Go with me," questioned the anchor. "I thought they were, I don't know, pets, or something."

As tiny hands went for their swords, Darby leaned forward quickly, shaking his hands and speaking in a bastardized elven that hurt the ears. After making Richards' apologize for him, then calling for another round of too-many-drinks, this time including a set of thimbles so the Kel'dernians could help themselves, the storyteller asked;

"So, what say you two? You've been with me a while, and there's all the fun in that, but this fellow, now ... he wants to put you on the tellie. What do you say ... would you like to be exploited for ratings?"

"Did I mention," offered the newsman with practiced timing, "that practically anything you might want is, of course, on the network?"

The offer brought a chorus of high-pitched giggles that seemed to delight Richards and Darby equally. Indeed, negotiations went so swimmingly after that point that it was but a matter of seven minutes before the anchor was on his way to the front door with his new stars, and Darby was signalling furiously for a waiter.

"That was a remarkable bit of history, Mr. Darby," offered Goward as a waiter approached. The storyteller asked for a heavy duty first aid kit then responded to the professor.

"What, oh, heh heh, sorry, but you might not want to be repeatin' any of that for one of your classes."

Morcey groaned, pulling a hand down over his face as he said, "Owwwww, suckered again."

"Now, now," said Darby as he removed a great wad of blood-soaked linen from beneath his coat, "it was just a harmless bit of fun either of you might have pulled. I mean, well and sure, now hasn't every young scamp played a merry prank or two in his time?"

"You mean to say, sir, that there are no cockroach fairies?"

"There are," said Darby with assurance. "Two, to be exact. Fred and Maxine, and you just met them, may the devil take their hindquarters, the ungrateful little bas--"

Morcey started to laugh as the waiter returned with the first aid kit. In moments, Darby was washing out his left arm pit with hydrogen peroxide while the waiter prepared to sew shut the ragged holes in his arm still dripping blood and loose bits of flesh. While the storyteller groaned at the first threading puncture, he explained;

"I might have promised the two of them a place to stay after a Halloween party a couple of years back. They went as cockroaches. I lost some sort of bet. I can't be too certain of the details, all I know is after drinkin' perhaps a wee bit too much, I woke up with those two livin' in me armpit, and no way in

hell of gettin' them out except comin' up with a better deal for them."

"So," said Goward, his knuckles turning white as he unconsciously gripped the stem of his Rob Roy far too tightly, "you're telling us that for several ... years, years ... you've had a small horde of cockroaches and fairies ... livin' in your armpit?"

Darby nodded sadly, pleading that anyone can get themselves into a spot of trouble now and again. The waiter bit off the last piece of threat knotting closed the last of the wounds in the storyteller's arm. Gathering up his kit, he removed it along with twenty-some of the empty glasses, mugs and thimbles, the emptied house mix basket and the remaining roaches. As he left, Goward sighed;

"I'm sorry to hear the tale was a fiction. It did explain a great deal about cockroaches. I've always sworn the damnable things were magic on some level or another."

"Oh," responded Darby absently as he tested his arm, "but they are. Dinna you know? It was one of the outer gods or the other, created them just to cause trouble, it did."

"Do tell ..."

Darby looked up, discovering Morcey and Goward looking at him with interest. Finding his arm reasonably repaired, the storyteller told them;

"Oh, indeed. What a tale I could tell you, if it t'weren't for my terrible thirst ..."

The two men looked at each other for a moment, shrugged, and then signaled for a waiter while Darby said;

"It was the Daemon Sultan, itself, the primal chaos men say sits in its court at the center of the universe ..."

And, while his story went on, drinks were served, vampires mingled with insurance salesmen, fairies stole mints from the bowls at the bar and cephalopods danced, as they did every night at the Narkane.