

'Mysterious castle' saga concludes

By ALAN DOERKSEN

So saying, I climbed out of the hatchway, grabbed the nearest vine and swung away. The ape (who said his name was Hairy) followed, shouting out directions. Soon I saw light at the edge of the forest, and headed that way. I heard a muffled shout behind me, and turned to look back as I grabbed the next vine. Not seeing Hairy, I swung ahead and found myself out in the open once more. In fact, I was swinging over the pond I had seen from my tower window, before. There were no available vines within reach, so I tried to swing back to the branch I had come from. Unfortunately, my vine snapped in mid-flight. With a yell, I plummeted into the water, from one hundred feet. Then my diving experience came into play, and I did a swan belly-flop, perfectly. When I regained consciousness . . . I was lying on an outcrop of rocks, in the middle of the pond, surrounded by mermaids. I blinked, and rubbed my eyes, but again the mermaids swam into view. There were three of them, half-woman, half dolphin, and each was incredibly beautiful, a ten on a fish-scale of one to ten.

"Where am I, in Davy Bones Locker?" I asked. Once again I got an unexpected reply.

"Why no, this is Loch Mess, didn't you know?" replied the cute, blonde naiad beside me, in open-eyed wonder.

"Now I do, but who are you?" I asked for the hundred and twenty-sixth time.

"I'm Daphne, and this is Echo (she indicated the wistful-looking brunette on my left side), and Calypso (she pointed to the dark-haired beauty in front of me)."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Alex Zuma."

"No kidding? I've read every one of your books!" exclaimed Calypso.

"I'm flattered," I answered, "but how do you get them?"

"The baron delivers them every so often, but mainly, we have to read books of mythology."

"Yeah," echoed Echo, resentfully. "He expects us to act like nymphs, or something."

"But that's what you are, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose. . . say, what are you doing here, anyway? We saw you drop in from the jungle, and rescued you out of the water, just in time."

"I appreciate that. As a matter of fact, I'm here to look for the baron."

"You won't find him here," replied Daphne. "He keeps a good distance away, and has

Hairy the Baboon drop off our supplies."

"By the way, where did he disappear to, anyway? We were going to the castle."

"I saw him up in a tree by the lake, just after you fell in. Then he left," said Calypso. "He's scared to death of the monster," she giggled.

"Oh no...don't tell me: the Loch Mess Monster?"

"You got it, buddy," Echo agreed. I groaned. "Don't worry, he's perfectly harmless, except at lunchtime," she consoled me.

"When is that, may I ask?"

Before she could answer, I heard a loud splash, and turned to see a particularly silly-looking head break the surface, accompanied by an enormously long neck. The monster was the spittin' image of a Protosaurus. As I watched, it looked around stupidly, chewed its cud and plunged back down into the water.

"You call that a monster?" I derided. "I've seen pet canaries more dangerous than that!"

"That's because he saw you with us," opined Daphne. "If you were alone, he'd have eaten you."

"That's debatable. He looks like a vegetarian to me. By the way, can you tell me how to get to the castle from here?"

"Can you swim?" asked Calypso. I nodded. "Then just swim to shore and follow the stream until you get to the vegetable garden. Once you're there, you can follow a path which leads to one of the castle doors."

"Gotcha. Thanxalot!" I said. I bid them goodbye and dived into the drink, being careful to avoid the sluggish Messy. Then I followed the brook's meanders for about half an hour or so. I passed from the jungle into a desert (on a small scale), and found a camel tied to a cactus. Untying it was no easy task, but I figured that speed was essential just then. I mounted my "fine, Arab charger" and set out across the dunes. Unfortunately, camels don't gallop, and this one didn't even follow directions. Somehow I got to the gardens, at which point I jumped off the camel, and let it run free, which it didn't.

The garden consisted of overgrown vegetables, in particular. I helped myself to a giant carrot, but couldn't lift it to my mouth. Then I came to beanstalk which seemed to extend to the very clouds themselves. I was tempted to climb it, but figured I'd got into enough trouble for one day, already. Beyond the beanstalk I found the largest pumpkin patch I'd ever seen. The pumpkins there could be hollowed out to provide pumpkin pie for

the rest of Barfaria, and the shells rented out as office space. Next to the pumpkin patch was an orchard of very strange fruit trees. The first one I came to had four varieties of apples growing on it: Corkland, Melvin, Muc'n'slosh and Rusty. They were normal size, but each was perfect in every respect, and tasted good, too. After sampling a dozen apples, I moved on to the next tree and found it covered with oranges, grapefruit, lemons and pineapples. I didn't think pineapples grew on trees. The baron should be convicted of graft! By now I was near to one wall of the castle, and saw it was smothered in grapevines, extending right up to the turrets. I stealthily crept up to the wall, and looked for a Safeway...into the castle. Just then I heard some words on the grapevine.

"Psst...Zuma! Look up, way up."

Expecting to see the Friendly Giant (or more likely, his Jolly Green cousin), I looked up and spotted Hairy the Ape about twenty feet directly above me.

"What're you doing?" I questioned.

He gestured me to be silent, and whispered, "I don't want Quasimoron to find us. I think he's in on some sort of plot, but I want to find out to make sure."

"Then why are you up there?"

"I'm trying to find the baron's lab."

"This is no time to go to the bathroom, stupid!"

"I said laboratory, not lavatory! Get up here, I think this is it." He was perched on a windowsill, looking in. I clambered up and took a gander. Inside was a dimly-lit room full of test-tubes, Bunsen burners and other chemical apparatus.

"This can't be it," I said. "It's too obvious!"

Nevertheless, we opened the window and climbed in. Now I noticed cages on shelves around the room, containing strange animal specimens. Among them was a giant frog, which looked as if it was ready to croak, a lizard with two tails, a snake with three heads and a bat with one wing (big deal, you say!). But what really alarmed me was a number of miniature people caged up.

"They probably think I'm Guillebe, and you're King Gong!" I commented.

"Say...they look familiar," noted Hairy. "Isn't that Ronald Raygun? And howabout that: it's Leonard Brashnev. What's this guy planning, a miniature war?"

"Hey, speaking of war, there isn't a door. How do people get in here?"

"We got in alright. I guess there must be some secret passage leading out of here. Now all we gotta do is find it."

We proceeded to tap the walls, and search for buttons or levers to activate secret openings. Suddenly the wall slid open, revealing an old, rugged spiral staircase (shag-rugged, that is).

"What'd you do?" enquired Hairy.

"I just said: Open Sez-a-me!"

He groaned, and so did the stairs as we descended them. It was pitch black, so we had to go slowly. Abruptly, I bumped into a door. It slowly creaked open, revealing the torch-lit castle dungeon. We stepped inside and found that we were at the end of a long row of jail-type cells. They were deserted except for a few scrawny rats, which squeaked and raced out of sight upon our arrival. Then Hairy spotted something. In one of the cells, in a corner, was a skeleton chained to the wall with shackles. Cobwebs now covered the corpse, but scattered remnants of hair and flesh remained, as well as a few tattered rags of clothing. The rats had got rid of the rest.

"Recognize the poor devil?" I asked.

"Not now, but it sure ain't the baron. I'd guess that this guy's been dead several years."

"Is that all? I thought that the dungeon had been abandoned for over a century."

"Think again. The baron must be doing worse experiments than I thought."

Just then I caught the sound of voices, somewhere ahead.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered.

"Yeah, let's take a look."

We came to another door at the end of the row of cells, from which the voices seemed to emanate. I put my ear to the door and listened intently.

"Looks like we've done it, Quasi," I heard a strange voice utter. The Quasimoron replied: "Yes, boss, they are all ready now. Just give me the word; and I'll let them loose on the world."

"This sounds like serious business," I told the ape. He raised an eyebrow and nodded solemnly. "What do you say we bust up this party?" he candidly suggested. I nodded, and carefully turned the doorknob. On a count of three, we rushed into the room and took stock of the situation. Quasimoron and a man I took to be the baron were standing a few feet away, in the midst of the ugliest group of monsters I'd ever seen. They appeared to be a collection of vampires, werewolves, zombies, Sasquatches, abominable snowmen (a bit out of season),

and other assorted undesirables.

"How did you get here?" cried out the baron. Addressing the hunchback, he added, "I thought you'd got rid of that creep!"

"Did I hear you call me a creep?" I addressed the bum. "Ha! That's a laugh. Take a look at yourself, von Gut. Even David Zowie couldn't come up with a stupider gang of so-called 'Scary Monsters and Super-Creeps!'"

"Oh yeah?" the baron retaliated. "Sic 'em, you guys!" He instructed the monsters, who made a mad dash for the door, where Hairy and I were standing. We casually stepped outside the room and slammed the door in their collective faces. Then we scrambled while they broke down the door.

"Quick, let's get to a telephone and call the police," I suggested.

"Are you kidding?" argued Hairy, as we raced through the catacombs beneath the castle. "There probably isn't a telephone here, and besides, there isn't a cop within twenty miles of this place!"

"That's great. Let's hope we don't run into a dead end, or we're dead, old chum. Any final requests?"

"How about 'And Whe I Die?' It always was a favourite of mine."

"Hey, wait a minute." I stopped in my tracks. "If these monsters are authentic, then they're all vulnerable somehow. All we have to do is find their weak points."

"I get your point," whispered Hairy, as we hid behind a column (with the inscription Mugwimp on it). Just then a vampire came running our way. I stopped it in mid-step by crossing my fingers! A werewolf appeared from around the corner, but ran off when I threw a silver dollar at it. With the way clear, we made a break for it. Soon we saw a light ahead.

"Let's get outside," I suggested. "It's safer there."

We had come to the foot of the marble staircase, but a Big-Foot was guarding it. Acting fast, I stomped on his foot, while Hairy delivered a knock-out punch. Then we raced up the stairs to the corridor, and headed for the drawbridge. Now we were really stuck.

"How do you open the drawbridge?" I asked in despair. The monsters were closing in fast, and there seemed no defense against all of them. Then I saw Juliana appear from a doorway. She called out in German, then ran to the gold suit of armor and took out the battle-axe.

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