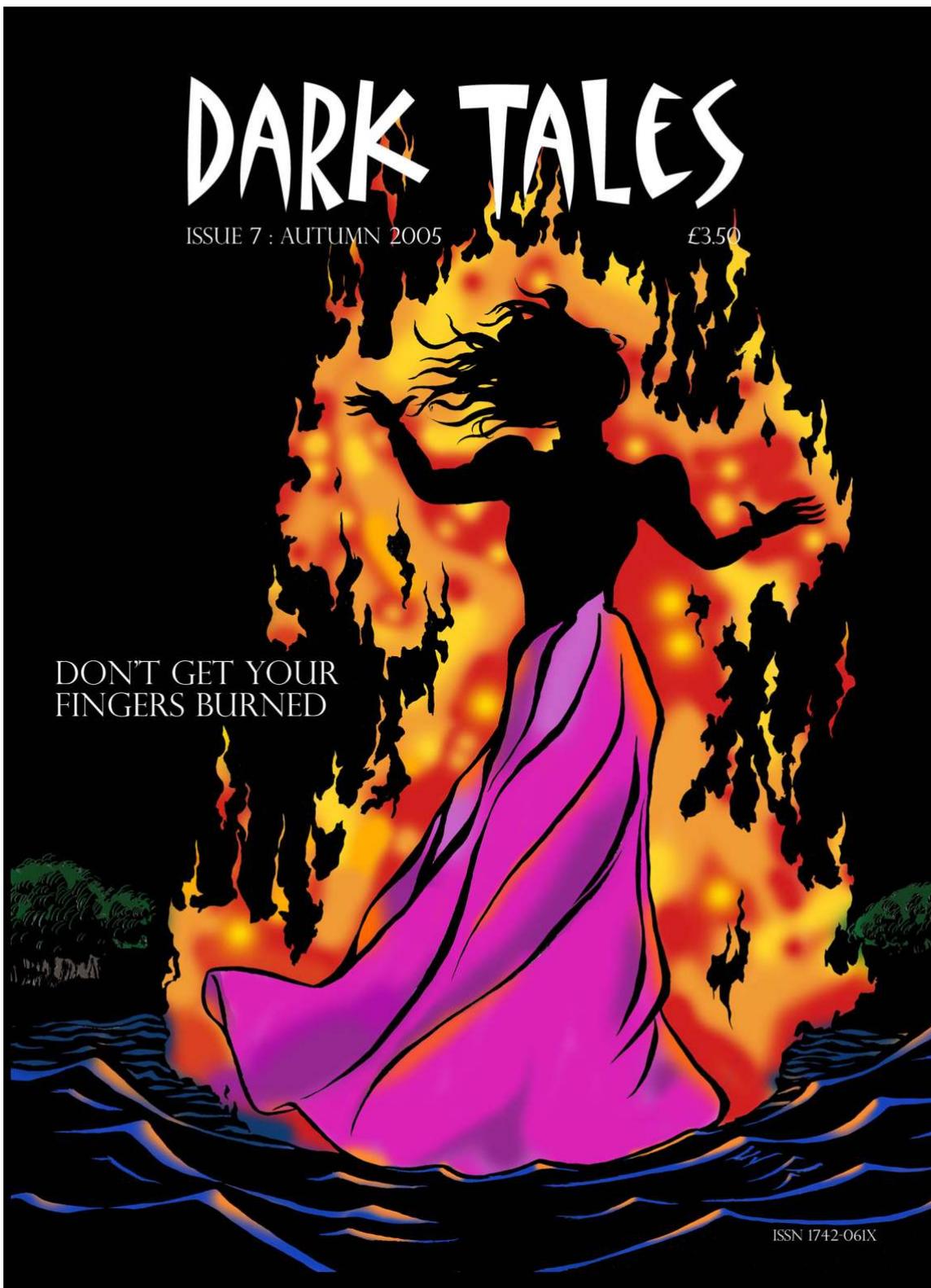


# DARK TALES

ISSUE 7 : AUTUMN 2005

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DON'T GET YOUR  
FINGERS BURNED



ISSN 1742-061X

## WELCOME TO DARK TALES

Revenge takes various forms in this issue, while you will also find paranoia, the black arts in ancient England, and a supernatural creature in Africa. Vampires and ghosts put in welcome appearances, leaving *Mervyn* the moose to provide not-so-light relief..

Enjoy the stories.



*Sean Jeffery—Editor*



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AS THE OTHER  
DOGS PICKED IT  
UP, TRACKING  
WHATEVER WAS  
COMING TOWARDS  
ME, I FELT A  
TOUCH OF FEAR  
NEEDLE MY SPINE.  
I HELD MY BREATH  
AS THE BARKING  
ROSE TO FEVER  
PITCH..

(GHOSTS OF LA  
JOYA - TYLER  
KEEVIL)

## CONJURATION

STEVE MANNING

With trembling hands Samuel Blood placed a sputtering candle upon the book littered table. For a moment dancing shadows threatened the flickering light, until it rallied, swelled and drove the darkness back. The book Samuel sought lay before him, thick and solitary amongst the towering piles of slimmer volumes. Scores of feather-edged bookmarks punctuated its well-thumbed pages. Hesitantly he reached for the cover; the silence deepened and the room seemed to grow expectant, watchful. Furtively Samuel peered over his shoulder, licked dry lips, grasped the tooled leather binding and lifted. Musty pages, dry as onion-skin, crackled and rustled so loudly he was sure someone would hear. Samuel tensed. Listened. No one stirred. Emboldened he urgently flicked to the index, ran his finger along columns of tightly packed text and found what he sought. His fingers scurried back through the fragile pages stopping at the chapter *Conjuration of a ffamilyar* illustrated with a winsome lass all raven hair, coal-black eyes and ruby lips. Samuel lingered briefly, drinking in her beauty, but time was short. Samuel began to read, his lips moving silently to the rhythm of the words, his brow furrowed in concentration. He pressed the pages flat with one hand and carefully followed ancient sloping characters, foxed and stained brown with the passage of years, with his finger. Shadows crowded him as the candle burned low. Behind him something scratched and scabbled at the wainscot, *Scritch, scritch, scrit*. Heart racing, Samuel stopped reading, his face corpse pale in the feeble light. He raised the candle, dripping wax on the pages, and peered around him. Nothing.

"Tis no but a mouse Samuel, no but a mouse," he reassured himself.

He turned back, pages stirring with his movement. Composing himself, Samuel Blood resumed his conjuration only to be interrupted by the jangling of a distant bell demanding his attention.

"Odds sake!" he hissed between gritted teeth. Reluctantly he gathered up his candle, closed the heavy tome and sloped off to answer the summons. In the deserted room, deep in the shuttered darkness, sharp claws scratched at bare boards.

Sunlight mottled with motes of dust streamed through the open French windows together with snatches of early morning bird song. A gaunt man dressed in clerical black sat finishing his breakfast, scattering crumbs of toast over his waistcoat and narrow chin as he addressed Samuel between mouthfuls. He halted in mid sentence, stared at his servant and smacked a bony palm on the table, rattling cups and saucers.

"Samuel! You have not listened to a word I have said."

Samuel, jolted from his reverie, turned away from the sunlit window where he had been watching a crimson-combed black hen scratching at Mudge's vegetable patch. "Beg pardon sir." Samuel was preoccupied, worrying about his incomplete



conjunction. The Rector resumed his address, his voice crisp as the cold morning air.

"...as a consequence I shall be absent this evening."

Samuel brightened. "ansum," he murmured.

"What?"

"Er, nothin' Master."

"And Samuel."

"Master?"

"Keep out of the study whilst I'm away. Understand?"

"Aye master."

The Rector dabbed at his mouth with a rigidly starched napkin, rose and left. Samuel returned his attention to the hen still kicking up dust amongst the pea sticks. Mudge wouldn't be pleased. Samuel picked a lump of coal from the coal bucket and hefted it at the preoccupied chicken. It squawked and ran inelegantly for the broad-leaved shelter of Mudge's rhubarb. Satisfied, Samuel closed the windows and cleared away the breakfast things.

Samuel Blood was a young man with boundless curiosity and an eagerness to learn. His master endeavoured to indulge his enthusiasm but had little patience and was miserly with his learning. So Samuel followed a path of self-improvement slipping furtively into the study whenever he could to filch fragments of knowledge. The Rector was catholic in his reading and kept a library to suit, although he confessed to an unsuitable interest in the occult. Which is why Samuel's attention had of late been drawn to the *Booke of Conjunction*, the volume he had been forced to abandon the previous evening. At first it had been the incredible antiquity of the book that enthralled but as he read Samuel realised that the pages contained a solution to his problem. Samuel was lonely and the chapter *Conjunction of a familiar* promised to provide him with a companion. In truth though, he was sceptical, doubting he would conjure anything more than tedium and sore eyes. However, he would persevere. Tonight he would read undisturbed and complete his task.

Throughout the rest of the day Samuel busied himself with domestic chores — dusting, sweeping and polishing. Twice he shooed the black hen from the scullery. It was intolerable, a bird in the house. Since childhood he had detested birds, shrieking hysterically if they flew near him. The thought of flapping wings and smothering feathers sent a cold shudder down his spine. He would have to tell Mudge, or rather ask — nobody 'told' Mudge anything - to keep his hens under control.

From attic to basement he cleaned and dusted and the rooms rang as he sang of his dream maid:

"She wears an artful bonnet, feathers stuck upon it,  
Coverin' a fringe all curled.

## CONJURATION

STEVE MANNING

She's just about the sweetest, prettiest and neatest  
Girl in the wide, wide world!"

A fine companion she'd make, thought Samuel, and he dusted with gusto, eager for the evening.

By late afternoon his chores complete he retired to the kitchen for tea and a well-earned crumpet. At the kitchen door he froze. Perched on the table was the black hen. She cocked her head, fixed him with her beady eye, strained and fouled the newly scrubbed tabletop.

"Odds sake! Out yer cackler!" yelled Samuel, snatching up a broom and sweeping her to the floor. With a squawk and flurry of black feathers she landed splay winged on hard flagstones. Samuel fought his revulsion and scrabbled to pick her up, intending to throw her from the house once and for all, but with a lightning movement she twisted her neck and viciously stabbed at him with her beak. Samuel yelled and let go. Blood beaded his finger. Calmly the hen soothed ruffled feathers, tucked her wings neatly into her sides and waddled off along the hallway like an old woman. Samuel, somewhat shaken, cursed and sucked his bleeding finger.

As the last rooks returned noisily to roost Samuel prepared himself for an evening of study. He wrapped a muffler tightly around his neck, wriggled his hands into fingerless mitts and snuggled his feet into warm slippers. The Rectory had not been built for comfort but to stand steadfast and resolute against the sins of the world. An edifice of cold stone and glowering windows capped with spiky gothic finials thrusting toward Heaven. Low ceilinged rooms trapped shadows and narrow stone-framed windows squeezed and tortured sunlight until it was too weak to penetrate the crepuscular gloom. Only the parlour's French windows welcomed any substantial light.

Samuel settled himself in the study. The *Booke of Conjuratioun* lay untouched and Samuel quickly found the relevant pages. Slowly and methodically he began to trace the words with his blood-stained forefinger. Beyond the lancet windows the last of the sunlight bled from the sky and darkness descended soft and silent as dark feathers. Samuel lit his candle and read on, stumbling over Latin phrases, and squinting at smudged words. Around him shadows deepened. Only the bell of St Peter's disturbed the silence as it tolled the passing hours. Samuel rubbed his weary eyes with a spittle-moistened finger. As he had predicted his task was becoming tedious. He struggled to maintain his interest, reading faster to reach his goal, until at last the closing words tumbled from his lips. Soon his companion would materialise.

Exhausted he sat back and massaged his stiff neck. Samuel Blood waited.

How long the wait would be was uncertain, the book being secretive upon this crucial point. Samuel's chair creaked as he made himself more comfortable. Despite the chill the room felt stuffy and hot and he eased his muffler loose. Idly

Samuel flicked back to the opening of his chapter, fingering pages that seemed stiffer than he remembered. Examining them carefully he realised that two leaves were stuck together. Gently he prised them apart. Melted wax smeared the text and a woodcut illustration. A smile creased his anxious face as he examined the naïvely executed picture. A servant, armed with a broom, gleefully shooed a black hen from a kitchen. A ribbon of Latin text flowed from the hen's open beak, curling back accusingly at her assailant. Opposite this was a second, equally primitive woodcut. Samuel gasped and drew the stubby candle closer. At first the image appeared absurd, a child's drawing but sinister in its execution. Another Latin banner curled and snapped across the picture. Samuel tried to make sense of the words but the room was becoming intolerably airless making him giddy. Smothering heat enveloped him. He clawed his muffler loose, tossing it on the floor and frantically tore the mitts from his hands. Panting with the effort he suddenly became aware of a smell — a foul acrid stench. Slowly the heat intensified, becoming almost tangible, as if a large brooding presence was bearing down on him. Eyes bulging, brow glistening with sweat, Samuel stared at the woodcut, desperate to make sense of the words.

"N-no! Please no!" Too late he realised his mistake. Two stuck pages; two incomplete conjurations combined. Terror flooded his veins. Every sense urged him to flee but his longed for companion stood behind him. There was nowhere to run. Samuel Blood, sick with fear, snivelling in terror, turned round. Darkness engulfed him.

"Samuel!" The Rector stood in the tiled hall pulling off his gloves, calling curtly for his servant.

"Samuel!" In response a grandfather clock thudded out the hour.

"Where is the wretched boy?" Throwing his gloves on a chair he strode along the corridor, his footsteps echoing in the ominous silence.

At the study door he stopped, wrinkling his nose in disgust. Inside the shutters were open and a chair lay up turned on the floor, books strewn around it.

He stalked across the room, righted the chair and gathered up the fallen volumes, tutting and fretting at creased pages. From beneath his desk he retrieved Samuel's muffler and mitts. Straightening up he noticed the large book lying open upon the desk, beside it a toppled candle spilling congealed wax.

The Rector recognised the volume immediately and hastened to read the page it lay open at. "Heavens," he whispered.

Before him a naïve woodcut depicted an almost comic scene. A studious young man sat at his desk absorbed in a large book, a candle burning beside him. Behind him a monstrous black hen puffed out her chest and clawed the ground. The boy seemed oblivious to his fate.

"Oh dear," sighed the Rector. Gently he closed the book and looked out on the bright morning. In Mudge's vegetable patch a black hen foraged for grubs. She

## CONJURATION

STEVE MANNING

clucked excitedly at some morsel she had found and at once a small black chick appeared at her side. She fussed over it as it greedily gobbled up its prize, then smothered it affectionately against her downy breast. Momentarily the chick struggled to escape but then yielded to her feathery embrace.

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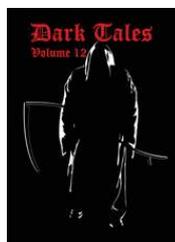
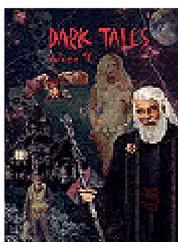
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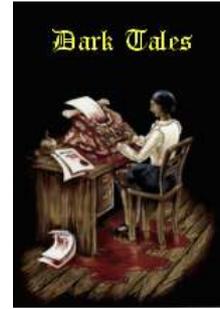


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