FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

AUG.-SEPT. 1953
Vol. 1, No. 2

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 1, No. 2, published bi-monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., H. L. HERBERT, President, at Chicago, Ill. Editorial and executive offices 471 Park Ave., N.Y. 22, N.Y. Aug.-Sept., 1953. Subscription 6 issues $2.50, single copies 50c, Canadian and foreign postage extra.

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the sepulchre of jasper sarasen

by .... H. Russell Wakefield

Modern mathematics could not protect Sir Reginald from the evil that rose from a murderer's tomb.

SIR REGINALD RAMLEY was by temperament and inclination no frequenter of cemeteries. Such dormitories depressed him mildly, not so much because they reminded him of Man's mortality, against which he cherished no grudge, as because they provided even further proof, if such were needed, of Man's inanity, vulgarity and sentimentality.

Why, for example, spend good and often ill-spared money on headstones and plinths, or even artistically execrable emblematic figures and designs, when a few quick years would weather their inscriptions into illegibility and—a little later—level the pious metal with the ground?

And the asininity of those optimistic mottoes which usually figured thereon! *Till we meet again ... Till a brigther dawn ...* and so on. Never satisfied! How much better the incomparable reality, a dreamless sleep!

It was, therefore, by mere chance that he entered the vast Death Field near his new West London home. He was strolling past it one Sunday morning in May when he heard coming from one of its trees, now proudly preening themselves in their new livery, the liquid tinkle of a

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The so-called Gothic story reached its peak during the first half of the nineteenth century—with such spooky giants as Horace Walpole, Mary Wollstonecraft, Bulwer-Lytton and many others. Yet the Gothic story will survive as long as darkness falls. Mr. Wakefield, one of the foremost modern practitioners of the sheer horror story, here offers a tale that, for complete terror, should scare anybody's pants right off.

willow warbler. To so keen, if intermittent, an ornithologist this was a matter of import, a willow warbler within four and a half miles of Hyde Park Corner!

He hurried through the gates between the wardens' lodges toward the clump of hawthorns in which, he judged, the singer was hidden, but when he reached it the little tune was already coming from a lime forty yards away, and soon it was a case of *Adieu, Adieu, the plaintive anthem fades.* The intrepid little visitor to town was returning aquiver to his proper habitat.

However, it had served the purpose of introducing Sir Reginald to that many-acred morgue. Having given up the hunt he found himself in a secluded corner of the place, hemmed in by a dense ring of distasteful yews and, somewhat to his astonishment, glancing into a small stone hut where some coffins could be dimly discerned through a gap at the top of a much rusted iron door.

He approached nearer and found there were six of these boxes resting on two tiers of shelves. Two were full-sized, the other four smaller. This seemed odd. He glanced up and there over the door were engraved the words *The Sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen.*

Quite—but why was it so indecorously open to the eye? He looked around him and there were headstones chipped and broken, some lying on their backs, and a half-dozen other small sheds in varying degrees unclosed to the view. So then he realised what had happened in this place. A bomb had dropped there, probably early in the war just ended, and its effects, though muted by time, were still plain to see. Jasper Sarasen's abode had suffered severely.

It was constructed of limestone with speckled granite panel insets in one side wall. It was about fifteen feet long by nine broad and twelve high. It could never have been a thing of any beauty or distinction. Now the triangular ornament over the door was down in the grass beside it, one of the rather risible angel pinnacles was missing, and bomb splinters had gouged out lumps of stone here and there.

Originally, he noticed, the gap over the door had been filled by a rectangle of dark purple glass, "teeth" of which were still lodged in the stone. Some of the other mausoleums were in even worse shape, and on investigation he found their contents had been removed.

He strolled back to the sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen. For some utterly inexplicable reason he was experiencing a sharp sense of tension and a tiny shiver ran down his flanks. Not only tension but a very odd feeling of curiosity about and interest in this battered little death-shed.

He went right up to it this time and peered in through the gap. Just before he had been contrasting in his mind the wild jocund winging and songs of the birds with the motionless residents in grass and tomb and now, as he looked into

the sepulchre, a bird flashed out of it and past him and was gone.

What sort of bird? The ornithologist was baffled. It was raven-black and about the size of a starling but its extreme speed of flight was what had startled him. Luckily it had not hit him in the face! It could not have missed him by more than an inch. Yet he had felt no air-stir from its wings.

Could it be nesting in this foetid little cabin? For foetid it certainly was—quite a potent reek, its base just fustiness and mustiness but mingling with that and dominating it was a kind of *sour spiciness.* One noseful was enough and Sir Reginald withdrew his head a bit.

It was fairly dark inside, even on this flaming spring morning, but he could pick out details. Perhaps that *was* the beginning of a nest, that untidy leafy mess on the far cross-beam. Otherwise there were just the six coffins, all of light yellow oak with discolored brass handles. One of them on the top shelf was skewed aside and looked none too secure on its ledge.

Certainly the bomb had done some macabre work and maybe stirred some sleepers in their eternal drowse. There on the floor, which somewhat to his surprise was soaking wet, was a small toy rowing-boat. No doubt some child had pushed it through the aperture. He then turned his attention to the gold-inscribed granite panels on one of the side walls.

They commemorated the following persons—Paula Mary Sarasen, who died on November 19th, 1892, aged thirty-eight, Lucy Elizabeth Sarasen who died on November 19th, 1892, aged sixteen, John Jasper Sarasen who died on November 19th, 1892, aged fourteen. Sir Reginald glanced quickly at the other two panels.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "they all died on the same day!"

And it was so, for that date had also seen the passing of Sarah Margaret, aged ten, and Robert William, aged eight. Railway accident, prehaps, or acute food poisoning—more common in those days—or something.

There was one other puzzle—this was Jasper's sepulchre, but there was no mention of him. The sixth panel was uninscribed. Yet there were six coffins inside—so, presumably, one was his. Of course there might be a hundred explanations of that immeasurably unimportant matter. What affair was it of his!

"And I don't suppose you worry, Jasper," he said in a jocular sotto voce manner. "You're sleeping soundly enough!"

He thought he heard a slight sound coming from inside the hut. Perhaps that odd bird had slipped back. He glanced through the gap once more. No sign of the bird, but he spotted something he had not noticed before—the lid of the askewed coffin was very slightly raised from its box.

He started to saunter back down the path to the entrance. He glanced over his shoulder for a moment and realised what a very isolated

enclave was occupied by those shattered and neglected little chalets, remote and dispiriting within its barrier of joyless yews even on a morning like this.

What would it be like on a foul November night with an evil gusty wind whining through those melancholy trees and whimpering past those oaken shells? Perhaps, he thought, paradoxically, somehow *less* sinister. The contrast intensified the impression. How that spicy reek stuck in one's gullet!

He spat vigorously several times, something he had not done in a public place since he was an ill-mannered urchin. An elderly female of forbidding aspect passing by gave him a look of extreme revulsion and contempt. He hurried home to his lunch.

Sir Reginald was within two months of his fiftieth birthday and came from a middle-class family with a reputation for intellectualism. He had been true to his line, having taken one of the most unarguable Double-Firsts at Oxford and becoming a distinguished mathematician into the scholastic bargain. He had then spread-eagled all comers in the Civil Service exam and chosen the Treasury.

During the war he had been abroad on various important missions and collected to his reluctant shame a Knighthood of the Order of the British Empire, a Companionship of the Order of the Bath, and a rainbow of foreign orders. He had now returned to his department and taken a service flat in Kensington.

He was a bachelor, presumably confirmed, a near-recluse by temperament. For exercise he fenced with the foil, for amusement went alone to concerts of music. He was tall, slim, perfectly "preserved," and the habitual expression in his face was one of good-natured tolerance and scepticism.

As he walked home, his mind playfully considered the exercise of composing a Greek epitaph in the Elegiac Mode on the family of Sarasen and those others whose rest had been so violently and vulgarly interrupted by low grade high explosive. By the time he reached Redcliffe Court the task was done. Very roughly translated the somewhat flippant couplet went as follows—

"He who so rudely disturbed your
repose
Oh strollers in Hades,
Recently joined your brigade,
See that he knows he's in
Hell!"

Over lunch he found his mind reverting to the Sarasen menage and what had caused that simultaneous taking off, except for Jasper himself. What had happened to him? Really, he complained to himself irritably, why *am* I worrying about those long-dead worthies, this petty and ancient history? What a waste of time and energy!

Curious how the mind selected, as it were, what one should think about irrespective of what one would choose and prefer. And who was

one? What a charming piece of metaphysical nonsense! History, Man's composite mind, did the same thing, selecting capriciously what should be recorded on its tablets.

Guy Fawkes, for instance. Sir Reginald's mind went on a meandering stroll through several topics and then returned to the Sarasens. One cause of this was doubtless the very displeasing taste in his mouth. After lunch he gargled zealously without much result.

Indeed the next morning he found himself with a sore throat and a slight feeling of malaise but he did a hard day's work as usual. In the evening after dinner he suddenly felt a strong uncontrollable impulse to go out. As he went through the front door his brain was apparently busy with an office problem, a question of high-level policy. Apparently, because this topic had a competitor.

Sir Reginald was a mighty concentrator and this sensation of, as it were, dual occupation of his mind was quite maddening. In fact he realised that certain kinds of insanity must consist of just such dual sway of the mind, such uncontrollable simultaneous tenure.

His fretful reverie was abruptly interrupted by a bass baritone voice exclaiming, "Sorry, sir, the cemetery's shut. Shuts at eight," and he found himself opposite the entrance gates, which faced him and barred his way. Also facing him and barring his way was a large person in a blue uniform, a cemetery warden.

Sir Reginald smiled. "I just came out for a stroll," said he, "and let my mind take charge. I've no wish to go in there, I assure you. Must be getting old and vague and absent-minded, I suppose."

The man smiled amiably back, "Same with me at times, sir."

"You live in the lodge here?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Yes, sir."

"Comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. Very cushy job all round."

"That's good," said Sir Reginald and then to his surprise and disgust he said something else, something which a moment before he'd had no intention of saying, something singularly inept and a lie into the bargain. "Oh, by the way, there is a sepulchre belonging to a family named Sarasen over there on the left-hand side of the cemetery. I think it just possible they may have been distant cousins of my father. I don't suppose you know anything about them?"

Could anything have been more inane! As if a cemetery warden, apparently in his early sixties, could possibly be expected to know one of the thousands and thousands of dead under his charge. Dead, in this case, for fifty-four years. Yet oddly enough, the warden looked at him in a slightly startled, wary way and then said slowly, "Well, it's a bit funny you should ask me that, sir. Thank you, sir!"

This last remark was in acknowledgement of a brace of half-crowns which Sir Reginald had slipped into his hand. This was also

out of character, for Sir Reginald was not in the habit of such riotous tipping, especially in advance of services rendered.

"Yes," continued the warden, "there's a story about that lot—so I don't think they can be any relations of yours, otherwise you'd 'ave 'eard about it, I suppose."

"How did *you* hear about it?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Well, sir, it was like this 'ere. One morning 'bout a year ago, a gent rang my bell and asked me if I could tell him where the Sarasen tomb was, and as I was going along with 'im to show 'im, we got talkin', and 'e told me 'is father 'ad been a well-known lawyer who 'ad defended this Jasper Sarasen when 'e was tried for murder, and got 'im orf, as a matter of fact, and 'e'd 'eard the family was buried 'ere and 'ad come along to 'ave a look for old times sake, if you gets me, sort of sentimental, becos 'e'd 'eard 'is father talk so much about the business, if you understand."

"I quite understand," replied Sir Reginald, looking down at his fingers and coughing and clearing his throat. "Murdering whom?"

"'Is wife and four kids, sir. Took 'em out for a row on the river, it seems. Never let 'em learn to swim. Then 'e tips the boat over and swims ashore 'isself. This gent I'm telling you of said 'is old man was sure Sarasen was guilty, dead to rights. 'E had good reasons to do it, to marry a very rich woman. 'Owsoever they couldn't quite pin it on 'im, and as I said, 'e got away with it.

"But it didn't do 'im much good, it seems, for very soon after 'e was found dead 'isself in 'is 'ouse, though this gent said it was a bit of a mystery what 'e died of. Well, that's what this gent told me, but 'e talked so fast it was 'ard to follow 'im."

"I see," said Sir Reginald slowly. "Nasty little story. And is his the sixth coffin in that sepulchre?"

"Yes, sir, but as you may 'ave noticed, there ain't no tablet up to him. This gent said that was probably because none of 'is relatives 'ad any use for 'im, knowing 'e was a wrong 'un, and wanted no more to do with 'im, so they just shoved 'im in 'is 'ut and left 'im there. That's what 'e surmised anyway.

"This gent said too that this Sarasen was in business in a big way but 'ard up at the time. This gent said 'e was very cunning and sly, a real bad 'un, as wicked as they made 'em. I'm putting it in my own language you understand, sir."

"Oh, well," said Sir Reginald, some shame in his heart, "they obviously weren't the cousins I was thinking of. A strange tale. This place must be full of such queer histories—enough plots buried here to keep all the writers in the world busy for years."

"Yes, sir," agreed the warden. "I'll tell you something, sir, but don't say I told you because I ain't supposed to talk about the job, but when the bomb dropped—I mean the one out in the open there—some of the coffins was blown right to the surface and opened up, and in one there weren't no body at all,

just some wooden blocks. And in another was a woman without no 'ead, and in another there was something very funny-shaped indeed, not nice to see."

Sir Reginald emitted a not-very-hearty laugh. "Yes," he said, "I can imagine there are some ugly secrets hidden here. Some persons, like the Sarasens, murdered, but not avenged. Unless they *were* avenged," he added vaguely. "Do you ever walk about here after dark? Oh, well, I'm sure that's a very silly question—of course you chaps must be quite hardened to that."

"Not so silly," smiled the warden. "I guarantee this place 'ud give anyone the willies, what you calls the creeps, sir, when there's just a little moon on a winter's night, just enough to make you fancy you can see things, especially in that dark corner where the Sarasens are. To be honest, I don't go down that path more than I can help, not since the bomb dropped, anyway."

"Why?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Dunno, sir, got a feeling about it ever since that bomb dropped. That's all I can say. Could you tell me something, sir," added the warden, rocking slightly on his mighty boots and clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back, "did you ever 'ear of blue lights being seen in cemeteries?"

"Blue lights?" repeated Sir Reginald. "Well, yes, as a matter of fact I did once read of something of the sort happening—in Rome, I fancy. Why? Have you seen anything of the kind?"

"No, sir," replied the warden quickly, "but my mate said something about it once."

Sir Reginald saw that he was not being strictly truthful—for rather obvious reasons. "Well," he said, "I must be getting along. Thank you for a very interesting little talk. I hope we'll have another some day. Good night."

"Good night, sir," said the warden.

A murderer, eh!, he thought as he walked home. *Well, Jasper—so you were worthy of your conventionally sinister praenomen! You evil old spider!* He coughed. *Curse this throat!* It did not seem to be getting any better.

Nor was it any better the next morning. Swallowing was beginning to be an ordeal and that cough frequent and harassing. It remained so for the rest of a very busy week. However, it is possible that he would have completely evacuated the Sarasens from his mind and forever had he not been made the victim of a rather sour dream. On the other hand the dream might have been evidence that their affair had already deeply penetrated his subconscious and taken up its abode there.

It was on the Friday night. Suddenly out of the depths of sleep he found himself standing not far from that battered little chalet dimly lit by a dying moon. He was very tense and watchful. He dropped to his hands and knees and crept round to the door and listened. After a moment, he heard a spasmodic creaking sound which he knew was being

made by the raising of a coffin lid.

Suddenly there was a clatter, a fearful stench filled his nostrils and he heard something moving inside the sepulchre. And then he awoke, his heart banging wildly and sweat bursting out on him, and the trace of that reek in his nose.

This was one of those rare and unrefreshing dreams which do not fade. It remained perfectly and dauntingly vivid in his memory. *Why?*—he irritably and a shade urgently asked himself. There was no rhyme or reason for it, no rational strand of thought linking him to this business. It was only by the purest fluke that he had ever seen that infernal little Death Ark.

The gloomy brood of Sarasens were less than nothing to him. But the human mind, one's own emphatically included, was a cypher to which no key was known. Sporadically it erupted these baffling and apparently causeless enigmas, and one had to make the best of them and laugh them off as well as one could.

He took Saturday morning off. *Now,* he said to himself, *I am going to challenge and defeat this thing, this petty but tiresome obsession.* So, not long after breakfast, with a firm step and stride, he made his way to the cemetery, turned to the left at the cross-paths, passed through the yew curtain, and a quarter of a minute later found himself observing that stark legend, *The Sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen.*

A moment before he had been feeling somewhat self-conscious, aware that he was behaving with some fatuity. Now that feeling went and at once. There was no doubting the displeasing fact that this place "got" him a little. It was "kinetic." What did he mean by that? Well, that it held for him a kind of reluctant fascination. Rather more than "reluctant"—and "fascination" wasn't quite the word—but he could not put his tongue to a better one. That "obsession" was stronger than he had hoped. It was partly, no doubt, its seclusion.

Outside that sable ring were lilacs, hawthorns and laburnums blooming in their hey-day, and tireless wings rustling their boughs. In here was no colour and no bird sang. And in that dismal little stone cave were lying the corpses of six persons, the Slayer and the Slain. The man who had lain with the woman and begotten those children, then mercilessly destroyed them all. All six of them were lying there together night and day, year after year.

And their souls? Sir Reginald was sceptical about souls but on the hypothesis that he was wrong, what about those souls? They might all be lodging there in that repulsive little cabin too. A pleasant family gathering! *Really!* thought Sir Reginald, *what ideas! I seem to have suffered some kind of cenotaphic change into something morbidly responsive to the stir of worms here in this place where all these thousands are repaying their debt to earth, that silent-intermingling metabolism.*

The trees rustled nonchalantly

over them, the birds played amorously but even for those their turn would come. *Well, these are not the thoughts I wish to think. No more cemeteries for me!* And then he said out loud, "But first I'll just have a last peep at you, Jasper." He said it with a nervous facetiousness which disgusted him.

As he cautiously put his face to the opening something ebony-black flashed past his ear. That strange bird again! Jet-propelled, apparently! he told himself. That odd stink again too! No good enquiring into *its* origin. And there were those six sleepers, if they slept. Which was Jasper? Well, which *was* he? Certainly one of the two full-sized coffins on the top shelf with the slightly raised lid.

"Is that you, Jasper?" he muttered. Why couldn't he control that fatuous babbling! That was odd! The gap between the lid and case was certainly wider than it had been the first time, and as he asked that puerile question it seemed to him as if something had fluttered across that gap. An illusion due, no doubt, to the fact that the sun had just at that moment swung from behind a cloud.

He tried to change the subject of his thoughts. How absurd that the dead should have the right to clutter up the earth like this! Those six bundles of corruption were taking up quite a sizeable piece of London. Burnt and their ashes scattered, they would have gone sweetly and cleanly back to their elements—even Jasper's! How much better than that the baleful old assassin should rot away there with his victims round him. Sir Reginald could not get the sardonic conception out of his mind.

Now that's enough, he told himself. *I'll come here no more. It's becoming a foolish nuisance. Perhaps as men grow older, especially rather lonely men, they become subject to such follies at times. They have to be fought. Now I've seen all there is to see and that is precious little. I'm in no way concerned with this tragic little group. No more cemeteries or sepulchral speculations for me! No more trafficking mentally with the dead!* Firm, resolute, uncompromising words, yet somehow not bringing confidence and certainty with them.

He walked off and then, when he reached the fence of yews, glanced back. His gaze became fixed and his brow furrowed. He turned right around and still stared as though much puzzled. He seemed to be hesitating but with an effort turned around again and walked quickly back to the entrance gates. Of course his eyes must have deceived him!

On the way out he passed his friend, the warden, who enquired after his health. He replied that his throat was giving him some trouble.

"You sound a bit 'oarse, sir," said the warden. "You ain't been putting your 'ead into any of them tombs, 'ave you?"

"Why?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Well, it ain't considered 'ealthy, so my doc says. 'E thinks they should all be emptied and pulled down."

"I'll remember that," said Sir Reginald with a faint smile, "but I don't think I'll be coming here again."

"Don't blame you!" said the man in blue. "It ain't exactly a Fun Fair!"

As he walked back to his flat Sir Reginald wondered if there could be anything in the doctor's contention. It was a depressing possibility, especially as his throat was really painful and clearly not yielding to home treatment. In fact it had got very much worse during the last hour. He would see a doctor himself on Monday, he decided, if it was not a great deal better.

He managed to swallow a little lunch and then went to lie down on the sofa in his sitting-room. To his intense irritation he found his mind again and again reverting to that accursed Sarasen shed. If he had been feeling fit enough he would have gone to the Athenaeum Club, membership of which was his sole concession to sociability, but his temperature was rising and he became slightly lightheaded, sufficiently so to permit the entry of distasteful fantasies.

When he fell into an uneasy doze, there he was at once in the vicinity of that hut, prey to a fearful urgent curiosity as to what was happening inside it. For that something was happening he felt horribly sure. He would crouch on his hands and knees like a beast and put his ear to the stone. And then, with an effort, drag his mind back to sanity and coherence.

But the moment he relaxed his guard, there he was back again at that reeking little shed. Once he found himself peeping slyly in, the stench strong in his throat. Out flew the foul bird on lightning wings. And there was that ochre coffin with its raised lid—its rising lid!

With a stifled cry he sprang from his couch. It was really rather beastly, undermining, ghostly, necrophilic, inexplicable. Inexplicable, because as he told himself for the hundredth time he was in no way connected with this malign set. There was no tie or bond of any sort between them. Why then— *why?* It was as if he had carelessly, unwittingly strayed within the ambit of some potent vicious instrument for evil.

The concept was not entirely new to him. Sir Reginald, like so many baffled and disillusioned persons of our time when confronted inexorably and bloodily with the human dilemma, had played—the word is apt—with the concept of diabolism. One looks in the glass and sees a tolerably humane honest peaceful member of a constructive society. One glances out the window and sees a howling mob, rifles at the ready, bombs at the belt. Unless one is very lucky, one only too soon sees oneself stamping and shouting in the crazed and suicidal ranks.

Was it possible that men left to themselves were good, in the sense that they were sane, social and capable of ameliorating their lot, however slowly, but that they were forever thwarted and opposed and

partially overcome by the powers of cosmic evil? That God was the Devil?

He began to feel intolerably restless and in great mental distress. He could not bear to be alone in this room a moment longer. Ill though he was, he must go out. He got his hat and stick and walked slowly along, dizzy with fever and not far from delirium.

Presently he found himself entering the cemetery and walking vaguely and unsteadily down the main avenue. The few persons he passed glanced at him casually and then more sharply. They looked back at him over their shoulders. "Been drinking," was their verdict.

"Why am I here?" he asked himself. "Why am I here?" He plodded painfully on, turned to the left, passed through the barrier of yews, reached the sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen. Then he could go no further and flung himself down on the long grass which faced the tomb.

After a while the bells rang for closing-time—the dark came slowly down and the thin curve of the new moon lifted over the horizon. It was death-quiet save for the distant muted murmur of the traffic. Sometime later Sir Reginald stirred from his fever sleep and, his eyes wide and staring, began crawling like a beast toward the sepulchre.

He slunk across the path and, breathing convulsively, reached the stone against which he put his ear. For a moment he heard nothing and then there came a small sharp *creak,* then another and something clattered down within the tomb. He crawled round to the entrance and jerkily, gaspingly, raised himself till his eyes were on a level with the opening . . .

He found himself staring straight into something which had the ghastly semblance of a face, livid with patches of corrupted skin, eyes glazed yet fiery, deep sunken in their sockets and foul matted hair drooping past its fleshless chin. The iron door began slowly opening.

He staggered to his feet and began running in wild terror; and something, he knew, was running just behind him on silent foot. Thin blue flames sprang up around him, a dark bird hurled itself again and again into his face. And then he could go no farther. Something touched him on the neck, he screamed twice, and fell.

The cemetery warden leapt from his bed, threw his overcoat on and ran toward those screams. He saw a movement in the grass and dashed toward it. Sir Reginald was lying on his back and thrusting, thrusting desperately with his arms. His eyes were vilely wide and pupil-less. His breath came in great convulsive gasps. He raised himself once, fell back and ceased to breathe.

A thin blue flame coiled out from under him, ran up to his breast and shone there, straight and unflickering like a flower. The warden cried out, ripped off his coat and beat at the flame in a crazy way, again and again, crying out all the while.

And when others came running, that is how they found them.