

## WORK IN PROGRESS

By Shelley A. Marshall

It is a clear autumn night. The leaves on the tree are donning their brightly hued fall coats, and those that have fallen to earth have delicately touched the ground with color. The milky moon shines down through the cathedral windows, casting elongated shadows on the floor of the library. A man carrying a silver tray, upon which a mug, cream, sugar, spoon and linen napkin are strategically placed, enters the library through 12-foot high French doors. He crosses the room, and delicately places the tray on a colossal mahogany desk. Strolling to one of the seemingly innumerable shelves of books which decorate his inner sanctum from floor to ceiling, he brushes his fingertips across the book bindings until they rest on the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, and Roget's Thesaurus. These he gingerly pulls from the shelf. Satisfied with his selection, he strides to the hearth, and stokes the smoldering logs, sending sparks fluttering up the chimney and reigniting the slumberous fire. He saunters to the stereo, selects Grieg's, "Peer Gynt," from his CD library, presses "play" and waits. As the first chords tumble softly from the speakers, he smiles and returns to the desk. Now ready, he settles into his chair, pulls open the top drawer of the desk, and withdraws two freshly sharpened pencils and several sheets of Hargreave's starched white paper.

The wind outside begins to moan as it rushes through the fortress of trees surrounding the estate. The eerie sound sends a chill through Irwin Roberts (his name, as stated on the gold filigree name plate centered on the front of his desk), and he repositions his ascot, smoothes his tweed vest, and pulls his cashmere cardigan closer around him. He thanks himself for the warmth of the fire.

A muffled "Thump" resonates from the roof. Pencil in hand, Irwin's concentration is severed and he curses, "Damned Ravens!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Thick, gnarled feet shuffle across the slate roof with a beat of "Clink, Clink -- Clink, Clink" as thorny claws tap the hard surface. Yellow eyes are curiously attracted to the soft patterns of light on the lawn below, emanating from the library's windows. Twisted talons wrap around the cornice of the house, a dark shape inches downward, and rough brick grabs at the wiry pelt.

\* \* \* \* \*

For 10 minutes, Irwin stares at the opening line, neatly presented on the once-virgin page. "The mist hung in the air like bad breath, and slapped his face." His pencil freezes above the paper as the final quotation mark mocks his creativity. Disgusted, Irwin crumples the paper, tosses it in the fire behind him and begins anew. "Mr. Pierrerot walked into the crowded station and searched for the shoeshine man." Again, nothing. Irwin scratches out the written words with a force that snaps the lead from his new pencil.

\* \* \* \* \*

From outside, hot breath fogs the bottom window pane. Warm saliva dribbles from blistered, parted lips and falls in yellow-green droplets to the window's ledge. Piercing yellow eyes lurk above the steamed glass, staring at the back of the man inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a new sheet of paper and a fresh pencil in hand, Irwin jots "17 October" at the top of the page. Hoping that a refreshment will unlock the creative juices, he reaches forward for the silver tray, and slides it across the desk. Two spoons of sugar, then coffee, followed by a dash of cream; stir vigorously until satisfied that the ingredients have thoroughly blended.

\* \* \* \* \*

The annoying sound of silver smacking against ceramic reverberates against the windows and spills outside with increased volume. A wet, scaly face scrunches into an ugly mass of wrinkles. A swollen, black tongue lolls out of a confining mouth, and whips from left to right. The yellow eyes slip back into the depths of the skull, replaced by murky whiteness. Dagger-sharp claws pry open the window.

\* \* \* \* \*

A sip from the mug, a gratifying smile... now Irwin is ready to write. "He mindfully dodged puddles in the cobblestone street, constant lumpy reminders of bygone road construction." Delighted with this literary accomplishment, Irwin throws up his hands and gives a little cheer. Hearing a pop and a crack, he spins around in his chair and surveys the room behind him. Nothing... but the fire is blazing away. Irwin shrugs, "Nothing like a crackling, popping fire to warm the fingers and clear the mind." Irwin touches the pencil eraser to his lips in contemplation of the next sentence, and then begins to write.

"The conductor announced 'All aboard,' as he reached the platform. Cape flapping behind him, the conductor inspected him approvingly, as he leapt for a step. Foot and hand met their holds, pulling him inside. A stuffed orangutan was crammed in with the excess baggage and he maneuvered quickly down the narrow aisle of general seating in search of his private car. A former cavalry officer, his stomach ached from his war wound. He had had three horses shot out from under him, the fourth went through him." Unfortunately, modifiers are not Irwin's forte.

\* \* \* \* \*

The window slides up easily. Two furry paws tipped with needle-sharp claws curl around the ledge and hoist. The entrance is made in silence as the strength beneath the dense pile is set in motion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Irwin fidgets, removes his spectacles, rubs his eyes with thumb and index finger, and picks up his pencil, rapping it sharply on the paper. Staring blankly at the page before him, Irwin tries to develop the next line to his story. Several minutes pass by with nothing but a few doodles in the margin. "Perhaps a new pencil would help," says Irwin as he slides open a drawer and extracts a box of pencils. He pours them out on the desk and begins to sharpen each one, placing them side-by-side in a neat, vertical row.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stealthy footsteps creep closer to the desk and further from the window. Pointed talons, in an upraised position, tremble with anticipation. The tongue is held between jagged fangs to prevent it from smacking noisily.

\* \* \* \* \*

The howling wind causes the once silently opened window to shut with a thunderous crash. Irwin leaps in his chair and spins quickly to look over his shoulder. His eyes bulge at the massive beast looming toward him. Blazing yellow slits stare back at Irwin as he closes his eyes and screams. In one sudden lunge, razor sharp claws pierce Irwin's flesh, drawing him closer to the wirey mat. The mouth opens wide, swallowing Irwin's head as fangs chomp down, severing his neck. Irwin is silenced forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

A fresh sheet of paper, a newly sharpened pencil, and the literary monster begins..."It was a dark and stormy night when Irwin Roberts met his worst nightmare. Rain darted across the window panes like tadpoles in a stream. A warm cozy fire, beautifully appointed library, and hot beverage made him comfortable, perhaps a little lonely, and not too watchful. He struggled with his story, his frustration mounted, and in the end it didn't matter. Be careful of things that go 'Thump' in the night."