

ALISTAIR GRIM'S
ODD AQUATICUM

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Contents

Chapter I	7
<i>The Sorcerer's Apprentice</i>	
Chapter II	19
<i>A Most Spirited Guest</i>	
Chapter III	33
<i>Cheers and Spheres</i>	
Chapter IV	47
<i>The Hell Mouth</i>	
Chapter V	63
<i>Dreams, Asleep and Waking</i>	
Chapter VI	81
<i>The Rival Bricklewick</i>	
Chapter VII	95
<i>A Sticky Situation</i>	
Chapter VIII	111
<i>Playing with Fire</i>	
Chapter IX	127
<i>Maps and Mothers</i>	
Chapter X	145
<i>The Moral of the Story</i>	
Chapter XI	159
<i>The Guardian at the Gates</i>	
Chapter XII	183
<i>A Watch of a Different Colour</i>	

Chapter XIII	203
<i>An Unlikely Ally</i>	
Chapter XIV	217
<i>An Unexpected Reunion</i>	
Chapter XV	233
<i>The Writing on the Wall</i>	
Chapter XVI	243
<i>The Return of the Black Knight</i>	
Chapter XVII	263
<i>A Resurrection of Sorts</i>	
Chapter XVIII	283
<i>On the River Thames</i>	
Chapter XIX	301
<i>A Change of Plans</i>	
Chapter XX	321
<i>Odditoria That's Given Back</i>	
Chapter XXI	335
<i>Just a Bit More</i>	
Acknowledgements	339
Character List	341
Glossary of Odditoria	345

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FOR MY DAUGHTER

From an article in *The Times*, London. 25 October, 18—

ALISTAIR GRIM WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE!

In light of the now notorious events in Bloomsbury, The Times has learnt that, in response to numerous lawsuits, all liquid assets and material holdings belonging to Mr Alistair Grim have been seized, by order of the Magistrate's Court, and are to be sold at private auction. Although this information seems to corroborate earlier reports that Mr Grim fled London to evade his creditors, it is the opinion of The Times that, unless the unhappy man and his Odditorium are found, all interested parties will have little to show for their efforts.

Readers of The Times will recall how Alistair Grim – inventor, fortune hunter, and, some say, mad sorcerer – and his long-time associate Lord Dreary partnered with various investors to transform Grim's Antiquities Shop into the aptly named Odditorium: a flying house of mechanical wonders, billed as the most spectacular attraction on the planet. After more than five years of construction and countless delays, the Odditorium gave its first public presentation three weeks ago, upon which Grim and his mechanical marvel vanished amidst what can only be described as the most bizarre spectacle our beloved city has ever seen.

Readers of The Times are by now familiar with the numerous eyewitness accounts of how, after an unprecedented demonstration of technical prowess, the much-anticipated

preview of Alistair Grim's Odditorium quickly devolved into bedlam. Spectators not only reported seeing a trio of purple-eyed street urchins with superhuman strength, but also a giant, black-winged demon and a flying cavalry of skeleton soldiers – all of which were said to have attacked the Odditorium before its mysterious mid-flight disappearance over the English countryside.

Although these events lend credence to Mr Grim's reputation as a sorcerer, renowned Cambridge University scholar and Regius Professor of Modern History Oscar Bricklewick believes he has a more scientific explanation. "The only sorcery here is a bit of high-tech flimflam," Bricklewick said, upon inquiry from The Times. "Judging from the eyewitness reports of a sparkling green mist emanating from the Odditorium as it took flight, it is clear that Mr Grim unleashed upon the public a powerful hallucinogenic gas, thus creating both mass hysteria and the perfect cover for his escape."

Indeed, it is the opinion of The Times that, if Professor Bricklewick's hypothesis is correct, it is nothing short of a miracle that no deaths were reported in the wake of Mr Grim's escape. However, in light of this blatant disregard for the welfare of his fellow man, Scotland Yard has assembled a special task force, charged with capturing Alistair Grim, dead or alive.

It is also the opinion of The Times that, with debtors' prisons bursting at the seams, it is inevitable that a few misguided souls will take extreme measures to avoid their financial obligations. However, should one of them possess the criminal genius of an Alistair Grim, Londoners can only hope that he shall refrain from the sort of havoc that the aforementioned has wreaked upon our fair city.

CHAPTER I



THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

“GO AHEAD,” FATHER SAID, and he passed me the Black Mirror.

The handle was warm to the touch, and I could barely make out my reflection in the mirror’s polished black glass. My eyes narrowed and my lips pressed together tightly. This was not the first time I’d gazed upon this strange black mirror. But unlike on previous occasions, I now knew what to say.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Father said. “All you have to do is ask.”

I swallowed hard. “Show me my mother,” I said, and the glass burst into life with a swirl of sparkling colours. I gaped in disbelief, my heart hammering as the colours began to churn faster and faster. The mirror flashed, and in its glass appeared the face of a woman weeping. I recognized her from the portrait in the parlour.

Elizabeth O’Grady, the Lady in Black.

“*I’m sorry, my love,*” she said, her voice hollow and distorted. She turned as if something caught her attention, and then her image dissolved and the glass went dark again. A heavy silence hung about the room.

“There, you see?” Father said finally. “Among other things, the Black Mirror is capable of holding the last reflection of anyone who gazes into it – words and all.”

“So that’s how you knew,” I said in amazement. “Because I’d looked into the mirror before, you saw my reflection when you asked to see your son.”

“An excellent deduction, my young apprentice.” Father took the mirror and slipped it into a wooden case upon the desk. It was night-time, and yet, in the soft, blue glow of the library’s lamplight, I could see his eyes had grown misty.

“Begging your pardon, Mr Grim—”

“*Father*,” he said gently. It had been nearly a month since I learnt that the man sitting across the desk from me was my father. But still, I hadn’t got used to saying it out loud.

“Begging your pardon – Father – but how did you come by this mirror?”

“It was a gift from Elizabeth O’Grady upon our engagement. Legend has it one of her ancestors stole the Black Mirror from a sorceress, after which it was handed down in her family for generations. What you saw was your mother’s last message to me before she died.”

A long silence passed between us. “I wish I’d known her,” I said finally.

“I wish you had too,” Father said.

I stared down at my shoes. There were still so many questions I wanted to ask, but Father was not the sort to talk about such things. Besides, we were on an adventure. And when one is on an adventure, there is little time to get gobby-eyed about the past.

“Now, on to more pressing matters,” Father said, “the first of which is preparing you to inherit the Odditorium.” He pointed to the notebook of spells on the desk before me. “Let’s hear it, then.”

“*Sumer... te... sulumor*,” I read aloud, slowly, and Father snapped his fingers.

“The correct pronunciation is *sub-meer teh sub-loo-mahr*. It’s ‘*Romulus et Remus*’ in Latin, spelt backwards.”

“Of course!” I exclaimed, the light dawning, and I uttered the spell again – this time properly.

Father nodded, then crossed to the hearth and pressed a secret button on the mantel. Above it, a large lion’s head with glowing red eyes swung open to reveal a hidden compartment in the wall. At the centre of the compartment was a small crystal conductor sphere with a tangle of pipes branching out from it in every direction. And inside the sphere floated the light source for the lion’s eyes: a fiery glass ball called the Eye of Mars.

Standing on tiptoes, Father opened the conductor sphere’s porthole and removed the Eye.

“There are essentially two types of magical objects in this world,” he said. “Ones that are activated by simple physical actions or verbal commands, such as the Black Mirror; and ones that can be activated only by the precise utterance of a magic spell, such as the Eye of Mars.”

Father waved his hand over the glowing red ball. “*Sumer te sulumor*,” he said, and the light went out. I’d seen him do this dozens of times, and yet the simple act of turning the Eye of Mars on and off never ceased to amaze me.

“Go ahead, lad,” Father said, passing it to me. I swallowed hard and waved my hand over the Eye.

“*Sumer... te... sulumor*,” I said – but nothing happened.

“Try it again. A magical spell is only as strong as the belief of the person who utters it.”

I took a deep breath. “*Sumer te sulumor*,” I said with conviction, and the Eye of Mars ignited, its red glow warm in my hands.

“I done it, sir!” I cried, and Father ruffled my hair.

“That you *did*. Now do it a hundred times more and we’ll move on.”

“Cor blimey, sir! A hundred times?”

“Consistency is everything in sorcery. Whining is not. Thus, if you wish to inherit the Odditorium some day, I suggest you carry on with your lesson.”

Father winked and, raking his fingers through his long black hair, stepped out through the library’s wide-open archway and onto the balcony.

“*Sumer te sulumor*,” I said, with a wave of my hand. And as the Eye of Mars went dim again, Father sat down at his pipe organ and began to play. I could barely see him out there in the dark – his long, slender back just a smudge of shadow against the starless sky. And yet the tune he played – ‘Ode to Joy’, I believe it was called – was so festive and cheerful, I could tell how proud of me he was, just the same.

My heart swelled, and I tried to carry on with my lesson as best I could, but as Father shifted into a series of expertly fingered flourishes, my eyes began to wander about the library’s fantastic contents.

Not much had changed since my arrival at the Odditorium, and yet I could hardly believe that some day it would all be mine. The countless books and clocks and mechanicals. The priceless antiquities. The suits of samurai armour and the lion’s head above the hearth – not to mention the Eye of Mars and all the other magical objects about the place.

And yet, for all the wonders I’d encountered, none was nearly so wondrous as the tall, dark man playing the organ out on the balcony.

I suppose every lad thinks his father special – save, of course, for the poor wretch with a father prone to drink and beating him now and again. My father was prone to

neither, thank you very much, but to me he was much more than special. In fact, I'd wager there wasn't another father like mine in the whole wide world.

"Since when did you become an expert on fathers?" you might be asking. And for those of you who know me, I must say I can't blame you. After all, when last we left each other, I'd only known my father a short time – not to mention that I caused him quite a bit of trouble back then. However, for those of you joining me on this adventure for the first time, I suppose a bit of catching up is in order.

You might say that it began with a pocket watch and ended with a prince. And somewhere in the middle, a runaway chimney sweep learnt that he was the secret son of an inventor, fortune hunter and sorcerer, all rolled into one. That son, of course, was me, and my name is Grubb. That's right: Grubb. Spelt like the worm, but with a double "b", in case you plan on writing it down. And my father was none other than Alistair Grim.

I say "none other" because, had you lived in London at the time, you no doubt would have heard of Alistair Grim. Had you lived in some other place, you might have heard of him there too. Or at least caught a glimpse of him flying about in his Odditorium – a house of mechanical wonders that looked like a big black spider with a tail of sparkling green smoke.

If you didn't see the Odditorium flying about, you most certainly would have heard it. "Where's that organ music coming from?" you might have remarked, upon which (had I been on the ground with you) I'd have replied, "The Odditorium, of course." You see, that's how Alistair Grim used to fly his house of mechanical wonders: by playing its pipe organ.

The organ sat upon the Odditorium's balcony and faced outward so that its massive pipes twisted up and down the

front of the building like dozens of hollow steel tree roots. I must confess, I found it very difficult to play the organ properly at first, but eventually I learnt how to make the Odditorium go where I wanted it to – except when travelling underwater.

Good heavens! There I go – getting ahead of myself. I suppose if I'm going to tell you about all that underwater business, I best back up and tell you how we got there in the first place. Come to think of it, for those of you unfamiliar with my tale, I best back up to the beginning. Otherwise you might get confused and abandon this adventure altogether.

All right, then: the beginning.

Twelve years before I arrived at the Odditorium, Alistair Grim's bride-to-be, Elizabeth O'Grady, fled London under mysterious circumstances and drowned in the North Country. Before she died, however, Elizabeth gave birth to a son and entrusted him to Gwendolyn, the Yellow Fairy. That son was yours truly, and the Yellow Fairy dropped me off on the doorstep of a kind, childless woman by the name of Smears. Unfortunately, she passed away when I was six or thereabouts, and for the next half of my life I had the miserable lot of being apprenticed to her nasty chimney-sweep husband, Mr Smears.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, while I was busy collecting soot for Mr Smears, my father, Alistair Grim, was busy gadding about the world, collecting Odditoria. Not to be confused with his mechanical marvel, the Odditorium (which, as you can see, ends with an *um*), the word *Odditoria*, at once both singular and plural, is used to classify any object – living, inanimate, or otherwise – that's believed to possess magical powers.

In other words, the *Odditorium* is the place, and *Odditoria* are the magical things *inside* the place.

Out of all the Odditoria Alistair Grim collected over the years, there are only three from which he harnesses magical energy to power his Odditorium. The first is none other than the Yellow Fairy herself, whose magic yellow dust enables the Odditorium to fly. The second is the red Eye of Mars, which powers the Odditorium's lightning cannons. The third is a mischievous banshee by the name of Cleona, who provides the Odditorium with a blue spirit energy called animus.

Cleona's animus is by far the most important of Alistair Grim's coloured energies, for it's the blue animus that gives life to the Odditorium's various mechanical functions.

However, there was *someone else* gadding about the world collecting Odditoria too: a wicked necromancer by the name of Prince Nightshade. And not only did this Nightshade bloke harness power from his magical objects, just as Alistair Grim did, but he'd also gathered about himself an army of nearly every evil creature imaginable: dragons, trolls, goblins – and, most terrifying of all, the Black Fairy.

But for all the prince's success at collecting Odditoria, there remained one magical object that continued to elude him: a source of the animus from which he could create an army of the walking dead.

I suppose that's where I come in. I got into some trouble while sweeping chimneys at an inn with Mr Smears and, fearing for my life, hid myself in a trunk belonging to one of the guests. That guest turned out to be Alistair Grim, who whisked me away on a flying coach and took me on as his apprentice. My entire life had changed in an instant – not to mention that I made loads of new friends, including Father's right-hand man, Nigel, and an animus-powered pocket watch named Mack (short for McClintock). An odd one, that Mack is, for not only does he never run out of

animus, he also stops ticking now and then for no apparent reason.

In fact, it was Mack who kicked off this entire adventure. On my first day on the job, I accidentally brought him outside the Odditorium, whereupon Prince Nightshade picked up on his animus and came after us with his army of skeleton Shadesmen. Nightshade didn't have many of those bone bags left, so he wanted the animus to turn flesh-and-blood people into Shadesmen too. I'd seen him do it myself – to Judge Hurst, Father's old enemy from London – and let me tell you, it was not a pretty sight.

So that's the nub of it, and right about where you found me during my lesson. Cleona and I had narrowly escaped captivity in Nightshade's castle a few weeks earlier, and Father had since come up with a plan to defeat him. The only catch: he wouldn't tell anyone except Nigel what he was up to. The fewer people who knew about his plan the better, in case the prince caught up to us before we arrived at our final destination.

Our final destination. I hadn't a clue where it was, but I got the sense that if we didn't get there quickly, Father's secret plan to defeat Prince Nightshade would fail. After all, the evil prince was still out there, plotting his next move to steal Mack's animus and create his army of purple-eyed Shadesmen.

Coincidentally, as I was gazing around the library, thinking about Mack's animus, the old pocket watch began shaking in my waistcoat. I'd since traded my raggedy old clothes for an entire wardrobe that Mr Grim – er, my *father* – had lying about since he was a child. If only my mates back in the North Country could see me now, I thought, they'd think me on my way to being a right proper gentleman.

I slipped Mack from my pocket and opened his red-and-gold-chequered case.

“What time is it?” he cried. His mechanical eyes flashed blue and his thick, curved hands twirled to VIII and IV so they formed a moustache atop his smiling mouth.

“Quiet, Mack,” I whispered. “I’m in the midst of my lesson.”

“Sorry to disturb ya, laddie,” he said. “But if ya wouldn’t mind setting me next to me chronometrical cousin there, I’ll shut me gob so’s ya can carry on.”

I glanced over at Father. He was still playing up a storm out on the balcony, so I placed Mack beside the clock on his desk.

“Ten past eight!” Mack exclaimed, and he twirled his hands to the proper time. “I tell ya, Grubb, now that I always know what time it is, I feel like a lad of yer age. Why, I remember when I was—”

“You best quit your jabbering, or Father might ban you from the library again.”

“But passing the time with me clock cousins is me reward for helping ya escape Nightshade’s castle. Mr Grim said so himself!”

“I don’t mean he’d ban for you good, Mack. Just until my lesson’s over. I’ve got to do this a hundred times, he says.”

Waving my hand over the Eye, I spoke the magic spell and the glass ball ignited.

“Well done, laddie,” Mack said. “Tell ya what. You do that ninety-nine more times and I’ll keep count for ya. After all, what good’s the chief of the Chronometrical Clan McClintock if he can’t help his best friend become a sorcerer?”

“Why, that’s a splendid idea, Mack. I should think it much easier to concentrate on what I’m doing if I don’t have to keep track of how many times I’m doing it.”

"All right, then, laddie. Off ya go!"

"*Sumer te sulumor*," I said, waving my hand, and the Eye of Mars went out.

"That's two," Mack said. "Now try again."

"*Sumer te sulumor*," I repeated – but as the Eye caught fire, it floated out of my hand and hovered in the air just above my head!

"Aye, yer getting good at this sorcery business, laddie," Mack said. "I didn't know you could make things fly."

"But I'm not doing that!" I cried. I rose to my feet and tried to snatch back the Eye, but it darted away from me and began floating towards the hearth – slowly now, as if daring me to follow.

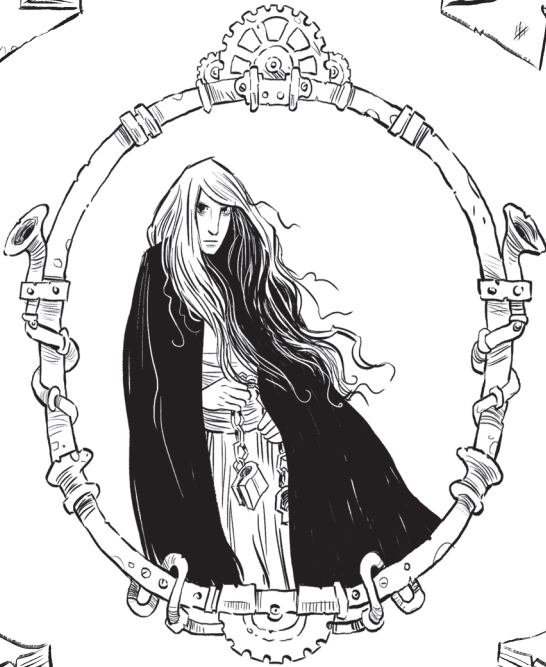
"Father!" I called out in panic. Father ceased his playing at once and came in from the balcony.

"Done already?" he asked, when the sight of the Eye of Mars hovering near the mantel stopped him dead in his tracks. Father's face grew dark and his fists clenched. A long, tense moment of only clock ticking hung about the library, and then Alistair Grim crossed fearlessly to the centre of the room.

"Show yourself," he commanded.

And to my horror, someone actually *did*.

CHAPTER II



A MOST SPIRITED GUEST

“LORCAN DALACH,” Father said, gritting his teeth, and the spirit smiled.

The young man floating before the hearth was a spirit, all right – and a banshee, to boot. I’d certainly spent enough time around Cleona to know a banshee when I saw one. The spirit had long, snow-white hair and ivory skin like Cleona, but instead of a tunic he wore a blue cloak trimmed with a glowing white maze pattern. The cloak hung open about his bare chest, below which was a pair of white trousers tucked into a pair of high, white boots. In one hand he held the Eye of Mars, and in the other, a length of glowing blue chain.

“Word travels fast in our realm,” said Lorcan Dalach. “But I must say I never expected to see you flying about Ireland so soon, Alistair Grim.”

“Let me guess,” Father said. “You managed to steal on board as we passed near Dublin. What’s it been – nearly an hour you’ve been sneaking about?”

“Nothing much gets by you, does it, Grim? Except for me. However, someone else knows I’ve been here the entire time.”

“Cleona,” I muttered.

“Very good, lad,” said Lorcan Dalach. “We banshees can sense each other. But don’t be cross with Cleona for not telling you. After all, had she warned you of my presence, she would’ve exposed herself to these.”

The banshee rattled his glowing blue chain.

"I am quite familiar with the Gallownog's spirit shackles," Father said. "All you need to do is touch Cleona with them and she's your prisoner – is that it?"

"Aye. But Cleona has always been good at hiding" – Dalach tossed the Eye playfully – "which is why I've had to resort to more drastic measures to flush her out."

"Give that back!" Mack cried. "That's Odditoria what belongs to Mr Grim!"

"All in good time," said Dalach, and he snickered contemptuously. "That is, if *you* can keep track of it, watch."

"What's that, neep?" Mack said. "Having a laugh at my expense?" Without warning, Mack leapt from the desk. "MCCLINTOCK!" he cried, flying straight for the banshee. But Mack passed straight through him, bounced off the mantel and fell to the floor. Mack sputtered and flashed, and then his bright blue eyes blinked out.

"Mack!" I cried, rushing towards him, but Father held me back.

"You must believe me, Grim," said Lorcan Dalach. "I don't want Prince Nightshade to acquire Mack's animus any more than you do. Both our worlds would suffer greatly should he succeed in creating his army of purple-eyed Shadesmen."

The banshee kicked McClintock across the floor to me. I quickly scooped him up and slipped him back into my pocket.

"Then what *do* you want?" Father asked. "Cleona is now attached to our family here at the Odditorium, and thus is no concern of yours."

"You know very well that banshees are forbidden to interfere in the destinies of the living. And so Cleona must once again stand trial before the Council of Elders."