

Excerpt from Charity Works  
By Raymond J Witte

“Ok. Mr. Horace, I’ll make sure the coast is clear.”

I opened the gate for him, spinning the heavy wheel to retract the bars that held the gate in place. Lenny seemed almost eager as he scrambled into the sewer and made his way down the ladder. I heard him splashing too and fro at the base of the thing as he scouted ahead.

“Looks OK to me, Mr. Horace!” he called up.

As I climbed down the ladder, the smell coming from the tunnels made One Tooth’s usual stench of rotten leather and halitosis a spring day in comparison. I nearly wretched as my boots hit the ankle deep water. I was still trying to compose myself when One Tooth, apparently wholly at home in such an utterly rank environment, piped up.

“Lookee here Mr. Horace! Pictures! What do you think they are, Mr. Horace? Is that Skraeling writing?”

“No Lenny, I’ve seen something like this before, but it was not Skraelings that wrote it.”

I had to think back. Part of the graffiti had obviously been drawn by children. The pictures were stick figures, mostly happy, which boded well for my assignment, engaged in what I assumed to be play. No worries there. But the other parts... I had seen something that was broadly similar. Once. Those are some memories I don’t like to bring up. There are some dark, old things in this world and there are dangerous, desperate men who truck with their secrets. I prayed to every god I could name that this was not the case, and that those symbols were old, written by someone long gone. If it were otherwise, I most likely wouldn’t make it to get the second half of that reward.

It was then that Lenny piped up again.

“You hear something Mr. Horace? I think I hear some scratchin’ in the walls.”

“ I don’t hear anything at all Lenny. Must be your imagination. Have you been sniffing turpentine again?”

“Well, not this morning anyway. There it goes again Mr. Horace!”

“You’re just suffering from the delirium tremens, Lenny.”

“Maybe Mr. Horace, maybe.”

I took then opportunity to have a slug brandy. After seeing those glyphs, and

knowing what they might mean, I needed it.

“Say Mr. Horace, could I maybe have some of your brandy?”

“Absolutely not, this is emergency brandy and I have a condition. You’ll just have to tough it out. Now onward!”

Lenny trudged on sullenly, slogging through the sewer muck and grime and I followed him through several more filthy tunnels until we reached another spot of scrawled figures on the wall. Just like the first set, some looked like they were drawn by children. These seemed to indicate that there was some path downward. There was other writing as well. Similar to the glyphs we had seen at the entrance to the tunnel and even more ominous, this time depicting something hulking and clawed and decidedly not human.

I started feeling even worse about this job. I even thought about backing out and making up some story about the children all being dead. But what if they tried to get the bodies? Or worse, what if the brats showed up alive somewhere? My reputation would be ruined and the prospects of coasting off of it for the rest of my days would be gone forever. Once again, I was stuck.

“Say, Lenny, this seems to indicate that there’s a way down. Can you see anything?”

“Nope Mr. Horace, I don’t see anything. Oh look, a tin can!”

He ran off like a child on Founding Day, eager to get to his treasure. I called for him to wait, but there was no stopping his headlong rush. Well, at least there wasn’t until the floor collapsed beneath his feet and he disappeared from my sight.

“Lenny, are you hurt?” I called down to him. I wasn’t terribly concerned about his well being, but if he had broken a leg or had gotten himself impaled on a pipe, I’d need to waste another day finding a new tramp.

“I think I’m OK, Mr. Horace,” I heard him stand and brush himself off, “Seems like we found a way... Oh lord, Mr. Horace, it’s that scratchin’ again and it’s louder than hell this time!”

This time I heard the scratching, desperate and wild, coming from a dark area further down the tunnel. I was about to start to lower a rope down, when Lenny screamed.

“Help me Mr. Horace! Rats! Good lord giant rats!”

I looked over the edge and there were at least a dozen that I could see, each the size of a bloodhound but obviously heavier, bodies low and skulking, all mangle and dirty fur and enormous, yellowed teeth. I abandoned the rope and began desperately rooting around in my pack. I had brought something for this situation.

“Hold on Lenny, just one second!”

He didn't answer. I could hear him shouting 'Get away!' and I heard a clatter, which I assumed to be him throwing stones. I found what I was looking for. The stock settled nicely into my shoulder and a few quick cranks had the device primed.

“Lenny, you might want to cover your ears...”

I stepped to the edge and discharged. Even with the aperture pointed away from me, the emanations were painful, a raw and grating hum just beyond what I could hear, both too high and too low for humans to process. The waves were invisible, but I could judge my aim by the effect and I played the broad copper bell over the unusually sized rodents as the generation box vibrated in my hand. The weapon's discharge might not be visible, the effects were dramatic. Everywhere I pointed the weapon, I was rewarded with frantic squeaks quickly followed by a wet bursting sound. All too soon, the weapon wound down, but it had been enough. The rats were in full retreat under my breath I muttered, “Thank you, Mr. Edison.”