

## Deadlines

### 1909

#### Sunday, January 17

The winter winds tapped at her window like tiny bone fingers, a crisp patter of icy snow blowing against the pane. Norma Wister shivered in the darkness beside her husband, the blankets and quilt curled carefully under her toes and up to her chin. She rolled to her side and sighed, unable to sleep and thinking about the impending hassle of the snow-covered morning.

Something clattered above her again, the snow storm blowing a neighbor's shutter or broken tree limb across the roof. The sound scraped across the ceiling, rhythmic and slow, almost like steps. Like some animal slowly walking across the snow-covered roof. She stilled her breathing and listened, telling herself it was only the wind.

She nudged her husband, but knew he would sleep until morning unless the roof blew off entirely. And, even then, she wondered. She sat up straight in the bed and listened again. *Only the wind.* A wind that carried a low growl and now tapped rhythmically at her window in a slow, playful tempo.

Norma swung her legs off the side of the bed, her stockinged feet hitting the cold wood floor, and stared at the window fully. Through a crack in the sash, she could see the snow sticking in wet drops against the pane and falling in the moon-tinted darkness behind it. There were more scuffing sounds from above, muted footfalls and something dragging across the roof away from the window.

*The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.* She thought of the popular children's book, the *Visit from Saint Nicholas*, and chuckled gruffly. She wondered tiredly if the "Jolly Old Elf" had simply fallen behind schedule and then moved towards the window. No good letting some raccoon tear up the roof and ruin what might be left of a terrible night's rest.

Norma pulled the sash aside and wrestled the window up, shuddering before the cold air. Her husband stirred behind her, rolling away from the wind into the blankets, as she risked her head outside into the snowfall. The wet drops tickled her face, and she looked up and down the snow-covered street. Certainly, something magical about a world covered in fresh snow, she thought, leaning out the window to get a better look up the roof. It wouldn't have surprised her at all if Saint Nick, and his tiny reindeer, were there to greet her.

The hand that grabbed her from above was skeletal and long and wrapped completely around her face, the palm resting on the back of her head. Norma Wister screamed into cold knobby fingers, her shriek lost in the suddenly howling winds. The sting of sharp claws sunk into her chin and cheek, and she felt herself being lifted into the winter night.

It wasn't Saint Nick.

### Monday, January 18

The morgue was dark and forbidding, a permanent fire hazard stacked to the ceiling with dust-laden books, catalogues, maps, and more than ten years of clippings. Owen Henneberger stood against a small desk in the back corner of the room while his boss randomly rifled through one of the shelves. The boy, Howard, worked at another shelf behind him, carefully stacking photograph cuts and galleys of previous issues. "A monument to lost motion and inefficiency," the editor grumbled to himself.

"Sir," Owen said carefully. "Might I –"

"I suppose you've heard," the editor turned to Owen. "About this 'What-Is-It' creature everyone's talking about?"

"Yes, sir," he replied. There'd been some gossip out of Burlington and Woodbury. Even from Bristol, just over the river. Something about strange tracks in the snow, hoof prints as if the animal walked on only two legs. Several had heard the creature's call, a high-pitched shriek, and a few claimed to have actually seen the beast. A competitor, the *Camden Courier*, had already run a full story with the headlines, "Strange Animal Makes Excitement" and "Mysterious Attack Upon Milk Dealer in Mt. Ephraim Barn."

"What do *you* make of it all?" His boss stepped away from the shelf and stood before Owen now.

"I don't... Well, it could –"

"It's the Leeds Devil, sir," Howard spoke out. "Isn't that right, Mr. Henneberger?"

The editor looked at the boy and smiled indulgently. Howard was a pale, thin lad no more than ten who hovered about the newspaper morgue and, for a few cents a week, ran small errands for the other reporters. He turned back to his morgue clerk. "Mr. Henneberger?"

"The descriptions *are* similar, sir. The tracks and horse face. I suppose –"

"That's fine, that's fine," the editor held up his hands to stop him. "The men upstairs reminded me you were interested in such things." He smiled again and picked the copy of *Argosy* off Henneberger's table. "Monsters and 'Men from Mars,' right?" Before Owen could respond, the editor finished his task. "Here's the matter. I don't have enough real writers to manage this hogwash at the moment. But, your obituary and fill-in work is certainly passable, and I feel confident this rat's nest can live without you for a few hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Thousand words, on my desk by four. We're already a day behind on it. *Philadelphia Bulletin* ran this morning with it." And the *Camden Telegram* too, Owen thought but caught the words. "Witness reports," the editor was explaining. "Talk to Robbie, he knows a lot of the police." He stepped back from the desk, his eyes roaming over the room again with aversion. "Have fun with it, Mr. Henneberger," he said, stepping from the room. "Maybe you'll find one of those monsters you're so interested in."

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Thank you, sir."

### Tuesday, January 19

John Kelly thought it was some kind of monkey at first, the way the shadowed thing leapt out of the darkness and dropped onto the back platform of the trolley. A hairy chimp with a long tail that had escaped from one of the zoos. Then, he saw its wings. And, though he'd read his daughters the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* a dozen times before, Mr. Baum had never mentioned the jagged fangs, and John had certainly left his magical Gold Cap at home.

The trip to Clementon had been empty and quiet and several passengers napped as the trolley moved slowly down the slush-covered road. It was late, the afternoon sun having already fallen behind the looming snow clouds. John had sat towards the back of the trolley. He'd stared absently out the window for most of the trip at the snow-covered trees and homes along the road, the day's newspaper laid flat in his lap. More on the blizzard. President-elect Taft was sailing to Panama. Several fires in town. And, strange animal tracks found in Collingswood and Haddonfield. A posse of hunters tracked the mysterious beast, 'looked like a small cow' one woman claimed, and concluded it was a deer.

But what John Kelly was looking at now was no deer. It was no monkey either, flying or otherwise. The thing scurrying up to the top of the trolley, the thing that had literally made the car jump with its weight, was something else all together. He watched its tail, a reptilian tentacle sprinkled with bristly hair, slither up the back of the trolley and out of sight. Something moved just behind him now, and he turned around in time to see it.

A wet dark snout pressed against the glass, and its hot breath fogged just above the nose. He realized the thing was upside down, clinging to the top of the trolley, and looking in at them. The eyes at the bottom gleamed red and bright. The color of blood.

John screamed, and the terrible eyes, eyes far too human and intelligent, flashed back at him. *Angry. Lost.* Then the gaze dimmed, dropping away from the trolley within a black shadow that bounced off of the street and into the night. John made a strange sound, and the newspaper spilled from his lap as he staggered to the back of the trolley. Others in the car had turned lazily to see him, wondering what all the fuss was about.

Outside, the thing moved quickly away from them, *hopping* almost, down the street. One moment, the setting sun glowed orange off its winged back, and then it vanished completely into the darkness.

"A deer," he chuckled after the vanishing shape. Then, John's legs gave out, and only the dropped newspaper was there to break his fall.

### Wednesday, January 20

"The mysterious animal jumped on the rear platform, terrorized passengers and rang up sixty five fares before disappearing in a luminous trail." Owen stopped reading and put the morning's paper back down on the desk.

“So?” The boss blinked, his eyes never leaving the page he was editing.

“And *rang up sixty five fares* before disappearing?” His words came out in a gasp.

“Funny, huh?”

Owen rubbed his forehead. “Sir, this creature is —”

“Henneberger,” the editor’s voice was warning, but he still hadn’t looked up from his desk. “Your work was fine. We just wanted to make it a little more... Fun. So I had Welty touch it up a bit.”

Owen warily dropped his finger on the illustration that had run with the article. “And the picture?” He couldn’t bring himself to actually look at it again.

“Enchanting, isn’t it? Fergusson did that from your description.”

“Sir,” he sighed, “It’s wearing a top hat and smoking a cigar.”

“It’s still got the tail and wings.”

He tapped the picture again. “What, in *anything* I submitted, would impart to you or Ferguson *this* image?”

“It’s a devil or something, right? Mischievous. Carefree. Like a wandering scamp.”

“No, sir,” Owen groaned. “Not at all.”

“The other newspapers are doing the exact same look. Henneberger, in case you haven’t noticed, most everyone who doesn’t live in a cave is treating this whole thing as a big joke.”

“Not the witnesses I’ve interviewed.”

“Drunks and loonies, all of them. I mean, come on. The creature’s prints change size? A foot long and hooved in one yard, clawed and only inches long in another? It looks like an owl, a donkey, some poor fellow’s mother-in-law. Are you kidding? I told you, we needed to have some fun with this.”

Owen breathed deeply and recollected himself. “Sir, what if we became the one paper who showed the beast for what it really was? Exposed the danger of it, the *horror* of the thing. Its murderous history.”

“That’s what the pulps and dime novels are for. We’re a *newspaper*, Mr. Henneberger.”

“But, you even cut out the part about Mother Leeds and the exorcism. That is the story, that’s the news!”

“Who’s ever heard of Mother Leeds?” the editor replied, looking up and setting the blue-marked paper aside. “This is bigger than the Pines, Henneberger. It’s the ‘Jersey Devil’ now.”

“Fine. Then, at least call it that,” Owen sighed, “The article names it only a What-Is-It or a flying kangaroo. The *Paterson Evening News* went so far as to call it a vampire!”

“A vampire,” The editor nodded, thinking. “I like that.”

“Sir, it’s not --”

“Tell our readers what its called and bore them with some Pine Rat tale about a demon baby, and this story is done in one day. Decent folk aren’t going to read such

claptrap. But, if we can keep the people playfully guessing what it is, maybe even run a contest to name the thing. Then, we've got a story with some legs, maybe run for a week if we're lucky." He grabbed another article to edit. "You let me worry about selling newspapers, Mr. Henneberger. You just go out and drum me up some more witnesses. Good work."

"Yes, sir," Owen replied, turning to leave. "Thank you, sir."

"And, Henneberger," he called out behind him. "If you can do anything with the vampire angle, do it. People are mad for vampires."

### **Thursday, January 21**

They worked through the files together well into the night. The morgue was cold, the new furnace unable to keep up with the frosty winter. The boy had his own pile of older clippings and a stack of source books, Owen sat with the past week's papers from a dozen different publishers spread out before him in a seemingly haphazard pile.

Tracks had appeared in Camden and Moorestown. Tracks that ended at bare walls and passed straight through, or over, tall fences. Collingwood, Mount Holly, and Riverside too, and strange cries were heard at all hours of the night. Several persons, respected citizens of various trades, claimed to have seen the beast directly. The descriptions varied, one witness said it was a kangaroo with wings, another put it as a large dog that walked on its hind legs. It ran, it hopped, it limped, it flew across open fields and perched in window sills, it rode a bike. Some said it was seven feet high, other put it at no more than three feet. The first time someone claimed to have killed the creature, it was discovered they'd only shot an opossum.

But Owen read other pieces too, something he'd done for years, the news within the news. While most morgue clerks had been assigned the job by an editor hoping they would quit, he'd volunteered for the job and never complained once. Looking for patterns and coincidence in the stories where there wasn't any. Possible clues to some larger story being told. He read about several elderly folk who'd died in their sleep, and middle-aged men and women who'd died of heart failure, regrettable victims of the blizzard it was reported. Strain from the snow, the cold. *How else to explain it?* And he read of dog attacks, a man mauled so badly, he had not yet woken in the hospital. No witnesses, but everyone assumed it was one of the wild dogs that'd been coming up out of Cumberland. *What else could it be?*

"How's it coming?" he asked Howard.

"I don't know," the boy admitted, looking up from his work. "I've marked all the months with unexplained attacks and stolen pigs and the like. Any unexplained murders or disappearances." He'd charted the stories over various five year periods, running through back-page reports on Burlington and a small collection of law-enforcement correspondence going back to 1850. Looking for peaks in the violence, the bigger picture within the news.

“That’s fine,” Owen said. The Pineys believed the creature appeared more frequently just before a war. Agitated by the impending violence, or perhaps attracted to it. *Was the creature’s sudden and volatile appearance some foreboding warning of a tragedy to come, some war on the horizon? And, if so, why had it reacted with such fervor this time?*

Owen slumped in his chair. Even if they found a provable pattern, what would his editor do with *that* story? He grabbed hold of a newspaper. “Remember the dentist we interviewed?”

“Absolutely,” the boy replied. “He was still shaking during the interview.”

Henneberger pushed his glasses back into place and read. “Dr. Alex Drews... The What-Is-It perched on his window with an exposed sharp tooth very much out of repair. When the good doctor acted to help the mysterious beast and its unfortunate toothache, it flew away.”

“A tooth ache,” The boy shook his head.

“Look at the illustration.” The hat and cigar were gone and the creature had the definite face of a horse finally, but now it was smiling with a big-toothed smirk. Grinning like a playful idiot. “Westville.”

Owen put another dot on his map, a layout of New Jersey he’d made marking the times and exact location of sightings he believed to be legitimate. It was getting harder to know for sure as more and more people were jumping on the story. More witnesses each day. Was the creature getting more brazen or was every owl, opossum and dog being thought of as the Demon from the Pines.

At least, the paper had liked the map idea, and only adding a picture of a bat in the left corner, printed Owen’s drawing exactly.

He looked down at the map again, studying the jagged lines of the creature’s travels for the hundredth time. He drew another line. “There,” he said, pointing.

### **Friday, January 22**

The mounted policeman did not stop when Owen tried to wave him down. Instead, the officer hunched low against the cold flurry, his dark coat pulled high and close, as his horse simply galloped past and then vanished into the falling snow and darkness. Owen blew into his hands and rolled his shoulders hoping to shake off the bitter night’s chill. The freezing wind swept down the West Collingswood street towards them, icy and harsh against his face, coating his glasses in frost.

*Piercing, biting, cutting, sharp,* Owen thought. *These are the words of winter.*

Howard stood beside him, chin to chest, arms wrapped tight against the same bleak elements. It had been a long night, but they were close.

They heard shouts again, faint echoes up the deserted street, and started jogging towards the muffled commotion. Closer to it.

Something was loose in Collingswood, something that walked like a man but looked like a kangaroo with a long neck. A vampire, perhaps, or a Jabberwock. Whatever some fool wanted to call it, it was stalking the city.

Owen jogged awkwardly, the cobblestone uneven under the snow and slick with an undercoat of ice. He passed several stores and a narrow alley. The boy ran just behind, panting. The shouts grew clearer.

A pistol fired and Owen slid to a stop.

“Was that...” Howard panted behind him. “Gunfire?”

The end of the street ended into another cobblestone road leading right and left. Owen looked down both sides, a small crowd gathering down the right street. Several hunched shapes rumbled past them in the snow towards the small crowd.

“They shot it,” one shouted raucously at Owen. “They shot the vampire.”

“Come on,” Owen grabbed the sleeve of Howard’s jacket and pulled him back up the street they’d just come down. “That alley we passed...” he took a needed breath.

They stepped into the dim alleyway and angled past several trash bins and crates as the wind whistled strangely up the lane in a high mournful sound. The snow trickled down slowly, edging through the narrow space between the two blocks. Owen saw where the alley ended, a flash of light reflected off the snow, and pressed forward. They stepped out onto a main street again. To their left, Owen could hear the others talking excitedly.

But, something else caught his eye just across the street from them. Some dark shape that moved in the shadows of the continuing alleyway. Owen stumbled towards it.

There were faint tracks in the snow, cloven footsteps already vanishing under the storm. And, dark stains, droplets of blood that trailed deeper into the shadows. Owen and Howard moved slowly into the darkness.

The alley ended against a tall red-brick wall and the Leeds Devil stood before it, half lost in the back shadows.

Its horrible shape stretched up towards the moonlight, one arm reaching towards the ghostly light above them. Owen gawked at the monster, simply watching it. *Reading it.*

*Piercing, biting, cutting, sharp,* he thought again. *These are the words of winter.*

Then it turned and looked at them both. The red eyes flickered for an instant and then shined black. Empty black orbs blacker than ink. Dark and infinite.

Owen Henneberger screamed.

### **Saturday, January 23**

“That’s it?” the editor grumbled. “That’s all you got? ‘Police shoot at mysterious creature. What-Is-It presumed dead or wounded.’ You two nitwits were *there* for the love of Pete. I was hoping for a little more of the chase and shooting.”

“Didn’t see much,” Owen replied flatly, then added, “Fergusson did the illustration.” It showed a kangaroo-like character wearing mittens, a huge frown and a massive bandage wrapped around its head.

The editor glared at him, then smiled thinly. “Now, why do I get the feeling you’re pulling my chain, Mr. Henneberger? That I’m not getting the full story.”

Owen thought of the story Howard had written and left on his desk. Just under three thousand words typed out carefully on the busted Remington in the basement. Eerie and clever, the boy’s words filled with the courage and promise of a future writer. The tale was set in New Orleans and the creature was something older and darker than what they had seen and yet...

“What story would you want, sir?” he asked. “That we saw the monster, and it was evil incarnate, something not of this world? That its cruel eyes were literally filled with entire worlds of murder and suffering. That... That death itself seemed a better option than facing that terror for just another single moment.” He shuddered. “You wouldn’t run a story like that, would you?”

“No, Henneberger, I would not.” The editor rose from his chair. “That kind of talk, or story. That kind of *thing* you’re clearly so fond of, has got no place among civilized people.” The editor shook his head angrily. “Not in my paper. Not in *this* world.”

Owen Henneberger stared out the window and watched the buildings across the street. The melting snow pooled in the cobblestone streets in black pools, pools dark and infinite. He looked at his editor.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, sir,” he said.

*NOTES: In 1909, the Leeds Devil, or at least the idea of him, left the Pine Barrens for a brief visit to the big cities of Southern Jersey. Naturally, he became an instant celebrity and throughout the week, dozens of newspapers in Philadelphia and New Jersey ran with the story of his escapades and sightings. Though the Leeds Devil had been portrayed as a fearsome and vicious demon for more than one hundred years, the media portrayed him as a comical figure and gave him such names as Kingowing, Woozlebug, and Asertoraskidimundikins, (along with those mentioned in this tale), and then put him in topcoats or with silly expressions on his face. This general caricature is still the most prevalent today for merchandise (eg: t-shirts, PlayStation games, hockey mascots, postcards, etc.). His so-far rare appearances in creative media, Hollywood and TV, naturally stick with the more fearsome and vicious demon manifestation.*