FEELING THE HEAT: A TWICE-TOLD TALE

Les Sklaroff

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*We begin this issue with a piece by a long-time contributor and old friend of Gil’s, which places front and center that thorny problem of what makes writing good. Perhaps the solution is to admit that writing simply IS good, whether it is ugly or beautiful, famous or infamous, read or unread*.

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*“Tell me where it is, Gyme, or your pretty friend here will suffer the same fate as Ormos and the others.”*

*Gyme forced himself not to glance over to where Silki was cowering. Behind his back his numb fingers were slippery, as an expertly modified thumbnail at last began to bite through tape instead of flesh.*

*“Look, Zengel, as I tried to explain…”*

With a grunt of distaste Strag flung the book across the room. Propelled by a casual flick of the wrist it landed accurately in the safety of an armchair. He had an instinctive feeling for the right trajectory, perhaps related to his youthful practice of hurling various objects (some edible) to be intercepted by an apparently tireless dog.

This indoor launch of the papery embodiment of Seff Haldegath, writer of a succession of spy thrillers, afforded Strag a frisson of satisfaction, almost bereft of guilt. Old Sprent would be appalled to see his young editorial assistant treating an actual book with such disrespect, no matter how banal its content, or how brief its flight.

Strag had picked up the book cheaply at Morg’s Bookery in the market, one of his and Yethne’s favourite haunts. Only the previous week they had been lucky enough to find a copy of Parel Tillon’s *Hoarse Whispers*, unusually bound, he supposed as a student exercise, in textured whent, with beautifully marbled endpapers. This week’s impulsive purchase, made while Yethne was away at an educational conference, he had found to be less rewarding.

Haldegath, who had reputedly spent some years in government service, churned out fat popular books of no discernable literary worth. Within the garish holographic artwork of the covers the same embittered protagonist, Statman Gyme, recurrently avoided death while outwitting psychopathic adversaries. The style was blunt, plots implausible, studded with scenes of sudden violence and desultory sex. Strag, an insatiable reader, knew he had encountered books by Haldegath before, and should have known what to expect, but the copy of *Firemonger* which lay rejected in the chair merely reminded him that, despite Haldegath’s enviable commercial success, he found this author’s work unmemorable.

As an aspiring writer himself, fortified by the high standards of literacy expected at Fissile & Sprent, Strag knew that he needed to resolve a troubling question. Could the kind of acclaim enjoyed by Seff Haldegath be achieved without resort to the same facile formulaic tricks? Probably not, he conceded ruefully, but at this moment what he really wanted to do was to expose Haldegath as a hack writer by demonstrating how much better one of his books could have been, in the hands of someone like himself, who strove to use words not as bludgeons, but as instruments of subtle persuasion. He stared resentfully across the room at *Firemonger*. Its microsensors responded by causing its cover to appear to smoulder.

What would be most satisfying, he reflected, would be to take a Haldegath novel, strip it of its dross, and re-work what remained into something with far more depth and resonance. He retrieved the copy of *Firemonger*, re-read the first few pages, extruded the workdesk, and began to jot down a few comments before attempting his own creative improvements.

*Clarify plot. Condense.*

*Less gore. Some credible foreplay (Check with Y).*

*Essential tech. specs only for weaponry and other devices.*

*Link characters to archetypes?*

*Spycraft. Consult H D Kruving’s ‘The Dislocator’.*

*Intersperse musical theme.*

*Chapter headings. Elements from Shaunt’s ‘Black Fire’ tapestries.*

He would need to change the names, of course. The reckless Statman Gyme, product of a clandestine liaison between a flotel sanitation officer and a part-time waitress, would now become Scover Buron, son of a feisty woman journalist and an absentee but distinguished father whose undisclosed identity would be crucial to the revised plot. Silki Lissom, the ditzy, fun-loving art therapist with a propensity for finding herself in life-theatening situations, will be replaced by the succulent but enigmatic Sireen Thrist, a research chemist with a range of skills not restricted to scientific enquiry.

There were some vestiges of an earlier age with which Strag Wilderfoot was oddly comfortable, in spite of the many modern refinements at his disposal. He preferred the feel of flowing water to hygienic cloud-sprays, had no time for ParaPets, however sophisticated, and although he had ready access to interactive devices, he relished the tactile intimacy of pen and paper. Turning to a fresh page with a firm sense of purpose, he wrote:

*Firemonger Renewed. By S.W.*

Strag stared at this. It was an accurate enough statement of intent, but he had an uneasy suspicion it might lead to legal complications. He would have to be more circumspect. After a few moments’ thought he amended the title:

*~~Firemonger Renewed~~ Slaying with Fire By S.W.*

That was better. It carried a touch of menace tempered by the hint of a pun, and no longer referred directly to the Haldegath book. On reflection, Strag decided he would use a pseudonym, not primarily to disguise his own identity, but to establish the worth of the writing independently of its author. After a few scribbled possibilities, he settled on:

*Slaying with Fire. By Morlan Corrovine*

He didn’t know anyone called Morlan, but it sounded suitably non gender-specific, and Corrovine, he thought, had a kind of respectable gravitas. So be it. The upstart Morlan Corrovine would now take on the entire domain of seedy pap as exemplified by Haldegath. It was to be an exercise in enlightenment.

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Strag chose to say nothing yet to his employer about this enterprise, even though the venerable Pentheus Sprent had been sympathetic to his literary aspirations as early as their first meeting, when barely out of school, the boy had arrived uninvited, in need of friendship, guidance, training and somewhere to live. As long as Strag continued to be diligent at work, it was not Sprent’s concern what he got up to in the privacy of his new apartment. Sprent, whose faculties were still sharp, knew that young Wilderfoot now lived with one of the girls he had met at the Wheggs place near the park, since when he had noticed that while no less headstrong, the lad seemed more at ease with the world.

Skimming through the text, Strag had decided that it would resolve neatly into eight sections, which conveniently matched the sequence of themes he planned to incorporate from the ‘Black Fire’ tapestries of Tosmor Shaunt. Thanks to a generous grant, those extraordinary works had found a permanent home in the foyer of Sparagulan College Auditorium, and had since gained a reputation well beyond the confines of Snoak City.

Not long after his arrival in Snoak, eager to sample urban culture, Strag had been cajoled by his fellow lodgers into attending a performance by Feblo Carribask, but the singer’s energetic exertions were eclipsed in his memory by that first stunning sight of the tapestries. Subsequent visits to the Auditorium were made simply to luxuriate in the haunting brilliance of Shaunt’s apocalyptic vision.

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*I Nightsparks*

*Buron knew they would still be following him. He had shaken off two of them; the inept pair on either side of the street whose air of studied indifference changed to consternation whenever their line of sight was obstructed by passing traffic or by other pedestrians. They did not anticipate his sudden sprint at a busy intersection, and consequently failed to see his running leap on to the far side of an accelerating westbound freight transporter, routed from Broskol to Deldorp. Settling down for a long ride in the gathering dusk Buron remembered to check the heavily-lined outer pocket of his coat, where his fingers gently explored the irregular contours of the device he had prised from the dead fist of Haptic Fabricator Hecht. Despite its insulating sheath he could already feel the intensifying heat it had begun to generate.*

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Knowing that Strag would probably be in bed, Yethne had let herself in quietly, having left the rather misleadingly-named ‘conference’ in time to catch a nightpod back from Platport, which brought her home just after midnight.

She was tired, dissatisfied, and in need of comfort. A succession of earnest lecturers in education had informed the delegates of promising advances in developmental theory, offering some interesting statistical evidence based on historical samples, but it was apparent that unlike the bulk of their tolerant audience, they lacked the fundamental benefit of practical experience. What they called the ‘norm’ was no more than a convenient abstraction held dear by academics. Her perspective was based on daily interaction with a volatile young group of evolving identities, variously fragile, resilient, excitable, stubborn, morose, anxious to please, complacent, burdened with private grief, preoccupied with fantasy, stung by insult, mute with inexpressible yearning. Each day demanded alertness, patience, and a multiplicity of fine judgements. It was never effortless, but she tried valiantly to remain unruffled. Yethne might have been disheartened to know how few of her colleagues shared the same outlook.

*Why had Strag left the light on?* she wondered, as she hung up her coat. Entering the room she discovered him asleep in a chair, head resting on the arm which lay sprawled across the workdesk. Torn between solicitude and expediency, she tiptoed over, pressed her lips to his ear, and was duly thankful when he awoke without complaint.

“Glad you made it back,” he murmured, turning to kiss her. She was trembling slightly, and he could sense that she was unsettled. He held her close, caressing her hair.

“How did it go?” he asked. “Do you want to talk about it now, or shall we leave it until tomorrow?”

“Oh, it can wait,” said Yethne, stifling a yawn. She reached for his hand. “Let’s get comfortable. But tell me, what have you been working on so late?”

Strag hesitated. Yethne understood his aspirations, and he needed to discuss his ideas with her, but just now the lure of bed took precedence.

“It’s a kind of experiment. I’ll explain in the morning. It’s the week-end. We both deserve a lie-in, and there’s a chance I might bring you breakfast.” He adopted what he hoped was an enigmatic expression and made a melodramatic bow “Meanwhile, milady, Morlan Corrovine is at your service.”

“Ooh, rôle-play,” said Yethne coyly, with a sleepy smile.

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“Have you read any Seth Haldegath?” he asked. They had spent a very relaxed morning, during which she had been relieved to vent her reservations about the Platport ‘conference’.

“No, I don’t think so.” He handed her the copy of *Firemonger*, and suggested that she should sample it and offer her opinion. Yethne glanced dubiously at the cover and settled into her favourite chair. After a few minutes she looked up. “Well, the characters seem rather one-dimensional, there’s a lot of brutality, the plot’s not very clear, and I’m fairly sure that Togger Chorp could do better.”

Momentarily puzzled, Strag searched his memory. “Oh, you mean the boy in your class? The one who…”

“…has a passion for ants, affects not to listen, doesn’t speak much, has a step-brother who bullies him, and parents hooked on vids. Despite which, he writes really imaginative, well-constructed stories.”

Strag smiled. “That’s exactly my point! Haldegath makes a living from selling this sordid, soulless stuff, and I’m guessing that most of the people who buy these books don’t realise that he’s a charlatan. So I’ve started – as Morlan Corrovine – to re-write this book, using its bones as a kind of armature on which to build something much more stylish and meaningful.”

Yethne didn’t want to see his time and talent expended on what looked like a secondhand project. She admired his enthusiasm, but needed some convincing that what Strag was attempting was really worthwhile. “Show me,” she said.

It was thanks to Yethne that he hit upon the musical theme which would recur in various guises at critical moments, being played, sung or chanted, or simply as a persistent earworm in Scover Buron’s head. *Wessy Pilfrel* was a doleful traditional ballad about an unfortunate girl’s disintegration into madness. Because of its repetitive structure it also existed in a merrier form as a children’s skipping rhyme. Both versions begin with the same first line:

*Wessy Pilfrel lost a sock…*

In the ballad, she goes on to lose her way, her heart, her virtue, and eventually her mind. The skipping versions, with their indeterminate number of verses, often spontaneous, have her losing not only other articles of clothing, but all manner of things – voice, teeth, soap, pets, temper – with results that have kept children amused for generations. Strag felt that judicious insertion of lines from *Wessy Pilfrel* would serve as psychological signposts for the reader.

Strag made rapid progress through the first four chapters. Scover Buron had temporarily eluded his pursuers, undoubtedly members of the same mercenary gang who had murdered Hecht. He’d had just enough time to create a diversion with a ‘rabid hounds’ sonic grenade, and had managed to escape with the device, but too late to save the scientist’s life. Later that night, travelling west on the transporter, he found that the device was becoming literally too hot to handle.

*Scavenging by torchlight among miscellaneous building supplies he improvised a protective container from ceramic granules, quickfoam and heavy-duty antithermal tape, mindful that it would have to suffice until he could make contact with one of his own people. Craunt, who had assigned him to the retrieval mission had clammed up when Scover had asked if he might know the device’s actual function. “All you need to know is that ‘229’ is looking for it. It could start a war. Or end one.”*

*The transporter’s automatic braking system engaged as it approached the depot entrance in Deldorp. Buron climbed down and made his way unobstructed through deserted moonlit streets until he reached the safe-house in the artisan quarter.*

In Chapter 5 (‘*Forge*’), Buron is working on ways to bring Hecht’s assassins to justice. He tries to ignore the faint high-pitched humming now emanating from the overheating device which he had gingerly deposited on the tiled bathroom floor of the safe-house. A quiet tap on the door signals the arrival of the technical expert sent to deal with problem. It is Sireen Thrist.

*There is no preamble.*

*“Buron? Thrist. Let me see it.”*

*She followed him to the bathroom, pulling on a pair of fine high-tech heatproof gloves. Scover watched in fascination as she donned her scanning visor and peered down at the object, making small adjustments to the visor’s depth control, pursing her lips thoughtfully. After a few moments she reached up behind her head with both hands to remove a stylishly glowing clasp, tossing her head to allow waves of dark silky hair to cascade around her shoulders. Scover felt his pulse quicken. This had nothing to do with any danger posed by the device. Outwardly maintaining his professional composure he waited to see what she would do next. Through the bathroom window, which he had opened in an attempt to lessen the increasing heat, he could hear someone whistling. The tune reminded him of his schooldays.*

*Holding the pin of her clasp with surgical precision she moved it across the device until it hovered over the spot indicated by her visor, and executed the gentlest of jabs. The humming ceased.*

*“The concealed magnetic lock deactivates it,” she explained. She removed the visor and gloves, turning to Scover with a smile that flashed through his defences like a silent bolt of lightning. “I’ve studied copies of Hecht’s research papers. Does this dismal place have a bar, by any chance?”*

“Surely you’re not going to let them get drunk?” Yethne protested, resting her chin on Strag’s shoulder.

“I haven’t quite decided yet whether there’s any drink to be had!” Strag said. “Buron’s a seasoned agent, but he’s been under stress, and the resourceful Sireen obviously needs to unwind. I think I might allow them a bit of relaxation. Bear in mind that by this point Haldegath’s characters would already be sweaty and grunty.”

“Like in *Glow Bright and the Humunculi*? suggested Yethne, feigning innocence. “I can never remember all their names.”

“Crazy, Sleazy, Breezy and Queasy,” said Strag. “Not to mention Teasy,” he added pointedly, swivelling round to face her. “Now, Sireen Thrist is about to discover a half-bottle of a quite palatable liqueur in one of the kitchen cupboards, and despite her earlier abruptness, she will generously offer to share it with Scover. Will he accept, I wonder?”

“All right, Morlan the Mysterious, my writer-in-residence, I can take a hint. I’ll leave you to get them acquainted. If you need my help with any… tricky bits, come and find me.”

“I really appreciate that, Yeth,” he said, with absolute sincerity.

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*Craunt was patient. He had confidence in his agents. He had re-checked Buron’s file before selecting him for the Hecht mission: his success rate was exceptional, on a par with that of his father, although of course there was no way the younger man could know that. Some secrets had to stay under wraps, no matter what the cost. The loss of Hecht had been a severe blow. There were no other haptic fabricators with Hecht’s inventive genius or level of experience.*

*Intelligence reports all pointed to the probable culprits being a shadowy organisation calling itself The Feathermen, known to be responsible for similar vicious raids involving significant items of military or commercial interest, sold through a criminal network to the highest bidder. The head of the organisation, known only as ‘229’ had so far not yet been identified.*

*At least the Hecht device had been secured and rendered safe, thanks to Buron and Thrist. Both loners, Craunt reflected, yet it was clear they made a good team. He made a note to commend both of them for their prompt actions.*

“Why ‘229’?” Yethne had wanted to know, but Strag was busy working on the next chapter (‘*Scorched Earth’*), and muttered distractedly that it was a prime number with some interesting mathematical peculiarities. “Try reversing it and adding…” He tailed off in mid-sentence, evidently following a different train of thought. She retreated prudently, considered the idea of a quick cloud-spray, but decided instead to treat herself to a proper shower.

It might have been the faint sound of streaming water that prompted Strag to contrive in that same chapter the seemingly accidental drowning of two burly middle-aged men. He had Forensics declare that they had both been in good health, which would have been no consolation to the deceased. Buron would have recognised them as the two incompetent pursuers he had eluded in Broskol. Their ignominious end in a muddy roadside gully was a definite indication that ‘229’ had a dangerously low tolerance for incompetence. Strag suddenly realised that even though the subject matter had not strictly been of his own choosing, what had begun as a literary exercise had become a compulsive immersion in this simulated world. He could now admit, grudgingly, that even Haldegath, with all his shortcomings and presumed cupidity, might also enjoy the creative thrill of writing. They were members of the same virtual community. Perhaps he had been too harsh in his condemnation. If there could be honour amongst thieves, why not magnanimity amongst writers?

Strag felt, oddly, as if a burden had been lifted, and turned his thoughts with relish to the penultimate chapter. In the *Black Fire* schema the heading was *Embers*, but there was to be nothing quiescent about the action. It was now that The Feathermen were revealed at their most ruthless, in a spate of violent robberies and several high-profile kidnappings. Prominent figures were subject to blackmail, public services repeatedly disrupted by means of sabotage or by panic induced by maliciously spread rumours of an imminent hazard – a gas leak, a toxic spillage, contagious disease, escaped warthogs…. Street-children were bribed to leave suspicious packages wherever they would cause most concern and inconvenience. ‘229’ was exacting revenge, and still among the prime targets was Scover Buron.

At the start of *Phoenix*, the final chapter, Craunt is wrestling with an invidious dilemma. Citizens are fearful, those sworn to protect them appear to be helpless. His best agent is on the hit list of an unscrupulous killer whose real name and whereabouts are still unknown. It had become necessary to draw the killer out somehow. Use bait. The obvious bait would be Buron, but Buron is indispensable. Who else had the same set of skills, the same fast-thinking ability to plan on the move and under pressure? Craunt knew of only one other person who had a chance of tracking ‘229’ to his or her lair, but that would mean having to break a long-standing promise, thereby putting both of them, father and son, in mortal danger.

He had his hand poised to make the call when he was interrupted by an urgent message from his regional director, informing him that Sireen Thrist had disappeared.

“I doubt that even Togger Chorp could have managed a neater ending!” said Yethne, handing the last page back to Strag, who had been patiently awaiting her comments. “Unmasking the odious ‘229’, finding the girl, reconciling the long-separated agents, but leaving that final seed of doubt for the reader to worry about.”

“Thanks, Yeth, that’s praise indeed; possibly more than I deserve. I must admit it was challenging tying up the loose ends, but I hope I’ve got away with it. We’ll see.”

*Slaying with Fire* edged into print under the benevolent dispensation of Pentheus Sprent. Wishing to preserve his anonymity, Strag insisted there should be no launch party, but agreed to discreet advance notices about the book’s forthcoming appearance. Fissile & Sprent had a reputation for being discriminating publishers, so the arrival on the scene of the previously unknown Morlan Corrovine was bound to stir ripples of interest. The trial print run was of no more than a few hundred copies, not unusual for an author’s first book. The unostentatious covers depicted sparks from a flint against a background of velvet blackness. If it failed to do well, any loss would not be too disastrous, and if it later chanced to become a cult classic, the unsold copies would become collectors’ items.

Early reviews were models of enthusiastic waffling, presumably by critics who had not yet read the book, amply padded with phrases such as “bright new talent”, “fresh approach” and “gripping page-turner”. Pentheus Sprent had forewarned him that without a formal launch initial sales might be slow. Strag had no option but to try to curb an unaccustomed sense of anxiety and to bide his time. Yethne did her best to cope with the nervous excitement.

The tension was unexpectedly mitigated by the arrival of an old-fashioned hand-written letter, addressed to him, not as Morlan Corrovine, but in his own name, Strag Wilderfoot, c/o Fissile & Sprent. The script was firm, clear and unfussy, without flourishes. The letter congratulated him on the publication of his first book and complimented him on the polish and subtlety of his writing. There was a brief coda:

*You may be aware that I am familiar with this particular genre. Having spent much of my early life working in the murky realm of secrecy and subterfuge, I can assure you that in reality tedium out-weighs excitement by a considerable factor. Trying to prevent or repair the blunders of those who wear the public mantle of ‘decision-makers’, and the thwarting of scoundrels in general is a wearying business, requiring constant observation, consultation and analysis. Most readers of fiction would find such details stultifying. As a form of catharsis I amuse myself by providing them instead with spicy confections. It is flattering to see that in many respects you have followed my example. However, there are multiple paths. I look forward to monitoring your progress.*

*- Seff Haldegath*

Strag read the letter several times. He was shocked at how easily his pen-name had been bypassed, but reasoned that it only served to confirm his correspondent’s credentials. He could hardly believe that what he was holding in slightly shaky fingers was a personal message from the man himself! A man he had naïvely held in such disregard, but who was clearly thoughtful and articulate, and who had taken time to encourage a new writer.

“You’re looking particularly smug,” Yethne remarked when Strag arrived back at their flat. Her endearing knack of interpreting his mood at a glance sometimes made him feel quite vulnerable.

He prevaricated. “Smug? Well, surprised, yes. Even gratified, I suppose, but…”

“What *is* it, Strag Tell me!”

He handed her the letter, noticing her brief frown as she saw how precisely it was addressed. She began to read it aloud, causing Strag to smile at this echo of classroom practice. It was difficult for him to be objective, but actually hearing Haldegath’s words he thought he detected in them just a trace of irony, or was it perhaps condescension?

“How extraordinary”, said Yethne, “A fan letter! From Seth Haldegath, your prime target.”

Striving to restore his ruffled self-confidence he fixed her with a gaze in which he attempted to combine insouciance with owl-like intensity. “We writers are full of surprises. I doubt that’s even his real name.”