

Sticks & Twigs like Men

A “Call of Cthulhu” Scenario

by
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Introduction

Primarily, this is a game about the tides being turned. There are plenty of false leads and switchbacks to keep our heroes guessing to the very end about what’s going on, and who the bad guy of the piece is. We hope to keep them in suspense, and give them a couple of chills along the way.

It’s also a game about scarecrows - specifically, scarecrows that come to life. The Keeper who spent Sunday evenings and Saturday mornings watching the “Worzel Gummidge” show will undoubtedly feel right at home here. Even more so if you’ve read the books. If you haven’t, and haven’t seen the show – Don’t worry. There’s enough in here that you can look like you know everything. Either way – Try and stick to what’ you have and don’t mention the basis for the scenario. Ideally, we’ll let the players feel good for knowing that this has a Worzel Gummidge feel before pulling the rug from under them.

This is a “Call of Cthulhu” scenario, but there aren’t any mad spells, and no tomes of forgotten knowledge to lessen the sanity scores of the investigator. Cthulhu purists – You can turn your noses up now. I intend to liberally sprinkle humour through the game, in the belief that if you mix humour and horror liberally enough, they complement each other well.

Background

This scenario takes place in the village of Soggy End in the present day. It’s a small village, away from the hustle and bustle of the rat race. Although it’s the present day, it should feel to the players like it’s the 1970s. Everyone’s fashions are a little out of date, and the relationships that everyone has within the small microcosm of the village make them seem like they’re inbred, parochial and just a little creepy. This means, of course, that there’s no technology to speak of and no easy telephone coverage. Soggy End is located in one of those network dead spots where mobile phones just won’t work.

The party of characters supplied with this scenario are a bunch of journalists from a small magazine that focuses on supernatural events. They’re perfect for this scenario. If you’re running the scenario with your own characters, they should have a degree of experience, and some supernatural knowledge. They should also have reason to investigate a report of zombie-like figures terrorising a small town in the West of England. I assume that the party have just arrived in Soggy End after a gruelling journey, and that they have some transport.

Soggy End looks like any small village – It has a church, a few shops and a pub

on the main street. There is a large square area (cobbled) which holds a market at weekends. There is an old stately home somewhat removed from the village, which is owned by the Barton family. There are houses along the street as well and pulling back down the winding sub-streets as well. All the houses seem like they were built in the 50s. They're solid and worn. There are a few newer houses too. Everywhere seems to have big heavy black cables for telephone connecting them together.

It's Spring – Specifically that part of Spring where there are always rolling clouds in the sky amid patches of blue. There's a constant fresh (and quite warm) wind, blowing from the South, and there's a constant freshness in the air, like there's a storm brewing.

Lastly – The crows. There should be a lot of crows to be seen: Crows watching the party from the eaves of a house. Crows cawing in the trees as the party drive by. The only place there should never be crows is around the scarecrows.

The Hook

The lead came from a tip-off. A young man by the name of Stephen Royston called in to the newspaper. He claims that there are walking dead in the village of Soggy End. Zombies are menacing residents of the village, and the attacks are getting progressively worse. Of course, the story might well turn out to be a hoax, but it's a good reason to send a team out. Especially since the team in question are due a break and it seems like an excuse for a nice day in the countryside – One night's accommodation paid for. Today is Friday.

The Truth

It's true – Something is menacing certain Soggy End residents. However, it's not zombies. It's the scarecrows. Soggy End is home to the Crowman: a hedge wizard (sic) who makes scarecrows who can come to life. The farming villagers are keen to keep their secrets and want the newer residents out, so they have been having their scarecrows menace them. The Crowman is unaware of what's going on, and would be appalled if he knew.

The problem that the farmers are unaware of is that the scarecrows are beginning to realise that they are the pawns of the farmers. They realise their true intelligence and have started to want to take the village for themselves. They are aided and abetted by Eibor – A lesser God whose form is similar to that of a scarecrow. More on Eibor later on, though.

Scene One – Arriving at the Village

The party arrive at Soggy End by whatever transport medium they own bright and early in the morning. Odds are that since they'll be looking to stay in the village for a little while they'll want to find some kind of accommodation. To make it overly easy for the PCs, there's only one hotel in the village – The Dewdrop Inn

(geddit?)

We've already described the village in a small amount of detail – feel free to embellish or not as you will. For now we'll skip straight in to the hotel itself, although it's not a good idea to call it that. Wait till the players suggest it might be a hotel, and then look disdainfully at them. Surely this can't be any more than a B&B really...

The Dewdrop Inn is situated in the middle of Soggy End. It's more of an extension to a pub really – The pub having the same name. Considering that the proprietors most likely live on the premises, there have to be barely more than maybe four or five rooms available. Still – There's a neon sign advertising that there are vacancies available.

Possibly, the players are expecting that there's going to be a frosty welcome awaiting them as they walk into the Inn. Not so – Mrs. Moore who runs the establishment is a little overweight, a little over-happy and a little too inquisitive.

As you enter the establishment you find yourselves in what must be the reception area – Really a small corner of the pub. It's currently deserted. The air smells... old. A little like the cupboard at home where you keep the older clothes. The heavyish woman behind the counter calls out to you. "Can I help you at all?"

So in short order we expect for the players to do the necessary. I suggest role-playing this encounter just to get them into the swing of things – Your players are still getting into the swing of their characters. In case they start quizzing Mrs. Moore, you should be aware that she doesn't know anything about zombies. She's pretty amused by the group's reasons for being here, in fact. Note for later that she certainly knows about scarecrows, and that the person who makes all the scarecrows for the local farmers is the Crowman, who lives locally. Yes, she can give directions. She's a little concerned that there's strangeness going on in Soggy End, though – She might be prepared to drop in comments like "It didn't used to this busy" or "Things were better in the old days." If pressured, she'll brush the comments off, saying that she's just an old woman and that her opinions don't really count anyway.

Mrs. Moore also knows where Stephen Royston lives – It's in one of the newer houses at the end of the village. We assume that the party are going to go there next, them having very few other clues.

Mrs. Moore would rather not be filmed or recorded, by the by. She just runs the hotel, and she's short-sighted enough to believe that the publicity isn't going to help her ("Nobody's ever going to come here and visit... Not if they think there are zombies, anyway!")

Scene Two – Royston's House

Stephen Royston, you'll remember, is the guy who phoned the paper in the first

place. So he's an obvious candidate for an interview at the very least. He lives in a modern house (by the standard of Soggy End) at one end of the village. There are seven houses of this style all in a line, and it's obvious that the road they're built on is new.

The newer houses in the village can't have been built more than a year ago. There's still a whitish crystallisation on some of the walls as the minerals in the bricks leach out. The road still has the dusty feel of a road that's not long ago been just a dirt track. The gardens have had a chance to grow a small amount of grass, but the hedges between the gardens haven't yet grown up enough to be a dividing influence. All of the houses face onto a field that looks like a cornfield. A single scarecrow stands in the centre of it, arms outstretched.

Let's talk about the scarecrow first. It's there in the middle of a freshly-sown field. If anyone asks, there's not a crow/raven/sundry other bird to be seen. It's currently facing away from the PCs, but will turn to see them leave Royston's house. This is mentioned now in case the PCs want to go and examine the thing before they make a house call.

Stephen Royston is a pudgy man in his late thirties. On answering the door he'll ask for some sort of ID (note – All the PCs should have press cards) and then invite everybody inside.

Royston's house is faux art-deco. Everything inside the house is done up in black, white or chrome. From the hallway, the kitchen can be seen – A triumph of chrome and white tiled floor with black ashwood cabinets. He shows you all into the living room, where the same color scheme continues – A plush white carpet (already a little worn) is complimented by black leather furniture. A television and hi-fi (both black) are housed in a black ashwood cabinet.

Royston has delusions of grandeur. He likes to make himself and the things around him, what he does and who he knows seem more important than they really are. He truly believes that the party are here to serve him and his needs, so he treats them accordingly.

Rather than giving you a potted description of Royston's story from his point of view, the facts are presented below. These can then be reproduced in whatever manner you feel is most appropriate. He has had three "encounters" – Once a week for the past three weeks.

Royston first encountered what he believes to be zombies on May the first – Mayday (also a Friday night.) He had been attending the local mayday celebrations (in the Dewdrop Inn) and had walked home after having a few beers. He was awakened by a sonorous knocking at his door at exactly midnight, but after getting up and investigating he saw nothing untoward. Thinking it was a nightmare or some of the local kids playing tricks he went back to sleep.

One week later, also Friday, he went to bed early, intending to drive to the

nearest town and do some shopping the next morning. Once again he was woken by a knock on the door at midnight. Once again he followed downstairs and found nothing. This time, however, in the light of the last week's incident he unlocked the front door and looked around. He saw three figures walking away up the street back into the village. At the time (he says) he didn't pay any attention to the fact that they walked stiff-legged. He didn't run after them (again – his description) for fear of waking his neighbours shouting.

And then there was last week. Royston awoke to the now-usual banging on his front door, but this time he was ready. He'd prepared his Polaroid camera and managed to lean out his front window in time to take some pictures of gaunt figures standing on his front lawn. He offers these as proof of his story to the PCs.

The photos are Polaroids, obviously taken in a rush from the top front window of the house. They depict three figures standing on the lawn – gaunt and worn. Each is dressed in tatters and all are looking intently at the front door. Whether through shadow or bad photography or something else, their features are not clearly visible. What is slightly disturbing is that all of them stand at slight angles – their bodies seem to be not quite right, their stance is all wrong.

Royston saw their faces dead on – He swears that what he saw was all wrong – These were not the faces of normal people. And this is why he contacted the PCs. He didn't give chase that evening, simply because he was terrified by what he'd seen.

So – The PCs will likely ask Royston a lot of questions, the majority of which should be answered above. If they do any snooping around the property, they won't find anything untoward (scarecrows are too light to leave footprints and the amount of farmland detritus around the place is no more than what is expected in such a rural area.)

It's likely that the PCs will suspect that something's going to happen to Royston tonight. Royston will not mind them staking out the house, and will in fact invite them to stay the night. However – He works from home and he'll not want them to come back until the evening. In the meantime, it's expected that the PCs will want to do one of the following:

- Talk to the neighbours
- Investigate the scarecrow
- Go back to the Dewdrop Inn

Scene Three – The Scarecrow

The scarecrow in the field opposite Stephen Royston's house is something which the PCs are going to get more and more interested in as the clues start to point to the scarecrows as the perpetrators of the "zombie attacks." So if your group

don't go for the bait first off, leave it go for a bit. They're going to come back later anyway.

The scarecrow seems a little ornate for it's purpose. It stands propped up against a cross of wood – the full figure of a man made carefully out of straw. It wears a suit jacket and a waistcoat with a cravat beneath. Matching trousers complete the ensemble, topped with a broken old hat. An umbrella is hooked over one arm where it is propped outstretched by the crossbar – obviously the work of some wag. What is surprising though is the care and attention that has gone into carving the turnip that forms the thing's head. An almost jovial smile stretches from ear to ear.

The important thing to get across to the party here is quality. The scarecrow is beautifully made – obviously more beautifully than deserves to be hanging around in some field. That said – There are no crows in this field. And if you've been following the advice from earlier, that should appear a little weird to the party in and of itself.

The second thing to get across is that there's something a little creepy about the scarecrow. During daylight hours, this scarecrow has very little to say for itself. It's just a scarecrow. If you feel the group is right for this sort of thing, and someone passes an Perception test, they might hear a noise that sounds very much like "Oooo Arrr." But it can't be pinned down to the scarecrow itself. They might see a rustle of movement from an arm, but it's only the wind, and maybe the small bird that has made its nest within the straw body.

Scene Four – The Nosy Neighbours

This scene is largely optional. The intention is to point the party towards the local farmers who might be of interest and to suggest that maybe Mister Royston might have something of an agenda of his own.

If the party go looking for Royston's neighbours, everyone will be out. Everyone, that is, except for one old woman who lives alone in the newer houses, but the one closest to the village. She is a literal as well as a figurative gap between the old village and the new – She used to live in one of the local farms with her husband until he died and she sold up to move somewhere warmer. Her name is Mrs. Peters.

Mrs. Peters is effusive and excited that anyone would come to visit her, let alone someone from the press. She will gleefully invite the party into her house and ply them with biscuits, sandwiches, tea and coffee (of which she seems to have an infinite supply. If you're doing this right then they'll wonder if she was waiting for them.) However – She's not pushy enough to be quite Mrs. Doyle of "Father Ted" fame. She just wants to be helpful.

Considering that the party will likely be alone in her living room for a large

amount of time (while she's off making/fetching food) here's a description:

Mrs. Peters' living room is almost unbearably hot, especially with the whole group within it. Almost every surface is filled with some knick-knack, photograph or keepsake. The old lady has photos of what you can only assume are grandchildren or even great-grandchildren. Her television is a standard affair and looks to be quite new. From the moment you entered the room it has been showing muted pictures of Lorraine Kelly interviewing some reality TV star. In the window is a vase of plastic daffodils behind a net curtain.

Here's a list of questions the party might ask Mrs. Peters and her responses.

Q: Do you know Stephen Royston?

A: "Mister Royston? Oh yes – He lives down the end of the street. Drives that big black car, doesn't he? He drives too fast through the village. I was only saying the other day to Mrs. Dunne etc. etc. etc."

Q: Have you heard any noises at night?

A: <scared look> "No... But... I sleep very well at night. The doctor – Doctor Petersen. He gave me some tablets because I wasn't sleeping so well after my Alf died. Have you seen this photo? That was him... he was a great man, he was etc. etc."

Q: Have you seen anything strange going on? / Have you seen any strangers around recently?

A: "Well... no... I mean I keep a lookout and all – We have a neighbourhood watch going, and now that you mention it, Mister Royston's the leader of our residents' association... He keeps us represented he does..."

Q: Can you tell us anything more about the residents' association?

A: "Well we have a few things, beside the neighbourhood watch. The farming community seem to always be trying to cause trouble – Driving tractors through on the road, wandering livestock – stuff like that. Mister Royston always ends up shouting with them..."

Q: Do you know anything about scarecrows?

A: Well the Crowman in the village – He makes all the scarecrows for all the farms hereabouts...

Scene Five pt. 1 – The Crowman

Where the party goes after Royston's house and the subsequent encounters with his neighbours (and possibly the scarecrow) is up to them. You may need to take them to visit one or more of the local farms. They will possibly go back to the Dew Drop Inn at some point as well. Take them to the relevant scene if that's the case. There's no reason why they need to be doing any of this in order.

The party could have been tipped off about the Crowman in one of several ways. Firstly, they may (justly) be suspicious about the zombie attack and the fact that there's a gaunt and obviously suspicious scarecrow outside Royston's house. Secondly, it's possible that they've been tipped off by Mrs. Peters. Thirdly they may have been given the Crowman's name by a farmer as someone who they might need to visit.

This scene comes in two parts. The first part should involve the Crowman being as unhelpful as possible to the party. The second bit should involve the party pulling the Crowman's fat out of the fire, after which he will become understandably more helpful and forthcoming.

Let's begin with a description of the Crowman's abode:

The shack looks like someone began with a small country house and then began to add bits to it. Behind the house a huge chimneystack rises, belching black smoke into the air. Off to one side there's a workshop-like structure, joined on to the house and made in part of a prefabricated building. The driveway is overgrown and old; the house looks like it has seen much better days. But in a strange way, everything seems beautiful, as though it has been left to go back to nature on purpose.

If the party knock (or whatever) they will be met by the Crowman (see relevant entry in the appendix.) He will take them to talk with him over tea in his workshop – Skip the next paragraph.

If the party decide to snoop around the house first, the Crowman will be aware of it. Let them have a wander around, then have them notice the Crowman standing tall, arms crossed, watching them with a stern expression on his face. Skip the "having tea" section of the scene – He's not interested in talking until the party help him out.

If the Crowman invites the party in for tea, he's polite to a fault – And this is the thing to bear in mind while playing him. He is constantly, unfailingly polite. Whenever he's inside the house, he will remove the battered top hat that he wears. He will refer to making tea as "afternoon tea", and despite the state of the house and the kitchen, there will be clean china cups and English breakfast tea. However – He is not going to tell anybody anything about anything yet.

Any questions that the Crowman is asked he will politely refuse to answer, unless they're obvious – Who are you, what do you do, is this your house etc. Basically, anything the party knows he will confirm, but he won't offer up any information. He'll do this in a very polite, probably hugely infuriating manner.

The workroom's description is as follows:

The workroom is small and cramped – There's barely enough space for everyone to fit inside it. Shelves live the walls above a working surface that runs at waist

height along three sides of the room. The workroom is filled with a variety of paraphernalia – Broomsticks, straw, turnips – Everything is natural and earthy with the exception of a rack in one corner which looks like it's come straight out of a jumble sale – Full of clothes in varying states of repair, all in different sizes.

Let this encounter carry on over tea for as long as you like. Basically the party are going to get the idea that the Crowman is hiding something and isn't talking about it (which is pretty much true.) They're probably going to get hot under the collar. If the party get hot under the collar with the Crowman, he will politely ask them to leave, pooh-poohing any suggestions that maybe they'll call the local police or something. If the players get hot under the collar with the GM – don't worry. You'll soon be giving them both answers and a quick burst of action.

If you can, try and make this scene amusing. The Crowman's anachronistic ways and his gentlemanly conduct could lead to a situation where the party are mocking him without him knowing. If it happens, let it – It's going to give you a better chance of spooking them with what comes next.

Scene Five pt. 2 – When Scarecrows Go Bad

As the party are leaving the Crowman's shack (as they eventually have to, dusk should be falling. You may have to fudge this in some way. We want it to be that kind of light that's halfway between light and dark. Possibly, the clouds are obscuring the sun if you're still in the middle of the afternoon.

Outside the Crowman's house, there's a strangeness, as though the air were charged before a violent thunderstorm – there's even a smell of ozone. And in the grassy drive stand three figures, one dressed in a trench coat, the collar high to hide his face. One stands short – hardly five feet tall, standing on what looks like a stool. One is a woman, but overly tall, easily six feet tall even though her head is tipped over on one side like someone has broken her neck. As one, the figures raise their left hands and point with skeletal fingers at the Crowman.

These scarecrows have been sent to bring their maker to Eibor, where he would probably be lauded as a God, but corrupted into something a lot less wholesome than he currently is.

The Crowman will react to the scarecrows' presence by addressing them sternly (their names are "Deafhead", "Topsy" and the woman scarecrow is "Mangold." It's worth noting that the one on the stool actually has a stool for legs and moves with a kind of rolling, pitching motion which looks all kinds of wrong.) He will attempt to order them to stop what they're doing and remember who they are and who made them.

The scarecrows will eerily take no notice, moving to capture the Crowman. We're expecting the party to do something about this (though if they don't, we'll cover that eventuality later on – It won't be a good thing...) Assuming the party do try

and save the Crowman, make sure the battle is a tough one – The scarecrows are pretty much single-minded in their attempt to capture their creator and they aren't hurt like normal folk. Look in the appendix for stats.

As you describe the battle, try and do as much narrative as you can – Describe the turnips and sackcloth that form the faces of the scarecrows, stretched and pulled into hideous snarls and grimaces. The party have little to work with in terms of weaponry unless they run into the house (and if they do, the scarecrows are going to run off with the Crowman.) Likewise they cannot be reasoned with or persuaded - Talking will not help here.

Top marks, though, for intricate plans involving fire. It's the obvious weakness of the scarecrows. Note three things – Firstly, it's difficult to generate fire here. Give each character a 30% chance of being a smoker if you're feeling generous (unless they've mentioned it already.) It's still going to be hard to set light to one of them with a lighter – A test of the "Throw" skill, perhaps? Something to note, though, is that scarecrows on fire do not fall down or run off screaming straight away. They'll continue to try and fight, still on fire for a full three combat rounds before they collapse, at which point they can do nothing but burn.

In the end, whether the scarecrows have their stuffing splashed to the wind or whether they're burned to death, the Crowman (who hasn't taken part in the battle) will be on his knees, weeping for his dead children...

Naturally, after this battle, the Crowman will be a lot more forthcoming. This time, the party will likely be the ones making tea for him. He will answer whatever questions they have that he can answer:

Q: Do you make the scarecrows come to life?

A: I do – It's a secret taught to me by my father. They scare crows better that way you see. And it lets them have something of a life of their own.

Q: Did you make the scarecrows that attacked?

A: <amid sniffing> Yes – I don't know why they came here... All of my children are polite... I teach them manners you see.

Q: How many of your scarecrows are there?

A: One hundred and forty four, less the three that died today. I'll... have to make replacements for them.

Q: Where are these other scarecrows?

A: In farms, all over Soggy End. I sell them to the farmers – they know my scarecrows are the best that money can buy...

Q: Do you know anything about the scarecrows attacking Stephen Royston?

A: No, although I do know Roystom doesn't see eye to eye with the farming community at all...

No – The Crowman will not be going anywhere with the party. He's too upset,

and he really does intend to start making replacements for the dead scarecrows right away, regardless of his condition – there’s something mystical about the number one hundred and forty-four. If pressed about how best to kill scarecrows, he will pretty much refuse to answer:

Do you think it's good to kill them? You seem to have done a good job of that already, mad though they may have been! I won't have any part in killing my children, understand me? And I've yet to see any evidence that they've really done any wrong!

Interlude

In between dusk and night (7pm – 9pm or thereabouts) the scarecrows will be kidnapping people around the village for use in their worship of Eibor (see Finale.) It might be worth putting in a few indicators to this when the party travel from scene to scene – There’s villagers moving at speed from place to place, urgently searching. Perhaps a mother calling for her child in the central square, getting gradually more and more hysterical. You might have the party see shadowy figures down narrow gaps between old buildings, hurrying from place to place in an inhuman lurching gait.

The trick is not to let any of these scene-ettes become a focus of the scenario. If you feel comfortable winging it, then by all means take the party down as many of these routes as you can. Indeed – If you feel your party are running ahead of time, feel free to put as many of these in as you like. Just bear in mind that you’ll need to return to the proper plot at some point for the finale.

Also note that there should be a lot more crows in the sky, come evening time: Huge flocks of them, turning as one, spiralling and wheeling through the sky above the village. If anyone bothers to check, all of the scarecrows have left their posts, too

Scene Six – Get Off My Land

So if we get to this scene, we’re assuming one of two things. Either the finger has been squarely pointed at the farming community as the Bad Guys of the piece by the Crowman in Scene Five, or the party are just generally suspicious, which is fair enough.

Use this scene regardless of what farm the party visit first. They just happen to have investigated a farm whose owner is active in the farming community first.

Also, this particular farm has had a recent disappearance. Amos – One of the farm hands has gone obviously missing. The owner of the farm – Mister Braithwaite assumes Amos is off on a drinking binge (again) but the truth is a little more sinister.

Rather than give you potted descriptions of the farm, I'll let you use anything you like that you know – Pretty much everyone's seen a farm and it'll work better if you've got something in your mind's eye that's from your head rather than mine.

Things to note, though:

- There's a lot of crows in the sky.
- It's getting darker by the moment now.
- The ground underfoot is marshy and mucky – Even though it hasn't been raining lately.
- Farmer Braithwaite (he may not even have a first name) is busy and doesn't want to talk to the party.

So the way this scene should work is for Braithwaite to grudgingly agree to talk to the party if they follow him while he “does his rounds.” This gives us a great excuse for the party to wander around the farm and notice things like the scarecrows being missing and the fact that there's a lot of birds around. More than at any point in the scenario. The feeling we're trying to build here is one of incoming menace. Something is going on and the party have a fair idea of what. Also, we're steadily shunting the “Bad Guy” label from the farmers in the community onto the scarecrows themselves.

So Braithwaite will trudge around his farm – He's basically checking up and battening hatches down for the night time – He'll check all the gates are closed, close the henhouse, make sure the indoor sheds are closed etc. While he's doing this, we expect him to be answering questions from the party, viz:

Q: Do you know Stephen Royston?

A: That I do. He's that annoying one from the village council.

Q: Do you have anything against Royston?

A: <shiftily> Well... no... He's just a loud voice is all... And I don't like loud voices.

Q: What's wrong with the city council?

A: Stupid council – Always trying to get us farmers to do things we don't want to do... it'd be better if someone shut it down – that's what I say.

Q: Do you know your scarecrows come to life?

A: I don't know what you're talking about. Stupid city folk...

Q: Where are your scarecrows?

A: I... don't know. <hastily> Sometimes the Crowman takes them back for maintenance.

Q: The Crowman?

A: He's local. Makes all the scarecrows for farmers around here. If you want

to know something about scarecrows, you should go and talk to him – There's nothing he doesn't know.

Once you've decided that there's not much more to be gained from following Braithwaite around, the last place that should be visited is some outhouse. The description should be as follows:

The outhouse is in complete disarray. Straw bales are thrown about, hither and thither. On the ground just at the entrance is a crumpled check shirt. Farm tools lie about the place in confusion as well. Farmer Braithwaite makes a clicking sound with his tongue and moves to tidy up.

A few things to note: The shirt at the doorframe is bloodstained. The farm tools aren't. This is where the scarecrows kidnapped Amos. Braithwaite will explain if asked that this is where his farm-hand was last known to be working. He'll be worried, but in a male way – He's not going to be biting his fingernails or anything. He'll also suggest to the party that they leave fairly quickly – He'll want to mount a search for the farm hand, call the police etc.

Which leaves the party high and dry. If they haven't visited the Crowman already, we need to persuade them to at this point. If they faff around, you may need to use Mrs. Moore at the Dewdrop Inn to persuade them to go visit. Really they shouldn't need the hint. After the farm, the party should either have a fair idea that something scarecrow-related is going on, or know it for a fact.

Interlude Two – Bridging the gap before the finale

There's three obvious ways of getting into the finale. The party might decide to follow a scarecrow in the village – a matter which the Keeper should allow once he feels there's no more information to be gleaned.

Alternatively, the party may well want to go back and stake out Royston's house until midnight – Sure enough the scarecrows will show, but this time they intend to kidnap him.

Thirdly, the party may try and visit another farm. If they go this route, it may be a good idea to try and have them happen upon the finale almost by accident, suddenly coming upon the tableau over the crest of a hill.

An important note – If I was the party, I'd likely want to "tool up" before going near a bunch of possibly homicidal scarecrows. In true A-Team style, there's a lot of weaponry to be had if you know where to look. Petrol is an obvious option, as are farming implements. The inventive party might be able to score a shotgun from one of the farmers, but they would have to steal it somehow – No farmer is going to hand a shotgun to a stranger. All of these options are left to the Keeper to expand as he feels necessary.

Scene Seven – The finale, and the Horrible Truth

Right – We're now fully into gruesome territory. This whole scene should be played as the ending to a dodgy 70s Hammer Horror movie. Be creative and descriptive as much as you can manage.

The scarecrows are worshipping Eibor, who they see as their God. To this end they have built an enormous wooden structure – a humanoid figure with a hollow head (more on this later) in a secluded field at one of the farms. They have, this evening, gone to the trouble of kidnapping and otherwise inveigling around fifty of the people from the village and have strapped them to this gigantic frame. The plan is to set fire to the structure, burning all of the villagers alive.

The final part of the plan involves the head of the humanoid figure. The head will hold Eibor, who will gain power from the flames and the mystical worship of the rest of the scarecrows.

Let's note – There will be no crows for the rest of the scenario. It should be dark now, or at the very least dusk. The night is still and warm – perfect thunderstorm weather, though the players will have mixed reactions to that possibility as time goes on (see below.)

So – The party have gotten here either on their own steam, or following a scarecrow. Either way they're likely going to be being stealthy, so we'll give them the advantage of a quick scene description before we go any further.

In a bowl-shaped hollow formed by raised ground all around, someone has built a towering structure, maybe sixty feet high. It's obviously wooden – beams are visible within it. It's also obviously a humanoid shape, looking like a lone giant standing in the middle of the field. But those are all impressions that you get later. Strapped to the frame are people: Lots of people, children and adults alike. Even from your current vantage point you can see their eyes are wide with fear. You can hear the crying of the children. Around them move the scarecrows – oddly proportioned figures, almost looking normal in the darkness except in the way that they move –stiff and rigid, jerky and faltering.

Now the party have a conundrum. They can attack or continue to watch. There are roughly eighty scarecrows down there... This isn't a situation where they can run in, guns blazing – or whatever. We expect them to spend a couple of minutes planning, talking or possibly bickering.

As a device to get them on edge, and push them toward decisions, start chanting on behalf of the scarecrows. Quietly at first, but then as time goes on you can start getting louder. "Eibor, Eibor." If there are other GMs doing this at the same time as you, join in – Reinforce each others' chanting. It'll be great. And your players will know they're all in the same dire situation.

To get their attention again, enter Eibor itself:

One scarecrow is obviously bigger than the rest, maybe eight feet tall, spindly, thin and misshapen. It separates itself from the rest of the scarecrows, walking purposely toward the structure and beginning to climb up, using its claw-like hands and feet to find purchase by stepping on the people strapped in place. Cries of pain and indignation reach your ears. As the creature climbs, the other scarecrows move forward, gathering soft brushwood and dry plants around the ankles of the giant figure. The trapped people begin to panic in earnest...

So now we have three new things to consider – The party can't go anywhere or get anything because it's fairly obvious that the scarecrows intend to burn the villagers. Secondly we have a focal point to the whole proceedings – This over-tall scarecrow. Thirdly, there's an obvious weapon to be used: The fire. On the other hand, the party may have trouble getting to it. We're also assuming that the party have cameras at the ready here, and/or are taking notes.

It's difficult to script exactly what the party are going to do. So... Here's what happens if the party don't do anything at all, first of all: Once Eibor has ascended into the head of the structure, the scarecrows will begin to chant his name repeatedly and the fires will be lit. The villagers attached to the structure will begin to struggle in earnest and scream properly – They expect to die. As the fire grows higher and higher, the figure in the head stands, barely able to be seen amid the smoke and flame of the conflagration. All the smoke and flame seems to go straight to the head, being sucked in by some mystical force. This will continue until the screaming of the villages has stopped and there is nothing but charred remains strapped to the giant figure in the field. Then Eibor will climb down, heedless of the ashes and slight flames to join his congregation before they disband (and possibly discover the party.)

Now with this as the background, let's discuss ways in which the party can succeed in stopping the ritual and saving the people.

Option one – Setting fire to as much as possible. If the party have thought ahead enough to bring fire with them in some way, this is viable. On the other hand, being sensitive to fire, the scarecrows have a 70% chance of noticing open flames in their vicinity. Someone could conceivably run down, grab the torch that will be being used to light the giant, but liberal Sneak and Dodge rolls will be required, made more difficult by 10% for every additional person that goes down there.

If this is successful, the party could very quickly create chaos in the field as the scarecrows run around, burning, setting each other alight. They will, however, continue to pursue the party for a while even whilst burning. The chant of "Eibor, Eibor" will slowly die out and when the fire under the giant is put out, the figure in the head will be found to be gone. Skip down to "The Aftermath" below.

Option two – Go for the leader. Now this is going to be difficult unless the party

get down to the giant before Eibor starts climbing. Unless of course they managed to get that shotgun. The effects of a buckshot loaded shotgun are fairly extreme on a scarecrow. On the other hand, Eibor isn't a scarecrow. He is made of flesh and will explode when shot, despite his gaunt appearance. Provided he can be shot. Firearms roll required, and bear in mind the effects of buckshot on the innocent villagers attached to the giant's structure.

If Eibor is wounded, or shot, or burned or whatever, the scarecrows will feel it. The shock of their God being hurt in this way will break the spells that are keeping them alive. After flailing in an increasingly staccato and jerky manner, they will eventually fall to the ground lifeless – Just scarecrows again.

And basically, that's it, bar freeing the villagers from the structure and dealing with an awful lot of shocked, scared people. Again – Play as much or as little of this as you like, depending on how your players want to take the story and how much time you have. You should have a feel for this anyway, and this would also be a good time to wrap up any of the questions that the party might still have.

The Aftermath

If the party really want to know, the Crowman is dead – found with what looks like a heart attack, with a straw arm held tightly in his hand and three half-built scarecrows in the room around him.

Really the best thing is to find out what the party want to put down in their report to the newspaper about the whole “Incident at Soggy End.” It's either going to include the supernatural stuff or it isn't.

For supernatural reports, read this:

Living Scarecrows in the West of England!
They walk – they terrorise the local villagers into submission and they're controlled by a shadowy figure known only as the Crowman. We cover the bizarre story of Soggy End in our two-page spread inside! The Enquirer – Always first with the stories YOU need to hear!

And otherwise:

A serious incident took place in the town of Soggy End over the weekend – A case of mass hysteria and a number of indigent men combined to produce riots in the sleepy village – Thankfully a local craftsman was the only casualty, although doctors are treating a number of people for shock.

Appendix – Dramatis personae

Scarecrows

STR 16 INT 13
CON 13 POW 10
SIZ 13 DEX 13

HP 12

Attacks: Twiggy Claws (30%) damage 1d4 + db
SAN loss – 0/1d6

The scarecrows come in different shapes and sizes – Some gangly and obviously far too tall, their spindly frames seeming not to be capable of holding them aloft. Others are squat and fat – like bizarre dwarves. Their faces are either the pallid lumpy consistency of turnips or bright red beetroots with gashes for mouths and unseeing knots for eyes. They should always be a little more than the standard shambling zombie, all the creepier for their lack of guts to spill and bones to poke out of dead flesh. They never speak. They never retreat.

The Crowman

Giles from Buffy meets the scary tramp in ancient clothing.

STR 13 INT 16
CON 12 POW 20
SIZ 11 DEX 10

HP 12

Attacks: As per any unarmed person

The Crowman is not taller than six feet, but looks much more so due to his slender nature. In a way he resembles one of his own creations, with arms as thin as branches and legs so straight and narrow they could almost be broomsticks clad in trousers. His face is narrow and he wears a pair of pince-nez half-moon glasses through which he peers myopically at the world. His hair is the color and consistency of straw. It might even be straw.

His manner is always unfailingly polite and imperious. In his world he is an emperor – a creator of his own subjects. He should always have a hint of otherness about him, or a “royal aura” though his voice is thin and reedy.

Stephen Royston

A wannabe businessman and pedagogue, but fat and pasty – Ultimately ineffectual.

STR 8 INT 16
CON 7 POW 8
SIZ 11 DEX 10

HP 8

Attacks: As per any unarmed person

He's heavy set and pallid – The product of the sort of attitude that develops one part of life to the detriment of all the rest. Royston's passion is his work, and he ignores his shape because of it. The trouble is that everything else has suffered – His voice oozes with self-importance and an attempt to speak above his class. His movements are a little too fast, as if he's intending on going somewhere much more important than the people he's around could ever notice.

He thinks the journalists owe him something for the story – And if it's not money, they could at least make him famous. Not that he's willing to put himself out of his way to make it happen.

Dedication

For everything she gave me for three years – friendship, support, good times and reasons to be happy, I dedicate this scenario to Kim Adams. It will never be the same without you, my dear, dear friend.

Oh Dear Lord! I've got five minutes to go and haven't read a thing! No problem. Follow the points one by one:

The Hook

The lead came from a tip-off. A young man by the name of Stephen Royston called in to a newspaper. He claims that there are walking dead in the village of Soggy End. Zombies are menacing residents of the village, and the attacks are getting progressively worse. The party are a team of reporters sent to investigate and write an article.

The Truth

It's true – Something is menacing certain Soggy End residents. However, it's not zombies. It's the scarecrows. Soggy End is home to the Crowman: a hedge wizard (sic) who makes scarecrows who can come to life. The farming villagers are keen to keep their secrets and want the newer residents out, so they have been having their scarecrows menace them. The farmers are unaware that the scarecrows are beginning to realise that they are the pawns of the farmers. They realise their true intelligence and have started to want to take the village for themselves. They are aided and abetted by Eibor – A lesser God whose form is similar to that of a scarecrow.

The Scenes

1. The party arrive at the village, book into the Dewdrop Inn and discover the landlady is a gossip. Naturally they need to interview their contact.
2. The party interview Stephen Royston, discover he's a twit and that he's definitely being menaced by something. They start to investigate.
3. A spooky scarecrow is discovered in the field opposite Royston's House. This may be a clue or a red herring.
4. The party interview Royston's endearing (and nosy) neighbours to get more information. This scene, scene 5 and six can be interchanged into any order.
5. The party continue to investigate. On advice they go to visit the Crowman and find themselves menaced by scarecrows gone bad.
6. The party visit the local farming community and are treated xenophobically. They discover that a farm-hand has gone missing.
7. Our heroes hopefully foil a mass villager sacrifice by the scarecrows.

NPCs

Mrs. Moore (scene 1) – Proprietor of the Dewdrop Inn. Nosy and loud. Think Hilda Ogden from *Coronation Street*.

Stephen Royston (scene 2) – The contact. Ambitious but ultimately useless.

Mrs. Peters (scene 4) – Royston's neighbour. Busybody. A gossip. Think Peter Parker's Aunt May.

The Crowman (scene 5) – The guy making all the living scarecrows – One part tramp, one part Giles from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Farmer Braithwaite (scene 6) – A farmer who doesn't want to talk to the party. Half the most unfriendly teacher you ever had, half a country bumpkin.

Ughs Matthew Braysher

Your surname is French – You are half-French and you are as ambitious as they come. You're a new addition to the paper, but already considered to be one of the "up-and-comers" as it were. This is largely why you've been given the chance to go on an "away mission" to the countryside to investigate something completely ridiculous.

For what it's worth, you don't think there's much chance investigating this whole "zombie" thing at all. It's just an excuse really. Write some lurid piece of fiction when you get back and it's a free weekend in the countryside. Unfortunately, some of the others are a little more over-zealous and want to do something whilst they're away.

So you'll go along with them, but unless there's something really spicy to be discovered or reported on, it's not really your scene. In fact, you'll probably use that trademarked French sarcasm to put them into their place about the whole thing. Especially that one claiming to be a "parapsychologist." What a load of *merde*.

Robin Wilkinson-Gill – He's a "parapsychologist". More precisely he's an overbearing member of the so-called intelligentsia who likes to give people orders.

Colin Dowle – He's supposed to be "lead investigator" of a trip to the countryside? What a load of rubbish.

Agnes Mori – The junior investigator who gets brought along purely because she's Dowle's girlfriend.

Jason Appleton – The only likable one of the bunch, really.

Gytha Rose – Some rich kid who's supposed to be writing a book. Why does she get to hang out with proper journalists?

Robin Wilkinson-Gill

Your official job title is that of “parapsychologist” but you may as well be just another journalist, hanging out with this group of newspaper hounds. It’s true, you always get to go and investigate the most strange reports, but it’s almost never what you want to see – Some final proof of the existence of something other than the eye can easily see.

You are well educated, in England and also in Africa, where you learned something of the occult, and also picked up additional language skills. You are also a burly man who takes care of himself. Really, you think you should be the one calling the shots around here. Sometimes you find it hard to listen to Colin – the de factor leader of your little troupe.

Colin Dowle – He’s arrogant and overbearing and makes bad decisions. You are more intelligent, therefore you should be trust with more.

Agnes Mori – If she wasn’t Colin’s girlfriend she wouldn’t be here. She’s more suited to research than actively going out to report on things.

Matthew Braysher – it’s difficult not to like the junior of the team – He’s enthusiastic and talented. He’ll go far.

Jason Appleton – He’s really the only one in the group you would consider a close friend. Well-learned, intelligent and pleasant.

Gytha Rose – Why is she here anyway? She’s just a rich kid who dreams of being an writer. She’s a tourist.

Agnes Mori

Really you're only a junior researcher with the paper. But you're Colin's girlfriend, so you managed to get brought along to this particular assignment. It's a "perk" from the paper really – A chance for journalists to get away from it all, meet each other properly and maybe get some rest and recovery. The others will all take it as a chance to slack off.

You're determined that there's something to be gained from this trip. Sure – The whole "there's zombies" story is going to be a non-runner, but there may be something else. You have done some research in advance and you know that the farmers are a little antsy down in this neck of the woods. They aren't keen on the other residents. You also know that the village has recently had a bunch of new folk move into it, incensing the farmers even further.

So while you fully intend to spend time with your other half, you also intend to try and write something good – An article which could see you getting some well-deserved recognition around the office.

Robin Wilkinson-Gill – He's the expert on supernatural stuff. You don't know why he works for the paper, and he's a little boorish anyway.

Colin Dowle – Your boyfriend. He's well experienced as a journalist and you love him.

Matthew Braysher – He's cute and he's the new "one to watch" at the office. If you weren't already attached...

Jason Appleton – He's clever and pretty cool. You get on with him but you know Colin dislikes him.

Gytha Rose – You'd like to be her friend. She's a rich young lady writing a book.

Colin Dowle

In theory, these small investigative groups which are sent out from the paper are for two things – Firstly to allow their members time off in a rural setting in the name of doing work, and secondly to allow their members a chance to better get to know each other.

And so this group has gone on a number of “weekends away” together – To be frank, if your girlfriend wasn’t one of them you’d be completely nonplussed by the opportunity. You don’t really like most of these people, and of course, the paper has given you the title of “lead investigator” which doesn’t go well with the rest of them.

So your intentions are to have a quiet weekend in the countryside with a night in some grotty hotel that you intend to spend with your girlfriend. That is, unless there’s some kind of story to be had in the village. In that case... well... You’re not the oldest journalist of the bunch for nothing!

Robin Wilkinson Gill – He’s a parapsychologist, which is funny enough. But he also thinks you’re some kind of “leader” that he has to try and “beat.”

Agnes Mori – Your girlfriend. She’s really only a junior researcher, but you had the chance to bring her along, so why not?

Matthew Braysher – A likable up-and-coming junior reporter.

Jason Appleton – Thick as thieves with Wilkinson-Gill. Annoying as all hell.

Gytha Rose – She’s a writer and a rich kid and she’s close with Braysher.

Gytha Rose

Your father is the second Earl of Shirehampton, and in all fairness you don't need to work for a living. Except for the fact that you discovered you have a knack for writing. Whilst in university you spent a little while on your own, slightly shy and not getting as many friends as the other students did. So you spent some nights alone, writing down the stories in your head about a mole called Percy and his friends and their adventures down the rabbithole. Surprisingly, when a boyfriend later suggested you send it to a publisher, it was moderately successful.

Although the "Percy" sequel is currently with the publisher, you've begun to wonder whether you could turn your hand to something a little more serious. To that end, your father (a good friend of the editor of the paper) has arranged for you to "tag along" with some of the journalists of the paper to stories and investigations you think might jog your mind.

Unfortunately, this whole "zombie" thing is turning out to be a bust – A simple excuse for some journalists to get together and drink beer in the country on the company's expense tab.

You are the wide-eyed observer – keen to take in every experience you can and record it all as grist for the writing mill. Unfortunately this means you occasionally come off as a bit of an innocent.

Robin Wilkinson-Gill – He's a parapsychologist! You don't meet a lot of those, so he's an interesting guy.

Colin Dowle – The lead investigator. He seems a bit distant and career-minded for you.

Agnes Mori – Colin's girlfriend. She seems nice, but she wouldn't be here if it weren't for Colin and she knows it.

Matthew Braysher – He's annoying. He made a pass at you that he probably doesn't even remember at an office party. You think of him only as arrogant.

Jason Appleton – You like him. He's attractive in a kind of Sean Connery when he was younger kind of a way and you wouldn't mind having some sort of fling with him. Maybe if you're bored?

<laJason Appleton

It's a bit of a lark, this – Jetting off down to the countryside with a bunch of people from the office. Theoretically it's a "busman's holiday" – You've all got some zombie story to cover. But none of you think it's serious and you personally intend to find yourself some nice rural pub in which to sit and have a few beers or ciders on the company's expense account.

You've also had your eye on the young intern – Gytha, who is really some rich kid with ideas about writing a book. You have it in mind that maybe you could teach her a few things about the journalism trade. You're not unattractive, and she seems pretty much the innocent.

If that fails, your friend Rob Wilkinson-Gill is around too. He's good for a laugh, even if he does appear to be a little overbearing to people he doesn't respect at times.

It's not as if you're a bad journalist – Quite the opposite in fact. Of the group, you think you're the only one who's brought a videocamera with you, for example. That said, you only brought it on the offchance of capturing some nice scenery on film...

Robin Wilkinson-Gill – A sound chap. His profession (parapsychologist) is a bit odd, and he went to posh schools, but beyond that... He's alright.

Colin Dowle – The lead investigator. You have no problem with him, but you don't know him well.

Agnes Mori – Colin's brought along his junior researcher girlfriend.

Matthew Braysher – A likable enough half French lad. New to the paper.

Gytha Rose – She's beautiful and rich – You've got to have her!