

→ HUMANOIDET ←

Springheel Jack Invades America

*Is this legendary leaper
an agile lunatic
or
an energetic alien?*

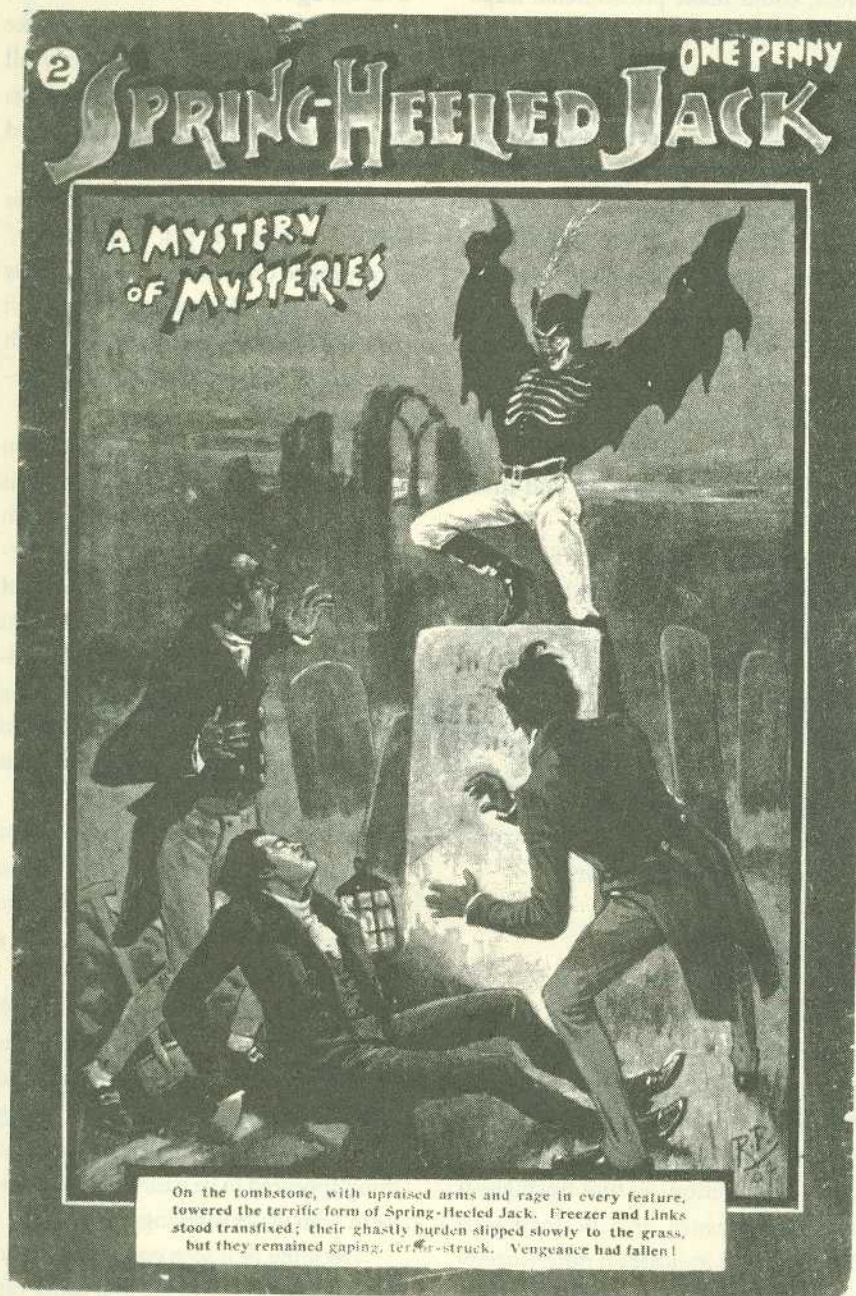


by Phil Rife

“The person appeared enveloped in a large cloak. He threw off his outer garment and presented a most hideous and frightful appearance. (He) vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flame from his mouth, and his eyes resembled red balls of fire.

“From the hasty glance which her fright enabled her to get at his person, she observed that he wore a large helmet and his dress, which appeared to fit him very tight, seemed to her to resemble white oilskin. Without uttering a sentence, he darted at her, and catching her partly by the dress and the back part of her neck, placed her head under one of his arms, and commenced tearing her gown with his claws, which she was certain were of some metallic substance.

“She screamed out as loud as she could for assistance, and by considerable exertion got away from him and ran towards the house to get in. Her assailant caught her on the steps, but she was at length rescued from his grasp by one of her sisters.”



Mary Evans Picture Library

The story of Springheel Jack has fascinated fans of Forteanism since 1837. This "Penny Dreadful" publication appeared early in the nineteenth century.

So reads what must surely rank as one of the most unusual stories of sworn court testimony in the long history of English law.

Long-time FATE readers will recognize the alleged assailant in the above testimony as none other than the infamous Springheel Jack. Starting in 1837 (the year the encounter just described took place), Jack repeatedly startled and

amazed hundreds of residents of the British Isles with his outlandish appearance and improbable antics until a final reported performance in 1904.

Springheel Jack earned the first part of his unique moniker by virtue of his truly remarkable jumping ability. Numerous witnesses saw him leap across roads and from ground to rooftops in single jumps of 25-30 feet.

But that wasn't his only superhuman characteristic. On more than one occasion, Jack displayed an apparent imperviousness to bullets. The best-documented incident occurred in 1877, when an individual matching Jack's description turned up outside a British army base. After the intruder ignored a command to halt, two sentries fired their rifles at near point blank range. Despite the fact that both soldiers were considered crack shots, their bullets appeared to have no effect whatsoever. Jack simply bounded off, prompting one London newspaper to conclude the intruder was "no ordinary mortal — if in fact he is mortal at all."

As the subject of books, several plays, and at least one movie, Springheel Jack attained legendary status in England. Less well known is the fact that Jack wasn't just a local flash in the pan. Like countless inhabitants of the British Isles before him, he apparently decided to take his act to America.

Actually, he'd paid a brief visit to U.S. as early as 1880. In July of that year, someone in Louisville, Kentucky, was practicing Jack's favorite trick of accosting women and tearing at their clothing. The attacker — who was described as tall, with pointed ears, a long nose, and long fingers — wore a cape, shiny uniform, and helmet. He's said to have sported on his chest a bright light which spouted a blue flame at his victims. He made his escapes in typical Jack fashion by jumping effortlessly over obstacles like wagons and haystacks in a single bound.

Jack apparently liked America, because his appearances here lasted nearly a hundred years and continued

long after they'd ended in England. He took a particular shine to the Cape Cod area of Massachusetts, where he popped up dozens of times between 1938 and 1945.

His New England hosts described him as tall (some said over seven feet), with fierce eyes and long pointed ears. Several witnesses claimed he spat blue flames in their faces. Their visitor was something less than well mannered in other ways as well. He had a habit of jumping out from behind trees and scaring people, and he once bounded down a street in Provincetown forcing other pedestrians from the sidewalk.

Jack demonstrated his prodigious leaping ability to startled Cape Codders on numerous occasions. "He was very agile," recalled one witness. "Some people said he must have springs on his feet." Once, when four local police officers thought they'd cornered him in a schoolyard surrounded by a 10-foot fence, Jack amazed them by leaping the fence cleanly and escaping.

He also displayed his Superman-like disdain for bullets. When a dog forced him against another fence, the dog's owner blasted Jack with a shotgun. But as the man later told police: "The darned thing just laughed and jumped my eight-foot fence in one leap."

Some students of the Springheel Jack mystery see the hand of Jack at work in a bizarre series of events that transpired in Mattoon, Illinois, in the summer of 1944. A nocturnal prowler set off a local panic when he sprayed a "sickening sweet" gas into 20 bedrooms over a nine-day period. The victims of these attacks suffered nausea and partial paralysis for periods ranging from 30 to 90 minutes. One victim's husband spotted the perpetrator, describing it as "tall, dressed in dark clothing, and wearing a tight-fitting cap."

A closer match to the classic appearance and actions of Springheel Jack was reported by a family in Sydney, North Carolina, in 1973. They said they encountered a long-haired man with glowing red eyes, pointed ears,

and a hooked nose who, they estimated, could make phenomenal leaps of 50 or 60 feet.

Six years later, at least a dozen residents of the Dallas suburb of Plano, Texas, observed a most unusual spectacle. As they watched in stunned silence from only a few feet away, a creature unlike anything they'd ever seen before crossed a junior high school football field in surprisingly few strides. Its motion reminded them of footage they'd seen of American astronauts taking long bouncing steps during walks on the Moon. The creature itself was described as 10 feet tall and thin, with long, pointed ears.

During his sojourn in England, Springheel Jack was invariably referred to in the singular, as if one person had been responsible for all the reported incidents involving the phenomenon. But a little math work will quickly show that any individual who put in an appearance in 1837 and was still bounding about 67 years later in 1904 would be one very spry senior citizen.

Springheel Jack's UFO Connection

Likewise, not even several generations of human practical jokers could account for the superhuman physical feats described by scores of eyewitnesses on both sides of the Atlantic. An alternative explanation — that Springheel Jack's appearance and performance characteristics indicate an otherworldly origin — is lent some credence by two incidents that occurred in the United States in 1953 and 1975.

In the first incident, three people were sitting on the porch of a Houston, Texas, apartment building one night when something caught the eye of one of the trio. "About 25 feet away, I saw a huge shadow cross the lawn," the woman later told a local newspaper. "Then the shadow seemed to bounce upward into a pecan tree."

All three witnesses then focused their attention on the source of the shadow. Their descriptions of what they

(H)
saw in the dim light varied somewhat. One thought it was a man with wings, while another believed what looked like wings was actually a cape. They all agreed, however, that the individual was tall, wore tight-fitting clothing, and "was encased in a halo of light."

After they'd observed the entity for about a minute, it "just melted away," according to one witness. "Immediately afterwards, we heard a loud swoosh over the housetops across the street. It was like a white flash of a torpedo-shaped object."

The possibility of a connection between Springheel Jack and UFOs is suggested by a second incident, which occurred on the Yakima Indian reservation in Washington state. A motorist was traveling down a dirt road at night when the beams of his headlights suddenly revealed three cows running toward him. He then caught sight of three vaguely human-looking figures in the ditch by the side of the road.

All at once, one of the figures leapt onto the road directly in front of the startled motorist. The man was sure the creature had made the move in a single jump of about 15 feet.

The driver slowed to get a good look at the stranger, who he could see was thin, approximately seven feet tall, and had long fingers, a long nose, and stringy hair that reached to its shoulders. The thing appeared to be wearing a dark uniform with white markings on it.

Deciding he'd seen enough, the man steered around the figure and drove on. But his evening's adventure wasn't quite over. Moments later, a brilliantly lit elongated UFO overtook him and briefly illuminated the interior of his truck and a 10-foot radius around it before disappearing into the night.

Phil Rife is a frequent contributor to *FATE* whose last article, "A Real Life Jurassic Park," appeared in the June 1996 issue. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Spring-Heeled Jack Does America

by W. Ritchie Benedict

Many years ago, I recall my grandfather mentioning the infamous Spring-Heeled Jack. As my grandfather was born in Scotland and the sightings occurred generations before he was born, it illustrates how the fame of this phantom of the night spread beyond the confines of England.

A Public Menace Re-Emerges

It is uncertain when Jack put in his first appearance, although author Paul Begg says that reports of a leaping man were in circulation as far back as 1817. In September 1837, a tall, thin figure who wore a cloak and possessed glowing eyes and pointed ears assaulted four separate per-

sons in London, three of them women. In one instance, he ripped off the top of Polly Adams's dress, scratching her stomach with fingers that seemed to be made of iron.

Now, Spring-Heeled Jack is apparently back—or at least a descendent of his is, as reported by Scott Corrales in his monthly translations of South American news stories for Lucius Farish's *UFO Newsclipping Service*.

On March 2, 2005, *El Litoral* of Santa Fe, Argentina, told of a weird entity described as a ghost. The entity, which had been reported for two weeks, was said to leap from one rooftop to another and vanish as quickly as it came. At 10 p.m. one evening, it invaded a private home for

thing else.

The most famous incident attributed to Spring-Heeled Jack occurred on February 20, 1838. The Alsop attack having been covered in so many books and magazine articles, I wondered if it had become distorted by time. Therefore, I endeavored to locate an original news account in the newspaper microfilm files. I managed to locate one from the *London Examiner* for February 25, 1838, and in part it reads as follows:

Outrage on a Young Lady

"Lambeth Street Outrage on a Young Lady. Many among the public have hitherto been incredulous as to the truth of various representations made to the Lord Mayor, of the gambols of 'Spring-heeled Jack,' the suburban ghost. The following particulars, however will remove all doubt on the subject:—On Wednesday, Mr. Alsop, a gentleman of considerable property, residing at Bear-bind cottage in Bear-bind lane, a very lonely spot between the villages of Bow and Old Ford, accompanied by his three daughters waited upon Mr. Hardwick, and gave the following particulars of an outrage committed on one of the latter: Miss Jane Alsop, a young lady 18 years of age, stated, that at about a quarter to nine o'clock on the preceding night, she heard a violent ringing at the gate in front of the house, and on going to the door to see what was the matter she saw a man standing outside of whom she inquired what was the matter, and requested



he would not ring so loud. The person instantly replied that he was a policeman, and said: 'For God's sake, bring me a light, for we have caught Spring-heeled Jack here in the lane.' She returned into the house and brought a candle, and handed it to the person, who appeared enveloped in a large cloak, and whom she at first really believed to be a policeman. The instant she had done so, however, he threw off his outer garment, and applying the lighted candle to his breast, presented a most hideous and frightful appearance, and vomited forth a quantity of blue and white flame from his mouth, and his eyes resembled red balls of fire. From this hasty glance which her fright enabled her to get at his person, she observed he wore a large helmet, and his dress, which appeared to fit him very tight, seemed to her to resemble white oil-skin. Without uttering a sentence, he darted at her, and catching her partly

the first time. A hair stylist named Elsa, whose salon is located in the heart of San Lorenzo, took to the street to say that while she bathed her youngest nephew, the phantom pressed its face against the bathroom window, showed menacing claws, and fixed her with a chilling stare. She said it had red eyes like fire and was dressed in black from head to toe.

Another witness swore to having seen the entity with other neighbors as it escaped the house, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Residents immediately armed themselves with such weapons as heavy clubs, machetes, stilettos, and kitchen knives.

The witness was perplexed. "How do you explain how this guy can climb a smooth wall six meters tall? How can you explain that it can leap across the street in a single bound, like it crossed Entre Rios street tonight, unless it was the Devil himself?"

A police officer claimed to have shot at the entity three times and to have hit it twice, without effect.

By March 4, 2005, there were hundreds of complaints concerning the the mysterious entity. One of the locals said, "He looks like the cat man. His outline is barely visible. He never showed his face, but they say they've seen his eyes and that they have a reddish cast." Witnesses stated it was two meters tall and clad entirely in black. It sported a cape and a balaclava, and was able to make acrobatic leaps up to five meters high and ten meters long.

Sheriff Gabriel Legstra went on the radio to try to calm fears, noting that the apparition hadn't actually attacked anyone, though a woman had told him that "the entity pointed at her with its finger and left her paralyzed." A resident of El Arenal was said to have fired 17 times at the figure without having the least effect. He did provoke it, however, and it howled like a beast, making dance steps on the rooftops with the tread of a cat. During an intense rain, the entity managed to jam the doors of a vehicle with seven passengers aboard, who were armed and ready to hunt it down in spite of warnings by the police. Residents were understandably frightened, guarding their homes 24 hours a day.

Early Appearances

On January 9, 1838, the Lord Mayor of London Sir John Cowan declared Spring-Heeled Jack to be a public menace, and vowed to bring him to justice, forming a vigilance committee for that purpose. There were already rumors that a certain Henry de la Poer Beresford, the Marquis of Waterford, was responsible for the attacks. The Marquis had protuberant eyes, and a sadistic sense of humor. He got his jollies by evicting tenant families from their homes on his estate at a moment's notice, and was noted for cruelty to animals as well as humans. This disreputable character reformed somewhat after his marriage in 1842, and he died in a fall from his horse in 1859, making later appearances by Jack attributable to someone or some-

by her dress, and the back part of her neck, placed her head under one of his arms, and commenced tearing her gown with his claws, which she was certain were of some metallic substance. She screamed out as loud as she could for assistance, and by considerable exertion, got away from him, and ran towards the house to get in. Her assailant, however, followed her, and caught her on the steps leading to the hall door, when he again used considerable violence, tore her neck and arms with his claws, as well as a quantity of hair from her head; but she was at length rescued from his grasp by one of her sisters. Miss Alsop added that she had suffered considerably all night from the shock she had sustained, and was then in extreme pain, both from the injury done to her arm, and the wounds and scratches inflicted by the miscreant about her shoulders and neck with his claws or hands.—Miss Mary Alsop, a younger sister, said that on hearing the screams of her sister Jane, she went to the door and saw a figure, as above described ill-using her sister. She was so alarmed at his appearance, that she was afraid to approach or render assistance. Mrs. Harrison said that hearing the screams of both her sisters, first of Jane, and then of Mary, she ran to the door, and found the person before described in the act of dragging her sister Jane down the stone steps from the door with considerable violence. She (Mrs. Harrison) got hold of her sister, and by some means or other, which she could scarcely describe, suc-

ceeded in getting her inside the door and closing it. At this time her sister's dress was nearly torn off her; both her combs dragged out of her head, as well as a quantity of her hair torn away. The fellow, notwithstanding the outrage he had committed, knocked loudly two or three times at the door, and it was only on their calling loudly for the police from the upper windows that he left the place.—Mr. Alsop, who appears very feeble, said, that he and Mrs. Alsop have been laid up for several weeks with a rheumatic affection, so as to be scarcely able to get out of bed, but such was the alarm on the night before, that they both got out of bed, and he managed to get downstairs, and found his daughter Jane with her clothes torn, and having all the appearance of receiving the most serious personal violence. Mr. Alsop also said, it was perfectly clear that there was more than one ruffian connected with the outrage, as the fellow who committed the violence did not return for his cloak, but scampered across the fields, so that there must have been some person with him to pick it up. In conclusion Mr. Alsop said, he would most willingly give a reward of ten guineas for the apprehension of the miscreant...

"Lea, the officer, communicated next day the result of some enquiries into this outrage, but they included nothing material.... Lea added, in corroboration of Miss Alsop's statement, that the candle and candlestick which she had handed to the man were found outside the gate."

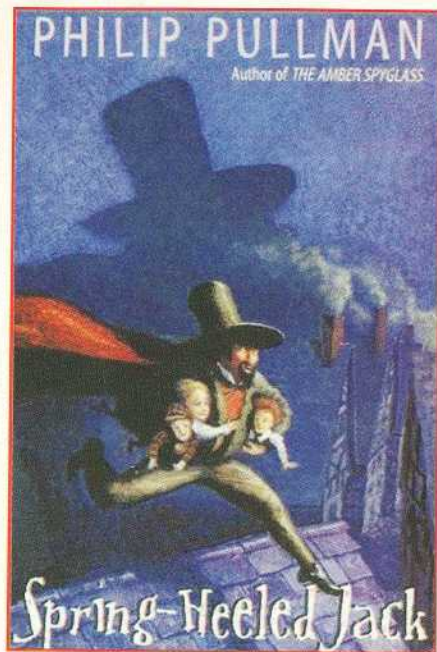
A second ruse a week later failed, as the victim became suspicious and Jack was forced to flee.

The Alsop incident was preceded by a similar assault several days earlier. Eighteen-year-old Lucy Scales and her sister Margaret were returning from visiting their mother when, at the entrance to Green Dragon Alley, a figure leapt from the darkness, breathed fire into Lucy's face, causing her to fall to the ground and be seized by violent fits. He then bounded away into the darkness.

Later Appearances

Spring-Heeled Jack surfaced again in 1843 in Northamptonshire, in Hampshire, and also in East Anglia, where he frightened the drivers of mail coaches. In 1845, sightings occurred in Ealing and Hanwell as a figure leaping over hedges and walls, shrieking and groaning all the while. After a report in London in 1872, Jack next turned up at Aldershot Barracks in early March of 1877. A sentry saw a peculiar figure bounding toward him. A challenge went unanswered and the figure disappeared from sight momentarily, then re-materialized beside the guard, slapping him in the face with an icy hand.

Several more attacks followed, but it wasn't until 1887 that the mystery man again made headlines. Several young ladies were playing the piano in a drawing room in Oxton when a black-clad figure rushed into the room, swept every ornament off the mantelpiece and vanished. Some of the



Cover of a children's book featuring Spring-heeled Jack.

newspapers attributed this appearance to a practical joke by several young men, and it is unclear whether the incident was authentic or a hoax.

The last known sensation was in Everton, Liverpool, on September 25, 1904, when crowds of people watched a figure identified as Spring-Heeled Jack making tremendous leaps up and down William Henry Street, some of which are said to have exceeded 25 feet. This appearance was later debunked by the papers as being caused by a man suffering from religious mania. Oddly enough, however, it parallels an earlier event in 1877, when Jack

long black cloak flowing in the the breeze. All at once, and in the twinkling of an eye, he disappeared in the thick woods as mysteriously as he came upon the scene. Mr. Creary says for the first time in his life, although a soldier under General Grant, he was frightened, and it was all he could do to control the horse he was riding, so great seemed its fear of the object.

"Mr. Cyrus Haggert and his wife, who were returning from church Thanksgiving eve, were surprised by the monster's peering with its cat-like eyes into their buggy and leaning against it, almost crushing the vehicle. The lady has not yet, it is said, recovered from the shock. Mr. and Mrs. H. both claim on this occasion a white cloak was worn.

"A large number of others have seen the strange creature, and tonight a large party is scouring the neighborhood of Hopewell Church, hoping to capture it. No newspapers of the city are represented in the searching party, which includes one or two St. Louisans, and a report from the expedition is awaited with much interest. The creature is thought to be located in the hills in the rear of one Philip Brown's residence. The Mexican party is under the leadership of Rob White and Jake Merkel."

After I discovered this, I wrote to the University of Missouri, giving the exact dates, and hoping there might be a follow-up story. Alas, the university wrote back, saying their newspapers did not go back that far, and requested a copy for their records, which I duly sent away. So unless

someone is able to find an account in one of the newspapers in a neighboring state, or in that vintage edition of the *Boston Globe*, this account is likely all that we will ever know about this incident.

It has been suggested by some writers that Spring-Heeled Jack was an alien, perhaps from a heavy-gravity planet, due to his ability to make prodigious leaps. Or perhaps he had an anti-gravity unit attached to his chest, making flying an easy task. Certainly, whatever turned up in 1883 Missouri does not fit the description of an average ghost. The cat-like eyes have been reported in some humanoid sightings. The long black cloak seems to be a standard feature both in Britain and the U.S.

Mad Gassers and Flying Men

A case could be made that the "mad gassers" of the 1930s and 1940s were in fact "Jack attacks." In January 1934, a number of homes near Fincastle, Virginia, were subjected to attacks by a mysterious individual who used some form of nauseating gas for whatever reason. In September 1944, Mattoon, Illinois, was the subject of a gasser's unwanted attentions. Mrs. Bert Kearney, a young mother, was aroused from sleep by a sweet, sickening odor in the bedroom. An hour and a half later, her husband returned from work and observed a strange man at the bedroom window. He was "tall, dressed in dark clothing and wearing a tight-fitting cap." A later witness said, "He was like an ape standing there, crouched, his long arms reaching out as he

leaped from rooftop to rooftop in Castor, Norfolk. A number of witnesses said he was dressed in something resembling sheepskin and had huge ears.

Jack in the New World

So goes the legend. So far as is known, Spring-Heeled Jack never left Britain. Or did he? A very famous Fortean account appeared in *The New York Times* for September 12, 1880. Under the heading of "An Aerial Mystery," the account describes a strange "flying man" who appeared in the air about 1,000 feet above Coney Island, heading for the New Jersey coast. He was described as having bat's wings and "improved" frog's legs. Supposedly the look on his face was "cruel and determined," although how this could be ascertained at a height of 1,000 feet is anyone's guess. The figure was said to have waved his wings as a response to the whistle of a locomotive. The most curious part of the account was a reference to an object of a similar nature that appeared in August 1880 over St. Louis, Missouri, and a little later over Kentucky. The significance of the Missouri sighting will become apparent momentarily.

In his 1994 book *Strange Stories*, John Robert Colombo makes reference to a December 1880 story that appeared in the *Victoria Daily Colonist*. A man of "striking and mysterious mien" was seen in the dark and silent streets, in all kinds of weather, plowing through mud and slush and answering to no one.

The most startling news story, however, was one I came across in the *Daily Sun* of St. John, New Brunswick, for December 14, 1883. It needs to be quoted in its entirety, and reads:

"A Strange Apparition. The Creature That Is Creating An Excitement Near Mexico, Mo. (Special Despatch to the Boston Globe). MEXICO, MO., December 11.—The neighborhood of Hopewell Church, near this city, is much excited over the appearance in the locality of a strange creature, which is thought by the credulous to be a ghost, and which is a puzzle at least to the most sceptical. The apparition is simply that of a lean monster man, between eight and ten feet in height, wearing a long cloak, and going about with his head bowed in an abstracted way, but occasionally glaring at those it meets with small, glittering eyes said to resemble those of a cat or some wild beast. The negroes believe the apparition to be a ghost; the white people do not know what to say. There appears little doubt, whatever the creature may be, that it has actually been seen a number of times.

"The school at Hopewell is about abandoned because of fear of the monster, and even sturdy farmers go about armed in apprehension of it. John Creary, a well known old resident, declares that yesterday afternoon, as he was returning from Mexico to his home, he had a good view of the queer being, who was about fifty yards ahead of him, walking in a leisurely way along the middle of the big road, in mud almost knee-deep, his head still lowered, and his

held the spray gun in his hands."

On January 6, 1948, a "sizzling and whizzing" noise announced the presence of a man 200 feet in the air over Chehalis, Washington, who seemed to be equipped with large silver wings and was manipulating controls on his chest. In the midst of a heat wave on June 18, 1953, at 2:30 a.m. in Houston, Texas, Mrs. Hilda Walker said that she, Howard Phillips, and Judy Meyers noticed the "figure of a man with wings like a bat. He was dressed in gray or black tight-fitting clothes. He stood there for about 30 seconds, swaying on the branch of the old pecan tree." The figure was about six and a half feet tall, wearing a black cape and quarter-length boots and seemed to have a dim gray light all around him.

John Keel, in his book *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* (Fawcett, 1970) refers to several cases from the 1960s that are highly suggestive. In 1968, farmers in Delaware County, New York, chased a broad-shouldered, grinning man with a shock of silver hair. He was over six feet tall and made impossible leaps across wide ditches. In October 1967, three men on Route 2 in West Virginia claimed they saw a large, caped man walking beside the road. When they stopped and looked back, he had vanished and there was nothing but open fields on both sides of the road.

Former FATE editor and UFO researcher Jerome Clark tells of an incident in Canby, Minnesota, in the mid-1960s when a friend of his was taking a short-cut home through an alley several blocks

from where Clark lived. The acquaintance was not looking where he was going and nearly walked into another person in the alley. The man was very tall and massive and was dressed in a black cape that covered the top half of his face. He was carrying something that resembled a large black bag.

Nightmare Taken Flesh

Even if a hoaxer such as the Marquis of Waterford created the original events, this would not explain why similar sightings have continued up to the present. There are very definite similarities in a number of the accounts, such as the ubiquitous black cape, the ability to make incredible leaps, and the cat-like eyes.

Perhaps the marquis (or someone else) began an archetype that continues to develop and expand, much like a Tibetan *tulpa* or thought form. If it was originally conceived as a hoax, it isn't any longer, and that may also be true of a number of famous paranormal events. Spring-Heeled Jack may have begun as an idea, somehow gaining substance and materiality over time. One wonders: if Jack is finished with his tour of the Americas, where will he go next?

II

W. Ritchie Benedict is a free-lance writer, researcher, and lecturer residing in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

