

Eric Maroney
The Hermit

1626

1. "I'll pay you four pounds a week. That includes room and board, but as you can imagine, the terms of this job are quite unusual.

"You can emerge from the grotto, but you can't interact with my guests. As the tenure of your employment is six months, with a prospect of six more based on satisfactory performance, you are to remain on the property, always in sight of the grotto. You will be given two shirts and three pairs of trousers. You are only to wash them once a month. You may only wash your person twice a month, the first and last Thursday of each month. Are these terms amenable?"

The tall man in riding boots and jodhpurs delivered the final words of his pitch with a ring of certainty in his tone, as if he was making an offer such a man as Amos could not refuse.

"The terms are amenable, sir," Amos answered, fingering the brim of his battered hat, casting his gaze to the neatly trimmed lawns.

"Excellent," the man boomed, satisfied. "From the look of you, it seems you can start right away. Hard times all around I suppose. You'll find all you need in the grotto. Hope you work out better than the other fellow. He couldn't stop smuggling in drink and falling down, which won't do. Fellow before that brought in a woman on the sly. Hermits on my land will not enjoy gustatory or connubial pleasures, rest assured."

2. Amos squatted in the vaulted grotto. He examined the rushed and sloppy work of the masons who laid the stones and applied stucco. The "ruins," shoddily constructed only six months ago to look old and dilapidated, were quickly deteriorating into authentic ruins. The towers and spires were dripping liquid stucco, exposing mesh, while the rain and wind were toppling stanchions and warping foundations.

The "Ruin" was supposed to be the centerpiece of Sir Henry's sprawling gardens, and the "hermit" its resident romantic - a lonely man clutching his solitude like a devote vagabond, tormented by evil deeds he had tied into the cords of his life, which, alas, he could not unravel.

Sir Henry did not have to season Amos for the hermit life. He arrived with long, wild hair and a tangled, ruddy beard, rags dangling off his gaunt frame. All Amos had to do was don Sir Henry's sackcloth garments and lounge in the grotto. Doing so, Amos found both the terms and the expression of his job simple and even satisfying to follow.

Amos idled outside his lair on a sculpted stone. The stone appeared to be solid, but it was as thin as papier-mâché. He placed his weight on his extended arm. This was the case with all the walls, towers, doors, ancient trees and fountains in the Ruins. They had been constructed from materials as insubstantial as gauze and as easy to topple as children's blocks.

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3. That summer, Sir Henry held modest garden parties for a man of his station. There were rumors of unrest, and many guests did not retire to their country homes. Sir Henry kept his guests a distance from Amos, as befitting Romantic scenery. He was simply to provide a touch of living mystery to the scene of tragedy built across well-tended knolls and dales. Far from the respectable and high ranked people, Amos was to provide a backdrop of harmless calamity. There were few guests, and one day Sir Henry arrived at the grotto visibly perturbed.

"How are you getting along out here?" Sir Henry asked Amos, chomping nervously on the right end of his long mustache.

"Just fine sir, thank you."

"Say," Sir Henry drawled. "I'll be in the capital for a week. Bit of trouble down there I must attend to. You've done a magnificent job at this whole hermit engagement. A bravo performance. So the grounds will be empty next week. Feel free to take some days off. Surely you have family about."

"Thank you sir," Amos answered. "But if you don't mind I'll stay."

"Suit yourself," Sir Henry rejoined, gazing at Amos sidelong. "You've turned out to be a top notch hermit. Who said good hermits are hard to find?"



The summer ground on, and Amos remained in the grotto. The week when Sir Henry was supposed to return became two, three, and then a blur. At first, Amos only detected minor fluctuations. The sun was unusually hot, and the water from the tap was laced with an acidic tinge causing his tongue to curl. Then two months after Sir Henry's departure, with a shift in the wind from the west to the east, in the direction of the city, a haze rolled over the dales and Amos' eyes teared like a man in mourning.

Towering columns of black clouds hung low over the grotto. Amos wrapped himself in rough blankets, but still shivered. Sir Henry had never given him permission to make a fire – so Amos stuck to the letter of his employment while disobeying the spirit of it. After days of cold he occupied the stables, then lodged in a building draped with livery, and finally, the cottage.

Cottage was a misnomer – the mansion had two dozen rooms, and a fully stocked larder. Amos created a fire in the kitchen stove, and prepared flapjacks. He ate until he collapsed on a sack of flour.

4. Days and nights peeled in rapid succession. Amos gazed out the beveled window adjacent to the far road: not a soul. He burned the last wood, and as he knew nothing of felling timber, took to wearing Sir Henry's clothes in cumbersome layers. He looked like a nobleman who had eaten a nobleman who had eaten a nobleman.

As the seasons did not change, he lost track of time. Six months? A year? The larder was empty, so he began to eat hard candies. After four

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tins of toffee, he had to pull out his front teeth with a piece of twine and the swinging knob of a heavy door.

Then he grew too thin for Sir Henry's layers, and found it far easier to be cold than haul around robes and smoking jackets like a suit of ill-fitting chainmail. He found his simple hermit's threadbare garments and fashioned a small coat from one of Sir Henry's night shirts.

5. The sun finally filtered through the dark clouds. Anemic rays of light struck the flagstones. Although Amos could see his breath, it felt like a spring day after the long season of black and bitter clouds. The hint of warmth in the breeze whispered promises. Amos closed his eyes slowly, and with singular purpose, inhaled, held the breath, and then released. Time stood still. Time melted away. Nothing. Only a high-pitched blare roused him.

"What are you doing here? This is my damned house!"

Amos opened his eyes. A man stood before him in rags, his bald head dented and scarred, his skin puckered and scored. Amos, without thinking, took the defense.

"This is my house," Amos confessed. "I've lived here for God knows how long. And not a single soul has come to claim it. In fact, I haven't seen another person in I don't know how long."

"Idiot!" the man spat. "Don't you know what's going on out there? What's happened!"

"No," Amos hissed. "Tell me."

"Absolutely not!" the man sputtered. "I don't caucus with low down trespassers!"

"I'm not trespassing," Amos explained. "I work here."

"Work here, doing what?" the man asked, his eyebrow forming an arch of astonishment.

"I'm the hermit," Amos explained.

"The hermit?" the man asked. "The hermit? The man I hired all those years ago? By God... I'm Sir Henry."

6. They stayed in the house for a few weeks, but then a candle rolled down a hallway and set a desiccated tapestry aflame. In a few minutes, the cottage was blazing.

Sir Henry and Amos sat in the grotto, which was warm and dry despite its decay. They ate little, and spoke less. Sir Henry's eyes grew brighter with time, while the eyes of Amos grew dim. Eventually the old hermit could not rise out of his bed, and Sir Henry fed him. Amos continued to grow weak, and died. Sir Henry buried him next to the grotto and fashioned a cross from two pieces of burnt cottage wood.

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7. The hermit sat by the grotto, and the sun grew stronger each day. Weeks, months, years passed, and he sat in stillness. Once, he caught a glimpse of himself in the evening light of the pond: his hair was in disarray, his beard tangled and draped over his shrunken belly, but his face was illuminated by his blazing eyes.

On another day when the leaves first started to bud from the trees, he spied a group of people in the distance. They were well dressed, as far as the hermit could see, but his eyes were weak. He tried to judge their circumstances. But soon they moved down the road, and the hermit still sat in the mouth of the grotto. What were they looking at, anyway? What did they expect? He was only an old hermit. Sitting was his lot in life.

Eventually an old man arrived - another hermit - and they lived together, and when the first hermit died, the second buried him. Yet another came, and then another. Along some unseen byway, the need for a hermit was broadcast in whispers, and always a man arrived as another was to be buried.

The sun rose and set. The clouds rolled across the sky. The cemetery was filled with crooked crosses and bare mounds and always, the hermit was present and still.