

Introduction

The Empire of the Necromancers is a sequel to Paul Féval's *John Devil*.¹ More precisely, it is the prologue to a vaguely-conceived but hopefully extensive series of sequels to my translation of *John Devil*—which is not exactly Féval's version, because it includes a long supplementary essay pointing out the inconsistencies in the novel's plot and making some suggestions as to how those inconsistencies might be resolved. *The Empire of the Necromancers* assumes that my interpretation of what “really” happened in *John Devil* is correct.

Forty years ago, Kyril Bonfiglioli (the editor of *Science-Fantasy*) rejected an early story of mine on the grounds that it was “too recherché”—which was a polite way of saying that the vast majority of readers would be unable to figure out what it was supposed to be about. Earlier this year, a publisher's reader killed off a much more recent book with the brutal judgment that “Nobody is interested in this stuff...there is no point in publishing it”—which proves that I have not changed my ways in the interim. One could certainly argue that no one but a lunatic would bother to write a sequel to a novel that practically no one has read in the last 100 years and practically no one is likely to read in the next 100, but I've done it anyway, because the whim took me.

Anyone who wants to read *John Devil*—together with my analysis of its enigmas—is very welcome to do so. It is, in my opinion, a very interesting and historically significant book, but I must confess that my own particular fascination with it arises from the fact that I kept such close company with its slowly-unfolding narrative for several months while translating it—an experience that is mine alone. It was a strange thing to stand in Féval's shoes, as it were, following the course of a story that he was making up as he went along (under some external pressure from the editor who was serializing it, it seems, and the readers to whom the editor was pandering), using narrative techniques that he was also improvising anew, in his capacity as one of the exploratory pioneers of popular fiction. Such an experience gives one a whole new perspective on the craft and business of writing—but no one else is likely to care about that, so the point of this introduction is to provide some prefatory information that will make *The Empire of the Necromancers* easier for its potential readers to understand.

John Devil is the story of a long and complicated duel of wits between its eponymous anti-hero and an English police detective named Gregory Temple. John Devil is a legendary figure, whose name is assumed during the story by a remarkable person who might, in fact, be two people. Its primary wearer is certainly Comte Henri de Belcamp, the son of a French aristocrat and an English thief named Helen Brown; in my interpretation, Henri is also Tom Brown, Helen's notoriously villainous son, although he claims that Tom Brown is actually his half-brother—a claim to which various other characters, including Gregory Temple, eventually lend their support. Comte Henri's objective in *John Devil*—which is set in 1817—is to build a powerful steamship with which to rescue Napoleon from exile in St. Helena and spearhead the building of a French empire in India.

Although he contrives to negotiate an amazing series of obstacles—some of which seem curiously self-imposed—Henri de Belcamp fails to bring his plan to completion (as known history requires him to) and he shoots himself in the head, apparently fatally, although he is such a master of disguise and deception that one is free to doubt the result. Along the way, he frames Temple's assistant and prospective son-in-law, Richard Thompson, for murder, but then contrives to take his place in his cell in Newgate—shortly before Temple arrives with the intention of working the same trick, thus bringing about a highly dramatic confrontation, in which Henri drives Temple to the brink of madness.

John Devil cries out for a sequel, and I suspect that, if Féval had ever managed to work out to his own satisfaction who had actually done what in the interstices of his plot, and exactly why, he might have attempted one. He would have been faced, however, with one intractable narrative problem: *John Devil* is simply too accomplished, and his plans too grandiose, to be hidden away in a secret history. In Féval's day, the genre of alternative history had not yet been invented, and it would have seemed inconceivable to him that his character might return with a plan worthy of his talents and ambition,

¹ Available from Black Coat Press, 2005, ISBN 978-1-932983-15-9.

which really could change the face of the world. Fortunately, I have no such inhibition. I can do what Féval could not, and give John Devil an opportunity worthy of his talent and élan—thus providing his mortal adversary, Gregory Temple, with a corollary challenge worthy of his.

I ought, perhaps, to mention one more observation I was able to make while standing in Paul Féval's shoes as his translator, and that is his astonishing ability (which must, I think, have astonished him too) to identify with whichever of his characters happens to be occupying center-stage at any particular point in his story. It seems extremely probable that when he began *John Devil*, he intended Gregory Temple to be its hero and Henri de Belcamp its villain, but things did not work out that way. When he brought Temple to center-stage, Féval inserted himself wholeheartedly into Temple's character—but he did exactly the same with Henri, so the contrast between them became utterly confused, first morally and then logically. More than that: when the author had occasion to bring other characters temporarily to center-stage, he identified so forcefully with them that they too became forceful and heroic, even if—like the vertically-challenged petty criminal Ned Knob—they had initially been designed to provide comic relief. I liked that, so much that I decided that Ned Knob must continue on his accidentally-destined road, and become more heroic still—perhaps even more heroic than either of his supposed masters (who are, at the end of the day, a little too deeply embedded in the history of their time to welcome the kinds of changes to which it might be subject if something really big were to upset it).

Now, as they used to say in the days of serial fiction, read on...

Brian Stableford

PART ONE: THE GREY MEN

Chapter One

In Jenny Paddock's Parlor

Ned Knob was sitting opposite Sam Hopkey in one of the new booths in the parlor of Jenny Paddock's Cabaret Theater when the grey man walked in.

Sam was on the upholstered bench, with Jeanie Bird at his side. Ned was on a stool with his back to the door, so he did not see the grey man immediately. The first he knew of the miracle was the expression on Jack Hanrahan's face.

Hanrahan had just sidled over to the booth, reaching out a hand to support himself against the post while he leant down to mutter in Ned Knob's ear. He had got as far as "I'd very much like a word with you if I may, Master..." when his eyes—which were flickering from side to side, as was their habit—were arrested by the sight of something that made all the color drain instantly from his face. He stopped in mid-sentence, as if his throat had been cut.

Ned knew that the sight that could do that to Jack Hanrahan must be an exceptional one. Jack Hanrahan was a burker, whose business it was to haunt mortuaries and churchyards, seizing the dead from their slabs or hauling them out of their graves so that they might serve the ends of medical science on the dissecting table. A sight that could make Jack Hanrahan blanch was a sight indeed, and Ned was as anxious to see it as he was to score a point off the body-snatcher by conserving the color in his own cheeks. He just had time to see Sam Hopkey turn white in his turn, and Jeanie Bird arrive on the brink of a fainting fit, before he glanced over his shoulder to see what had occasioned such dread.

He had to admit, when he found himself looking straight into a monochrome image of Sawney's face, that there was reason enough for a certain amount of mental disturbance.

Sawney had been hanged not quite six weeks before, despite all that his friends could do for him. When a man is charged with being the most prolific supplier of false witnesses that London has ever known, there is little that can be done by way of mounting a convincing defense with the aid of false witnesses, even if his professional shoes have been filled by as clever and articulate as Gentleman Ned Knob.

Had Sawney returned from the dead, Ned wondered, or was this some kind of strange doppelganger?

Ned knew that he would need all his famed articulacy if he were to rise to such an unexpected occasion, but he was never daunted by a challenge. He spun around on his stool, glad for once that his legs were not long enough to reach the ground when he was thus seated. He leapt to the floor, throwing his arms wide as he went to greet his old friend.

"Sawney! What a joy it is to see you!" he cried—although he would have been clearly audible had he spoken in a whisper, so profound was the silence that had fallen on the Saturday-night multitude. The crowds packed Jenny's establishment every night now, from newly-whitewashed wall to wall, but Saturday always attracted a surplus.

Sawney's grey face showed no sign of immediate recognition, so Ned went on. "We thought you dead, you know," he said, "and it has to be said that, save for your evident ambulatory capability, you certainly have the look of a corpse."

Ned heard a chorus of sharply intaken breaths, but the simulacrum of Sawney did not seem offended. The shade of grey that now possessed the old man's face—and his hands too—was somewhere between the color of clay and the color of slate, but it did not have the glutinous sheen of freshly-dug clay or the leaden glimmer of freshly-cut slate. It was, as Ned had frankly observed, a dead grey. What was more distressing still was that the eyes slowly scanning the room had no color in their irises, nor any tiny red blood vessels in their whites; the pupils were like black points set upon on two billiard-balls.

Sawney's hair had been greying before he went before the judge, but it was a paler shade now. If the suit he was wearing was the one he'd been buried in, though, it had certainly sustained a deal of wear in the coffin.

"Don't you know me, Sawney?" Ned asked, taking the old man by the arm. "It's Gentleman Ned—or Republican Ned, as they're as likely to call me nowadays. Here's Sam, do you see, to whom you've been a second father—and Jeanie, his lovely leading lady. Sit down and have a drink with us, old chap. Jenny! A brandy for Sawney—it's raw outside and the cold has got into his bones."

Sawney reacted at last. He looked Ned in the face, and his lips moved. The sound that came out was not his old acting voice, with which he had been able to reach every last corner of an auditorium, but it was clearly audible. "Ned," he croaked, his voice as dry and grey as his face. "In the parlor. And Sam. Wanted to see Sam. Jeanie too. Cold in my bones."

"That's all right, Sawney," Ned said, pulling him toward the booth. "We'll soon have you warm. Take my stool. Do you know Jack Hanrahan, Sawney?" It was mostly mischief that made him ask that question, because he had gathered from Jack Hanrahan's reaction that the two had met before. He was curious to know whether Sawney would recognize the burker, assuming that they had met for the first time after the hanging.

Sawney did not look at Jack Hanrahan—for which mercy the burker seemed relieved. Hanrahan beat a hasty retreat, his expression readable as blind terror. Sawney, meanwhile, continued to look at Sam Hopkey and Jeanie Bird. "My friends," the grey man said, in a strangely tender manner, given the neutrality of his tone. "Wanted to see you."

Sam and Jeanie, to their credit, were actors enough to mask their own superstitious dread as Sawney took Ned's stool. Ned fetched another from a neighboring table.

"Not on stage, Sam?" Sawney murmured, as if making conversation.

"Tonight's performance is over, Sawney," Ned told him, as he hopped up on to his new seat. "You're late, I fear—but you'd be a good few days late for All Soul's Eve, if you really were a ghost. You're not a ghost, are you, Sawney? How did you cheat the hangman, old friend?"

Sawney's papery brow furrowed slightly at that, as if he were puzzled, or searching for a lost memory.

Jenny Paddock arrived with a jug of brandy, four glasses on a tray. It was not her habit to wait at tables, but she was not a woman to hang back when something extraordinary needed to be done.

"Thank you, Mistress Paddock," Ned said, politely. "You may pour, if you don't mind."

"You can pour yourself—and I'll take the money now, if you don't mind," was Jenny Paddock's retort. Ned thought the demand a trifle rude—and quite unnecessary, given his status in the establishment and the fact that Sawney showed not the least sign of running amok or strangling anyone. He handed over threepence, and then poured brandy into all four glasses. He glanced sideways to see how far Jack Hanrahan had retreated.

The burker had paused a dozen paces away; he had his own glass in his hand, having just taken a liberal gulp of gin. Hanrahan was staring at Ned now, not at Sawney. Ned liked that; he always gloried in the admiration of tall men.

Sawney had still not replied to Ned's last question, and Sam seemed uncharacteristically tongue-tied, so Ned decided that it was up to him to keep the conversation going. "We miss you, Sawney," Ned assured him, "but we're keeping things going, exactly as you would have wished. Jenny Paddock's Cabaret Theater is the talk of the town, always packed out. We're a success, and we owe it all to you." He thought it best not to add that the publicity given to Sawney's hanging had done the troupe no harm.

After a pause—while Sawney continued staring at Sam and Jeanie, with what might have been affection in his grey features and disconcerting eyes—Ned went on. "Perhaps that's as well, given that the witness racket hasn't picked up at all. Business is bad all around, I fear—except for burking, where there's said to be a boom. There's hardly a grave from Highgate to Dulwich that hasn't been raided these last three weeks, if you believe the gossip—which we don't, of course. I wish you'd tell me though, that you aren't dead at all, and never were. I think there's many a mind hereabouts would be set at rest by that assurance."

Sawney lifted his glass to his colorless lips, and sipped the brandy. Having tested it, he drained the glass and put it down, obviously hopeful of another.

Ned poured.

“How did you escape, Sawney?” Sam Hopkey whispered.

“And where have you been these last forty days?” added Jeanie.

“Forty days,” Sawney echoed, as if slightly surprised by the figure. “Forty days and forty nights, in the wilderness. Wanted to see my friends.”

“If you’ve been fasting,” Ned said, “we’d best get you something to eat—if there’s anything left, that is.” He raised his voice to shout: “Jenny, my love! Have you some mashed potato and gravy?” He took the absence of a rude reply as an affirmative.

“How did you get away, Sawney?” Sam repeated. “I couldn’t bear to go myself, you know, but there are people in this crowd who went to your hanging, and saw it done. Are you a ghost? Tell us, I beg of you.”

“Ghost?” Sawney repeated, quizzically. “Am I a ghost?”

“No!” said Ned. “Let’s not have superstitious talk at this table! You’re as solid as you ever were, Sawney, although you seem a trifle thinner. I’ve seen you play a ghost, mind, up there on that stage Mistress Paddock built for you. That’s what you’re doing now, isn’t it? You’re playing games with us, because you knew we thought you dead. You’ve made yourself up as a ghost, and you’re playing the part to the hilt, as ever. Bravo, Sawney, bravo! But Sam’s right, you know—it would be a kindness if you’d explain to us exactly how the hanging failed to kill you.”

While he was speaking, the door opened again—but Ned’s back was still to the door, and he did not turn around immediately. Sam and Jeanie did not react as they had to the sight of Sawney, with awe and terror, but they did react. Ned realized that the *dramatis personae* in the unfolding drama was not yet fully assembled. He turned to look at the newcomers—and Sawney turned too.

This time, only one of the two men who had come in was grey enough to seem dead, and he was no one that Ned Knob had ever met. This grey man was so tall as almost to qualify as a giant, and powerfully built. His head seemed slightly out of proportion to his body, but that might have been a trick of the light cast by the lantern he was carrying—which he was still holding up at head height, even though Jenny Paddock’s was reasonably well supplied with candlesticks.

The grey giant had the same white-irises eyes as Sawney. Their strange gaze picked Jeanie Bird’s face out of the crowd, but there did not seem to be any menace or recognition in them. Ned’s stare, by contrast, was drawn by a similar magnetism to the other new arrival.

The giant’s companion was as wondrously short as the giant was tall, and seemed as vividly alive as the giant seemed dully dead. Had the short man been 25 years younger, Ned Knob might have felt that he was looking at a long-lost brother. Age aside, he and the shorter newcomer were very similar in their physique. The newcomer’s good suit was a better quality than Ned’s, even though Ned tried as hard to live up to his first-chosen nickname as to his second, but that only served to emphasize that here were two dandies in miniature. The shorter newcomer was carrying a large suitcase in his gloved left hand, sturdier than any bag Ned had ever needed to carry his own meager portables. He was presumably a well-traveled man.

The smaller newcomers was looking at Sawney, having quickly scanned the room. It seemed that the exotic pair had come looking for Sawney—but the small man hesitated before coming forward to claim him. He was evidently wary of a place so crowded, into which he had never stepped before.

Ned spun around again and hopped down to the ground. He went directly to the shorter of the two men, and marveled at the fact that he could look the fellow straight in the eye without tilting his head at all. “Welcome to Paddock’s Cabaret, my friends,” he said. “You’re a little late for the performance, I fear, but I hope you’ll have a drink with us. Would you care to join my party? I’m Ned Knob, by the way. May I know who you are?”

The short man only hesitated for a moment before setting down his suitcase, pulling off his brown glove and reaching into an inner pocket. He took out a silver card-case, drew out a visiting card, and handed it to Ned without saying a word.

“Germain Patou,” Ned read, aloud. “A physician—from Paris, I see.² Well, Monsieur Patou, if you’re the man responsible for our friend’s uncanny state of health, you’re doubly welcome.” Then, on an impulse, he leaned forward, and whispered in the other’s ear, so softly that he could not be overheard even in the general hush: “*A l’avantage, mon ami!*”

² Germain Patou was introduced in Paul Féval’s *The Vampire Countess*, Black Coat Press, 2003, ISBN 978-0-9740711-5-2.

Patou's eyes gave him away, although he tried to hide his surprise. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Knob," he said, his pronunciation very precise despite his French accent, "and I am sure that everything is indeed for the best. I am your friend's doctor, as you have deduced—and he is not yet fully recovered from his ordeal, as you can plainly see. We have come to take him back to the ward, if you will kindly permit it."

"Sawney doesn't need my permission to go where he will, Monsieur Patou," Ned said. "You'll forgive my familiarity, I hope, but I don't meet many men whose stature is similar to my own, and never one from Paris. You're a man of 40, I suppose—tell me, is it true that the Emperor Napoleon was no taller than you or I?"

Again he heard a chorus of gasps, but none of them was Patou's. Patou smiled before replying: "I had the honor of meeting the Emperor on more than one occasion, when he was the First Consul," he said. "I had a dear friend who knew him very well. Alas, he was taller than I—and therefore taller than you—by twice the width of my thumb." He held up his hand as he said it, by way of illustration.

"Alas," Ned echoed. "Will you have a drink with me, Monsieur Patou—and your friend too, of course. I have just ordered a meal for my old friend, who seems a trifle thinner than when we saw him last. What is your companion's name, by the way? Has he too passed through the hangman's noose and survived to tell the tale?"

"John," said Patou—addressing the giant rather than answering Ned's question, although the name provided one item of the information for which Ned had gone fishing, "will you take your fellow patient by the arm and guide him to the door. I'm sorry, Monsieur Knob, but I am fearful for the well-being of both my patients. No one should be wandering abroad on a night so cold, even to see his old friends. He will come again when he is fully recovered—you may be sure of that."

"I'd dearly like to know the hospital in which he's lodged at present," Ned was quick to retort as the giant moved forward. "We'd all like to visit him, wouldn't we, Sam? With your permission, doctor, of course. Is he in Guy's, perhaps, or St. Thomas's?"

"You may be sure that I shall send word to you when that is possible," Patou said, his voice still purringly polite, although there was a slight edge of steel in it now. "Mine is a private sanatorium. As you can see, your friend has been very seriously ill, and he is far from himself at present. When he is well enough, I shall be very glad to admit visitors to see him."

"But where?" Ned retorted. "Your card has only a Paris address."

Patou bowed, and reached out his ungloved hand to take back the card. Then he produced the stub of a pencil from the pocket of his trousers, and scribbled on the back of the card. "You may reach me via that address," he said.

Ned glanced down. The address was in Stepney; Ned did not know the street, but he did not know of anything in that neighborhood that could pass for a private sanatorium. He had taken note of the fact that the Frenchman had not said that he was actually in residence there. Ned wondered how many men it would require to immobilize the giant. There would be no shortage of volunteers if he called for help on Sawney's behalf, and the two newcomers could not possibly stand off a multitude. On the other hand, Ned did not want to start a fight in which Sawney might get hurt. The old man's condition was obviously very delicate. If this physician really had revived him after a hanging, even if the executioner had been careless, it was the next best thing to a miracle—and it would be a great pity were the work to be carelessly undone.

"You're very kind," Ned said, insincerely. "Are you sure that Sawney would not be better if he were fed before he braves the night again?"

"Quite sure," Germain Patou replied. "But I hope that you'll permit me to pay for the wasted supper." He rummaged in his trouser pocket again, and this time hauled out a sixpence. He threw it on the table, saying: "Please let me buy you a drink, Monsieur Knob—and your friends too. Are you ready, John?"

"Won't you stay a little longer, Sawney?" said Jeanie Bird, courageously. The giant was still staring at her; there was no hostility in the stare, but it was intimidating nevertheless.

Patou moved around Ned with surprising agility, and laid his hand on Sawney's shoulder. "We must go back, now," he said. "You will see your friends again, I promise."

Sawney stood up. "Wanted to see you," he said, regretfully. "Must go back now." His voice had faded to a broken whisper, and his grey brow was deeply furrowed, as if the memories he had been trying to recover were proving perversely evasive.

The Frenchman guided Sawney back to the giant named John, who took Sawney by the arm. Sawney looked up at the giant, trustfully. “Wanted to see...” he repeated—but this time his voiced drained away to nothing, and he seemed to be on the point of collapse. The giant took firmer hold of him, supporting him as he took a step towards the door. Ned did not imagine that there would be many in the hall who would be sorry to see him go. He did, however, observe that the giant cast a long backward look at Jeanie Bird.

“You must come back and see us again, Monsieur Patou,” Ned said, softly. “You have our undying gratitude, for what you have done for dear Sawney. Do you hear me, Sawney—we love this man, for what he has done for you, as we have always loved you. Send for us when you can, I beg you.”

Sawney roused himself in response to this speech. “Ned,” he said, weakly. “Gentleman Ned. Wanted to see...”

“You shall see us all, old friend, when you’re well,” Ned assured him. “Depend on it.”

The giant was already guiding Sawney through the door. Patou bowed and tipped his hat before picking up his suitcase and following them.

Ned was so confounded by the event that he did not even try to prevent Jenny Paddock from scooping up the sixpence as she laid down the unnecessary mashed potatoes, or complain when she did not offer him any change. “Stay here, Sam,” he said—although Sam had not given the slightest sign of getting up. “I’ll follow them all the way to Paris, if I must. I’ll meet you here tomorrow, as usual.” He paused just long enough to make sure that Patou’s visiting card was safely stowed in his breast pocket before setting off for the door. By the time he got to it, the hubbub of conversation had risen behind him to twice its normal volume.

The night was very dark, and there was enough fog to stifle the meager lamplight that shone at either end of Low Lane. That was not to Ned’s disadvantage, though, for it made the giant’s lantern that much easier to see, and to follow. The exotic company made slow progress, for the giant was still supporting Sawney and was by no means light on his feet himself.

Ned had followed better men than these and gone undetected. He was on his home ground, and knew how to hide himself away whenever Germain Patou glanced behind—which he did quite often. Ned had hoped that they might turn north but they went south, towards the Thames, and then turned east. They went under Blackfriars Bridge and continued along the embankment towards Southwark Bridge.

If they had a boat waiting for them, Ned knew, his boast that he would follow them to Paris would be so much wasted breath.

The route that the three men followed was not a safe one for a man dressed as Patou was dressed, even if he had not been carrying a bag, but they went unmolested. If the giant’s size were not deterrent enough, the lantern-light still displayed the corpse-like pallor of the Frenchman’s two companions. The hawks patrolling the rookery and the shore were very prone to superstition, and there had been all kinds of eerie rumors abroad since the recent epidemic of burking had begun. No one imagined that the surplus of snatched bodies was merely being piled up in some cellar beneath St Thomas’ Hospital, and everyone had his own hypothesis as to the use to which they might have been put.

So far as Ned knew, there had been not an atom of evidence available within the bounds of the city to support any of those hypotheses—until now.

Despite its slowness, the journey was not a long one—but the three men did have a boat waiting. Nor was the ferryman’s skiff the craft that would take them all the way to their destination—in which case Ned might have been able to follow it along the bank. The ferryman took them no more than 30 yards out into the watercourse and 100 yards downstream, where a two-master was waiting on the far side of Southwark Bridge, on the edge of the navigation channel. There were men waiting too, to haul Patou’s two companions up to the deck—ordinary men, so far as Ned could judge, not grey ones. The lantern in the stern cast just enough light for the vessel’s name to be read: *Prometheus*.

The giant passed his own lamp down to Patou before climbing up, and Ned hoped that Patou might keep it lit, but the short man snuffed it out before he was lifted in his turn. Ned was doubly annoyed when someone else came out on to the bridge to look down at the new arrivals. Ned’s heart began to pound within his breast, and not because of his exertions in following the three strangers from Jenny Paddock’s. It was pounding because the man on the bridge was wearing a Quaker hat.

Ordinarily, Ned would have remained deep in the shadows, anxious not to be seen by the men he had been following, even though that no longer mattered. The sight of the Quaker hat changed his mind. He stepped forward on to the quay, deliberately setting himself beneath an oil-lamp, where he knew that he would be seen—and having done that, he raised his arm, as if in a salute.

The man in the Quaker hat did not return his gesture—not, at least, before a blanket was suddenly thrown over Ned's head from behind, and he was grabbed by at least two pairs of hands.

Throwing a blanket over someone's head to cushion the cudgel-blow that would lay them out was a burker's trick. Ned just had time to curse the name of Jack Hanrahan before the anticipated blow landed on the back of his head and knocked him insensible.