

Escape of the Fire Demon

By: Mike Phillips

Fire burned in pricks of light, spreading quickly over the wizard's hands, growing in heat and radiance until he understood the creature had escaped. Capistrone withdrew his mind from the enchantment, breaking the summoning spell he had put upon the fires of the blacksmith's forge, severing all ties with the thing he sought to release.

No longer protected by the spell, Capistrone realized his hands still clutched the fiery coals of the forge. His flesh was burning and he knew he must soon quench the flames or risk permanent damage. Injuring his hands might cause him to lose much of his ability to work magic, a thought horrible to contemplate.

Forcing his hands open, the wizard dropped the coals to the floor. The effort was terrible, making him faint with pain. He stumbled backward, tripping over some object in the darkness and landing hard on the dirt floor. Upon forearms and elbows he crawled to the water barrel and thrust his smoldering hands deep into the cool water.

At last the fire was out. He breathed a heavy sigh as the pain began to ease. In the dim light of the still burning forge, he ventured a look at the extent of his injuries. His fingers were black, charred and split like overcooked sausages.

"Curse the beast," Capistrone said, trying to close his fist. His hands worked well enough to reach into the breast pocket of his robe, finding the cordial he had prepared for just such an eventuality. Pulling the stopper with his teeth, he quickly drank it down.

The rich liquid cooled him as it flowed within, finding a path to his blood and his damaged hands. Even before his labored breathing slowed, the cordial started working. He felt less pain. Strength returned to his grasp.

“Now,” he said, for the first time looking about him, “where have you got to? You can’t have gained sufficient power to flee. Not yet, leastways.”

The wizard stood, nearly as whole as he had been only moments before, the cool healing of the cordial having done its magic. Fire burned in the forge, the light playing on furniture and tools and piled stock of metal. Nowhere was the fire demon to be seen.

Fearing the use of greater spells, the wizard began to chant quietly, not in an effort to find the demon, but to reveal the heat that would have remained after its passing. In reply, a glowing ember shined in the darkness, near the forge where he had stood. It was an amulet.

“Then I had caught you,” Capistrone said with a satisfied hiss, “only you managed to escape somehow.”

Capistrone picked up the amulet and examined it. One of the prongs that had secured the gemstone was burned away. Beneath the damage was a small chip in the polished surface of the stone.

“Ah, so that is it. The jeweler must have damaged it in the setting.” He sighed miserably. “That’s what you get for hiring relatives.”

Tying the amulet to his wrist, Capistrone rolled down the wet sleeves of his robe and continued the search. A growing light from the far wall drew his attention.

“There you are, my pet,” the wizard said soothingly, walking toward a wooden bench with careful grace. “Come to me now. There’s nowhere to go.”

The thing was small, barely larger than the gem into which it was intended to be made captive. It was vaguely human, but with leathery wings and a long tail, glowing with a fire more intense than even the purest coal could light.

“Enough fun, my little friend, come here, come on,” Capistrone said, making kissing sounds as if to call a dog. “We can’t let my first success in the summoning arts turn out to be a failure, now can we?”

With sudden speed the demon seemed to recognize the man, seemed to realize the danger it was in. Capistrone saw this change of attitude and reacted, trying to subdue the demon with a blast of green light. But the demon was too fast. It leapt from its resting place in the dirt onto the bench, the spell landing ineffectually beyond.

As the demon speeded down the bench, everything it touched caught fire. Indifferent to this new danger, Capistrone followed the demon, sending blasts of sorcery after it, missing again and again as the demon lit from a shelf to a beam and then to the doorway, leaving in its wake fires that roared with greater and greater ferocity.

Shouts rose in the distance. The apprentices who slept in the adjoining rooms of the smithy were awake and calling alarm. Capistrone looked desperately about him. It would be no good going out the front way, chasing after the demon now. Neither would feats of magic to secure his escape do more than draw an angry mob to his own front door. His only hope, he quickly decided, was in concealment. Stepping into a corner as far from the flames as he could manage, he drew the darkness about himself.

Two young men came into the building with buckets. Shouting, they splashed water on the nearest of the fires. The master and his family soon joined them, bringing

more buckets to extinguish the flames. They hadn't worked long before another call of fire rose from nearby. In the confusion, Capistrone slipped out the back way.

Exiting the forge, the wizard found the whole town alight. The thatched and wooden roofs were burning bright enough to light the heavens above. People were running up and down the streets, calling alarm to their fellows and carrying buckets of water, their efforts futile.

Putting his face in his hands, the wizard said, "Oh no, they'll hang me by a gibbet for this one. Time to go."

Finding no adequate shadows to hide within, Capistrone called upon his powers to make himself invisible. But unlike the darkness he was able to put to use in a dark place, he didn't have the strength to disappear, even in such a fickle light as that of the burning homes and shops of the town. Weary from his labors, he could do little more than change himself into something less than threatening in appearance.

Inspired, Capistrone ripped his clothes and rubbed them with dirt, bending at the middle and pushing up a shoulder. Leaning on a stick from the smith's woodpile, he limped, making himself look a beggar man. With the last of his magical energies, he cast deception about himself, starting down the narrow roads and alleys that would lead him away from the fiery path of the demon.

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Many carefully placed steps from the forge, Capistrone took a moment to rest and to collect himself from the night's efforts. Exhausted, he slumped down against the backside of some tall building, hidden near a few garbage pails that sat at the stoop of a

quiet doorway. It seemed the entire town was up behind him, calling to each other in their attempts to extinguish the ever spreading fires.

The wizard was rapidly losing interest in his mislaid demon, fearing that even if he were able to find and subdue it now, the good townspeople would lay blame for all that had happened on him. His only hope was to pass unseen by the guard at the gate, if indeed the guard remained at his post and had not gone to fight the fires.

As he sat, absorbed as he was in his plans to escape and feeling confident enough in his hiding place, Capistrone was overtaken by the need for rest. Just closing his eyes to clear his thoughts, he forgot himself and let better sense succumb to desire.

With no more than the lifting of the latch as warning, a nearby door was flung open and a big man, both in girth and height, a veritable giant, appeared. "Come give me a hand. I've got two more buckets right out here," the big man shouted to someone behind him.

Frightened and off guard as he woke from drowsing, Capistrone jumped to his feet, forgetting that no crippled beggar would move in so sure and quick a way. The giant, smelling badly of smoke, stood at the door and took in the outward signs of the disguised wizard in a moment.

"What's this about then, eh? Up to mischief?" From the steps the giant picked up one of the garbage pails and hastily dumped the contents onto the ground.

"No sir," Capistrone replied, remembering to hunch over and speak in a weak voice, "just gathering a bit of rest for my tired limbs, my good sir."

"Tired limbs?" the giant said suspiciously. "I'd say not tired enough for this time of night, especially with all that's been going on."

“No, no sir, you misunderstand. I’m just a tired, old man,” the wizard said, trying to make himself look more the beggar than he had. The giant eyed him severely and didn’t move.

Gathering what power he could into his mind, preparing to force his will upon the stranger, Capistrone said, “You’ve had too much to drink. You’re drunk and you’re tired and you have breathed too much smoke. You’re seeing things. Calling out will only bring shame upon yourself.”

“Tired old fool maybe, and as drunk as I might or mightn’t be, but you’ve got the look of the devil about you or I’ll be a donkey.” The giant turned his head toward the interior of the building and yelled loudly, “Hey boys, seems I caught the trouble maker right out here on our doorstep!”

A cry came from within the building, as did the sound of a great many people heading toward them. Capistrone ran. “There he goes around the front!” the giant yelled behind him, dropping the bucket and following in close pursuit.

The alley behind the building had been dark, but as he ran along the side between it and a stable, Capistrone saw that the street was bright as if it had been lit by a thousand torches. Then he realized it was. The work of the fire demon had been quick, and though the demon had not yet come to the building behind which the wizard slept, nearly all else was ablaze.

Reaching the street, the gate looked to be unguarded, but there were people everywhere fighting the fires. Capistrone ran for the gate as fast as he could. He had a horse tied to a tree only a half mile or so down the road, and if he could only make it that far, he could be away and home and able to deny all of the night’s activities.

A shout came from behind him, then another. The giant moved faster than the wizard expected, and those from within the tall building, he saw now that it was an inn, had gained the front door. They were yelling to the others. The villagers saw him and pointed and shouted in return, dropping their buckets and running in his direction.

Capistrone knew that he could not possibly make it to his horse with so many after him, so he ducked into the stable, hoping to find there some answer for his need. Inside, it was dark but far from peaceful. The animals were nervous, calling out in their own fashion and moving with a desperate anxiety. Closing a wide door behind him, the wizard quickly found a hayfork to bar it.

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Behind an open area where wagons were stored, horses were kept in stalls. There was a big horse in the first stall, but as the wizard approached, intending to be away on bareback in his haste, the horse neighed loudly and reared, knocking him to the ground. Crablike, he scurried away from the horse and then scrambled to his feet.

“It’s that wizard! The stable! He’s in the stable!” the giant’s voice rang out. “To arms! To arms!”

Trusting that he would have no better luck with any other animal, Capistrone ran to the back of the stable, hoping to find a way out before being surrounded. Besides horses, there were also sheep and pigs and cows. These were separated into pens, each pen with an opening to the outside. Capistrone climbed a board fence and jumped down, landing on something that squealed like mad under his feet and ran off, sending him into a place thick with dung.

Groaning, he rose but took no time to clean himself, for the door behind him was broken open and he could hear the shouts of the angry townspeople. After the frightened pigs and into the night he went. The yard was for the moment empty, but by the shouts it would not remain so for long. Capistrone climbed the outer fence and made a sure step back to earth, looking round to plan where he should go next. It was then he saw it.

The thing had grown in a short while. Though not big, smaller than a newborn child and not threatening to someone of his abilities under normal circumstances, Capistrone had no power left with which to fight the creature.

At that moment, the fire demon saw him as well. Its gaze fixed upon the amulet, borne upon the wizard's arm, the device that had called it forth and had been used to try to imprison it. In fury, its fire exploded and the demon raged headlong toward the man.

All Capistrone could do was turn and raise his hands as the demon fell upon him and set his clothes on fire. But the magic of the cordial must have remained in his blood, for the fire broke upon him like water upon the shore and he was not wholly overthrown by its heat. Feeling the power of the cordial wax, he seized the fire demon and grappled with it and pushed it against the ground.

In the sheep pen beyond, faintly reflected moonlight caught his attention. A watering trough laid not two strides from where he knelt. With a mighty effort, the wizard spun and stepped and thrust the demon against one of the plank boards of the fence. The plank burned away faster than thinking and Capistrone crashed into the watering trough with the demon under him.

The fire demon screamed and struggled, a great vapor rising all about them, but Capistrone held it deep within the bubbling water until at last the demon's fire was put out. Victorious, he breathed a heavy sigh and stood straight, his hands empty.

"Why, I'll be," said the giant from behind him, "would you look at that?"

"What was that thing?" said someone else.

"Don't know," replied a third, "but looks like that fella saved us."

The second man agreed, "That man's a hero and no mistake."

The townsfolk were standing in a group, watching, buckets or hastily gathered weapons in their hands. Those who had answered the call of alarm with blades or cudgels were now sheepishly putting their weapons behind their backs.

Straightening himself to his full height, Capistrone announced in a clear voice, "The creature is gone. Earlier this evening I felt the stirrings of magic from your village. I came to investigate, expecting to find some miscreant practicing the dark arts."

"Then what were you doing behind my inn?" asked the giant, looming above.

"Well, I planned to find out who it was first," the wizard started carefully, "and so I disguised myself. The culprit must still be at large, though by setting the fire element against the water element, the demon has perished."

"Curious luck then, I'd say," the giant went on, giving Capistrone a doubtful look. He was accustomed to dealing with all sorts of disreputable persons as any inn keeper would be. "So what was all that other nonsense you were spouting?"

"I could waste no time in explaining the matter," Capistrone lied smoothly. "For your protection and that of your village, I hurried off to finish the job."

"Right," the giant said, nodding his head suspiciously.

“Come on, Roger, this man’s a hero,” someone said. The gathered crowd shouted agreement.

“Sorry, sorry,” the giant said. He looked Capistrone in the eye and said, “For a moment there, I thought you were the cause of this. Forgive me, will you?”

“Why of course, I will. No harm done.”

“Not to you anyway, not yet,” the giant said, putting a meaty hand on the wizard’s shoulder, a crushing gesture. Capistrone shivered. “Time to go to work. Let’s get this mess of ours cleaned up.”

The End

Bio: Mike Phillips is the author of Reign of the Nightmare Prince available in bookstores, online booksellers, Kindle and Nook. He has published several short stories both in print and online, including ParABnormal Digest, Sinister Tales, Dark Horizons and many others. He is best known for his Crow Witch and Patrick Donegal series.