

The Metamorphosis

By Alastair McCullough

Sinead McPhee wasn't happy. She couldn't sleep. It was the noise. It filled her with dread.

The Newcastle night was hot, and the sullen air hung thickly, silently in her bedroom, an unfulfilled, un-crashed wave. She pushed back the thick duvet with a deep sigh, rose in her Marks and Spencer cotton-rich red and white striped pyjama set, a gift from Alan, away on his rig in the North Sea.

Crossing the darkened room, Sinead turned the doorknob and opened the bedroom door. A scent of rose petal bathroom soap. Walked down the narrow stairs in the little terraced house. Pulled up the brass latch on the white wooden kitchen door quietly, swung it back slowly and, placing her slippers carefully on to the stone step outside, let herself out into the night. She turned half back before she took another step; reached around the corner into the darkness behind her, to the little yellow shelf where she kept the pile of old, split, and crumbled shoes.

Fumbling in the blackness, her fingers felt leather; wrapped themselves around the tongue of a shoe, pulled, and drew it into the yellowing light from the road lamp at the back of the house, as she turned to face her little garden and its red bricked walls, black now, and dark grey in the late shadows.

The noise rose. An ugly screeching in the darkness.

Soorki Cannollyne was proud of his noble heritage. He was a Convenor. Had been since the age of majority, when he was *ingratiated* by his aged father into the ancient role. The old noble was a Convenor until Soorki's ingratiating. His grandfather before that. He carried proudly on the Cannollyne family tradition, the long and gracious line of Convenors, stretching back to the Dark Ages, maybe beyond.

At Soorki's Ingratiation, his father, Sonki Cannollyne, had stood tall. Had made a grand and powerful speech before all the city's people, announcing the passing on of the Convenorship to him, lauding him as a strong *proclaimer*, a speaker of truth to power. One of wisdom, of fearless inquiry and utmost integrity, sustainer of the power and the glory, the majesty of the law, the majesty of the Cannollyne clan.

Convenor: A role ceremonial yet carrying the high authority of *the one who convenes*, who calls together the people. Who bids them join in meeting at the Moot. To hear the words of absolute truth, of news, and of the world beyond. To debate. To learn. To propose, decide and to legislate. An almost priestly role, steeped in the sanctity of tradition, forged in ancient gnostic knowledge and the speeches of the Great Teachers.

The Convenor was not a solitary role. Mooki Kynnekynd, Convenor's Paladin, had knelt before Soorki at the Ingratiation ceremony for his re-appointment. Had inclined his head before the new Convenor's extended palm, bowed deeply, then prostrated himself completely. Lifting his head, Kynnekynd had vowed loyalty; renewed his unbreakable oath of fealty to Soorki and to the whole Cannollyne family, as he had done for his father before him.

But here there lay an ancient mystery. A tradition, and the Convenor's deepest secret. In all his pomp, in all his glory, there was a darkness he held within him. An untruth.

To the world, Kynnekynd appeared merely an ordinary, if well-born retainer. Softly spoken, thin, pale-eyed, though with a shock of memorable orange hair. He was likeable, kindly. Trustworthy. Surely, the sort with whom you would share food and spend a long evening talking amiably by a crackling fireside? Not, then, apparently the spy he was. Not the searcher. Not the teller of deep secrets, of skewed gossip, nor conveyor of clandestine knowledge. Not the assassin. Not the one who owned the multiple, layered, nuanced truths upon which the Convenor's authority rested, nor the enforcer whose presence should have been feared more than valued, were it understood.

Kynnekynd, too, had this ancient heritage. For as long as he knew, his family had been *Convenor's Welches*: Retainers, yes, but spies, and killers too. The ultimate Cannollyne *agents*, unknown, yet with all-knowing power. In truth, none would wish Kynnekynd's eye to fall upon them for it could bring only dread. Kynnekynd's was the force behind the throne, the steel fist in the ermined glove.

For the Convenors knew there were dissidents amongst the ranks of the faithful. Knew there were those in the population who cared neither for them nor their clan, who distrusted their motives, their heritage, and their power. There were those who said people had been manipulated by a thousand years of lies. Anarchists who would change society, bring down the Cannollyne line, plot their downfall.

A Convenor had always to be wary, to see risk in the air, threat in the shadows, death in the misstep, and traps for the weak of heart.

Now, dressed from head to toe in the thick, sumptuous black and white furs of his rank, Sorki Cannollyne stood proudly before the people he had called to him this night. He knew their secrets. He knew their fears. He knew the dissidents. Tonight, he would cry out with power, with force, with passion and righteous truth.

Suddenly something caught his eye in the darkness, some movement: Shooting towards him through the night air, a dangerous black mass of a thing with unstoppable speed...

And there they were, huddled at the end of Sinead's garden. Dark forms moving against the night like monks. Amongst them the loudest, the fat one with black fur and a white collar.

Sinead walked forward two steps on to the little stone path, raised the shoe above her head, angled her arm backwards and threw the thing with all her might in the direction of the Cannollyne Street wicket gate. The shoe spun through the heated air, arced full force towards the loudest in the middle of the mewling cats' conference. "Bloody shut up!" she screamed.

Sinead was a mean thrower, and accurate.
