Where Mohicans Fear To Sleep, Part 1

by

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(1972)

Bannerman’s Island viewed from the south, Summer 1970.

Four miles up the Hudson River from West Point, New York, and about a thousand yards off the river's east bank lies Pollepel Island, a lump of dark granite and gneiss sloping low on one side and rising about a hundred feet on the west. It's summit is high enough to provide a commanding view of the "Northern Gate" of the Hudson Highlands, the gap between Storm King Mountain and Breakneck Ridge that Dutch sailors called the "Wey-Gat," the "Wind Gate," owing to the gales that would materialize without warning in the narrows between "The Point" and my adopted hometown of Cornwall-on-Hudson.

Across the water from Storm King (called Butter Hill on many old maps) and visible from the next street over in my neighborhood, Cliffside Park, Pollepel was once called Cheese Island, but such benign- and bucolic-sounding names never fit the history, topography, weather, or, most of all, the legends.

Fearing the islet was swarming with ghosts, local Indians, primarily Mohicans and Munsee, refused to spend the night on it. And what land wasn't covered by sharp rocks and scabrous, hardscrabble soil was covered with a particularly prickly cactus normally encountered in more temperate climes. Avoiding the cactus was difficult, I'd heard, as the remaining indigenous vegetation seemed equally divided between poison ivy and oak, and what surely was every thorn-brandishing bush known to botany.

Apparently, until wealthy war surplus mogul Frank Bannerman bought it in 1900, from one Mary Taft of Cornwall, the only ones reported to live there were a herring fisherman and his eccentric wife. Thinking herself the Queen of England in exile, she wore a bespoke crown and waged long verbal battles with the storm goblins that she believed shredded the air between Storm King and Breakneck with sudden squalls and meteorological occurrences that were more than just passing peculiarities of our northeastern U.S. climate. Beginning in the 17th Century, travelers had attributed the capricious weather in the river's twists and turns to the south, and here as well, swirling around this stony sentinel guarding the northern gate of the Highlands, to elfin chicanery.

Local lore says Dutch captains paused to douse their sea-sick crewmen in Pollepel water to immunize them against the bedevilment of spell-casting hobgoblins infesting Storm King and the deep, dark cloves around it. Another legend holds that the master of the Flying Dutchman, condemned to sail the seas forever, finally and gratefully saw his cursed ship go down just south of the island on a hidden mud flat that today still holds the ghost ship's spars and ribs in its grip to snag shad nets and befoul other boats. And on the northwest shore lies an odd, slanted rock surfaced only at low tide that wails like a ghostly flute when a certain northerly gale blows across holes bored by whirlpools, or worse, into its surface.

During the Revolutionary War, Pollepel anchored one end of a string of a cheveaux-de-frise to halt movement upriver of British ships, but, while those sharpened, iron-tipped timbers - many as long as five tall men were tall - must have looked formidable when being constructed on shore in nearby New Windsor, the enemy navy somehow passed through unharmed. I wondered if the strange vagaries of everything Pollepellic were so great that even military strategy cannot properly benefit from them? Or had the perfidious Britons made a devil's barter with the goblin king?

I once heard from the old man that supervises what one can take for free or fee from the local dump - one Montgomery Bloodso - that Pollepel is sinking. Then again, he also told me that thunder is the sound of long-dead Henry Hudson and his crew bowling tenpins above the clouds. And to beware a monster in clown's clothing called Bosco the Snake Eater that traveled the Catskills with what seemed a circus, but was far more malevolent.

Practically speaking, it’s one of the last islands in the lower Hudson Valley, many others having disappeared not from geologic subsidence, but from being silted into more useful peninsulas by relentless human development.

Of course, it's not simply that Pollepel is an island in a river that attracts so much interest, but rather because it features what resembles a ruined centuries-old Scottish castle on its eastern side. The "castle," actually three large warehouses, each more ostentatious than the other, crowned by a gaudy tower, was designed and built by arms dealer Francis Bannerman VI between 1900 and 1918. The castle, which he called the "arsenal," housed his vast stores of military surplus items from the U.S. Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I, as well as a large personal collection of antique weaponry and other artifacts dating back a dozen centuries.

As his holdings also included a few hundred tons of black powder and an estimated quarter of a million "live" artillery shells, cannonballs, and other projectiles, the New York City fathers requested that Bannerman cease storing such volatile materials at his famous store on Broadway and relocate those elsewhere. When one of his sons spied the island from a train heading north from Manhattan, the idea for the arsenal was born.

One day, after attending a lecture by the town historian about the island, I decided to visit the place myself. Such a journey required making a deal with a friend whose family had a small boat and allowed him free use of it. He'd skirted the island himself many times, but never landed. I even knew older boys that had walked across the frozen river in winter to explore it,

or said they did, but they only bragged about breaking windows and shot-putting cannonballs into the frozen-over harbor to open holes in the thin ice that had formed atop the water.

The price I paid for passage in baseball cards will probably be irksome in the future, when I realize what value I'd given him for a lousy boat ride.

The friend - let's call him Bill - agreed to drop me off on the island, but wouldn't accompany me ashore. An Eagle Scout candidate and a bit of a tight-ass, he was deathly afraid of being nabbed for trespassing, but I had convinced him that if he didn't set foot on the island, he technically wouldn't have been on it, and therefore wasn't trespassing. I was taking all the risks.

He agreed to wait for only two hours at anchor for the additional cost of several comic books from my prized collection. Each additional half-hour would be billed at five additional comic books of his choice, not to exceed two additional hours. Bill, I thought, would someday make a good businessman or lawyer.

I promised we'd leave so we'd both be back for a late lunch. No way was I going to risk losing my Girl from U.N.C.L.E comics, which he'd greedily eyeballed the last time he came over to the house.

I'd been warned about deer ticks and poison ivy, and even about goblins too, so I took what precautions I could against those more mundane terrors in the form of gloves and a long pair of pants sprayed with a few shots of Black Flag insecticide. But I didn’t think I actually had to protect myself from imps. I didn't know how to do so anyway. I always wore a small crucifix on a small chain, so that would have to do. I believed, furthermore, that the pervasive sense of gloom that had settled over the river on the Saturday morning in April that we set sail was mere coincidence, not a portent of doom or anything.

Bill eased the boat out of its slip at the local yacht club, and headed upriver, skirting the main channel just west of Pollepel. Once he was sure he was past the channel, a deep, V-shaped underwater cleft through which unpredictable currents, almost like submarine rivers themselves, flowed at various depths from just below the surface to the bottom of the V, some 80 feet down, he turned the motor - which was also our rudder - hard right just south of the Newburgh waterfront. We crossed the Hudson at that point, proceeding a few thousand yards east, to a point just south of Beacon, before shutting off the motor so we'd begin drifting slowly downstream. I was happy to be past the deepest part of the river, since while I didn't have a fear of heights, I definitely had one of depths.

We floated like a piece of flotsam in the near-dead-calm, past the sloop Clearwater's anchorage in a small cove and a crazy house called Craig Manor brooding on a bluff south of Beacon, safely passing over both known and new obstructions, and heading for a clandestine landing on what was now state land. Entry by unauthorized persons was verboten, and a warning sign the size of a highway billboard had been erected on the island's east side, in full view of riders on the commuter line, to emphasize the point. And new obstructions were common, since parts of the disintegrating wooden breakwaters that surrounded the island's harbor continually broke off and were carried north and south of the island with the tides,

before sinking and coming to rest haphazardly on underwater rocks and mounds of mud. Charts of local waters had to be constantly updated as a result.

We mostly discounted rumors of submerged iron spikes and underwater mines, even though one of the buildings was emblazoned with huge rust-colored letters spelling BANNERMAN'S ISLAND ARSENAL. Frank Bannerman surely had plenty of spikes in his collection, and I would've been surprised if he didn't have at least one of those World War II sea mines around, like those big iron balls of TNT that the Copperfin, captained by Cary Grant, had to avoid when sneaking into Tokyo harbor in "Destination Tokyo."

As we entered the shallows under the still grim sky past heaps of riprap surrounding a nearby navigational light, Bill motioned for me to take the rudder, so we changed places and he took a position at the bow.

"Run the engine for ten seconds, head left, then kill it," he said. I started the motor and turned the handle as ordered, counted out ten Mississippis, and then shut it down. The short burst of power pushed us toward the island's north side.

Bill studied the water, and finally picked up a long bamboo pole that I thought was a fishing rod, but with hash marks and numbers painted in black every six inches or so. It was a sounding pole. He was going to use it to test the depth as we floated closer and closer to the island. The wind, blowing into us, began to freshen and I had to spin up the Evinrude every so often to maintain our heading and maintain our modest forward momentum.

Bill was paranoid about invisible rocks and those remnants of Bannerman's rotting breakwaters lying scant inches below the propeller blades. As he became increasingly fearful, he began muttering. "If I hole the hull, Dad's gonna hole me." I wrote his anxiety off as that of a junior sailor taught to feel safe only with six fathoms under his keel. Not to mention that he was, when it was all said and done, a goody-two-shoes Eagle Scout afraid of his own shadow. I've seen him run a country mile in under four minutes at the slightest twig-snap on our treks into the Black Rock Forest.

Knowing nothing about boating, I was blissfully ignorant and dismissive of the dangers and what could befall even a dinky vessel like Bill's. In an attempt to put him at ease, I reminded him that we were in a flat-bottomed metal boat expressly made for river shallows just like these.

"Damn, but you're insistent," he said. "What is it about that stupid island anyway?"

I replied that in crossing the new Continent, the strongest attribute of America's early explorers was insistence, to which Bill responded, "What about intelligence? Or plain ole-fashioned common sense?"

"Where's your sense? Of adventure?"

"Up your ass," he answered.

I stuck my tongue out at him. He returned the expression, and resumed sticking the pole into the muddy water until it hit relatively solid bottom and pulled it out, repeating his regular probing as we moved slowly along.

"Four feet ... three ... four ... five ... TWO! ... two and a half ..."

The hulk of Bannerman's castle began to emerge from the mist, wispy tendril after tendril of gray-white fog falling away, as if the giant fingers of a huge ghostly hand were retracting into the rotten guts of that goblin-cursed structure. As we got nearer, we could slowly make out its turrets and crenellations, parapets, embrasures, and battlements, some built from cobblestones reclaimed from 19th Century New York City streets, others from red and orange bricks from demolished buildings. Bannerman was a notorious cheapskate, I'd read, and even the disrepair into which his vaunted castle had fallen was testament to the substandard and found materials he'd used in construction. But that didn't make it any less imposing looking as we skirted the main structure.

The shadowy aura surrounding the garish, haunting edifice silenced us, and I wondered if we were moving toward it under our own power or being pulled in by some strange force emanating from it.

Bill turned and whispered to me, as if speaking any louder would alert one of the place's supernatural sentinels to our presence.

"Be careful now. Steady as she goes. This could be tricky. My Dad says the guys hired by the staties to clean the joint out treated the harbor as an underwater junkyard when their contract was up. They just wanted out of Dodge and pushed tons of stuff right off the dock. None of it was supposed to be dangerous, but who the hell knows?"

Bill zipped an index finger across his lips, turned and again poked the pole into the brown murk, and raised four fingers. Then three, then two, and then, just as it was about to flash five fingers followed by one and utter "Inches ... not feet! NOT FEET GODDAMNIT!" came a godawful shattering crash, then another, and finally a sharp scrape, as if we had snagged on a snapped-off mast of the dreaded Dutchman, a goddamn revenant if there ever was one.

Bill, eyes wide and face turning beet -purple, whirled toward me and shouted angrily, "We're on the bottom, asshole! We're on the goddamn bottom!"

"No way!" I blurted.

I raised the motor, and the Eagle Scout yelled in the most adult-sounding voice he could muster, "You just can't enter these places like Admiral Farragut charging into Mobile Bay!"

I stood up calmly, and said - in my best British accent, cultivated by multiple watches of the old Sherlock Holmes movies with Basil Rathbone - "The hitch in such an admonition, sir, was that much of the time on this expedition we would have had to have proceeded to learn whether the way was indeed passable."

"You damn cintus supremus. Jesus Christ, it's my goddamn boat." He pushed past me in a huff and knelt down at the stern to look at the motor out of the water. "You snapped a blade off the propeller, shitheel!"

Even a boating dilettante like me knew even welding a new blade on would be a major repair, and I knew that more baseball cards and comic books weren't going to cover it. What was worse was having to deal with Otto Grunwald. He was the only one we could deal with that

could fix it. I mean we weren't two adults who could bring the thing to Hannaford's Marine for repairs. We were little punks with a combined allowance of four dollars a week.

"Well, technically, I didn't snap it off. Something underwater did."

I leaned out over the stern, and dipped a hand into the water, and reached down, hoping to still possess all five fingers still attached when I brought it back. Not a half a foot under the boat was a smooth metal object that, the longer I looked, came into greater focus. It was long and curved, black with bright orange spots, and I suddenly realized what it was.

"We hit a cannon! A gosh-darn cannon! The thing must be 15 feet long. Wow!"

"Cannon, schmannon. You're gonna figure out how to help me get this fixed! Without my Dad finding out. And pay for it."

"Okay. That's fair." I paused, and then offered: "I know a guy."

"You know a guy?"

"You know him too. The lawnmower man."

"Otto Grunwald? Otto Parts? My older brother says he was a concentration camp guard during the war!"

"Jesus, Bill, that's bullshit. He came to Cornwall when he was a kid and he's lived here his whole life. Just because he sounds like Sergeant Schultz when he talks doesn't make him a Nazi. He can fix anything mechanical. Plus, he won't charge us an arm and a leg. Plus, you got any better ideas?"

Bill knew he didn't, shook his head, returned to the bow, and just stared at the island. He then looked longingly across to our town on the other side of the bay, and then back at the island. I looked past him at Storm King looming in the distance. If you caught the mountain just right, in the right light, it resembled the head of a giant, grinning reptile. It was grinning alright. It was hissing "you young fools" under its prehistoric breath. The beast's mouth, of course, didn't exist before they built Storm King Highway by cutting the road right into the rock 400 feet above the Hudson. If that cut had been there when the Dutch sailed past, we'd have stories of a massive sea monster to go along with goblins.

"By the way," I asked. "What's a cintus supremus?"

"It's Latin. For big nothing. We learned it at St. Thomas. We couldn't very well call each other A-holes or F-wads with nuns around ... Jesus Christmas, Larry, I didn't mean it. Just be more careful next time. We don't want to get stranded out here."

I was surprised at how quickly his anger had subsided. And I was secretly glad Bill said "next time."

"I'll be a good sailor yet, Bill. You're a good teacher. I'm looking forward to learning how to tie some of those fancy knots."

"Let's get on with it," he said, giving me a thumbs up, but stopping short of a confident smile. "I'll tie you into a knot," he muttered.

"Okay. I'll be careful."

Bill moved back to the bow and stuck the pole back in the water. He held up four fingers, so it seemed after hitting that massive gun, that we'd slid over and off it into somewhat deeper water. I dipped the motor back in the drink and started it. After a few seconds, I shut it off, and raised it again, which again put us into a brisk, gentle glide, this time toward a small footbridge connecting two crumbling stubby brick towers. I turned the motor right to pass under the sagging bridge - barely, since the towers had settled over time - and we entered a narrow bay between the island's south shore and another part of the sunken breakwater that was barely visible. I could see what seemed to be rotting railroad ties held together by rusting iron clasps just a few inches below the surface. Bannerman, I thought, had seriously underestimated how salty the Hudson was in this vicinity, and how that would eat away at any iron in his jerry-rigged jetties. The water all around us was brackish, and the smell of the ocean, 60 miles south, had begun to grow stronger as the day grew warmer.

Bill kept four fingers aloft as he raised and lowered the pole, and we continued to glide, passing a portion of yet another partially submerged barge. Still another old barge, gutted but riding higher in shallower water, came into view on our right, and I caught sight of a small beach just past it that looked like the ideal landing spot.

"We'll beach her over there, Bill," I said, pointing. "Just past that barge. That's the one Bannerman wanted to put a tennis court on, but he croaked before he could get it done. I read that there always was a barge anchored in that spot. One housed a speakeasy and another one was a whorehouse."

"Speakeasy?"

"An illegal bar. Whenever selling liquor was against the law, speakeasies would crop up. This place was the perfect spot for illegal activity."

"A floating whorehouse too? Gee, you sure know a lot about this place. I have to admit it's pretty interesting."

"Interesting enough to want to come ashore with me?"

"No way."

"I know."

"Curiosity killed the cat, Larry."

"Meow."

I grabbed an oar from the floor of the boat, stood up, and jammed it into the mud to slow us down. I then started the motor briefly, and turned the blunt nose of the boat toward the beach. As we glided in, Bill held up four fingers, then three, then two, then one. Finally, the boat ran over a patch of sand studded with bright orange bits of broken brick and pieces of green and clear glass, making a sound like a piece of sheet metal being dragged across gravel. Bill man-handled the anchor - a gallon-sized plastic milk jug filled with cement - and tossed it onto the strip of brown sand with a thud.

It was 10:15 am by my Timex, and while a breeze had cleared most of the mist, visibility across the bay to Cornwall Landing was still limited. The morning sun, growing ever stronger

as morning had worn on, gilded the island with a diffuse, golden-coppery glow. Though it was early Spring, the leaves on the very tops of the trees were the colors they'd eventually assume come October. Nothing seemed as it should in this place.

"Well, get going, Captain Cook. I don't have all day," said Bill as he plopped down on the floor between the seats, put his legs up on the battered gas can, an old wartime jerry type, and with his back against one seat, took a well-worn copy of Playboy from his canvas scout bag.

"Why do I believe you only came out here with me so you could look at that in private?" I said, shaking my head. "You sure your Dad won't miss it?"

Bill didn't look up from Miss April or May, shoo-ing me away with a wave of his hand.

"Don't forget this, Jungle Jim," he said sarcastically, still making no eye contact, tossing my knapsack at my feet, the very one my father had carried across Europe in World War II, from Omaha Beach to Hitler's Eagle's Nest. That was where he and his buddies ended up the day Germany surrendered. Inside now, in place of a few packs of Luckies, candy bars, and nylon stockings, were a flashlight, a bottle of Costa strawberry soda, matches, a hacksaw blade glued into a block of wood, a flathead screwdriver, and my Kodak Instamatic. In my front pants pocket I had a jack knife and a pack of Teaberry gum.

I picked the bag up, slung it over my shoulder, and hopped off the boat and onto the little beach. Directly in front of me, I could make out the vestiges of a path that had been hacked through the underbrush, leading up to the top of the island. I turned back to Bill, hunched over his magazine. I bent down and pocketed a few pieces of broken brick. The action of the tide had polished them to an incredible smoothness. Some of the pieces looked like fiery agates. Maybe, I thought, I could make something from them someday.

"Let's synchronize our watches," I called out.

Bill put the magazine down, and pulled out the crown on his watch, and looked at me.

"Right, Sergeant Saunders."

"5-4-3-2-1 ... it's now 10:20. "I'll be back by noon."

"Come hell or high water, you better be," he said, his attention returning to the magazine.

"If I'm not back by then--"

"Send in the Marines?" Bill quipped without looking up.

"Nope. Tell Janet Willard I love her." And after a little mock-sobbing, I did an about-face, padded across the narrow strip of sand, and started up the weed-choked path to the top of the island.

Gee, I thought. Here I was risking my life on this rock, and I was afraid to even talk to Janet. Boy, did she look damn cute the way she held her books to her chest and look at me over the tops of her glasses. I began to say to myself, "The first thing I'm gonna do if I make it out of here alive is ask Janet to the Spring Fling dance next weekend. First thing Monday morn--" "We'll see, big boy. We'll see," interrupted another voice. "You don't even know how to dance."

The intense smell of fresh forsythia blossoms struck me as I entered what had become less a path and more a tunnel through overhanging arches of dense, wild foliage. Though it was somewhat dark and cool inside, the profusion of yellow flowers to either side and the sunlight streaming in from above the steep, serpentine track lit my way as I climbed toward the top of the island. A machete would've helped deal with all the untamed flora in a few spots, and I tripped a few times. In another 100 feet or so, I'd reach the best-preserved remains of Bannerman's derelict dream, his summer house, a copy of the castle in miniature.

The house, through binoculars anyway, didn't look nearly as rundown as the castle. I was interested in it for one reason, namely a rumor of a hidden door somewhere within that provided access to a vast series of underground chambers that Bannerman had blasted out of the rock in secret, with the sound of those explosions covered by those from the dynamiting required to level the site he'd chosen for the main arsenal on the other side of the island. What might I find if I could get inside such chambers? Artifacts long forgotten or believed lost? Logic told me that Bannerman wouldn't have built a subterranean cavern just to store more of the same items - cannonballs, black powder, uniforms, helmets, rifles, and more. Would he? I'd read a book a few years earlier about the great lost treasures of antiquity - some real, some legendary. I wasn't thinking the Holy Grail could be down there, but could Confederate or even Nazi gold be? Or other fabled spoils of war or loot? Bannerman bought such huge lots of war surplus, often numbering hundreds of crates, that who knew was in all of them?

As I reached the top of the path and emerged into the mid-morning sunshine, the façade of the house came into view a little further up the slope. Two large oval windows stared like great eyes down the Hudson.

I negotiated a set of wide stone stairs barely visible beneath tangles of roots and vines, which led to a cracked cement landing between two circular structures, one with two small slit windows to either side of an open doorway, and another cement area with stone benches covered by a natural rock overhang. On the surface of a thick concrete column supporting the overhang was carved the words "The Grotto." The opening didn't look like any grotto I'd heard of. Grottos, I thought, were like caves. Underwater caves. Like the one in which Captain Nemo hides the Nautilus between raids in Jules Verne's "Mysterious Island." Maybe someone saw the carving and manufactured a tall tale about an actual grotto. I remembered that Nemo despised war and Bannerman was an accused war profiteer. I imagined if they ever met, even in fiction, it wouldn't be over tea and crumpets.

I looked left, then right, and left again, and spied another set of steps to the right of one of the two circular structures, which I could see led up to the house. Before ascending them, I took the flashlight out of my bag, and walked over to the open doorway and clicked it on. The door itself was missing, but its heavy iron hinges were still attached to the wooden jamb, but bent grotesquely and exploded outward. Perhaps the door had been locked and had been blown open by thieves years ago. No, I realized, the hinges had been bent outward. Violently. Whatever forced it open came from inside. Shining the light inside, I could make out several wooden tables covered with flower pots, as well as old garden tools and larger cement pots, some smashed, on the floor. The room, even from the doorway, smelled like old, musty earth. It was a garden shed. One built to last a few hundred years, but a shed all the same.

I shoved the flashlight in a back pocket and backed out. I crossed to the battered stairs and carefully ascended them, wary of the scores of vines that seemed to be nipping at my ankles as I did. A minute later, I reached the top of the island.

I was standing on a large slab of concrete that probably had once served as a patio. Turning around, I was afforded a fantastic view south down the river, with the gray towers of West Point clearly visible in the distance. Breakneck Ridge rose some 1300 feet to my left and Storm King, another 100 feet or so higher, to my right. The steepness of the hillside I'd just come up prevented me from seeing the beach below, where Bill was waiting.

The Bannermans must have sat out here on warm summer days long ago, Frank planning his next arms purchase or addition to his island fortress, and his wife thankful just to find relief from the city heat.

I looked down at the tops of the two circular structures and noticed that the one with no visible entry had a roof that resembled a funnel with a large hole covered by a grate in the center. I realized that I was looking at a cistern. That's why it didn't have any doors or windows like the otherwise identical one next to it. It occurred to me that the island probably had no natural source of fresh water for drinking and bathing, and it either had to be brought in in barrels to replenish tanks or collected in such a cistern when it rained.

Checking the time, it was almost 10:45, so I decided just to limit my exploring to the house and leave the castle, which was by all accounts far more dangerous, for a future visit. As we passed it, it looked like harsh language would've caused every wall to collapse.

I reached into my knapsack for my camera since I wanted to document the place, inside and out.

Just then, a sense of dread washed over me. I noticed that the fog that had seemingly burned off in the last half-hour, was somehow returning, but I couldn't tell if it was indeed fog, or low clouds, portents of a squall.

I froze, literally, since the temperature seemed to plummet as the small summit became swaddled in a chilling mist. I shook myself, and realized I was shivering.

The opening passage of a book I'd read a few summers before, and memorized - Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" - suddenly invaded my head.

"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against the hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone."

Had I merely remembered the words, or heard them spoken aloud? I'd felt my lips moving as I heard it. Had I spoken the words?

Was I standing before Hill House itself? THE Hill House? A Hill House? Could there be more than one such place?

I raised what I thought was my camera, but I instantly realized I wasn't holding it. Instead, when I looked down, I was holding the homemade saw I'd brought along to cut away anything underwater that we might've gotten tangled in on our way over. My palms were sweaty and shaking.

And it was then that I noticed that the hacksaw blade I'd glued to the wooden handle was dripping blood.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost 1 o'clock! Where had the last two hours gone?

Just then, Bill appeared from another path, brandishing a piece of rusty iron, his eyes blazing.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been looking for you all over this Godforsaken place! And why are you covered in blood?"

TO BE CONTINUED …