

ETHAN UNBOUND

By Gary L. Blackwood

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MS. MORGAN was a witch. At any rate she certainly looked like a witch. She wore baggy dresses and had stringy black hair and a pinched face, and if you could have stood to look into her beady eyes long enough, you would have seen that they were violet. With a little putty on her nose, she would have been a shoo-in for the Margaret Hamilton role in a revival of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Not only was she ugly, she was mean. Not in any big, shouting, physical way, but in little, underhanded, nasty ways. She was, in short, the sort of person who gives librarians a bad name. Now, most librarians, as you know, are extremely pleasant and helpful people. Many are quite attractive and fashionable. Some even wear running shoes and know about such things as Nintendo and motor-driven skateboards.

Ms. Morgan was emphatically not one of this sort. If she knew anything about anything, she kept it to herself.

Ethan—the Ethan referred to in the title—was a book-worm. Not literally of course. If he had been an actual worm, Ms. Morgan would have long since searched him out and ground him beneath her heel. As it was, she only looked at him as if she'd like to.

Not that Ethan deserved it. He was a good kid, at least as teenagers go—a little on the klutzy side, a little too obsessed with grades, but on the whole pretty well liked. Except by Ms. Morgan. But then she didn't like anybody, probably not even herself.

You might expect that, being a librarian and all, Ms. Morgan would be partial to a boy like Ethan, who obviously loved books. He was even named after a book—a famous one written by Edith Wharton that had made his mother cry.

On the contrary, Ms. Morgan seemed to single him out for particular abuse. On those rare occasions when he brought a book back overdue, she charged him triple the usual fine. She sent him snide little reminders in the mail concerning books he'd checked out only two days before. When he couldn't avoid using the reference books, she kept her violet eyes pinned on him every second.

The sad fact of the matter was that Ms. Morgan, who had been attached to the library since long before Ethan was born, regarded each and every volume in the library

as her private property and bitterly resented having to give them over into the hands of strangers.

With her piercing gaze, she examined each book that came back across the circulation desk, and heaven help anyone who was foolish or unlucky enough to return one with a smudged or, worse, a torn page. It was as though, in Ms. Morgan's eyes, the books were living things that could feel pain, and she fussed over a broken binding as a mother might over a child with a broken arm.

Ethan's fondness for books was a little less obsessive—though not much. He did have a few other interests—astronomy, for example, and bicycling—and he had three or four pretty good friends at school. But there was no denying that his best friends were the ones he met in books, and that very often the world he found in the pages of a book was more real and more comfortable for him than the actual world around him.

When he came across a really intriguing title on the shelves, sometimes he couldn't stand to wait until he got it home. He had to sit down with it right there in the aisle, on one of those little rolling stepstools, and an hour or two later, or three, when Ms. Morgan called out, in a whine not unlike that of a very large mosquito, "All right, everyone, the library is closing!" Ethan would come to, as if from a dream, and hurry to the circulation desk, where he pretended to tie his shoe, or examine the rack of large-print books, or anything to avoid the accusing stare of those violet eyes.

On the fateful night of which you are about to hear, Ethan was not in his usual spot in the Young Adult fiction. He had recently discovered an author named Heinlein, who was shelved in the adult books, and Ethan was so engrossed in something called *Tunnel in the Sky* that he shut out everything, including Ms. Morgan's insect whine. The thing that finally broke his concentration was every light in the entire library being switched off.

Startled, Ethan cried, "What?" and jumped to his feet. The only illumination in the big room was the red glow of the **EXIT** signs. The only sounds were the hum of the furnace blower somewhere in the bowels of the building and the feathery rustle of rain on the tall windows.

"Oh, man!" Ethan whispered to himself. "I'm locked in."

Without even taking the time to reshelve the book in its proper place, he stumbled out of the stacks and down the center aisle to the main doors. As he had feared, they were locked tight.

"Crap!" he muttered and gave the door a token kick with one sneaker.

The prospect of spending the night in the library wasn't so alarming. In fact, for somebody who loved books as much as Ethan did, it was actually rather appealing. The thing that gave him pause was the thought that, when his dad got home, he wouldn't

know where he was. Ethan was going to have to find a phone and call his dad at work.

He turned toward the librarian's desk and found himself face-to-face with Ms. Morgan. "Aghh!" he said.

Ms. Morgan wore a shapeless raincoat and carried a black umbrella. In the light from the **EXIT** sign her eyes looked red. "Well, well," she said.

"I—I—" Ethan said.

"You got caught up in a book," Ms. Morgan said, not unkindly, "and you forgot the time, is that it?"

Ethan nodded—or was it a shudder?

"I'm not surprised. I knew it would happen sooner or later, a boy like you."

Ethan shifted about nervously. "Could I—could you—you know, let me out?" His voice cracked on the final word.

"In that downpour?" Ms. Morgan glanced sharply at the volume under his arm. "And with a *book*?"

Hastily Ethan clapped the book down on the desk. "I'll get it out another time," he said with a sickly smile.

"But surely," Ms. Morgan said, in a tone that would have sounded reasonable coming from someone else, "surely you don't want to get soaked to the skin. Couldn't your parents come for you?"

"Well, there's—there's just my dad, and he works late."

Ms. Morgan's eyes narrowed in what might have been construed as a smile. "What a shame. Perhaps you'd better stay, then."

"St—st—stay?"

Her raincoat rustled as she took a step toward him. "Of course. You like books, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, then," she said, raising her umbrella as if she meant to impale him on the tip. "You should enjoy *being* one."

Ethan swallowed hard. "What?"

"I'll even give you your choice of what sort of book you'd like to be. What could be fairer?"

Ethan backed away, holding on to the edge of the desk for support. "I—I don't know what you mean." His hand groped for the telephone, but just as he lifted the receiver, Ms. Morgan's umbrella descended and, with a sharp whack, knocked it back onto the cradle.

"Come, come," she said, impatiently. "Where do you imagine that books come from? They don't grow on trees, you know."

Ethan clutched his stinging hand to his chest. “I—I thought you *bought* them someplace.”

Ms. Morgan gave a derisive snort. “On the budget they give me?” She waved the umbrella. “Oh, I buy some things—series, joke books, that sort of nonsense. I’m talking about good books, books that last, books that seem real. They’re not that easily come by, I promise you. They’re not just written. They are created. The authors must put something of themselves into them.” She took another step forward. “Sometimes all of themselves. Now, what will it be? Or shall I choose?”

“I—I really have to—”

“You remember Mr. Wise, the science teacher?”

Ethan blinked in bewilderment at this sudden change of topic. “The one that—that moved away a couple of years ago?”

Ms. Morgan wagged her umbrella at him. “No, no. He moved no farther away than my nonfiction section. He made quite an attractive book on physics.”

Ethan put a hand to his muddled head. “This is crazy—I—”

“And you recall little Stephen Shelton, no doubt.” She shook her head, making her plastic rain hat crinkle. “They searched for him high and low, when all they’d really have had to do was look in the picture books, under S. “She raised the umbrella again, and smacked it into the palm of her other hand. “But enough of that. Have you made up your mind yet? May I recommend a rousing adventure book? Or what about a historical novel? I don’t really believe I’d care to have any more problem novels, they’re so depressing—” She broke off abruptly, for Ethan, seeing that she was beyond a doubt either demented or dangerous, or both, had made a break for it.

“I thought you loved books!” he heard her screech behind him as he dived desperately into one of the narrow, darkened aisles between the shelves of the adult section. He scrambled to the far end, plunged across an open space, and rolled beneath one of the reading tables, where he crouched, his breath coming in quick, shallow bursts. He clamped his mouth shut and tried to breathe more quietly. “Oho!” he heard Ms. Morgan cry. “That’s the way it’s going to be, is it? I must say, I’m disappointed in you. I thought you’d welcome the chance to really lose yourself in a book. But never mind. If you want to do it the hard way, that’s all right too. You won’t be the first. I’ll just call up a little assistance.”

Assistance? Ethan thought. *Who would help a crazy woman?*

“Let me see,” she was muttering. “Where are we? Mysteries, eh? Let’s try under D. Ah, here we are. Doyle. Yes, this will do nicely.” In her mosquito voice she called, “You see, my foolish friend, the spell works both ways. I can create books from life or”—a bright greenish spark, like a welding arc, lit up the part of the room where she

stood—”life from books!” She laughed a manic laugh that was all but obscured by a sudden outburst of vicious barking and snarling. “Remember the Hound of the Baskervilles?” she shouted over the clamor. “Go get him, boy!”

Ethan heard the sound of claws scrabbling across the tile floor, and then, around the end of a set of shelves, a dark, four-legged form came thundering. It drew up short not five yards from the table where Ethan hid and stood quivering, swinging its huge head back and forth, sniffing the air.

Ethan didn’t wait for the horrible hound to catch his scent; he shuffled backward on all fours, knocked over a chair with a heart-stopping crash, and, springing to his feet, took off at a run through the stacks. Behind him he heard the hound break into a frenzy of barking, and he knew he’d been spotted. He knew, too, that if he didn’t do something drastic, the dog would be on him in a matter of seconds.

He darted behind the reference desk, fled past the magazine storage, and ran through an open door into the children’s activity room. His impulse was to shut the door behind him, but he realized that if he did, he’d be trapping himself in the room. Instead he left the door ajar and burst through a second door that led to the children’s collection, slamming that one shut behind him.

By the time he had circled through the children’s department, past the magazines again, and back to the first door, the hound was inside the activity room, clawing at the door he’d just closed. Ethan banged the first door shut and leaned against it, his chest heaving, his legs like putty, while the hound, growling rabidly, flung itself against the inside of the door.

“Excellent!” Ms. Morgan’s voice echoed through the big room. “I see you’ve learned how to use your library!”

Ethan guessed from her voice that she was still somewhere in the adult stacks. If he was right, that meant he had a clear shot at the front door. Taking a deep breath, he sprinted through the reference area, crashed into the freestanding globe, and recovered. A flash lit up the room behind him, but he made it to the main entrance without any interference.

He looked frantically around for something big enough to smash his way out with and settled on the electric typewriter that sat on Ms. Morgan’s desk. She’d be furious—then again, what did it matter? Yanking the cord from the wall socket, he hefted the machine over his head. Before he could launch it through the window, something seized it from behind.

Ethan let go of the machine and whirled around to confront a figure who wore a black, batlike cape—but who he was pretty sure was not Batman. The caped figure tossed the typewriter carelessly aside and smiled a terrifying smile at Ethan—a smile

that revealed two long, fanglike teeth. “Oh, man!” Ethan groaned. “Dracula!”

“Ah, I see you’ve read my book,” the figure said, in a thick accent. “Or,” he added, distastefully, “more likely you’ve seen the movie. The book is much more worthwhile, I assure you. Perhaps you’d care to be a sequel?”

“No!” Ethan shouted, and bolted again. He wasn’t really thinking very clearly, but he had a vague notion that he might be safer in the children’s collection, where the books were not quite so threatening. He staggered past the picture books and into the nonfiction, where he flattened himself against the 700s and clung there, his mind and his heart racing.

Over the pounding of his own blood in his ears, he could hear footsteps approaching, passing the display case, moving through the picture books, pausing, heading into the fiction. In a minute or two more they would make their way back to the aisle where he was hiding.

There had to be some way out. He peered warily around the ends of the shelves. Obviously, he couldn’t escape through the activity room; he could still hear the Baskerville Hound thrashing and growling inside. He looked in the other direction and saw a pale red light high up on the wall. The emergency exit, of course. He had walked by it a hundred times, but, because of the sign that read in bold letters **DO NOT OPEN EXCEPT IN EMERGENCY**, it had never quite registered.

Well, if this wasn’t an emergency, what was? Ethan slipped out from between the shelves and crept with painful slowness and care across the carpeted floor toward the **EXIT** sign. He was less than six feet from it when a flash of green lit up the fiction stacks off to his right. Instinctively he threw up an arm to shield his eyes. When he lowered it, a new figure stood before him, blocking the exit, a bulky figure dressed in coarse, curious clothing from another century—a figure whose left leg ended above the knee, and who supported himself with a wooden crutch propped under one arm.

“So, lad!” the man said, in a booming voice. “About to jump ship, was you? By the powers, I can’t make out why you’d want to do that and leave behind companions such as us!”

“Get out of my way!” Ethan shouted, his voice cracking with panic.

“Out of me way!” croaked the parrot that sat on the pirate’s shoulder.

Ethan backed away and turned, ready to run again. But the dark, dread form of Dracula glided out from between the last two rows and stood in his way.

Frantic, he lunged down the aisle next to him, only to stop short as a third figure stepped into view at the far end of the aisle.

“Well, now,” Ms. Morgan said, her raincoat rustling as she advanced on him. “That was fun, wasn’t it? But it’s time now to wind things up. Or should I say bind them

up?” She gave a snorting laugh and extended her umbrella. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll do a very nice sewn binding, and of course you’ll get only acid-free and recycled paper. You’ll last for centuries. Why, you’ll be practically immortal!”

As the tip of the black umbrella moved closer to his chest, in desperation Ethan yanked a book from the martial arts shelf next to him and flung it at the old woman’s face. Shrieking, she jerked up the umbrella to ward it off.

The instant the book struck the umbrella, a fierce spark of green fire tore through the air, blinding Ethan. He staggered backward, out of the shelves and into the clutches of Long John Silver. “Too much grog, mate!” the parrot squawked.

Ethan squirmed out of the pirate’s grasp and stumbled forward to find yet another figure confronting him—a lithe Asian man, barefooted and bare-chested, wearing only a loose pair of black pants. The man gave a perfunctory bow. “Bruce Lee,” he said. “At your service.”

Ethan beckoned frantically to him. “This way!”

Bruce Lee sprang out from between the shelves like a tiger and landed in a crouching karate stance before a very surprised Long John Silver.

“What’s this, then?” boomed the pirate.

“Yahh!” said Bruce Lee.

“Look out!” said Ethan.

Before the words were fully formed, Bruce Lee had executed a 180-degree turn, and one of his bare feet was flashing through the air to intercept the dark form of Dracula, who had been about to launch an attack from the rear .

Dracula let out a rodentlike shriek and went flying backward. His slick-haired head bounded off a fire extinguisher, and he crumpled up like a Halloween bat made of black construction paper.

Bruce Lee whirled back around to face Long John—none too soon, for the pirate had raised his crutch aloft and sent it on a collision course with Lee’s head.

But when it reached its target, the Asian man was no longer there; instead he was standing directly beside Silver, aiming a quick chop to the pirate’s thick neck.

The startled parrot flapped away, squawking, “Out of me way,” while Long John slumped heavily to the carpet.

Bruce Lee turned to Ethan with a small, satisfied smile. “Please,” he said, “never tell anyone that I fought a man who had only one leg.”

“I promise,” Ethan said. He was about to add, “Let’s get out of here,” when he caught a glimpse of a dark, raincoated shape emerging from the shelves behind Lee. Before he could call out a warning, the old witch had raised her umbrella and launched it like a spear at Bruce Lee’s bare back. As the tip of it struck him, a flash of green filled

the room again.

Ethan fell back, rubbing at his eyes. When he opened them, Ms. Morgan was bending down to retrieve the umbrella with one gnarled hand and, with the other, a book featuring a colorful photo of Bruce Lee on the cover .

“I don’t like it when books are out of their proper places,” she said acidly. “And it’s high time you were put in yours. You’ve been so much trouble to me, I believe I’ll make a biography of you—one of those long, boring ones.”

Ethan was almost past the point of caring. He was so tired of running, of resisting, that it sounded almost inviting to be put to rest between covers. But some part of him still protested, still insisted that it was better to live in the real world, with all its faults and stresses, than to sit stagnant on a shelf, cataloged and categorized.

“No!” he cried hoarsely and shrank back from the touch of the umbrella. He stumbled backward between the rows of books, clutching at volumes on either side, trying to keep from falling. But they gave way under his hands and tumbled from the shelves, and he kept staggering back and back until his heels struck against one of the rolling stepstools and he toppled over it and landed on his back in the aisle.

“I won’t have my books treated this way!” screeched the old witch, and descended on him, her violet eyes wild.

With one foot Ethan sent the stool rolling at her, but she sidestepped it and came relentlessly on. From the corner of his terrified eyes, Ethan caught a glimpse of a shelf card that read **OVERSIZED BOOKS**. But no book could be big enough to protect him now. He needed something to defend himself with a book about guns, or tanks, or—

Then his eyes fell on a familiar volume, one he’d read years before, a massive book with the title stamped in gold on, the spine. Rolling on his side, he pulled it frantically from the shelf.

As Ms. Morgan’s black raincoat loomed over him and, grinning gleefully, she extended her umbrella, Ethan yanked the book open to a vivid illustration and held it before him like a shield. The tip of the umbrella struck the page, and once again the blinding green spark exploded.

This time, when Ethan struggled to his feet, blinking and shaking his head, a figure stood before him that made Ms. Morgan’s pinched face go tight and her violet eyes go wide in alarm. “You!” she breathed, her voice a long, low sigh of defeat.

“Aye, madam,” said the white-robed figure, stroking his long gray beard with something like anticipation. “After all these centuries. And this time you’ve no beautiful enchantress to do your dirty work for you.”

Ms. Morgan lowered her umbrella and took a few faltering steps back. “Now,

Merlin,” she said, in a tone Ethan had never heard from her before, a tone that was wheedling, pleading. “You had your day, I wanted mine, that’s all.”

“Fair enough, madam,” said Merlin. “And now, it’s over. Adieu.”

Ms. Morgan opened her pinched mouth to protest, but the old wizard had raised his broad-sleeved arms, and a jagged white spark leaped across the gap between his fingers and her flinching form. The transformation was too sudden to be seen. One instant the old witch stood cowering in the aisle, the next there was nothing but a thick black volume lying on the carpet next to the other fallen books. Merlin stooped to pick it up and handed it to Ethan. “There you are. A dubious addition to the library’s collection.”

Ethan stared at the old wizard, then at the cover of the book. It read, *The Memoirs of Morgan le Fay*.

“I wouldn’t bother reading it if I were you,” Merlin said. “You’ll find it far too long and boring. You may as well go home now. I’ll clean up here.”

Ethan hesitated. “But—but there are things I want to ask you—”

Merlin waved a hand to dismiss him, “Ask your librarian,” he said.

Ethan nodded vaguely, waved good-bye, and found his way to the main entrance. It was unlocked, and outside it had stopped raining.

When he got the nerve to visit the library again, a few days later, there was a new employee at the circulation desk—a kindly-looking old man with a neatly trimmed gray beard and a pair of running shoes.