

WOLFGANG HOHLBEIN



WITCHES OF
SALEM

03

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What is The Hexer from Salem?

The Hexer from Salem, a novel series in the vein of H.P. Lovecraft, was created and written almost entirely by Wolfgang Hohlbein. The epic began in 1984 in a pulp-fiction series: Ghost-Thrillers from Bastei Publishing and later as a stand-alone series under *The Hexer from Salem*, before it finally became available in paperback and collectors editions.

The story takes place primarily in nineteenth century London, following the chilling adventures of The Hexer, Robert Craven and, later on, his son as they encounter the Great Aged — godlike creatures hostile to humans — and their representatives on earth.

The Author

Wolfgang Hohlbein is a phenomenon: With more than 200 books selling over 40 million copies worldwide, he is one of Germany's most prolific fantasy writers. Hohlbein is well-known for his young adult books and above all his novel series, *The Hexer from Salem*.

Wolfgang Hohlbein



Episode 3: Witches of Salem

Translated by William Glucroft

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Witches of Salem

He was running for his life.

They were behind him. Though he couldn't see or hear them, he could feel them closing in. Behind him, or maybe already in front of him, somewhere in the darkness blanketing the street like a black cloud. This was their territory and they knew every step, every hiding place and every shortcut. He had a bit of a head start but he was under no illusion. They initially took him for an idiot from the countryside, a farmer terrified by the sight of a knife, the thought of fighting back not even crossing his mind. But as soon as he knocked out the teeth of one, the other three knew not to make the same mistake ...

Andrew stayed where he was, gave a quick look around and took a few short breaths. The cold air hurt his throat and there was a terrible taste in his mouth. His heart was pounding.

The street was empty. He had made it twenty steps before his pursuers recovered from their surprise and three of them continued the chase. The fourth was probably still hunched over, spitting his teeth out. Twenty steps were nothing. The area he had wandered into was one of the least known parts of London. More precisely, Andrew soberly thought, one of the parts better to avoid after sundown. Yet, he hadn't listened, fool that he was.

If only the men had wanted his money! He'd have happily handed over the meager twenty-three pounds in his satchel. However, there was something to them. Something he could read in their faces when they first emerged from the darkness and surrounded him. Something that told him

they wanted more. Sure, money, but not just that. These four were out for blood — exactly the type Dingman had warned him about: deranged people who'd thrash someone just to pass the time. Maybe even kill.

A low rumble penetrated his thoughts. It snapped him back to reality. Andrew spun around and stared into the darkness, squinting with suspicion. The street before him was empty, though he found it hard to believe. This was Britain's largest city and home to more than a million people who usually filled the streets with light and life, even at night, to no end. Here was another London that rarely made itself known to outsiders.

Now he knew why.

Andrew pivoted, swallowed the bitter knot which had built up in his throat, and pressed on with slow, careful steps. He could see light somewhere ahead of him, but it was only a street lamp shining an island of bright, yellow light into an ominous sea of darkness. Safer parts of the city lay at least a mile further. Too far.

He could hear the soft rumble again. An icy chill pricked his back and a new, indiscernible fear arose in him. For a moment he almost wished for the shadows of his pursuers to emerge from around the corner. He kept going, then paused at an intersection, unsure of what to do next. Two steps in front of him a pile of over-filled trash cans, boxes and rain-soaked cartons blocked his way. To his left and right the empty street stretched into a black pit. Further ahead, a few streetlights flickered and in one building he saw — or, at least, thought he saw — light creeping out from closed shutters. Perhaps he could get help there.

Andrew hesitated. Then he ran onto the trash heap and tore a loose plank from the side of a carton. It was a pathetic weapon against three thugs' switchblades, but better than nothing.

When he turned around, a man was standing there as though he'd risen from the ground.

It was one of the three thugs who had been chasing him, and he had learned from the fate of his companion. His switchblade was out like a menacing snake ready to strike. Andrew desperately tried to dodge the swing of the knife but couldn't. The sharp blade tore through his vest and shirt, and cut open a long, bloody gash. Andrew cried out from the pain and shock, stumbled, and lost his balance on the slippery ground. As he tripped, he tried to twist to the side and hit back, but his attacker was too fast. The thug swiftly avoided Andrew's swing, and snatched the plank from Andrew's hand. Andrew was thrown backwards. His head hit against something hard and he felt himself losing consciousness.

The man was standing over him when he came to. The knife in his hand shimmered in the dull light of the streetlight. An evil smirk came over his face.

"You piece of filth," he said, his voice trembling in fury. "Time to finish you off."

Andrew tried to lift himself up but was forced back down.

"What ... what do you want with me?" he asked.

The man laughed. "What do I want with you? Nothing. But I believe Freddy would like to have a few words."

Andrew figured it was Freddy that had been spitting out teeth after Andrew hit him. Meanwhile, he was berating himself: Why hadn't he just given up the satchel? Maybe they would have beaten him up and then left him.

Now they were going to kill him.

"I ... I've got money," he flustered. His tongue flitted nervously over his lips. He sought desperately for a way out but there was none and there was no way this man would let him get away again. Andrew didn't doubt for a second the thug's willingness to stick the blade in his ribs if he made a move.

"Money?" he asked, his eyes perking up in curiosity.