

Gerard Houarner's fiction is always strong on mood and atmosphere. Witness this tale of the deep places, where some venture to find themselves.

On the Wind That Blows Hard From Below

by Gerard Houarner

Runo's serves their ale at cellar temperature, the way it's done in England, and never chilled, because of the wind.

All the places along Summit do, and many a good couple of blocks down into the city along the side streets, sometimes all the way to Rampart, where all the tourists huddle on the other side of the wall in the day stays and flea markets. Down there, the tenders charge double for the privilege of a warmer pour, and the brew's nowhere near as thick, dark, and rich as on Summit, and you don't ever get to hear the wind rattle the windows with a good gust, or blow in cold through the door every time someone comes or goes, or whine like a beaten dog, or howl like a vengeful one, when something shifts at the bottom of the hole.

On Summit, though, proprietors keep a few coals glowing in their cellars, so their stouts and ales and biters won't freeze in the earth so close to the hole. Some say that's what gives the casks their bite.

And there's always the wits who say there's more than the cold down below to give you a bite.

A lot of tourists never make it as far as Summit. Rich folks, neither. Pilgrims, hardly ever. There's the markets and the games to distract them, temples to the Revelation for the devout, and the ruins poking up out of the ground like spikes from the Devil's crown that's the main reason people come: to say they saw what we once were before the world was punished..

But it's the wind that really puts them off. At this time of the year, only the special ones, or the mad, find their way up the maze of paved paths, crooked alleys, and crumbling squares to mingle with the tradesmen, beggars, merchants, and thieves who congregate in these dark, cool dens at the top of the world to sip their dinners around the hole, with nothing more than the meager lives they've lived and fresh-headed mugs in hand to keep them from slipping over the precipice.

You'd think more pilgrims would pay their respects to the source of so much of our discomfort. Maybe toss in a coin, or a folded prayer. Bargain in whatever currency's on hand with what waits at the bottom. But those kinds of traditions never caught on. Not that some don't try. But just the special ones, and you have to wonder if they don't stand out just a little bit more than the rest of us when it's time to choose the sacrifice.

I'm not saying anything about you personally, just so you understand. But there are no illusions, up here.

What made you pick this place?

I'm the same way.

I like Runo's. Everyone's welcome, and a bit of everyone comes. You see you hardly caused a stir when you came through the door. There are limits, of course. No diggers. Not that they'd try. The wattage is always low, but it's still too bright for them. And the tax officers have to knock on the window and stay where the proprietor can see them, or else they'll get everything that's coming to them through double barrels. But otherwise, monks mingle with leaf sellers, and drunks debate matters of the soul with holy hollers. Folks come to tell their stories, or listen to them told. Some just come for the quiet, like when there's been a death near the hole and no one feels like a song, much less words kind or cruel.

By the way, a bit of friendly advice: don't let the monks take your confession. They aren't sanctioned during the festival. It's a common misconception. If they hear yours, it's just to fill their pockets with your offering. No prayers will be chanted for forgiveness. That would run counter to the spirit of the festival.

Most times, I'm not given leave to run my mouth off. I can try, if I want, but the regulars feel the weight of my company before my story's done, and look to their watches or to who's just come or gone, or sign to a fellow across the way who doesn't even like them, and they're

off and out of earshot before a bubble of froth has burst on the head of a fresh one. I have the power to bore, apparently, though I make my living with words at the *Journal*, and from jazz articles and album liner notes. Bird lives, and all of that. My father was a drummer, and I used to sit in the studio as a little kid listening to Miles and Coltrane and Cannonball cut records, so—

Well, there you go. You see the effect I have. No, no, I saw you stifle the yawn. The clench of muscles between jaw and ear. It's my voice, I'm sure. Maybe my timing, always a moment too late. A lack of confidence, an inability to invest any truth, much less a lie, with the conviction of certainty. I've spent too much time near the hole, I'm too close to its uncertainty. I'm a quantum speaker.

Or maybe it is my words. After all, I don't make much of a living at the *Journal* with a beat covering the morgue, sewers, and the doings up on Summit around the hole. Not the first thing folks turn to when they open the newspaper in the morning. Not even during the festival. Maybe my father was right, and I should have become a musician. Of course, I'd still need a sense of rhythm for that.

Anyway, Runo's keeps me honest. In my place. It's important in this world to know where you stand.

Praise be to the Revelation, yes.

I'd watch that bag if I were you. Put it between your legs, under the seat, and tie the strap around your ankle. There is a thief or two here tonight. They don't dare bother the regulars. But you're not one of us.

There you go.

You're welcome.

Yes, it is funny, us sitting here by the frosty windows, talking much around a lot of nothing. Well, at least I am. You in your quilted leather and fine-finished woolens, me in my tattered old herringbone. A cartoon waiting for a satiric caption.

No, it's only funny, not strange. This is Summit, after all. Besides, every now and then, when I'm looking for stories in the city or sipping on a tall one when it's warmer, some fine young stranger does find me—always the lads, I'm sad to say. Newcomers to the city, bungling their way around fresh territory, trying to find their little corner and thinking the wind isn't that bad. Not afraid of the hole, yet. Tourists, to notch the dare of the hole's lip on their gilded belts. The rich, to laugh at us up on Summit. And the mad, to do the same. Sometimes it's just a young lad from the country whose curiosity has gotten the better of him and who's braved the wind, always at summer's height, mind you, to actually sit on Summit next to the hole to imagine a more adventurous kind of life, or maybe just consider the choice between suicide and returning to his family's

farm.

No, you're certainly like none of them.

These youngsters are drawn to me because, I think, I'm better kept than most of the others, who don't need to look neat and clean to come and go where they need to, as I do. Of course, I'm not passing myself off as rich. That would be a pathetic joke, as us sitting here together shows. It's just that my look must seem to these types as friendly, or at least not actively hostile. Maybe I remind them of a teacher they once had. Or a faded uncle.

I don't mind. Your type are the only ones who listen.

Yawn away. You won't leave.

I understand. You're not the first pilgrim who can't get a night's sleep at festival. That's what makes drinking until you pass out such a favorite distraction.

Sure, have another. It's on me. He'll take a taste of the Figurn's, if you have that on your tray? Good. Good.

No, no, I know you can buy the whole neighborhood and everyone in it. It's not about the money. It's about the hospitality. Be my guest.

You see? It's not so bad, being a poor man's company.

You felt the wind blowing long before you saw the hole, didn't you. That's what keeps the tourist trade down in Winter. Though there are some who claim nothing revives the spirits like the bracing air. If they really wanted bracing, they'd find their way up to Summit.

So close to the hole, the wind bites, even during summer. Winter, it draws blood. That's why business is slow in the Winter.

Except for the festival. It's what draws the season's tourists from the valleys and the island, from places so far west only another ocean stops the land, and even from across that far sea, as well as this closer one lapping at the shore if you go down far enough on the other side of the hole.

They all want to see a pilgrim die.

All praise to the Revelation, yes.

Let me guess. Twenty-five? Really. I see, you've been to war. Yes, that's aged you, all right. Seen quite a few horrors, felt any number of terrors, I imagine. Been a few, naturally. Young heirs like you, who've already proven themselves, are rare enough. We get the green ones, mostly. None like you ever come to the Winter festival. Your elders always certify—

Your father. I'm sorry. I forget that blood runs as bitter among the rich as the poor. I take it you have a brother or two in the wings.

And he's already passed through the festival.

Do you want the hole to take you?

That's the spirit. That's right, embrace the Revelation. Pass by Hell's door and be saved, ride salvation's grace