

The Black Archive #6

GHOST LIGHT

SAMPLER

By Jonathan Dennis

Ghost Light is another bricolage of Victorian literature, but whereas **The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen** takes whole characters from specific works, *Ghost Light* is taking types. The most obvious is Gabriel Chase himself. The haunted house is a fixture of Gothic literature and is such an interesting topic that it gets its own chapter later on. Once you get past that, the first character the Doctor and Ace are introduced to in *Ghost Light* is Redvers Fenn-Cooper. The name itself is a reference to an author whose works may well have been in Gabriel Chase's library, James Fenimore Cooper, chiefly known as writer of **The Leatherstocking Tales** (1823-41)¹, a series of novels about Natty Bumppo, a white child raised by Native Americans. You can see how the name is relevant: **The Leatherstocking Tales** were adventure stories about battles and exploration in the frontier. Yes, it was the American frontier rather than the African one, but the parallels are there.

For Redvers Fenn-Cooper is the very archetype of the British gentleman explorer, beloved of fiction of the era. In his first set of scenes he references Henry Stanley finding Doctor Livingstone, a story that captured the imagination of people at the time and was in large part responsible for the popularity of the type. He also references 'giant dinosaurs' and 'young Conan Doyle' which is an obvious reference to Arthur Conan Doyle's **Professor Challenger** books (1912-29)² and implies that Redvers was the inspiration for the Challenger character. Another popular gentleman explorer of the time was Allan Quatermain, created by H Rider Haggard³. In fact, the gentleman explorer has appeared so often in various media over the years that you could get away with doing a novelty song about it⁴. *Ghost Light* is not even the first time this kind of character has been used in **Doctor Who**: just a year before, *The Greatest Show in the Galaxy* (1988) had Captain Cook looking even more the type, pith helmet and all, though Redvers proves to be more of a gentleman than Cook.

As a character, Nimrod is a fusion of multiple types. His hunched manner of walking is meant to remind you of the servant character you would see in a Gothic novel or horror movie, like Igor from the movie *Frankenstein* (1931) – except that that character was actually named Fritz and people only remember him as Igor because they are in fact remembering Mel Brooks' parody *Young Frankenstein* (1974). Another aspect of Nimrod's character is the native plucked from his home and brought back to 'civilisation' to serve. Characters like this often showed up in the same kind of fiction as the gentleman explorer. They would serve as the explorer's native guide and prove so useful and trustworthy they were brought home. An example would be the Hottentot Hans from the **Allan Quatermain** books, and the tradition continued as Gothic fiction crossed the Atlantic and transitioned into pulp fiction, with characters such as Tonto in **The Lone Ranger** (1933-54) and Kato in **The Green Hornet** (1936-52) and beyond. Admittedly, Nimrod's native land is a bit farther away than most, and that's one of the things that sets him apart from others of the type. Having been separated from it by time instead of distance, he can never go home. No time in *Ghost Light* is given over to Nimrod contemplating how he is the last of his people, but the Doctor will more than make up for that, starting in 2005.

¹ Beginning with *The Pioneers: Or The Sources of the Susquehanna; a Descriptive Tale* (1823).

² Arthur Conan Doyle would have been 24 at the time of *Ghost Light*. His first **Sherlock Holmes** story, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) would not be published until four years later, and the first **Challenger** novel, *The Lost World* (1912) not until nearly 30 years after Redvers disappeared off the face of the earth.

³ First appearing in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885).

⁴ 'Hunting Tigers Out in Indiah' (1969) by The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band is just one example.

Given the 'native servant' aspect of the character, it is no real surprise that, by the end of the story, Nimrod rejects serving Josiah and Light and seeks advice from, and allegiance with, Redvers. In effect, he is rejecting two genre roles, servant to a mad scientist in a horror story and superstitious native, for a genre role with better prospects.