

Guys & Dolls

By Keith Hackwood

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Dolls. We all know and remember them, maybe we owned some, or had a particular favourite - an external unifying centre all of our own. Maybe we lavished it with love, treasured it, named it – told it every secret, every feeling we had. Then one day we put it away, never to take it up again. Neglected and forgotten, yet always connected to our deepest emotions and memories, perhaps that lost doll sits there to this day. Perhaps not. Question here is what would happen if that were true for your PC, or for that grizzled necromancer over there, or for the little beggar child you passed on the street? And what if the doll had a will of its own? Welcome to the twisted world of animate toys, their owners, and their unstoppable quest for attention.

The Unusual Suspects

Penelope Nizzen is a twelve year old girl from Cheaplore, the poor quarter of Leng City. Orphaned at birth, she has lived her short life from hand to mouth, surviving on her wits and by her canny knack for appearing just how others wish to see her. A successful beggar, Penny now operates alone across town, begging for alms from temples and guildhouses, evoking pity from even the stoniest of passersby. As you meet her, she is sitting by the steps of the mercantile hall, cradling a bundle of rags. As you pass she asks for a copper or two, perhaps you pay her, perhaps not.

Penny is a twelve year old human female, AC11, HP3, primes in Charisma (isn't she sweet, poor thing?), Wisdom (no flies on our Penny) and Dexterity (watch your pockets). Although frail looking, she is more robust than she appears (and is very capable of surviving alone in an urban setting). Penny is by nature deeply neutral, understandably preoccupied with meeting her own needs. However, the doll she cradles under those rags, and whom she calls '**Virula**', is quite another proposition. Virula is a foot or so long, with an old fashioned body of stuffed gauze and hessian and a painted wooden head. She appears inert, but is in fact an animated doll (AL:LE, AC6, HD2(d6), HP8, Save P, Move: 18ft, *Move Silently* capability, Att: her arm is basically a needle (1d4 dam) with a cork hand which she removes and replaces at will, she can emit an inaudible scream (causes 1d4 dam + *fear* effect each round), and she can use her gaze to distract or control (as per *hypnotism*)).

Virula comes to life upon Penny speaking a command word known only to her, though in her history (Virula is at least a hundred years old) there have been many moments when Virula has animated through her own innate magical capacity. Being evil, Virula attempts over time to bend Penny to her own path, leading her often into situations of ill-intent or seducing her to go further than she intended (recently at Virula's impulsive instigation, Penny pushed another beggar child in front of a cart, where she broke her arm; wracked with guilt Penny swore not to use Virula again, until hunger got the better of her and she sent her out to steal bread). Virula feeds off being needed, she creates dependency and will use any means to inculcate her current owner with fear, to control them and their actions, and to use anything she learns against them.

Often preying upon children, Virula is the culmination of generations of distorted desires and needs. Her hallmarks are spite, subterfuge, resentment, rage and revenge. Anyone encountering Penny has a base 25% chance of triggering the interest of Virula, modified by context (so 50% if Virula is animate at the time, or if Penny becomes particularly interested). Once animated, Virula is active for 1d12 rounds before her energies fade and she becomes still again, unless she is able to lap at fresh blood. In this latter case, the taste of blood acts as a reanimation and she can function for another 1d12 rounds.

Virula is believed to be one of the so-called 'Argvain dolls' crafted generations ago by an enslaved sorcerer and puppeteer. A dozen were made, according to legend, and most are thought lost over the years, to domestic tragedy or wear and tear. The dolls were enchanted and designed to be playmates and companions for the offspring of wealthy Argvain slave merchants (originally all were lawful good by alignment). However, Virula has slid, through her many owners and experiences, into an altogether different place – and is by now a total corruption of her original purpose. She seeks to spill blood, create suspicion, jealousy and hatred, and everywhere to sow the seeds of discontent. She may, through Penny, follow a PC or party and attempt to steal from them or cause disputes in any way possible; or she may attack, stealthily, as a doll-assassin might do. Her abilities are limited, and her physical form now quite frail (split seams, a lost hand, loose head) hence her immediate need is to have someone with the means to pay (i.e. not Penny), get her repaired and re-stitched. She is capable of great guile, deceit and brutality in the pursuit of this end. She may detect as magical to the right spell-user, but her alignment (should it ever be checked) will produce no result – instead, she will appear as a hazy succession of memories based on the alignments of her previous owners (most of whom, of course, she has ruined or even dispatched entirely).

Hilbertix Bonemeal (AC11, AL:CN, L3, HP8, Primes in INT, CHA & DEX) is a failed sorcerer from the east, the third son of a wealthy landowner, highly disenchanted with his lot in life. Leaving his studies at the College of Arcane Medicines in Poule, the twenty-six year old Bonemeal eloped with his lover, the aspiring bard Paradine Mudel. However, Paradine contracted the ague and died last winter in agony. Unable to contain his grief at her loss (and his own narcissistic rage at having failed utterly to save her) Hilbertix threw himself into the necromantic arts – studying furiously, reapplying his previous years of arcane research to this new end. So far, in his shack at the edge of town, Hilbertix is no nearer raising his dead love (whom he keeps beneath the floorboards in a trough of ice-melt) – though he has, unintentionally, managed to animate her favourite bear, **Cordy**. By turns despairing and depressed to the point of inaction, or else seized by urgency and apt to work for days without sleep, Hilbertix has lost all contact with reality beyond his immediate surroundings. Meanwhile Cordy, discarded in a recent depressive episode, has developed a rudimentary will of his own.

Cordy is a two-foot tall stuffed bear, made with real bear fur, and though his muzzle turns up in a glib childish smile, his teeth are real enough to be dangerous, and his paws have recently taken on a new sharpness (AC11, AL:NE, HD2(d6), HP9, Save P, Move: 30ft, *Move Silently*). He can attack with a claw/claw/bite (1d2/1d2/1d2+1) and is surprisingly strong, especially when in motion. He has already bitten and mauled Hilbertix, hence being thrown out. Cordy is animate by night, but is light sensitive, and hence tends to withdraw in daytime. Hilbertix, when in a more active phase, may seek the lost bear – since it reminds him of his mission to raise Paradine. However, Cordy has had a taste of life and freedom and is bent on maximising this experience – the toy bear has truly gone feral. Local dogs and foxes have been showing up dead, with heads bitten off and claw marks aplenty; last week a toddler was mauled and almost died, whilst her mother gathered in the washing at dusk. People are becoming nervous and suspicious, and Hilbertix is already being pointed at as a suspect.

Poitrenau of Klip (AC15, HD6(d8), HP31, Move:20ft, Save P, AL:N, Att: by weapon, limited two-handed capability, or two-weapon use with no penalty) is a nickname given by squires at the court of Jerome to the mannequin used in jousting practice. This man-sized figure, with outstretched arms, is built out of hardwood and iron plate, and designed to take fulsome blows by charging knights at practice with lance, cavalry axe or sword. For years Klip has stood in the tilt-yard surrounded by sawdust and sweat. But recently, following the summer's tourney, **Sir Jerome Flaxen**, gentleman knight of the manor at Klip, had the mannequin refurbished. As well as new welds

and a general tightening, and the freshest livery of red and green paint, the artisan hired to do the work replaced Poitrenau's head. However, the helm which he placed upon the carved wooden head, which he'd taken from a store of old kit in the tourney stable, was in fact a *helm of animation*. The result was that during the next practice joust, having been hit with the lance, old Poitrenau the blade-bag dummy, reared up and struck with flail and sword and brought down a charger at full tilt. The stunned squire, Tepran, fell with great alarm, and before he could raise himself, Poitrenau had cut him to pieces, delivering the coup de grace through Tepran's visor.

The newly animated mannequin then stomped through the tilt-yard gates and disappeared into the countryside, and has not been seen since. Sir Jerome is known to be offering a reward for the return of the dummy and the helm, and news of these events has attracted a good many others to the area, with intentions of their own.

Enjoy using/adapting these unfortunates and their awkwardly animated toys however you may choose.

KH

13 May 2009