



This Edition

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EDITORIAL

In this week's edition, we see another Slicer Chronicle, *Mind Snatcher* by Todd Nelsen, plus the concluding part of John L. Campbell's *A Night With Angeline*; another episode of Thomas C Hewitt's epic poem *Ayame's Love* and the third part of *The House of Skulls*.

In *Days of High Adventure* we meet *People of the Dark* in a Robert E Howard story of reincarnation featuring the sinister Little People. As promised, we have *Hunter*, a short story by Terry Grimwood, author of "The Places Between" (Pendragon Press) and "Bloody War" (Eibonvale Press), and proprietor of [The Exaggerated Press](#). We also have *Asphyxiation*, by Jay Sizemore, a poet from Nashville who is currently working on a novel, and has also written a few scripts "for movies no one will ever see."

Meanwhile, *After London* continues its description of a world fallen into barbarism.

-Gavin Chappell

THE SLICER CHRONICLES:
Mind Snatcher by Todd Nelsen

Rape, murder, it's just a shot away.
-- The Rolling Stones

Chloe, an attractive girl, and not a day over nineteen, plopped down on her daddy's couch and "plugged in." There was some shopping she wanted to do later in the day, and she wanted to browse the merchandise before she headed on down to the store and made her purchases with Daddy's money. She tapped the button on her temple, patiently waited out the loading time; she was in no hurry, and found herself --

"What's going on --?"

Her hands were tied.

And her feet, her feet were tied, too.

Instinctively, she pulled against the bindings. Although she was clothed before she had started surfing, she was naked to her bottom undies, it seemed. Her long, dark hair flayed back from her bare shoulders and chest, her arms and legs spread to a wide V; the toes of her feet pointed upward to --

A sun?

Hold on a second, she thought, this isn't *my* interface. *My* interface is a moonlit garden, beneath a veranda, on a sandy beach. There's a young and handsome waiter (who bore a striking resemblance to Clark Gable, she was quick to add) that served her piña coladas and --

The sun winked at her.

She closed her eyes, closing it out. "There's been a mistake," she said. "This is *NOT* my interface."

* * *

First, she tried to will herself out; when that proved unsuccessful, she pulled at her wrists, attempting to get a free hand to her temple and manually remove herself from the Net. Realizing she was helpless, and would have to remain like this until somebody came along and "untied" her (the ropes weren't real), she waited. She didn't look at the sky a second time. Some folks had strange notions of NeuNet life, it seemed. A winking sun wasn't on her agenda today -- or any day, for that matter. Save that for the freakazoids. No, she was probably stuck in some child's playpen, she thought to herself, or much worse a retard's. She knew one, by the way. A half-wit. A dummy. One lived down the street from her. He'd just turned thirty, liked to color with crayons, make funny sounds with his nose, and walk around bare-ass in the backyard.

Chloe shuddered.

NOT cool, she thought.

But rather than panic, which she seldom did, she decided to take in her surroundings.

* * *

Her surroundings were familiar to her, in the casual, NeuNet sort of way. She was in a clearing. Surrounding it were trees, all virtual, of course. The sky was a typical blue (she could see it on the skyline without looking back at Mr. "Winky"), and there were clouds drifting overhead. Beneath her was a --

You've got to be kidding me, she thought. Is that what I think it is? She twisted and

stretched her neck, attempting to get a better view.

Is that a goddamn *pentagram*?

It seemed it was. Chalked in what looked like white flour was the telltale sign of the devil's mark beneath her.

She sighed. What does a girl have to do to get a day of shopping in?

Not only was she stuck in some retard's interface, tied to the ground with ropes and stakes (she saw the stakes now, two for her wrists, and two for her ankles), but the guy was a devil worshipping pervert!

Chloe was a sensible girl, however. She knew there was a rational explanation for just about everything, even --

Then she saw it, watching her from the cover of the trees. She knew it was watching because its eyes were as big as saucers.

* * *

Chloe waited, hoping her visitor would say something, anything, when finally, when she felt she could stand it no longer, she said the first thing that came to her.

"Help me."

But her voice sounded small.

Chloe swallowed hard and tried again. "I really could use a hand, you know," she said. "Something has gone terribly wrong. I shouldn't be here."

It blinked then, and vanished, stepping behind a tree... only to reappear behind another, a little closer to her now.

Was this some sort of game? Chloe wondered.

"Are you going to help me or not?" she asked, giggling; it looked silly to her, vanishing from tree to tree.

But instead of answering, it vanished, yet again, to reappear, once more, at the edge of the enclosure. It stood there, for a moment, then when it seemed as if it might stand there and watch her forever, it started to her.

But Chloe, suddenly conscious of her virtual nakedness, and the very unladylike position of her legs, decided she didn't want the help, after all.

"Go away! Shoo!" she said.

As it approached, she saw it was black from head to toe. Its eyes, large and wide, felt like they were sizing her up -- evaluating. She had a notion to shut it out, just as she had done with Mr. Winky, then a thought occurred...

"Did you bring me here?" she asked.

It jerked its head up and down, nodding. Yes.

"You the one who tied me up, too?"

Again, it nodded. Yes.

"Will you untie me, please?"

It shook its head from left-to-right. Nope.

"Pretty pwwwease with sugar on top?"

Still, no.

Chloe sighed. "Well, you can't keep me here forever," she remarked. "What do you intend to do with me?"

It couldn't hurt her, she knew; to her knowledge, the Net protected against it. Besides, her daddy would sue NeuNet's pants off, if something *bad* happened. Still, why she had ended up here, rather than her own sandy beach, was perplexing.

Where was Clark Gable? she thought. Her pineapple piña colada?

As it continued to eye her, she looked it over. She glanced to its shoulders, black, its

chest, black, its stomach, black... black was a very dull color, in her opinion... but when she reached its waist, she averted her eyes.

And for good reason.

An enormous penis stood erect there, between its legs.

She was surprised she hadn't noticed it before. It *was* there before, wasn't it? She wasn't sure now.

"Listen," she said. "I'm not into *that*."

But if it was the least bit concerned of her opinion of it, it didn't show it. In fact, she sensed it was pleased she had seen it.

"And what's with the pentagram?" she asked, remembering it, too. "NOT cool," she said.

But black head, as she thought of it now, continued to stare, its eyes taking her in, and said nothing.

This, of course, annoyed Chloe further.

"Go cyber-fuck somebody else, freak-o!" she shouted. The f-word wasn't a word Chloe *ever* used, but considering the circumstances. She wanted it away from her. "I'm not interested, okay!"

But when it started to lean in towards her, Chloe's mood changed. She was no longer annoyed; she was --

"I mean it! Go away! Leave me alone, you fucking freak. Don't touch --!"

* * *

Chloe never lost consciousness; she was there to the very end.

* * *

High above them, Mr. Winky smiled, very, very, very, very happy.

* * *

"How's he doing it?"

"I'm thinking he firewalls his victims and sends them a virus of some sort."

"Is that even possible?"

"Yes, I believe so, but it's only a theory. We don't have much to go on."

"Any idea who this guy might be?"

"None, but it'd have to be somebody with knowledge in the field. It won't be your ordinary Joe."

"I want this guy, Slicer. Sixteen victims is sixteen too many. Understand?"

"Understood."

"Good, you have us at your disposal. Get to work."

"Right."

* * *

Thirty-seven year old Jerry Tuttle (aka Mr. Winky) tapped his temple, and in nine seconds -- Tuttle had found a way to cut the time by nearly 25% -- was removed from Net space. Zipping his pants, his prick no longer hard, he walked to the fridge of his small apartment and reached for a jar of pickles, opened them, and began feeding his pimply face.

The programmer was excited -- exhilarated, in fact.

It had worked.

How many was that now? Sixteen? Seventeen? He was losing track.

Too bad she had to die, he thought. He'd liked her. But he liked all of them, didn't he?

He closed his eyes and thought of the new girl, the one he'd met two weeks ago and was casing. Her name was Tiffany, and she had long, pretty legs. She was prettier than Chloe. She had a better personality, too.

Tuttle was *sure* she was a screamer.

And she was much, much younger...

PEOPLE OF THE DARK by Robert E Howard

Part One

I came to Dagon's Cave to kill Richard Brent. I went down the dusky avenues made by the towering trees, and my mood well-matched the primitive grimness of the scene.

The approach to Dagon's Cave is always dark, for the mighty branches and thick leaves shut out the sun, and now the somberness of my own soul made the shadows seem more ominous and gloomy than was natural.

Not far away I heard the slow wash of the waves against the tall cliffs, but the sea itself was out of sight, masked by the dense oak forest. The darkness and the stark gloom of my surroundings gripped my shadowed soul as I passed beneath the ancient branches--as I came out into a narrow glade and saw the mouth of the ancient cavern before me. I paused, scanning the cavern's exterior and the dim reaches of the silent oaks.

The man I hated had not come before me! I was in time to carry out my grim intent. For a moment my resolution faltered, then like a wave there surged over me the fragrance of Eleanor Bland, a vision of wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. I clenched my hands until the knuckles showed white, and instinctively touched the wicked snub-nosed revolver whose weight sagged my coat pocket.

But for Richard Brent, I felt certain I had already won this woman, desire for whom made my waking hours a torment and my sleep a torture. Whom did she love? She would not say; I did not believe she knew. Let one of us go away, I thought, and she would turn to the other. And I was going to simplify matters for her--and for myself. By chance I had overheard my blond English rival remark that he intended coming to lonely Dagon's Cave on an idle exploring outing--alone.

I am not by nature criminal. I was born and raised in a hard country, and have lived most of my life on the raw edges of the world, where a man took what he wanted, if he could, and mercy was a virtue little known. But it was a torment that racked me day and night that sent me out to take the life of Richard Brent. I have lived hard, and violently, perhaps. When love overtook me, it also was fierce and violent. Perhaps I was not wholly sane, what with my love for Eleanor Bland and my hatred for Richard Brent. Under any other circumstances, I would have been glad to call him friend--a fine, rangy, upstanding young fellow, clear-eyed and strong. But he stood in the way of my desire and he must die.

I stepped into the dimness of the cavern and halted. I had never before visited Dagon's Cave, yet a vague sense of misplaced familiarity troubled me as I gazed on the high arching roof, the even stone walls and the dusty floor. I shrugged my shoulders, unable to place the elusive feeling; doubtless it was evoked by a similarity to caverns in the mountain country of the American Southwest where I was born and spent my childhood.

And yet I knew that I had never seen a cave like this one, whose regular aspect gave rise to myths that it was not a natural cavern, but had been hewn from the solid rock ages ago by the tiny hands of the mysterious Little People, the prehistoric beings of British legend. The whole countryside thereabouts was a haunt for ancient folk lore.

The country folk were predominantly Celtic; here the Saxon invaders had never prevailed, and the legends reached back, in that long-settled countryside, further than anywhere else in England--back beyond the coming of the Saxons, aye, and incredibly beyond that distant age, beyond the coming of the Romans, to those unbelievably ancient days when the native Britons warred with black-haired Irish pirates.

The Little People, of course, had their part in the lore. Legend said that this cavern was one of their last strongholds against the conquering Celts, and hinted at lost tunnels, long fallen in or blocked up, connecting the cave with a network of subterranean corridors which honeycombed the hills. With these chance meditations vying idly in my mind with grimmer speculations, I passed through the outer chamber of the cavern and entered a narrow tunnel, which, I knew by former descriptions, connected with a larger room.

It was dark in the tunnel, but not too dark for me to make out the vague, half-defaced outlines of mysterious etchings on the stone walls. I ventured to switch on my electric torch and examine them more closely. Even in their dimness I was repelled by their abnormal and revolting character. Surely no men cast in human mold as we know it, scratched those grotesque obscenities.

The Little People--I wondered if those anthropologists were correct in their theory of a squat Mongoloid aboriginal race, so low in the scale of evolution as to be scarcely human, yet possessing a distinct, though repulsive, culture of their own. They had vanished before the invading races, theory said, forming the base of all Aryan legends of trolls, elves, dwarfs and witches. Living in caves from the start, these aborigines had retreated farther and farther into the caverns of the hills, before the conquerors, vanishing at last entirely, though folklore fancy pictures their descendants still dwelling in the lost chasms far beneath the hills, loathsome survivors of an outworn age.

I snapped off the torch and passed through the tunnel, to come out into a sort of doorway which seemed entirely too symmetrical to have been the work of nature. I was looking into a vast dim cavern, at a somewhat lower level than the outer chamber, and again I shuddered with a strange alien sense of familiarity. A short flight of steps led down from the tunnel to the floor of the cavern--tiny steps, too small for normal human feet, carved into the solid stone. Their edges were greatly worn away, as if by ages of use. I started the descent--my foot slipped suddenly. I instinctively knew what was coming--it was all in part with that strange feeling of familiarity--but I could not catch myself. I fell headlong down the steps and struck the stone floor with a crash that blotted out my senses...

* * *

Slowly consciousness returned to me, with a throbbing of my head and a sensation of bewilderment. I lifted a hand to my head and found it caked with blood. I had received a blow, or had taken a fall, but so completely had my wits been knocked out of me that my mind was an absolute blank. Where I was, who I was, I did not know. I looked about, blinking in the dim light, and saw that I was in a wide, dusty cavern. I stood at the foot of a short flight of steps which led upward into some kind of tunnel. I ran my hand dazedly through my square-cut black mane, and my eyes wandered over my massive naked limbs and powerful torso. I was clad, I noticed absently, in a sort of loincloth, from the girdle of which swung an empty scabbard, and leathern sandals were on my feet.

Then I saw an object lying at my feet, and stooped and took it up. It was a heavy iron sword, whose broad blade was darkly stained. My fingers fitted instinctively about its hilt with the familiarity of long usage. Then suddenly I remembered and laughed to think that a fall on his head should render me, Conan of the reavers, so completely daft. Aye, it all came back to me now. It had been a raid on the Britons, on whose coasts we continually swooped with torch and sword, from the island called Eireann. That day we of the black-haired Gael had swept suddenly down on a coastal village in our long, low ships and in the hurricane of battle which followed, the Britons had at last given up the stubborn contest and retreated, warriors, women and bairns, into the deep shadows of the oak forests, whither we seldom dared follow.

But I had followed, for there was a girl of my foes whom I desired with a burning passion, a lithe, slim young creature with wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. Her name was Tamera--well I knew it, for there was trade between the races as well as war, and I had been in the villages of the Britons as a peaceful visitor, in times of rare truce.

I saw her white half-clad body flickering among the trees as she ran with the swiftness of a doe, and I followed, panting with fierce eagerness. Under the dark shadows of the gnarled oaks she fled, with me in close pursuit, while far away behind us died out the shouts of slaughter and the clashing of swords. Then we ran in silence, save for her quick labored panting, and I was so close behind her as we emerged into a narrow glade before a somber-mouthed cavern, that I caught her flying golden tresses with one mighty hand. She sank down with a despairing wail, and even so, a shout echoed her cry and I wheeled quickly to face a rangy young Briton who sprang from among the trees, the light of desperation in his eyes.

"Vertorix!" the girl wailed, her voice breaking in a sob, and fiercer rage welled up in me, for I knew the lad was her lover.

"Run for the forest, Tamera!" he shouted, and leaped at me as a panther leaps, his bronze ax whirling like a flashing wheel about his head. And then sounded the clangor of strife and the hard-drawn panting of combat.

The Briton was as tall as I, but he was lithe where I was massive. The advantage of sheer muscular power was mine, and soon he was on the defensive, striving desperately to parry my heavy strokes with his ax. Hammering on his guard like a smith on an anvil, I pressed him relentlessly, driving him irresistibly before me. His chest heaved, his breath came in labored gasps, his blood dripped from scalp, chest and thigh where my whistling blade had cut the skin, and all but gone home. As I redoubled my strokes and he bent and swayed beneath them like a sapling in a storm, I heard the girl cry: "Vertorix! Vertorix! The cave! Into the cave!"

I saw his face pale with a fear greater than that induced by my hacking sword.

"Not there!" he gasped. "Better a clean death! In Il-marenin's name, girl, run into the forest and save yourself!"

"I will not leave you!" she cried. "The cave! It is our one chance!"

I saw her flash past us like a flying wisp of white and vanish in the cavern, and with a despairing cry, the youth launched a wild desperate stroke that nigh cleft my skull. As I staggered beneath the blow I had barely parried, he sprang away, leaped into the cavern after the girl and vanished in the gloom.

With a maddened yell that invoked all my grim Gaelic gods, I sprang recklessly after them, not reckoning if the Briton lurked beside the entrance to brain me as I rushed in. But a quick glance showed the chamber empty and a wisp of white disappearing through a dark doorway in the back wall.

I raced across the cavern and came to a sudden halt as an ax licked out of the gloom of the entrance and whistled perilously close to my black-maned head. I gave back suddenly. Now the advantage was with Vertorix, who stood in the narrow mouth of the corridor where I could hardly come at him without exposing myself to the devastating stroke of his ax.

I was near frothing with fury and the sight of a slim white form among the deep shadows behind the warrior drove me into a frenzy. I attacked savagely but warily, thrusting venomously at my foe, and drawing back from his strokes. I wished to draw him out into a wide lunge, avoid it and run him through before he could recover his balance. In the open I could have beat him down by sheer power and heavy blows, but here I could only use the point and that at a disadvantage; I always preferred the edge. But I was stubborn; if I could not come at him with a finishing stroke, neither could he or the girl escape me while I kept him hemmed in the tunnel.

It must have been the realization of this fact that prompted the girl's action, for she said something to Vertorix about looking for a way leading out, and though he cried out fiercely forbidding her to venture away into the darkness, she turned and ran swiftly down the tunnel to vanish in the dimness. My wrath rose appallingly and I nearly got my head split in my eagerness to bring down my foe before she found a means for their escape.

Then the cavern echoed with a terrible scream and Vertorix cried out like a man death-stricken, his face ashy in the gloom. He whirled, as if he had forgotten me and my sword, and raced down the tunnel like a madman, shrieking Tamera's name. From far away, as if from the bowels of the earth, I seemed to hear her answering cry, mingled with a strange sibilant clamor that electrified me with nameless but instinctive horror. Then silence fell, broken only by Vertorix's frenzied cries, receding farther and farther into the earth.

Recovering myself I sprang into the tunnel and raced after the Briton as recklessly as he had run after the girl. And to give me my due, red-handed reaver though I was, cutting down my rival from behind was less in my mind than discovering what dread thing had Tamera in its clutches.

As I ran along I noted absently that the sides of the tunnel were scrawled with monstrous pictures, and realized suddenly and creepily that this must be the dread Cavern of the Children of the Night, tales of which had crossed the narrow sea to resound horrifically in the ears of the Gaels. Terror of me must have ridden Tamera hard to have driven her into the cavern shunned by her people, where it was said, lurked the survivors of that grisly race which inhabited the land before the coming of the Picts and Britons, and which had fled before them into the unknown caverns of the hills.

Ahead of me the tunnel opened into a wide chamber, and I saw the white form of Vertorix glimmer momentarily in the semidarkness and vanish in what appeared to be the entrance of a corridor opposite the mouth of the tunnel I had just traversed. Instantly there sounded a short, fierce shout and the crash of a hard-driven blow, mixed with the hysterical screams of a girl and a medley of serpentlike hissing that made my hair bristle. And at that instant I shot out of the tunnel, running at full speed, and realized too late the floor of the cavern lay several feet below the level of the tunnel. My flying feet missed the tiny steps and I crashed terrifically on the solid stone floor.

Now as I stood in the semidarkness, rubbing my aching head, all this came back to me, and I stared fearsomely across the vast chamber at that black cryptic corridor into which Tamera and her lover had disappeared, and over which silence lay like a pall. Gripping my sword, I warily crossed the great still cavern and peered into the corridor. Only a denser darkness met my eyes. I entered, striving to pierce the gloom, and as my foot slipped on a wide wet smear on the stone floor, the raw acrid scent of fresh-spilled blood met my nostrils. Someone or something had died there, either the young Briton or his unknown attacker.

I stood there uncertainly, all the supernatural fears that are the heritage of the Gael rising in my primitive soul. I could turn and stride out of these accursed mazes, into the clear sunlight and down to the clean blue sea where my comrades, no doubt, impatiently awaited me after the routing of the Britons. Why should I risk my life among these grisly rat dens? I was eaten with curiosity to know what manner of beings haunted the cavern, and who were called the Children of the Night by the Britons, but in it was my love for the yellow-haired girl which drove me down that dark tunnel--and love her I did, in my way, and would have been kind to her, had I carried her away to my island haunt.

I walked softly along the corridor, blade ready. What sort of creatures the Children of the Night were, I had no idea, but the tales of the Britons had lent them a distinctly inhuman nature.

The darkness closed around me as I advanced, until I was moving in utter blackness. My groping left hand encountered a strangely carved doorway, and at that instant something

hissed like a viper beside me and slashed fiercely at my thigh. I struck back savagely and felt my blind stroke crunch home, and something fell at my feet and died. What thing I had slain in the dark I could not know, but it must have been at least partly human because the shallow gash in my thigh had been made with a blade of some sort, and not by fangs or talons. And I sweated with horror, for the gods know, the hissing voice of the Thing had resembled no human tongue I had ever heard.

And now in the darkness ahead of me I heard the sound repeated, mingled with horrible slitherings, as if numbers of reptilian creatures were approaching. I stepped quickly into the entrance my groping hand had discovered and came near repeating my headlong fall, for instead of letting into another level corridor, the entrance gave onto a flight of dwarfish steps on which I floundered wildly.

Recovering my balance I went on cautiously, groping along the sides of the shaft for support. I seemed to be descending into the very bowels of the earth, but I dared not turn back. Suddenly, far below me, I glimpsed a faint eerie light. I went on, perforce, and came to a spot where the shaft opened into another great vaulted chamber; and I shrank back, aghast.

In the center of the chamber stood a grim, black altar; it had been rubbed all over with a sort of phosphorous, so that it glowed dully, lending a semi-illumination to the shadowy cavern. Towering behind it on a pedestal of human skulls, lay a cryptic black object, carved with mysterious hieroglyphics. The Black Stone! The ancient, ancient Stone before which, the Britons said, the Children of the Night bowed in gruesome worship, and whose origin was lost in the black mists of a hideously distant past. Once, legend said, it had stood in that grim circle of monoliths called Stonehenge, before its votaries had been driven like chaff before the bows of the Picts.

But I gave it but a passing, shuddering glance. Two figures lay, bound with rawhide thongs, on the glowing black altar. One was Tamera; the other was Vertorix, bloodstained and disheveled. His bronze ax, crusted with clotted blood, lay near the altar. And before the glowing stone squatted Horror.

Though I had never seen one of those ghoulish aborigines, I knew this thing for what it was, and shuddered. It was a man of a sort, but so low in the stage of life that its distorted humanness was more horrible than its bestiality.

Erect, it could not have been five feet in height. Its body was scrawny and deformed, its head disproportionately large. Lank snaky hair fell over a square inhuman face with flabby writhing lips that bared yellow fangs, flat spreading nostrils and great yellow slant eyes. I knew the creature must be able to see in the dark as well as a cat. Centuries of skulking in dim caverns had lent the race terrible and inhuman attributes. But the most repellent feature was its skin: scaly, yellow and mottled, like the hide of a serpent. A loincloth made of a real snake's skin girt its lean loins, and its taloned hands gripped a short stone-tipped spear and a sinister-looking mallet of polished flint.

So intently was it gloating over its captives, it evidently had not heard my stealthy descent. As I hesitated in the shadows of the shaft, far above me I heard a soft sinister rustling that chilled the blood in my veins. The Children were creeping down the shaft behind me, and I was trapped. I saw other entrances opening on the chamber, and I acted, realizing that an alliance with Vertorix was our only hope. Enemies though we were, we were men, cast in the same mold, trapped in the lair of these indescribable monstrosities.

As I stepped from the shaft, the horror beside the altar jerked up his head and glared full at me. And as he sprang up, I leaped and he crumpled, blood spurting, as my heavy sword split his reptilian heart. But even as he died, he gave tongue in an abhorrent shriek which was echoed far up the shaft. In desperate haste I cut Vertorix's bonds and dragged him to his feet. And I turned to Tamera, who in that dire extremity did not shrink from me, but looked up at

me with pleading, terror-dilated eyes. Vertorix wasted no time in words, realizing chance had made allies of us. He snatched up his ax as I freed the girl.

“We can’t go up the shaft,” he explained swiftly; “we’ll have the whole pack upon us quickly. They caught Tamera as she sought for an exit, and overpowered me by sheer numbers when I followed. They dragged us hither and all but that carrion scattered--bearing word of the sacrifice through all their burrows, I doubt not. Il-marenin alone knows how many of my people, stolen in the night, have died on that altar. We must take our chance in one of these tunnels--all lead to Hell! Follow me!”

Seizing Tamera’s hand he ran fleetly into the nearest tunnel and I followed. A glance back into the chamber before a turn in the corridor blotted it from view showed a revolting horde streaming out of the shaft. The tunnel slanted steeply upward, and suddenly ahead of us we saw a bar of gray light. But the next instant our cries of hope changed to curses of bitter disappointment. There was daylight, aye, drifting in through a cleft in the vaulted roof, but far, far above our reach. Behind us the pack gave tongue exultingly. And I halted.

“Save yourselves if you can,” I growled. “Here I make my stand. They can see in the dark and I cannot. Here at least I can see them. Go!”

But Vertorix halted also. “Little use to be hunted like rats to our doom. There is no escape. Let us meet our fate like men.”

Tamera cried out, wringing her hands, but she clung to her lover.

“Stand behind me with the girl,” I grunted. “When I fall, dash out her brains with your ax lest they take her alive again. Then sell your own life as high as you may, for there is none to avenge us.”

His keen eyes met mine squarely.

“We worship different gods, reaver,” he said, “but all gods love brave men. Mayhap we shall meet again, beyond the Dark.”

“Hail and farewell, Briton!” I growled, and our right hands gripped like steel.

“Hail and farewell, Gael!”

AYAME'S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

4.

The metal felt cold in Ayame's hands.
As Carlton passed it she could feel the years
and his grip hesitated to loosen
like the ore that held the iron of the steel
which he had used to kill many a man

Ayame was shocked that she could see peace
in the eyes deep set like jewels in Carlton's
brow that was sculpted by revenge and fear
after fourteen years he had lost all taste
for blood of men and the negative quest
which led two of his friends to early death
and seemed to achieve very little else

it had been four years now since that hollow day
as steel filled palms the memory clawed her face

One by one those tough years had passed slowly
the children turned hard through hunger and fight
fighting not for revenge but daily need
as in each village they found no respite
from eyes that saw not children but easy
takings from those who as yet were unwise
seeing a nuisance that played in the streets
would not be missed if they didn't survive

At first they had gone in to towns to beg
for food, for money or shelter instead
they were offered vitals as a slaves wages
and shooed out of the towns that could not take
from five lives so small with nothing at all
to give in return for meat bread and corn

With years grew strength and ways with means to ends
but when they grew tired of stealing it was
Carlton who pointed them to the brigands
saying "all that our parents had they have
let us not be thieves but retrieve from them"

So started steps that began to lead back
to the place where their lives were abandoned
and hate was the compass of that track

What artefacts they could still remember
they decided to seek and trace with care
in an effort to find anything that
could precisely point to even one man
that would live off their pain a few years less
which is how one small cup led to two deaths

Ayame had been with them on that day
an odd thing that she remembered was that
the path to the market prickled with rain
and the cold mud softened like leafy pap

Ben was laughing at his shoes with disdain
as the dirt clung to them like leather fat
he said "that's what I get for being vain"

Ben was always well dressed against the odds
he amazed his friends more often than once
transforming their rags in to pristine suits
though needle and theft were all he could use
he would often drag Sean on his night-time trips
and they picked from the garden of the rich

Why Ben and Sean was so close was unclear
Sean would wear anything that kept him warm
liking thick heavy wool throughout the year
his young face was ragged and weather worn
though often was lit with abundant cheer
and that was the look that the mud had spawned
as Ben cursed the ground with a mocking leer
and his freshly cleaned shoes were clean no more
that was how they journeyed in to Brigham
three friends in glee at the miserable damp

The three friends who were the youngest of five
had always seemed to find ways to be light
even the hardest of situations
had not seen their spirits become undone

Brigham was altogether less wholesome
than the mud they had stepped in whilst walking

the three imagined it stood so lonesome
and thrived because it was built on a spring
from which all the worlds selfish actions sprung
that the towns people were the plants that drink
that spring like parasites with greedy gulps
of the selfishness oozing out from it

The grim humour that accompanied them
through the towns gate in to the market
was sat ill at ease in Ayame's thoughts
of a day in her mind so far from joy

That Sean's dark face could turn any darker
was only the first thing to alarm her

Ayame was browsing a market stall
that was how they had found the first three men
from a seller who was willing to talk
about her suppliers to five children
so pleased was she with how much they had bought
she even gave names and where to find them

When they found the men they were drunk as lords
easy to kill and easy to question
and proudly bragging they gave their reports
of all the people they had sent to death
and how they had taken what they'd possessed

Carlton's knife thrust in to the speakers throat

and the other children's knives soon followed
stabbing in pairs at the other two men
the oldest thirteen, the youngest seven

Sean was the one who started that day
noticing a box carved by his father
and in Brigham he noticed first again
although the days end would prove much harder

"Over there" a sharp harsh whisper proclaimed
and roused her out of her market stall world
Sean's finger pointing with a bowman's aim
at a stall out-skirting the market square
his countenance was bitter and sickened
as he opened his mouth and the words formed
"over there they're selling my mother's face
next to battered tin mugs and worn wooden plates
carved on a cup that I used to drink from
in the days before that cup was taken"

There was no kindly woman at that stall
but a man with a face like shards of glass
eyes shark black almost no eyes at all
his limbs like pig iron didn't shift but snapped
in fits like bubbling stock and he sprawled
the chair with arachnid angles that matched
the web coloured dust that lined the shop floor
looming behind the counter like a scratch

Ben voted himself the one who should speak
if the truth had to be gained from deceit
as he was the eldest and the best dressed
and often used words to escape a mess
cocksure, not sure why the others agreed
Ben approached the man planning strategies

Ben browsed the stall confidently humming
commenting to his friends about the goods
he subjected to a cautious thumbing
and then let his interest fall on the cup

“This one cup alone was worth us coming
but alone I fear it is not enough”
then spoke to the owner his tone humbling
“do you have more cups in this type of wood?”
Ben had looked and he obviously didn’t
the man’s shook head was almost a present
“well then, I wonder could you point me to
the person that supplied this cup to you?
it is my wish to buy a dinner set
as my father expects important guests”

The shop keeper eyed him suspiciously
but he seemed suspiciously of everything
so Ben didn’t wonder as to why he
would answer the question with questioning
he asked “does your father live locally?”
Ben gave a solid yes without thinking

the owner of the stall grinned gleefully
“you will have to send my regards to him”
with that the shutters of the stall snapped closed
even the goods were no longer exposed
the three stood there for a minute confused
drop jawed bewilderment, too stunned to move
Sean came first to his senses and so he
suggested they quickly move from the scene

The market square was bumpy with people
as the three began their flee from Brigham
they scuttled the crowd; nervous as beetles
breathlessly waiting for feet to crush them
and panting panic had made them feeble

Ayame was grabbed by the hair and wrenched
through the crowd by two men’s hands with mean pulls
the others pursued them to her defence
in to an alley still filled with the day
and townsfolk who cautiously looked away

People stepped aside like a stage curtain
to reveal Ayame to her two friends
strands of hair clung to her face like hot tar
matted with blood from the opening scars
one man held her to the wall by her throat
whilst the other turned with eyes full of hate

It was the spider-like man from the stall

using his weight to subdue Ayame
with skinny fingers like thin ragged claws
pressing a thumb so that she could not breath
and a palm keeping her chest to the wall

Back at the stall that man had seemed to be
like most adults, to their eyes tall
but next to the man he accompanied
the shape he cut was less impressive
for the other was impressively built
though his height and weight could still find their match
in a sneer that bore its teeth like a rat's
and in eyes that were like mathematics
harsh and uncommonly calculated

"You have two other friends go and get those
as they are older they are more to blame
for the blows that your childish hands smote
against our friends and that you would have again
smote blows against us were you not uncloaked
fetch those friends and we might not slice her face"

Ayame remembered the scene through eyes
half closed through beating half fear stricken wide
she saw Ben sprinting forward knife in hand
abruptly stopped by the blade of that man
that burst from concealment in a brief arc
Ben's scowl cut open, his bone torn to shard

Sean's eyes stared down the alley almost white
almost completely white with sheer hollow
everything was a desert in the light
that seemed to inappropriately glow
around that moment of bad silted time

The man holding Ayame let her go
and turning to the side she saw Sean smile
then her senses blinked black with one hard blow
She woke cold in that same alley that night
almost woken up by the harsh quiet
but dazed and forgetful of what she'd seen
thinking her eyelids were sticky with sleep
she stumbled moaning to Brigham's town gate
and dredged through the heavy mud path again

Her clumsy steps were swayed by the aching
patches of scalp that had been torn blood bald
the stagger still swaying from a hands sting
was acquiring more mud to make her fall
the cold night gave way to morning
though scant in distance was the return walk
bountiful were falls and need for resting
her conscious slipping as her body sprawled

The slump of her shoulders was not defeat
but determination from lack of speed
with the feeling that if she could convey
all the events of the previous day

to the ears of either Ruth or Carlton
then she could give in to exhaustion

The air seemed louder than Ayame's words
it hummed as though it could blister Ruth
as her vision choked on the broken girl

The five had set up camp there in good cheer
Ruth was allocated camp protector
while Carlton had work in a nearby field
the five had agreed that one should stay there
and the peace of solitude had appealed
to Ruth who got tired from Sean and Ben's jokes
that playfully never left her alone
she was a gentle pragmatic person
who only met the days as they moved on
and had tried of having thoughts of revenge
long before the first revenge had commenced

But she had struck knife blows with the others
and as she held Ayame with soft care
violence filled pain as the rain fills gutters

Not even waiting for Carlton's return
Ruth picked up the tale Ayame cluttered
and carried it down to the market square

Her eyes spiked for the face of Sean's mother
falling on that which increased her despair

he clothes she had last seen Ben in were hung
from the stall where the others found the cup
and like her friends she approached the same stall
and quickly followed Ben's chosen course
taken for the asking of one question
and in the back of the stall with two men
taking her dignity first then her life

Two days had passed and there was no sign of Ruth
Carlton had decided that Ayame
had healed enough to allow a pursuit
leaving her with all the food she would need
he set off to find his friends though in truth
he had hope only to find their bodies
but Brigham offered a far crueller proof

At fourteen years of age he stood six foot
and as tall as him was the rod he clutched
it was a farming tool for planting seeds
which he had raised many times in the fields
where its pointed end would puncture the ground

Carlton surveyed the market place and frowned
he had looked for hours and found nothing
to make it worse no-one would answer him
or would swear in return for his asking

The sunlight with his hopes began to dim
the crowd in the market like smoke to thin

and drinking house lights became shadows kin
the town gates closing and locking him in
cold air and hopelessness starting to sting

Carlton trawled his pockets for a meals worth
of money and ate by a tavern's hearth

Suspicion of strangers filled the words
of drinking voices that Carlton heard
rumours of violence in conversations
offering him no useful information

As his stomach filled so did the tavern
the air thickening with chatter and clinks
red faces glowed more than the fire that burned
to warm the loud voices that held the drinks

In this unlikely setting Carlton heard
one voice in the room becoming distinct

The voice was talking about a girl
who seemed like Ruth and spoke as she did
Her words were used to Garnish their bragging
from their chat he gathered what had happened

As the men left the bar Carlton followed
and when the door of their dwelling was known
he killed them both before they turned the key

Inside he found only one of the three
the upstairs rooms were as unsightly
as the two bodies that lay at the door
the two men had still not moved Ruth's body
it lay in a room with nothing at all
no furniture or carpet could be seen
only her and the burnt and battered Sean
murmuring to himself as if in sleep
he was barely able to stand or walk
yet seeing Carlton he was able to
help him by taking a shoulder to Ruth

As they straggled through the night-time town streets
the tavern out-spills that passed gave cheers
thinking the three were a party of youths
who'd taken more drink than they were used to

Ayame could remember the tale well
as well as the day that she had first heard it
how uncomfortably those words first had fell
when the joy and loss of two friends were mixed
hating her wounds as they stole what she felt
how Sean's face had blood soaked paper for skin
how Sean watched Ruth and was powerless to help
and how emotions flailed like dying limbs

The steel clasped her hands to close the revenge
it pawed at a man already half dead
and with a sigh Ayame felt steel thuds

heavy as sorrow soften flesh to blood
as the skull broke with blows so did her needs
shattered splinters lay broken and empty

A NIGHT WITH ANGELINE by John L Campbell

From across the room she smiled at him once more, revealing a hint of two slender, white fangs. A moment later she was gone, Linus standing by himself on the dance floor, arms still raised as if holding a partner, blinking rapidly as if awakening from a deep slumber. Angeline was nowhere in sight.

Within ten minutes the peaceful night had been broken by the starting of many engines, the slamming of doors, and the clop of hooves and rattle of carriages. Headlights blazed around the circular drive, and more than a few chauffeurs laid on their horns as the crowd of luxury automobiles jockeyed to leave the estate. Within their well-appointed interiors, well-bred ladies and gentlemen complained loudly to one another about their guest's utter rudeness and abrupt manner, vowing never to return, and fully prepared to drag the name of Madison through society's mud. *Such bad form, and from such a good family. Scandalous.* More than a few suggested that losing his wife and son, combined with his experiences in the war, had driven him mad. Even the most charitable among them shook their heads and sadly proclaimed that the current Earl certainly wasn't the man his father was.

After Angeline had vanished, Nathan had immediately and loudly ordered everyone out of his house. When no one reacted, several even chuckling at the obvious joke, Nathan had bellowed it in a command voice, one which had once sent reluctant men charging into enemy fire. That got them moving.

Servants had scurried to collect and deliver coats and cloaks and furs and top hats, working furiously to distinguish this black umbrella from that black umbrella, mumbling their apologies while guiding the dismissed assembly out the door. The elderly couple staying the night had the good sense to immediately retreat to their rooms, but the Edgemonts found themselves a perch on a padded bench in the entry hall and watched the exodus with delight. Linus still seemed a bit dazed, and chalked it up to the wine, but Caroline hungrily took in every sneer and sharp word. Oh, she would have gossip to dispense for a *year* after this.

Nathan hadn't bothered seeing his guests out. He went straight to Amelia's room, alerting the sergeant major and waking Nannybird, who clutched at a string of wooden prayer beads, eyes wide with alarm. Amelia had been sleeping deeply, clutching a much-loved stuffed rabbit, and Nathan pulled the tangled covers straight, tucking them around her. Then he checked the window, which was locked as it had been earlier. At the glass, he looked out into the night, barely able to hear the chaos of his front drive this far back into the house. The landscape was a realm of grays and blacks, lit by a three quarter moon, but nothing moved.

Now, hours later, the house was quiet. From the giant hearth in the great hall came an occasional pop as a knot burst among the glowing embers, and in the entry hall, a grand

old clock ticked away the hours. Corporal Andrews stood watch at the top of the grand staircase, armed with his regimental saber and a Rigby, double barrel rifle. The two stablemen, Davis and Kealty, patrolled as a pair, endlessly circling the house with lanterns. Voorhees was in his chair in the hallway, and Corporal Stark sat on a flower-patterned divan in Amelia's playroom, the lights on, armed with a heavy caliber pistol and a dangerous-looking, curved Swazi tribal knife.

Nathan sat in a chair, his daughter's darkened bedroom around him, the girl dreaming only a few feet away. The only light filtered in through the heavy drapes, forming a pale slash on the floor, and deepening the blackness of the rest of the room. Like his men, he was armed as well. He looked towards the small, still figure in the bed, and felt the weight of his soul like a block of iron in his chest, heavy and unrelenting in its pressure.

He and Elaine had married in '92, within a year of his return from Africa. Geoffrey was born the following year, and for a while life had been wonderful, the house a place of laughter and the joy that comes from watching a child grow. By 1907, however, Nathan had changed. He grew increasingly withdrawn and irritable, slept poorly, and began drinking heavily. He took to sleeping in a remote room, concerned that his nightmares and screams in his sleep would frighten his wife.

Geoffrey was four then, and Amelia came along. It should have been a time of happiness, but shortly after the birth, Elaine grew ill and by the end of the year, was bedridden. The physicians, both from here in the country and those summoned from London, attributed her sickness to a weakened heart, which was soon followed by a respiratory ailment. Both maladies kept her down, and she began to grow thin. Nathan drank constantly, neglecting his family, his business, unable even to look at his once-beautiful wife as her body turned against her. For nearly a year Nannybird raised his young children.

Nathan met Angeline in the spring of '08, at a small theatre in Manchester, where she was playing Juliet. He had been drunk, as usual, and was taken with her beauty, the unabashed way she moved on stage, her vigor and her life. He purchased roses from a street vendor, bulled his way backstage and introduced himself to the lovely young woman. An affair followed, and for three months his life was centered on her. He bought the Rolls to impress her, the two of them riding at high speed down country roads, laughing and drinking and ending up making love in meadows or in the back seat. When he was with her, lost in her passions, his troubles vanished. There were no tormenting thoughts of war, of sickness, of failure, and the nightmares which so often plagued him were pushed away for a time.

In the darkness of Amelia's room, Nathan felt the familiar, savage bites of shame and guilt, and he was nauseated by them.

Elaine died in July of that year.

Angeline killed herself the following night, after a drunk and enraged Nathan came to her flat and stormed out minutes later.

The next two months were an unremembered blackness of alcohol, during which the manor staff worked diligently to care for him, make his excuses on business matters and to his few remaining social acquaintances, and care for his family. Nothing had ever been said of that dark time by any of them, and for that Nathan was both grateful and deeply ashamed.

The darkness peaked in October of 1908, when that *thing* carried Geoffrey into a rain-soaked night and ended his short life. Nathan had never actually seen it, only heard its animal wail of hunger and his son's high pitched cries for his father as it fled through the woods of the estate. Mad with panic and fear, Nathan had been joined by the sergeant major and several other servants as they tracked it through the night with lanterns and whatever weapons they could quickly find. Their hunt had ended beside a hard-packed dirt road, where Geoffrey had been discarded, small and limp and cold, lying at the edge of the tree line. The creature was gone, but its distant, inhuman shriek of victory had carried through the black forest.

Nathan's cries rivaled it as he dropped to his knees in the wet leaves and earth, cradling his boy, sobbing his name and then screaming at the sky. His men stood around him, impotent in their unspent rage and sadness. Nathan had drawn his revolver and jammed it under his chin, clicking the hammer back, his chest heaving, his eyes squeezed tight and his teeth clenched in agony. His finger tensed. And then the sergeant major's hand came to rest on his shoulder, the man kneeling beside him in the downpour, speaking softly, his eyes filled with tears of his own.

"Amelia," he had said.

Nathan had opened his eyes, blinking at the rain for a long moment. Then he eased the hammer down and set the pistol on the leaves, holding his son close. And in that moment, Nathan Madison's life changed again.

He never touched another drop.

And he swore to heaven and earth that there would only be one woman in his life, for the *rest* of his life.

Over the next three years, he filled his world with Amelia, trying to become everything she could ever need or want in a father, and the largest part of a heart which had been so scarred began to soften and warm. She was his light, his faith, and on the rare occasion he dared to dream it, his hope. And the part of his heart which was not made whole again by the love of a daughter, that part turned to steel. Cold, unbreakable, unrelenting. Hunting the thing which had robbed him of his child became his purpose.

Until today, when he thought he had put an end to the nightmare.

And had been so very wrong.

Nathan closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, wishing for the sun. He opened them a moment later, feeling a chill draft, and seeing the paned, double windows standing open, soft curtains drifting in the night breeze. Not the sun but a pillar of lunar

light fell across the room, and from the blackness on the other side of it she spoke, her voice soft and full of hate.

“Oh, darling, how I have enjoyed seeing you suffer.”

He tensed, fully alert, and glanced to his daughter, who still slept.

“I have watched you so many nights, battling your demons, tormented in your sleep, trying so desperately to find peace.”

She stepped into the moonlight and laughed, her voice a harsh whisper, and where the moon touched her flesh she became as marble, the rest of her in shadow. Nathan grabbed for the big revolver in his lap, raising it and standing in one movement, about to cry out, but she was no longer there. Now she stood at Amelia’s bed, having pulled the bedclothes down, exposing his daughter to the chill. One slender, pale hand rested on the girl’s chest, long nails dangerously close to her tender throat. Angeline looked at him and smiled, ignoring the barrel of the pistol pointed at her face.

“Go ahead. Call your men...and I’ll take her life.”

Nathan didn’t lower the revolver, but neither did he cry out.

Angeline stroked his daughter’s hair, and the child murmured as if dreaming. She looked down at her, but there was no tenderness, no sense of compassion, only a cold examination as her fingers moved softly through the curls. When she looked up, her face wore a pout, but it was only the facade of an actress.

“Poor, poor Nathan, so distraught, so pitiful. I watched you with *delight* as you wallowed in your pain. And when the moment was right,” her mask of sympathy fell away, revealing the pitiless fiend she was, “I delivered even more sorrow to your door.”

Nathan’s hand shook, his finger only ounces of pressure away from unleashing a bullet.

She laughed, revealing her fangs. “And you hunted *him* for it! That wretched creature who forbade me to touch you, who spared *your* life from my hand. That harmless thing who never killed more than a sheep. And how did you repay him for his misplaced mercy? You ran him to ground and destroyed him as he slept.” She laughed again, trailing her fingers over Amelia’s neck. Then her hand paused, nails resting on the girl’s pulse, and she looked at him.

“I took Geoffrey from you, Nathan. And now I’ve come for this one.”

The gunshot was like an artillery blast in the small room, the flash blinding, and Nathan fired twice more. In the bursts of whiteness he saw his first round take the top of her head off at the eyebrows, the second and third smashing through her chest and driving her into the wall with an enraged shriek.

Amelia screamed and sat up, and Nathan moved to her, but Angeline sprang out of the corner and onto the bed, hitting him straight-armed in the chest and sending him

sprawling away to strike the far wall, the pistol knocked from his hand. The bedroom door crashed open and Stark rushed in, firing twice and closing on the creature with his tribal knife. Angeline leaped, meeting his rush and taking the blade as he thrust it into her belly, seizing his lapels and lifting the young man off his feet. Then she turned and hurled him through the windows in an explosion of glass, to land on the hard stone walkway far below.

Nathan tried to stand, his head thundering, his vision blurred from the impact, and he saw the burly figure of the sergeant major charging into the room. The older man roared as he went at her with the battle axe, slamming it into her neck and shoulder, the force of his weight and charge hitting her, throwing her back onto the bed. Angeline hissed and clawed at his face, at his eyes, digging bloody furrows in his skin, thrashing beneath him. The sergeant major flung himself onto her, pinning her with a knee, jerking the axe free and raising it high over his head. His face was crimson with rage and he cried something in Dutch, swinging down.

The blade never made it.

Angeline tore out his throat with one hand, and with the other flung his body to the side.

Nathan stumbled towards the bed, reaching for his wailing child, and saw Angeline snatch her up by an arm, holding her like a rag doll, the wounds which should have been fatal already closing. "Time for the little princess to join her family," she hissed, and then leaped out the shattered window frame into the night, taking Amelia with her.

Corporal Andrews met Nathan coming out of Amelia's rooms, limping badly and clutching the sergeant major's battle axe. His former commander's face was set with a deadly purpose, but his eyes blazed with madness and rage. The young man had only seen that look once before, on a cratered and bloody hillside, during the final day of Tugela Heights. Wordlessly he followed him down to the great hall and out through the entry, onto the curved drive.

Linus's Rolls sat there, shining in the moonlight, and Nathan went to it, the garage too far away. The keys were missing, the driver nowhere in sight. Several yards behind the limousine stood the black coach belonging to Nathan's elderly, overnight guests, an open air surrey with a canopy. Instead of being stabled, the horse still stood in its traces, nickering softly. The body of his coachman lay face-down and still on the bricks not far away, his head twisted at an unnatural angle and his surprised eyes wide and staring at nothing.

Nathan hauled himself into the surrey, ignoring the flaring pain in his leg, as Andrews scrambled in beside him, barely reaching the seat before Nathan began snapping the reins. He immediately drove the horse into a gallop, urging the coach rapidly down the long, tree-lined drive that led to his estate, the moon lighting the way as it fell in white spears through the canopy of stately oaks. When they reached the main road, which led right towards distant Manchester or left deeper into the forested countryside, Nathan turned left without hesitation. He knew where she was going.

Beside him, Andrews set the stock of the Rigby against the floorboards and held it between his knees, gripping the edge of the surrey's frame. Nathan stood and jerked the driver's whip out of its sheath, cracking it over the horse's head and putting the beast into a full run. As they rocketed into the night, Andrews braced a boot against the frame as well.

"Where are we going, Colonel?" he yelled over the wind.

Nathan's eyes were like coals. "Into battle."

The forest flashed by them in a shadowy blur, the horse's hooves thundering over the hard-packed road and the surrey creaking and swaying dangerously. The whip cracked, and the horse strained at its traces. Clouds moved swiftly across the night sky, and the moon darted in and out amongst them, casting the countryside in intermittent spells of black and white. The road was theirs, and nothing moved in the forest, not even the small deer which often grazed on the long grasses beside the road. It was as if the land were holding its breath, waiting to see what would be.

Nathan drove the beast faster still, the rough road threatening to throw him out of the surrey as he stood, reins in one hand and whip in the other.

When Geoffrey had been taken, the first thought was that his murderer had been a madman, and Nathan had employed the local constabulary to commence a search of the county. No such person had been found. As months passed, reports of slain and blooded livestock circulated, initially attributed to wild dogs or perhaps one of the few remaining wolves in England, but the theory had proven groundless. Not until residents of rural villages began reporting encounters with a shadowy figure, perhaps a man, seen lurking on rooftops or in barns, sometimes peering in nighttime windows, did an impossible picture begin to form. The sightings were accompanied by livestock slayings, and only at night. Although pursued on occasion, the figure had never been apprehended or clearly seen.

It was the sergeant major who first uttered the word *vampire* to Nathan one night at the fireside, telling him stories of his childhood in South Africa. He claimed both the Boer and the native Swazi held closely to their legends, and insisted that the tales were true. Nathan's respect for Voorhees prevented him from dismissing his friend outright, and he soon found himself pouring through books in the manor's library, learning about a legend which seemed to remain frighteningly similar throughout the world, regardless of nationality. It began to fit.

And so he began a hunt which would range across rural England, scouring the places such a creature would use as lairs, following sightings and wild tales, even catching sight of the fiend several times. It remained elusive. Until he and the sergeant major finally tracked it to that mausoleum, to that particular cemetery.

A destination Nathan knew far too well.

He slowed the horse, its chest and flanks lathered in foam, and turned the surrey off the road and through a pair of granite pillars marking the entrance to the place. In the night, among the hills and flats of sprawling trees and narrow paths, black shapes sprouted

from the ground, some simple stones, some gothic structures complete with gargoyles. He guided the small carriage into the quiet cemetery, no longer needing the whip, and brought the horse to a halt at the foot of a gently sloping and manicured hill. Atop it, standing in silhouette against the night sky, was the grandest mausoleum of all, a great granite shape with broad stairs and a pillared face, where silent angels brooded at the corners and peak of the roof.

The Madison family crypt.

Even in the half light, Nathan could see one of the tall, bronze double doors standing open, a deeper blackness beyond. A soft night wind rustled through the ancient trees flanking the place, and dead leaves tumbled across the marble path which led to it.

Andrews rose and prepared to swing to the ground, but Nathan held him back with a hand.

“Not this time, my friend.”

Andrews looked confused. “But, Colonel...”

Nathan shook his head. “You’ve stood with me so many times, and never a question asked. But your place is here. Mind the horse, and watch the front so I’m not flanked. This is my affair.”

Andrews looked ready to argue, but could tell by his commander’s face it would be useless. “Do be careful, Colonel. And Godspeed.”

Nathan swung down, wincing when his bad leg hit the ground, gripping the sergeant major’s battleaxe, then walked stiffly up the path towards the crypt. His shoes scuffed at the granite as he climbed to the covered entry, the wind whispering around the eaves of the mausoleum as he entered without pause. The cemetery had been quiet, but he hadn’t known silence until he stepped inside.

The main chamber was large, with a high vaulted ceiling and a white marble floor shot with veins of gray. Nathan’s footsteps were hollow and echoed through the open space, and the only light was that of the moon streaming in through a large, arched window high on the far wall, the glass set in elaborate twists of wrought iron. Deep shadows lived in the corners and high against the ceiling. To the right and left, squares of marble set in the walls marked individual crypts, each mounted with a small brass plate to identify its occupant. A pair of archways led to smaller chambers in each direction, these rooms also housing Madisons of years gone by. The center of the chamber featured four white marble benches arranged in a square, framing a large circular hole, where spiral granite stairs descended to an inky darkness. The room smelled of lavender, for he had long ago directed that fresh-cut blooms from Elaine’s beloved garden be placed here weekly.

Nathan moved to an altar-like slab beneath the window and withdrew a wooden match from a pocket of his tuxedo vest, striking it against the stone. The scratch was deafening in the silence, and the sulfur flare hurt his eyes for an instant before a flame took hold. He lit a trio of candles set in a silver candelabrum, throwing a circle of yellow light

around him and chasing the shadows deeper into hiding. Then he raised it and turned towards the room.

Nothing moved, and there was no sound other than the flutter of the flames and his own breathing. He considered examining the rooms beyond the archways, but dismissed the thought. He knew where they would be, and started towards the stairs. As if to confirm it, a sound floated up from the darkness.

“Daddy...”

Amelia’s voice, small and distant. His heart quickened as he tightened his grip on the axe and started down the stairs. The spread of his light was constricted in the tight turn of the stairs as he descended, and death could well be lurking only feet away in the darkness, waiting for him, yet he did not hesitate.

“Daddy,” called the voice again, and he struggled against the urge to charge down to his daughter. He had learned hard lessons about ambushes, and the fact that she was still alive signaled she was being used as bait. He would do her no good racing to his own death, although he had already accepted that his end was already a forgone conclusion.

A moment later the stairs emptied into another room, this one with a lower ceiling, but still grand and also floored in marble. More plates lined the walls, and another four archways led to long passages of older, smaller crypts. Over two centuries of Madisons rested here, above and below. This chamber, once a common room for reflection, had been transformed into a place of reverence. The benches had been removed and replaced with a pair of large stone sarcophagi, each a granite box with a lid carved in loving detail. Touched by the candlelight, the one on the left depicted a beautiful woman sleeping with a bouquet of flowers, and on the right, a sleeping boy holding a book.

He had been here countless times. His heart still broke when he saw them.

Amelia was huddled in a far corner beyond them, shivering and clutching her knees.

“Daddy?” she whispered, her eyes frightened.

Nathan took a long stride forward and then stopped himself, realizing that to go to her would put the dark archways to his unprotected sides and back.

“Still the soldier,” Angeline said, sliding out of the archway on the right, the one closest to his daughter. The light from the candles did nothing to warm her porcelain features, and Nathan could see that she had completely healed, including the top of her head, which the bullet had removed. A dancer and an actress, she had always been smooth and graceful, but her new existence gave her a predatory liveness as she glided to put herself between Nathan and Amelia, resting a hand lightly on Geoffrey’s tomb. Her eyes radiated in the flickering light.

Nathan eased left, putting the two sarcophagi between them, and set the candelabra on Elaine’s tomb, taking a two-handed grip of the battleaxe’s three foot oak

shaft. His sight never left her, though he had learned from his reading not to look her directly in the eyes. Amelia whimpered softly in the shadows.

“Daddy’s here, love,” he called to her. “Stay where you are.”

Angeline cocked her head. “Yes, Daddy’s here. Such a good daddy, so loving, so thoughtful. Here to rescue his little princess.” She smiled, her fangs touching her red, bottom lip.

“Why?” asked Nathan.

Angeline’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “Why? Have you forgotten us? Have you forgotten that night?”

He said nothing.

“Well,” said the vampire, “you had been drinking. Perhaps it’s a bit hazy, but I’m quite certain you remember what I said to you.”

“I went to tell you we were finished, and you...”

She nodded. “And I told you about the baby. And you laughed and said it probably wasn’t yours.”

Nathan took a sharp breath.

“You *laughed!*” she screamed. “Of *course* it was yours!” Angeline leaped atop Geoffrey’s tomb and crouched, hands flat against his image, and she shrieked, “I *LOVED* YOU!”

Nathan raised the axe and stepped left again, circling towards his daughter, keeping the two tombs as a barrier. Then Angeline stepped lightly off Geoffrey and was standing between the resting places, only one tomb between them now.

“I wasn’t myself,” he said, sickened by his own, weak words. “You needn’t have killed yourself.”

Angeline blinked, then laughed, her harsh voice echoing through the crypt. “I *didn’t* kill myself, darling. I tried to get rid of the baby. I wanted you so badly, and thought if it was gone, we could still be together. I was a foolish girl, and as it turned out, unskilled. I did something wrong, and began bleeding terribly.”

She moved right, in the direction Nathan had been heading, putting herself once more between father and daughter. Nathan was forced to retreat back behind Elaine.

“It was the blood which drew him. Cedric Pickering, that was his name. You probably didn’t even know that. He came to me, full of pity, and as life slipped away, he turned me.” She glided forwards, trailing her fingertips across Elaine’s stone face. “A weakling, afraid to hunt, morally opposed to taking human life, as if he could deny what he was. I despised him.”

She reached the candle holder and used her thumb and forefinger to extinguish the left and right sticks, leaving only the single flame. The crypt slid deeper into darkness. Nathan continued to retreat, circling to the right now and actually closer to Amelia than she was.

“Geoffrey was my first human kill,” she said, smiling as if proud of her achievement, her eyes drinking in the anguish on Nathan’s face.

He choked. “He was a little boy, innocent. Why not take me instead?”

Angeline kept moving, slow, steady, gracefully. “I had intended to take you all, one night after the next, but after I fed on Geoffrey – and he was delicious, Nathan – Cedric became angry and forbid me to touch any of you. As I said, a weakling. I was powerless to disobey, as he was my maker. So thank you for that, darling. When you destroyed him, you released me to my own free will.”

“Amelia has done nothing to you,” he said.

The vampire began moving between the sarcophagi, getting closer, and with her back to the candle her features were in shadow. “She’s your child, my love,” and in a flash she was over Geoffrey’s tomb and upon him, one frigid and powerful hand clenching his throat and slamming him against the wall, pinning him there. Her other hand plucked the battleaxe away and snapped it in half, the pieces clattering to the marble floor. His wounded leg threatened to give way, but the force of her grip kept him upright. She put her face close to his, her breath cold, cold death as she hissed.

“I started with one of your children when I still lived, Nathan, then took a second. Seeing your pain has been my only joy in this hell I live in, so before you die, you’ll watch me take your last.” Holding him against the wall, she reached towards Amelia.

The vampire had been so intent on her prey that she didn’t hear the boot steps on the stairs. The Rigby’s .470 slugs were designed to take down a hippopotamus, an animal so tough that rifle bullets had been seen to spark harmlessly off its tusks. Corporal Andrews fired both barrels.

Angeline’s right arm, shoulder and a large chunk of her breast and torso were blasted away in an instant, the double booms a thunder as terrifying as God’s wrath. Her body was flung away, into the wall beside Amelia, leaving her forearm and hand dangling from Nathan’s neck. He jerked it away even as the vampire was turning swiftly to face them, rising, her face twisted by hate and rage, fangs bared and snarling.

Nathan closed on her, grabbing the splintered shaft of the battleaxe off the floor and meeting her in mid step, clenching her tightly and ramming the shaft under her left breast, driving it through her and piercing her heart. He held her close, like a lover.

Angeline screeched and thrashed in his grip, coughing dark red blood into his face. Nathan stared into her eyes, his own filled with a father’s fury, and this time it was she who could not meet his powerful gaze. She whispered his name, and then collapsed into ash.

Nathan wiped at his face, then lifted Amelia off the floor, cradling her in his arms. "Daddy's come for you, sweetheart." She hugged him tightly, crying softly into his chest. Corporal Andrews kicked at the ashes until they were well dispersed, then carried the candle for his commander as they climbed the stairs together.

As they reached the night air and breathed deeply, Nathan looked at his little girl. "Let's go home, Daddy," she said.

And Nathan smiled.

Asphyxiation by Jay Sizemore

“Say, have you ever held a million dollars?”

He asked this question, already knowing the answer.

“What are you crazy? I’ve never even seen a million dollars, and I’m not likely to either, unless I win the lottery some day.”

“Well, would you like to?”

Oh, how her eyes lit up when he said that!

“Why? Steven, are you telling me that you’re a millionaire?”

Her whole attitude changed in an instant. She shifted her torso toward him in the passenger seat, slightly revealing her cleavage through the top of her v-neck sweater, and smiled enticingly. If this long-legged, blonde bombshell didn’t want to get in his pants before, she definitely did now. Things were looking up for the evening.

“Oh, no, don’t be silly. I’ve never saved more than ten bucks in my whole life. But I do just so happen to manage a bank. We could stop by there on our way to the hotel if you want.”

Her momentary disappointment at hearing he wasn’t a millionaire was immediately replaced again with a girlish excitement. Her vibrant green eyes, slightly glazed from the night’s alcohol consumption, flickered with a kind of mischievous anticipation and she licked her lips.

“Oh, yeah, that sounds fun. Kinky. But wait; won’t there be security cameras or something?”

Steven chuckled lightly. It never failed.

“That’s one of the perks of being the manager, sweetie. I know the security codes. Don’t worry, no one is going to videotape you. Unless you want them to.”

He smiled at her reassuringly and she giggled nervously. This was like an adventure to her. And it should be. How often does one get the chance to hold a million dollars? To actually feel the weight of it in their hands? Steven allowed himself to speed up slightly. It was another thirty minutes drive to the bank and he didn’t want the effects of the alcohol to wear off before they got there. He had a fifth of rum in the backseat though. Just in case.

Steven Klein was a very attractive man. This fact had not escaped his attention and he was very proud of it. He took great pleasure in the knowledge that when he entered a room almost every pair of female eyes glanced his way. And some eyes watched him much longer than others, making no real effort to conceal their attraction. This was his gift. Chiseled features and a high metabolism that kept his body svelte, accompanied with a pair of the most piercing blue eyes the world has ever seen. In most cases, all it ever really took for him to woo a girl was to stare longingly into her eyes and she would melt like a tub of butter. It was something he truly enjoyed. It kept him out of trouble. He never had to try exceptionally hard for anything he wanted to achieve. In school, for instance, the teachers always gave him a higher grade than he deserved. And in the job market, like when he applied for the bank manager position, as with any other job he applied for, he was way less qualified for the job than the competition. People were just nice and accommodating as long as he could remember.

And it certainly didn’t hinder his success at the bar.

Lydia, for example (who needs to know last names when you are only going to see the person for one night?), was just the second girl he had talked to this evening. And he wasn’t rejected by the first one either. He didn’t like her fingernails.

Now, here he was, driving to his bank for a night of pure bliss with a blonde goddess. He knew they would never make it to the hotel. It made him feel sorry for ugly people.

Just as long as we're out of there by six, he thought. Wouldn't want anyone walking in on us.

But he knew they wouldn't. The bank didn't open until nine anyway, and no one usually got there until seven so they should be fine. He could already feel the excitement building inside him and his foot pressed down a little harder on the accelerator.

They arrived at the bank at a quarter till midnight. Steven glanced at his watch as he was unlocking the door and saw that they would probably be cutting it close this evening. No matter, there was no turning back now. Lydia had already pulled her panties off while they were in the car.

"Wait here a second while I shut off the alarm."

"Okay, but hurry. It's fuckin' freezing out here!"

"Would I keep you waiting?" Steven said and kissed her on the cheek. It must have been cold out, because he could see the hard points of her nipples peaking through the fabric of her sweater. His heart jumped excitedly in his chest and he hurried inside to punch in the security code.

After shutting off the alarm, he led her into the bank, allowing her to lean on his arm for support. The alcohol had not worn off, and he had asked her to bring in the bottle of rum as well. He had been drinking too, of course, but he had only had enough to take the edge off. She was smashed. And she was apparently very horny. He quietly thanked the inventor of booze in his head as he led her to the counter. It made things so much easier.

"Jeez, it's kind of creepy in here with all the lights off," she said.

"Yeah, but it's cool too. I love coming here at night when no one else is here. It's invigorating."

He found a coffee mug sitting on one of the tellers' desks and set it on the counter.

"I would turn on some lights, but I'm afraid we might attract some unwanted attention. Know what I mean?" He asked this and winked at her as he unscrewed the cap to the rum bottle and poured some into the mug. She smiled at him. This one was in the bag. All he had to do was open the safe and she would spread her legs for him. It made him feel powerful.

"Yeah," she said taking the mug and sipping from it, "you especially don't want that, if you show me what you promised."

She leaned over the counter and let him get a good look at her cleavage again. This girl was a real slut. He was almost disgusted by her for a moment, but then she leaned back up and winked at him. His heart nearly skipped a beat. There was no reason to feel disgusted now. He had made his choice and was going to have to deal with it.

"Oh," he said, clearing his throat nervously, "thanks for reminding me. I almost forgot."

He said this sarcastically and got the giggle he was hoping for. Sometimes it was too easy.

He grabbed a flashlight from a desk drawer and told her to wait while he went and unlocked the safe. The beam from the flashlight would not be nearly enough to draw any attention from anyone. He had done this enough times to know by now. Not that he really needed it anyway. He could find his way through these halls blindfolded. It was mostly for her benefit. With practiced ease, he punched the numbers of the combination into the keypad by the vault and then entered his management code to override the timer. There was a hiss and several metallic sounds as the tumblers slid into place and bolts unhinged. The door to the vault opened slightly and Steven pulled it the rest of the way by the handle. He then took out his key ring and opened the security gate. There was a hum over his head and he looked up at the motorized camera that oscillated back and forth, recording all activity in the money area. He still had to turn those off. But not yet.

“So, you ready to see a million dollars?”

She had been drinking from the mug and slammed it down onto the counter, splashing rum onto the counter-top. She smiled and her face beamed with pure excitement. The moonlight shining through the glass doors accentuated the soft skin of her legs and face and for a moment Steven was taken aback by just how beautiful she was.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Bank Manager. Show me the money!”

She ran to him and nearly fell down. Steven caught her and she laughed drunkenly. He raised her up and their eyes met for a moment. A moment was all it took. She kissed him hard on the mouth, flooding his taste buds with the aroma of the coconut rum she had been drinking as her tongue slipped over his. He pulled her to him, gently caressing the back of her neck and she cupped his crotch, running her hand up and down his erection. For just a second he was lost in the moment and he actually wanted to fuck her. But then he thought of the pleasure yet to come and he was able to restrain the urge. It was best to be patient.

“Wow, girl. If I didn’t know better, I would think that you liked me or something.”

He smiled at her and she smiled back. This was always a good line to use. It kept things fun, while at the same time keeping the sexual tension alive. At this point it probably wouldn’t have mattered to Lydia what he said though. She was raring to go.

“I’ll like you even more in a little bit.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Come on, I’ll show you the vault.”

He led her back through the corridor to the vault entrance. She looked inside at all the shiny metal and the polished black floor and was instantly disappointed.

“Hey, where’s all the money?” she asked, her bottom lip protruding slightly.

“It’s here. It’s just locked up. Look.”

Steven pulled out his key ring again and inserted a small nickel-colored key into one of the large metal doors. He opened it to reveal several large stacks of bundled bills. He stood back and motioned with his arm as if to say, “Ta da!” Lydia was not disappointed any longer. Her mouth hung open in disbelief and her eyes were filled with child-like wonder. She stumbled forward and gazed into the open door, her slack-jawed face nearly comical. She reached her hand out to touch it, but stopped and looked at Steven uncertainly. He smiled and reached into the box and pulled out two stacks of the bills, which were thousands. Amazed at how easy this was, he handed the bills to her and watched with silent hysteria as she almost dropped them. Her hands were shaking.

“Oh, God,” she said, “how much money is this?”

“Well, lets see, ten bundles of a thousand dollar bills in each stack...one hundred bills per bundle. That comes out to...yep, a million dollars.”

“No way!” she gasped.

“Yep.”

She stared at the bills in her hands and then looked up at Steven; her eyes were gleaming with tears.

“This is amazing. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure.” He actually meant those words. It never ceased to amaze him the power that money held over people.

Lydia looked down and wiped the tears away with her shoulder. When she looked back up, the expression on her face had completely changed.

“You haven’t experienced pleasure yet, my friend.”

With a sudden flurry of her hands, she tore into the paper bindings around the bills and they came loose from the bundles. She ripped them apart in frenzy and threw the separated currency into the air. The bills fluttered through the air like green confetti, resting on the polished tiles around their feet.

“What the fuck?” Steven said, surprised.

was not the least bit scary. Sometimes he would swim up to the edge of the bowl and just sit there, his little mouth opening and closing as he sucked the water through his gills. It was almost like he was as fascinated with Steven as Steven was with him. It never failed to make him smile.

One day, it was probably the third day that his mother was at work, the day before he had to go back to school, he was doing just that, sitting and watching his fish. Then, he noticed that there was some gunk building up around the edge of the bowl and he decided it was probably a good idea to change out the water and clean it. He had done this numerous times, and it was no big deal, however this time would turn out to be quite different.

First he dipped out some water from the bowl into a large coffee mug. Then, he used the small fish net to catch Alfie and placed him in the mug so he could empty the bowl and wipe it clean. In a matter of minutes, the bowl was spotless and filled with new water, but he knew he could not put Alfie back into the bowl just yet. One time he made this mistake when he was seven years old and his first fish Georgie had “bit the dust” as his mother was fond of saying. He had cried for nearly six hours until his mother had shown up with a new fish.

“Hey, look what I found outside,” she had said. “This fish is Georgie’s brother Alfie, and he was wondering if he could live here with you.”

Steven had looked up with wide-eyes and tears streaming down his cheeks. The fish did look a lot like Georgie. He smiled and wiped the tears away with the palms of his hands. He ran to his mother and threw his arms around her. Then he held up the fish in the clear plastic bag and he told it that he was sorry for what he had done to Georgie. He promised to never make that mistake again and it was a promise that he kept. Now he knew that there was no way his mother could have found that fish outside just as he knew there was no way that Alfie had been Georgie’s brother. His mother had went and bought the fish while he was in his room crying. But that was okay. He had believed her then, and the fact that she would do that for him only made him love her more.

He looked down at Alfie swimming around inside the mug. He was swimming very fast around in circles because there really wasn’t that much room for him to move. All the same, Steven knew that he would be okay until the water in the bowl warmed up. He touched the tip of his finger to the water in the mug and then placed it into the bowl for a comparison. It had a while to go yet.

“Don’t worry, Alfie,” he said, smiling at the fish, “we’ll get you back into your bowl in no time.”

Then, suddenly, a look of solemn concentration came over his face as he watched the fish. His heart sped up in his chest. His breath became erratic and nervous butterflies fluttered around in his stomach. For a reason unknown to him, he reached out and poured some of the water from the mug into the sink. The goldfish reacted with a panicked flurry of circles, realizing that the water level in the mug had lowered considerably. Something deep inside Steven liked this. His face flushed with pink excitement. He licked his lips and watched the fish until it had settled down, and then he poured some more of the water down the sink. Now the water barely covered the top of Alfie’s back and it was difficult for him to maneuver in the shallow liquid. He became more panicked than before, slamming himself into the sides of the mug as he tried to maintain forward momentum. The fish wanted to escape but its attempt was futile. His fate rested solely in the hands of a young boy, whose calm blue eyes had the serene look of madness or euphoria. Steven knew there was no turning back now, the fish had probably sustained serious nerve damage and would not survive, but he wanted it to survive a little bit longer. He waited a few moments and then dumped the remaining contents of the mug, including the fish itself, into the sink. His eyes lit up with crazed jubilation as he watched the fish thrash around in the metal sink, convulsing in its spasms of suffocation. His small pale hands gripped the edge of the sink until his knuckles were white. It didn’t take too

long. The fish soon was a lifeless form just resting in the sink, its blank eye staring up at Steven accusingly. The whole ordeal lasted maybe twenty minutes.

Slowly, Steven reached his hand into the sink and picked up his dead friend. He had killed his pet, again, but this time he felt absolutely no remorse. The feelings that had surged through him were unlike any that he had ever felt. His hands and face tingled with pins and needles. His throat was dry. He was alive. The fish was dead. As he had watched it die, he felt completely aware of his surroundings. He had such a feeling of power, a complete reversal of how he used to feel when his father would come into his room early in the morning after his mother had left. He didn't want that feeling to end. But it had. Calmly, he dropped the fish into the clean bowl and watched as it floated at the top of the water level. He knew the bowl was still probably not warm enough for the fish, but now it didn't matter. He walked away from the bowl and went about his day as if nothing had happened.

That was how it began.

When his mother arrived home later in the evening and found the fish floating in the bowl, Steven acted shocked and sobbed on his mother's shoulder for an hour. But the tears were really meaningless. He wanted his mother to buy him another fish. And of course, she did what she thought she had to do to keep her son happy. They named the new fish Franklin. But he didn't stay with the family for too long. Steven performed his ritual again two months later. This time when he did it, he prolonged the event by thirty minutes instead of twenty. He became addicted to how killing the fish made him feel. They went through eight fish over a one year period before his mother stopped buying them. She said they apparently just weren't "pet friendly." Steven, although sad about this, knew it was probably best to not raise too much fuss and he let it go.

When he was fourteen, however, a new kind of opportunity presented itself. While walking home from school one day in the blazing summer sun, he heard a sound that sounded like something in pain. He paused for a moment, and looked around. The heat was radiating off the blacktop in waves and the air barely stirred at all. He heard the sound again and he walked toward it cautiously. He wasn't sure where it was coming from; sound seemed to travel weird in the humidity. He glanced around the landscape and didn't see anything unusual. Then he looked down. Lying in the ditch was a beagle hound puppy that had apparently been hit by a car. Steven jumped down into the ditch. He crouched beside it and investigated to see how badly it was hurt. Its two back legs appeared to be broken and it could not move. It stared at him with sad eyes, its side rapidly moving up and down as it breathed. Steven looked around to see if anyone else was close by. There was no one and the cars going by were too far above him to really notice what he was doing. Quickly he unzipped his backpack and put the small dog inside it. The dog whimpered in pain, but allowed him to do this thinking that he was trying to help it. The dog's instincts in this matter were horribly wrong. A familiar feeling had crept into Steven's chest, a feeling that he had not felt in four years, and his breath and heart rate quickened in anticipation.

He hurried home, trying not to jar the contents of his backpack too much. He didn't want to cause the dog any unnecessary pain. After he got to the apartment, he unzipped the pack and carefully pulled the dog from it. He set it on the kitchen floor and sat beside it for a moment, stroking its back. The dog was shaking, either in pain or in fear. Now that Steven had the dog, he didn't really know what to do with it. He looked around the apartment trying to decide the easiest way to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. At first no ideas sprang to mind. He felt a little disappointed.

Maybe I should just forget this and call the vet, he thought sullenly.

That was when his eyes landed on the refrigerator.

His eyes darted to the clock on the wall and he knew that his mother would not be home for at least three more hours. His hands started shaking in excitement and he licked his

lips. His cheeks flushed red as he noticed that he had become sexually aroused. Carefully, he reached around the puppy and picked it up. It yelped in pain.

“Shhh, it’s okay, boy,” he said. “We’re going to take care of you.”

He walked over to the fridge and pulled the door open. As was typical for his small family, there wasn’t really much of anything in the cooler to begin with, so he had no problem squeezing the dog into the bottom part of the unit. The dog sat on the cold surface uncertainly and looked up at Steven with pleading eyes. For a moment, he wasn’t sure if he should do this. But the moment didn’t last long.

“Sorry, boy,” he said and he shut the door.

His heart was beating so fast it felt like it might leap out of his chest. He reached behind the refrigerator and pulled the cord out of the power socket, setting it on the countertop beside the unit. He didn’t want the animal to freeze to death. The motor whined down and the refrigerator stopped humming. In a kind of trance, he hurriedly pulled his shoes and his pants off. He had no idea why he was doing this. Then he sat in the floor and pressed his head against the cold surface of the refrigerator door. The textured surface of the door was like pressing against the skin of a snake. He could barely hear the dog whimpering in the darkness of the cooler. There were louder scratching sounds as it clawed against the hard plastic frantically. This only excited him more. He started touching himself in his excitement. This was the first time he had ever done this, but it seemed natural to him. As the dog’s cries became more panicked his sexual arousal became more uncontrollable. He came for the first time and the pleasure was like a white explosion in his mind. He shuddered all over and his skin rippled with gooseflesh, but his erection did not go away. He masturbated three times listening to the dog die in his refrigerator. It was an ecstasy unlike anything he had ever felt before. After the puppy stopped crying, he waited another thirty minutes, just leaned up against the door of the fridge, pant-less. He wanted to make sure the thing was dead before he took it out.

When he opened the door to the fridge, he nearly screamed. The dog fell forward, its tongue lolling from its mouth and its eyes staring emptily. There seemed to be a frozen look of terror on its face. Steven re-gathered his composure. He placed the dead dog into a garbage bag and then cleaned out the mess it had made in its death spasms. This did not take away from the joy of the act for him. He had always been taught that every great thing came with a price and that if you made a mess you had to clean it up, so he just took cleaning up the mess to be a part of the price he had to pay for such a terrific experience. He put his clothes back on, plugged the refrigerator back into the wall, and then carried the dog out to the dumpster. That night, his mother commented that he was happier than she had seen him in a long while. Steven just shrugged and smiled at this observation.

Thus began a new ritual for Steven. He began luring stray dogs and cats to his apartment by leaving them food outside the door while his mother was away. Once he had earned their friendship, he would take them inside and repeat the act that he had done with the beagle. This went on for a few years, until the stray population had thinned out to the point that it was a very rare occurrence for him to find a new one to kill. Then, when he was eighteen he moved out of his mother’s apartment and went to college.

At school, there was little opportunity to pursue that type of thing anyway, because he was far too preoccupied with homework and girls to think about such things. That was where he met his future wife Sharon. He never had a shortage of girls that wanted to go out with him, of course, but after he saw her, she was the only one that he wanted. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It was the first time he was interested in a girl for more than just sex. She actually said interesting things and they talked for hours at a time. It wasn’t long that they were in love and the thoughts that used to obsess his adolescent mind seemed like a

distant daydream. Life moved on, in a hurry as it always did. Soon, they were both graduated, married, had jobs, and were thinking about having children of their own.

Ironically, the idea of using the vault was Sharon's idea. Steven had just gotten the job of bank manager and she suggested one night that they go and make love in the vault while no one was there. It seemed like a crazy idea, and at first Steven resisted the thought. He had just gotten the job after all. But eventually she won him over with the idea and they went. It was great sex. Their sweaty backs slid and made quiet squeaking sounds on the tiled floor as they moved in rhythm with each other. Steven would never forget the look of complete satisfaction on his wife's face as they fucked. He was surprised at how being in the vault had aroused her so.

Afterward, while they were lying in the dark, preparing to get up and leave she said something that triggered a thought in Steven's mind.

"Boy, wouldn't it be awful if the door somehow closed on us while we were in here?"

Steven sat for a moment in the dark and didn't answer. His breath hung in his chest.

"Um, yeah, it would actually," he said and swallowed. His throat was suddenly dry. "This baby is air tight. We wouldn't last three hours at the most probably."

"Well, I'm glad we're the only ones here."

Already the wheels had started turning in his mind.

"Me, too."

For a moment he actually contemplated shutting her in. But he knew he would never get away with it. And besides, he loved her. He really loved her. He didn't know what his life would have turned out like without her. So, he let the sensation pass. He let the idea percolate in his mind. It began to ferment.

Later that night, as his wife slept in the bed beside him, he laid awake thinking how he could do it. After a month of planning, he made his first attempt. He told his wife that he had a business trip and he drove an hour and a half to the nearest city and went to a bar. He had no trouble getting women to talk to him, even some wanted to go home with him, but he had no idea of how to get a woman to come to the bank with him. Especially when it was an hour or more away. Then, one night, it happened by accident after he mentioned what he did for a living.

"Gee, how much money do you usually have in your bank?" the girl asked him, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Oh, I don't know, probably not more than 15 million at any given time," he said, not thinking anything of it. In fact, he was already bored with the conversation.

"Really?" she gasped, her mouth dropping open. "You know I have never actually seen a million dollars?"

She scooted closer to him. Steven's ears perked up at this and he immediately took his opening.

"That's too bad. Everybody ought to at least once. Hell, everybody should get to hold a million dollars in their own hands at least once. Just to know what it feels like."

He watched her as he said this and he knew he had said the right words.

"Boy, I wish I could get that chance," she said and leaned in closer to him. She licked her lips and smiled seductively.

Steven smiled at her winningly.

"Would you like to?"

From that moment, the plan was flawless.

*

Steven stood outside the vault door with his hands pressed against the cold steel. He had to take a moment and calm his nerves. Thoughts ran crazily through his mind like a wild brush fire. He could not hear her through the thick steel door, but he knew that she would probably be freaking out. He smiled to himself and could not believe how easy all of this was. This was the seventh girl in three years that he had done this to, spacing them out carefully from one another and always dumping the bodies in different locations. This was a small town anyway and no one had the slightest clue. It truly was the perfect crime.

Shaking his head, he walked away from the door of the vault, whistling as he went to his office. He turned on the monitor to the vault interior and saw that Lydia was standing at the door knocking on it with her fists. This was a typical response. He clicked on the audio and he could hear her screaming.

“What the fuck?! You fucking asshole, let me out of here! This isn’t funny goddammit! You fucking prick!”

She had already screamed until she was hoarse.

The arousal was overwhelming and he masturbated right then and there. He kicked his pants off into the corner and then he made sure to stop the video recorders. He rewound them an hour to cover his tracks and set the timers to automatically start recording again at seven. He would be long gone by then.

He walked back over to the monitor and pulled up his office chair. Lydia was now sitting on the floor crying. She had not gone into panic yet and that was good. He wanted to be ready for another climax by the time she did that. It was his favorite part of the show. Calmly, humming to himself, he walked to the front room and grabbed the bottle of rum. It was only twelve thirty and he had plenty of time to enjoy this one. He sat down in the office chair and took a drink from the bottle. Not that he needed the alcohol, it was just something to wet his throat. His mouth always got dry.

He masturbated eight times over the next two and a half hours. The last three times, during the most intense moments when Lydia was panicking and throwing herself into the vault door frantically, he strangled himself with the phone cord. This was a relatively new addition to the ritual, but it heightened the experience by leaps and bounds. He had read about it in a magazine and decided to try it on the last girl. The sensation was incredible. The elation he achieved when he ejaculated was multiplied by a thousand by the euphoric sensation the asphyxiation caused him. It was like he was floating on air and coming at the same time. The thought had occurred to him of course that he could accidentally kill himself while doing it and that it would be really awful for his wife to hear about it, but he didn’t care. The experience was too wonderful to stop once he had felt what it was like. He now not only exercised power over the victim’s life, but also over his own. He felt like a god. And gods could do whatever they wanted, including jerking themselves off while strangling on a phone cord.

All too soon, Lydia stopped breathing and lay lifelessly on the vault floor in her own puke and piss. Steven just sat and stared at the monitor, the cord from the phone still dangling around his neck. His shirt was soaked through with sweat and his desk was covered in splotches of his semen. His eyes were glazed and red; tears had dried on his cheeks. He sighed and pulled the cord from around his neck, letting the receiver fall to the floor with a plastic cracking sound. He pulled his pants back on and walked to the vault door, staggering unsteadily as his head was still swimming. With a shaking hand he punched in the code again to the vault and opened it. A horrific smell wafted out of the interior. For a moment, Steven just stared into the vault with a dazed look on his face. Maybe he had let this one get a little bit out of hand. He had no idea how he was going to clean the bills that she had urinated on, but he guessed he would figure something out. He rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands to clear his vision. Then he steadied himself for the task at hand. Calmly, he walked

into the vault. He bent over Lydia's body and turned her over onto her back. Her blank eyes stared up at Steven and some vomit spilled from her open mouth.

"Oh, lovely," Steven said and turned his head for a moment. He grabbed her under her arms and dragged her body across the floor to the far corner of the vault. He thought it was a good idea to clean up the floor as best as he could before he carried her out to the car. He sat her in the corner and closed her eyes with his hand. He didn't like her staring at him that way.

"So, this is what you call a business trip, huh?"

Steven froze. Suddenly, he was no longer dizzy at all. Suddenly, reality was far too in focus. If his heart had been going fast before, it was now beating faster than the speed of sound. He slowly stood up and turned around.

Standing in the vault doorway was his wife, Sharon.

"Honey," Steven said, licking his lips and trying to smile, "this isn't what it looks like I swear."

"Oh, really? Because it looks like to me that you have been fucking some drunk slut in your vault. I should know. I've been sitting outside in the car the whole time you've been in here. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to see it for myself."

For a moment Steven allowed himself to be relieved.

She has no idea what is really going on. That is good. *Your marriage may be over, but you can still save your life*, he thought to himself.

Steven put his hand to his forehead for a moment and pretended to be in shame. He was really contemplating how best to proceed. Allowing tears to fill his eyes, he looked back up at his wife.

"Sharon, I don't know how to even begin to say I'm sorry. You are right. I'm a terrible person. But I can change."

He started to walk toward her, opening his arms and giving her the most sincere look of guilt he could muster. That was when she pulled the revolver out from the back of her pants. She pointed it at him and her hands did not shake at all.

"Shut up you lying son of a bitch."

Steven looked into her eyes dumbfounded. He tried to find any trace of the love that he had known there for the past six years and he saw none of it. In her eyes there was only the flinty steel look of betrayal. He stopped in his tracks and held his hands up, not knowing what to do.

"These past years, all these 'business trips' you've been going on...they've all been with different girls haven't they?"

She looked at him like she already knew the answer to the question so Steven just nodded guiltily. He didn't know what else to do. With the confirmation Sharon cringed for a moment in anguish. She held the gun to her forehead for a second and sobbed. Steven started to walk to her to try and console her. She quickly snapped out of it and pointed the gun back at him.

"Don't move," she breathed, tears rolling from her eyes. "Why, Steven? Why did you do this? How could you do this to me?"

I'm a dead man. She's going to kill me, he thought to himself as he looked into her eyes. The darkness of the gun barrel facing him seemed endless.

"I don't know, honey. It's just the way I am," he said shrugging. Oddly enough, this felt like the truth.

Sharon just stared at him icily. They stood like that for a good two minutes. Tension built up in the small room like a cloud of static. Nothing moved.

"Turn around," she said coldly. "Turn around and face the wall."

Steven did as he was told.

"Honey," he pleaded, "this is crazy. I know this is bad but..."

“Shut up, you prick.”

He could hear her erratic breathing. She was nervous.

If she comes close enough to me, maybe I can surprise her, he thought.

“I would assume that you turn off the cameras for these little escapades. Like you did the night we were here a few years ago.”

Oh, shit. She is going to kill me.

“Y-yeah. Why?” he could barely get the words out.

“Good.”

“What---“

Then, all was darkness.

*

He felt like he was falling...falling through emptiness. A deep abyss with no end. A bottomless pit. The air was stale, flowing past his face in a steady current, smelling like death. The world spun beneath him. The inertia caused his stomach to turn unpleasantly. He couldn't tell if he was blind or if it was just so dark that nothing was visible.

It's neither, stupid. Your eyes are closed.

He opened his eyes only to find that he could still not see. However, he was not falling; he was lying on a floor of some kind. He could feel its gritty texture beneath his hands. Moaning with nauseous unease, he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position. He had no idea where he was. The room was full of shadows and imperceptible figures. His head ached and his vision seemed to waver in and out of focus.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye.

Steven spun around on the hard floor, almost falling on his face.

“Who's there?” he shouted into the blackness.

Nothing responded. There seemed to be the whisper of movement in the background. The soft hiss of fabric rubbing against fabric.

Oh, God. Something's in here, Steven thought to himself. He felt sweat break out across his back. He could feel his pulse in his forehead. He held his breath for a moment to try and see if he could hear something more. He strained his hearing.

Something or someone was breathing. There was another shuffling sound of movement.

Shit. What the fuck is that?

Steven strained his eyes, they seemed to be better now, not out of focus, but he still could not see anything. He shuffled across the floor for a few feet, being as quiet as possible. Something bumped into his leg. He almost screamed. He felt out with his hand and grasped a solid, cylindrical object.

The flashlight!

Steven frantically jerked the flashlight from the floor and flipped its power switch. A beam of light exploded into the room like the birth of a sun. He flipped the light around in the small room, but there was nothing that could have been making the noises. Just plain, gray walls.

Maybe I am crazy.

Feeling a huge wave of relief wash over him he sighed and turned around to try and find a way out of the room.

There was the face of a dead woman staring at him, illuminated like a ghost by the flashlight beam.

Steven screamed and dropped the flashlight. He fell on his ass and scooted backwards from the woman. He recognized her. It was the first girl he took to the vault. The flashlight

bounced and scuttled across the floor, its light flickered and rolled around like a search light. As it did, Steven saw that the room now had many people in it walking around him. They were all women. There appeared to be six of them. Steven thought he would probably recognize all of them.

“Where am I? What the fuck is this?” he screamed at them.

“You are in hell,” they answered in unison. “You have to pay for your sins.”

Suddenly, he noticed more light in the room. Apparently, it came from an unknown source behind the walls, which had quickly taken on a kind of transparent quality. The light flickered and glowed orange as if from a giant unseen fire. Steven’s eyes widened as he saw all of the women more clearly now. They were not ghosts, but they appeared to be decomposing. Their flesh had rotted and sank into the contours of their bones, some worse than others. They shuffled around the room, touching themselves, rubbing their boney hands over the sick discolored skin. One of them, while staring at Steven with her empty eye sockets, stuck her finger inside her vagina and moaned as a large swath of maggots poured from it onto the floor. The dogs and cats that were now in the room crowded around her feet and lapped up the larva like pet food.

Steven screamed. He scrambled to his feet and turned to run.

Standing in his way was Lydia.

He tried to stop and slipped. He fell at her feet. She smiled at him and dropped something down around his neck. It quickly cinched tight and cut off his air. He clawed at it with his hands, gasping for breath. He knew what it was instantly...a phone cord.

Dots of light danced across his vision as he struggled for air, but she would not let up. More hands grabbed him from behind and forced him onto his back. They grabbed his hands and his feet. The tension around his neck loosened a bit and he sucked in a breath of air. His vision had gone blurry again, speckled with spots of bright light and color. A large figure had stepped in front of him.

“P-please. P-please...I’m...sorry. Don’t...hurt...me,” he gasped, struggling to maintain consciousness.

“It’s okay,” a familiar voice said.

The scene slowly swam back into focus revealing the identity of the figure standing before him, the owner of the voice. His eyes widened in terror.

It was his father.

He stood before him, his gray eyes staring down at him lustily. His brown hair was disheveled as it always was in the morning and he was shirtless. His chest was covered in dark and gray hairs in the middle which thinned out as they went downward toward his slightly rotund stomach, which was a direct result of his love for Old Milwaukee. Steven’s eyes crawled slowly down his father’s body, not wanting to, but he was unable to stop himself from doing it. He wasn’t wearing any pants, just as he always wasn’t when he came into his room in the early morning hours.

“Come here, boy,” he said drunkenly. “Put this in your mouth and suck it. Just pretend like it’s a lollipop.”

Steven’s eyes stared down at his father’s crotch wide with horror.

Where he should have seen his father’s penis there was a goldfish, dangling lifelessly, its eye staring at him accusingly.

Steven opened his mouth to scream. When he did, his father stuck the goldfish into it.

The phone cord pulled tight again, cutting off what little air he had left. He gagged. His eyes rolled around crazily in their sockets. The slimy, scaly thing was shoved into the back of his throat, suffocating his senses. He could feel its scales rubbing sickeningly against his teeth. The faces all looked down at him smiling. He could feel himself slipping into

madness. Choking on the fishy smell of fear and semen. Making him feel powerless and weak. Making him feel dead. Making him. Making him...

*

wake up with a splitting headache. He reached up with his hand and felt the side of his head. His fingers came away bloody, but the blood was nearly dry. He rolled over onto his back. The front of his clothes were damp from lying in the urine on the floor.

Not dead, but I probably have a concussion. Oh, God, how long have I been out?

He checked his watch and saw that only twenty minutes had passed at the most. It was only five minutes till four. He looked around the room. Something seemed odd about it and at first he could not place what it was. Then he realized all of the money compartments were standing open. He checked his pockets and his keys were gone. His wife had taken all the money.

“You fucking bitch.”

Using the lockers for balance, he stood up shakily and turned toward the door. He stopped dead in his tracks. The door to the vault was shut. It was so obvious he missed it the first time.

“You FUCKING BITCH!!” Steven screamed and ran to the door. He shoved on it but he knew already that it was sealed. His death warrant had been signed. He looked at his watch again. He had maybe three hours, and he would start feeling it way before then.

“I can’t believe this.”

He checked the lockers to try and figure in his head how much money she had taken with her. It had to be close to twelve million dollars, and it would be untraceable. How could he have been so stupid? How did he let it go this far? This was a very ironic twist of fate. He would go down in history as one of the sickest people in the world he was sure. Especially if they viewed the video tape and saw that he locked Lydia into the vault. And what he did afterward.

Maybe she forgot to go check the tapes. Maybe it will just look like I got robbed and murdered. In that case, maybe they’ll catch her.

But somehow he knew better. She had to have realized that Lydia was dead. There was really no way around it. After she had clocked him over the head and started taking the money out of the vault it wouldn’t have been too hard to notice that she wasn’t breathing. That was probably part of the reason why she locked him in here with her. She wanted him to get caught. Hell, she probably watched the tape he had rewound and then reset the VCR’s to start recording after she left. He looked up. The camera continued its steady oscillation. He wondered if his wife was still in the bank, in his office, watching him. Hoping she was, he gave the camera the finger.

Slowly, he staggered over to the opposite corner from Lydia’s body and sat down. He crossed his arms and rested his head on them. He was already very tired. But he knew better than to allow himself to go to sleep. He had to find a way to occupy his time.

But it was pointless to try and find a way out of the vault. Trying that would only tire him out quicker. There was really nothing more for him to do but sit back and accept his fate. There was no chance of rescue. None of his employees ever came in early. He was lucky if they ever came in on time. Sighing, he leaned his head back against the wall.

He found himself staring at the lifeless body of the girl on the other side. She was sprawled out, still only in her bra, and her legs were half-way open allowing him to see up her skirt. A nasty thought crept into his brain.

No, no, that’s disgusting. I’m not that fucked up.

A few more minutes went by and he found it hard to come up with reasons not to do it. He really had nothing to lose. In a few hours, he would be dead. A smile turned up the corners of his mouth as he slowly stood up.

Oh, well, he thought as he walked toward the corpse, might as well have some fun before I die.

And he began unbuckling his belt.

HUNTER by Terry Grimwood

Seventy-two hours from Christmas Day and the perfume counter clientele were no longer females with time and desire to linger, but panic-stricken men demanding that Anita tell them what scent their wives and girlfriends would like.

A pretty woman with long Celtic-red hair and pale skin, Anita used a well-practised smile to hide her contempt for the white-faced, hard breathing males as they shoved wads of notes or credits cards in her face and begged olfactory omniscience.

There was no joy in this noel.

Or love.

But, Anita knew it was this stampede of snarling greed and fear-driven profligacy that paid her salary and bonus. Yuletide cash-for-crap Anita called it, but never out loud.

"Hello," said the customer as it grew dark outside and the crush finally began to abate.

Smile refreshed, Anita turned to her new client.

He was alone. Dark brown eyes, fetchingly unruly hair, leather jacket, roll neck sweater -

No, not a roll neck, a clerical collar. The man was a priest.

Anita's smile became genuine. "How can I help?"

"For my sister," he said. "I have no idea..." He shrugged, Just another helpless male at the perfume counter. But this male was different, polite, quietly spoken. He made Anita feel shy.

"How old is she?" Anita asked. "What sort of person, outgoing? Fun loving?"

"Fun loving definitely."

Anita selected the most popular of the year. "It's pricey I'm afraid but a gorgeous scent." The priest allowed her to spray a little on his wrist. She held his hand, felt the beat of his pulse. Her own heart rate increased.

He put his wrist to his nose. "I like that."

"I'm sure your sister will as well."

He paid then made affable small talk while Anita wrapped the perfume. She was nervous.

"What... What church do you run?" she asked.

"Run? Oh, no, I'm not employed as a parish priest at the moment. I have other duties, but I am affiliated to St Cyprian's, in Marylebone Road. Why do you ask?"

"I need to talk to someone..." Her words dragged in the night.

The priest was suddenly serious. The kindness in his eyes made Anita want to cry.

"Of course. Can you come to St Cyprian's tomorrow night? There's an early evening jazz concert, so probably best if you don't get there until it's over, say eight-thirty."

"Thank you," said Anita and watched him leave the shop.

She walked along Baker Street, past restaurants and bars and night-closed shops, shivering though she was bundled into the thickest jumper and warmest coat she could find.

Alleyway.

And life. Hidden in the stinking, icy shadows, a small, warm bundle of blood and flesh, scurrying, heedless and consumed by its hungers. Anita stopped and took a faltering step into the dark.

She dropped into a crouch. There it was, jammed between two swollen and packed bin bags, gnawing at the plastic covered cornucopias.

The taking was all instinct. Suddenly the rat was in her gloved right hand, a squirming shrieking bundle of flesh and animal soul. Anita growled contentedly then sank her teeth into the warm fur of its back. Flesh parted and blood squirted hotly into her mouth. Anita's trembling stopped.

The priest was chatting to the jazz roadies as they packed lights and amps. He glanced round, dazzled Anita with his smile and beckoned her to follow him.

He led the way through a maze of low-ceilinged, dim-lit passageways to an office.

Anita sat down, made awkward by the priest's proximity. He poured coffee from a pot on a small corner table. Anita politely refused. She didn't want caffeine, she wanted redemption.

The priest perched himself on the desk. There was no barrier between them.

"Take your time." he said. "Find the words."

"I don't think I have a soul," Anita said.

The priest leaned forward. He frowned, but there was no scepticism in the expression.

"What makes you say that, Anita?"

"I...I'm a monster. I'm not human."

"What are you then?"

Suddenly she couldn't speak. Darkness reared inside her. This was a priest, the enemy -

No, he was the first good man she had met.

"I'm a flesh eater, a murderer."

"Who have you murdered?"

"The homeless, the lost, people who wouldn't be missed, people who *are* missed. When I'm hungry I can't stop myself."

The priest reached out, suddenly and grabbed her hand. "Is this the truth, Anita?"

She nodded. "I made a bargain...I was lonely, depressed. It was my face...I had a birthmark, a huge wine stain. I went to a séance with a colleague. *Something* whispered to me and asked what I wanted most in the world."

"But there was a price."

"I didn't understand, I was young. Now I want it to stop."

"God wants it to stop as well." The priest held her hands tightly. "Do you know what *I* am?"

Anita shook her head.

"An exorcist. I can cast this thing out of you. Do you want me to do that?"

"Yes."

"It will be terrible but it will be gone."

"I don't care."

"I've been looking for you, Anita. I didn't come into that shop by accident. God led me to you. We know about your crimes; the police are not interested, just more deaths in the shadows. But the church, we recognised what was happening."

Anita gripped *his* hands now. She wanted him to hold her. The priest smiled gently, stood and went to his desk, back turned.

"I'm going to free you. Do you trust me, Anita?"

"I trust you," she said.

"God help me," he groaned.

Then spun round, wooden stake gripped in both hands.

There was pain, and searing, searing grief. His blood was hot in Anita's mouth. His death, ice in whatever she had for a soul. In the final moment he was clumsy and she was ready, because she had known the moment she first saw him; hunter recognising hunter.

He had wept as he came for her. As she wept now.

ENDS

Yeduza had left her own assegai with her horse. As the wickedly sharp tip of Ngiri's weapon hissed towards her, she flung herself to one side, hitting the hard packed earth with a gasp as her wounded leg sent a stab of pain throughout her body. She caught a glimpse of the Nago warriors staring down at the scene in consternation; of Mtogo rising from his throne, bellowing orders. Ngiri lifted her assegai again, and Yeduza rolled towards her, grabbing her bare feet and toppling her before the Amazon could spit her. Ngiri went crashing down at Mtogo's feet. Yeduza forced herself up, grabbing Ngiri's assegai as she did so.

'Make your obeisances well,' Yeduza said, as Ngiri seemed to grovel at Mtogo's feet. 'But I shall not remain to bow my neck before a tyrant.'

As Mtogo's cold eyes turned to her, regarding her like a python regarding a rodent, Yeduza leapt astride her horse.

'Take her down!' Mtogo bellowed. 'A hundredweight of gold to whoever brings me her head! She conspires to seize my throne!'

As the confused warriors ran to surround their erstwhile general, Yeduza looked down at Mtogo in silence. Then she spurred her horse, and rode straight at the unwilling warriors. They scattered. Riders came to intercept the escapee. Yeduza down one with a thrust of her assegai, took another's attack in her hastily raised hippopotamus-hide shield, and galloped across a clear space towards the city streets.

'Bring her back to me!' Mtogo shouted. 'Bring me her head!' But by now, Yeduza was charging through the southern gate of the city.

He turned coldly to look down at Ngiri, still prone before him, and he sat down upon his throne.

'Rise, Ngiri,' he said irritably. 'Take your best riders, and pursue Yeduza. If you bring me her head, you will replace her. If not, it is your own head that will be the foundation stone of my House of Skulls.'

Ngiri rose, looked shakingly at her lord, and went to gather her best riders from among the confusion in the courtyard.

A week later, Ngiri and her riders returned, empty-handed and many of them on foot.

'We pursued her south to the edge of the jungle,' Ngiri told Mtogo. 'But she didn't stop there; she simply rode on into the trees. We pursued as far as we could, but our horses began to die, and many of us became feverish.'

'Those jungles are a sinkhole of pestilence and corruption,' Mtogo murmured. 'Horses die; people die. Yeduza will not survive there. The wound in her leg will rot; she will die in agony, in the silence of the forest. We need not concern ourselves with her ambitions...'

Ngiri knelt proudly before the Emperor. 'Then I have fulfilled your commands,' she boasted. 'I become captain of your bodyguard, general of the armies of Nago!'

Mtogo gazed far off, as if into undreamt of vistas. Suddenly he shook his head, and turned his cold gaze upon Ngiri.

'What's this?' he rumbled. 'You lie! I ordered you to bring me her head. You failed.' Mtogo nodded to one of his companions, a muscular man, naked but for a loincloth. He drew a broad, sickle-blade sword and stepped forward.

Ngiri's face fell. Shortly after, her head copied it. It lay in the dust, ringed by a sticky pool of gore, until Mtogo lifted it up by the spiked locks, and laughed.

The horse died after the second day in the jungle. As she limped away from its unmoving form, using her assegai as a crutch, Yeduza feared that she would soon join it. Her wound was festering agony, and her sweat-slick body quivered involuntarily as she staggered on into the depths. In the dank, oppressive gloom of the forest, she felt confused, weak, lost. The trees grew higher and higher on either side, lianas hung down like stranglers' garrottes, and she had no idea of where she was going, and little notion where she had come from. The cries of birds and beasts echoed from the canopy above, or filtered through the dark wall of green that surrounded her. Her bare feet splashed through thick mud, and sometimes she saw snakes slithering away into the gloom. It was a dark, awful place.

She had ridden far and fast and the horse had almost died under her even during the flight across the savannah. Her pursuers had seemed relentless until she plunged into the trackless, waving depths of the jungle. Then the pursuit had faltered, died after a day or two. Much like her horse.

Why had Mtogo wanted her killed? The question had rolled around inside her brain throughout the long escape. They had fought side by side in the old days, and he had favoured her throughout his reign. Now, suddenly, it seemed he would cast her aside like a broken calabash. Had Ngiri poisoned his ear against her? Had the woman even now taken her place? Yeduza had been one of the highest in the land; now, after a single encounter with Chinja, all that had changed. Her lord reviled her, her subordinates plotted against her; she had been pursued from the land like a defeated lion being chased from the pride. Now, here she was in the depths of the jungle from which came little more than pestilence, disease, rumours of war... It was said that a mighty kingdom lay further to the south; an empire hacked from the forest. Traders had spoken of its expansion in recent years. But that was still far to the south. Endless leagues of desolate jungle stretched away before her, deserted except for deadly animals and lethal disease.

Sweat was pouring down her face. As she looked about her, the forest seemed to wheel, its sinister gloom a blur of darkness. Yeduza heard a pounding in her brain. She reached up an arm to dash the sweat from her eyes. Her sight was growing dim. She fell forward helplessly, unaware that she was falling until she collapsed into the thick clay of the forest floor. The last thing she saw confirmed that the sickness was taking control of her brain, as she seemed to see tiny men stepping from the trees to squat at her side, staring down at her in amazement. Then all was darkness.

Yeduza awoke, feeling strangely refreshed. Soft daubs of light dappled the forest floor. Her nausea and fever had left her, the pain had gone from her leg, and she felt strong and invigorated. She was lying on a bed of leaves.

She lifted herself on one elbow to inspect her leg, and halted in amazement, wondering if the fever dream still remained. Three small men crouched at the side of the clearing, watching her. She stared at them, and they returned her gaze unafraid. Then one of them spoke, a venerable, grizzled old fellow, naked like the rest except for a loincloth.

'Your sickness has gone. We mended your leg as best we could' -- Yeduza looked down at it, and saw that the swelling and discolouration had gone, but it looked crooked, twisted -- 'but you will be lame for the rest of your life.'

Yeduza rose slowly, cautiously, and tested the leg. It pained her, with a dull, nagging ache, but she could stand on it. She looked down at the three little men, wonderingly. They seemed real, no figment of her fevered mind.

‘Who are you?’ she asked slowly.

The older man smiled. ‘Our own name we keep to ourselves,’ he said. ‘But your folk call us the Mbilikimo.’

Yeduza’s eyes widened. She had been told stories of the Mbilikimo, the pygmies of the forest, when she was a child. They were said to be fierce hunters, despite their small size, expert trackers who could vanish at will. But she had thought them nothing more than fireside tales.

‘Then I have you to thank for my life,’ she said, half questioningly. The elder pygmy nodded.

‘It was Dogo who found you,’ he said, and indicated a handsome young pygmy on his right, who carried a bow over his sinewy shoulders. ‘He hunts far and wide, alone in the forest. He returned from one of his forays with a tale of a great Amazon lying near death in the swamp; urged us to come to her aid. He would not listen to our deliberations but took several hunters and brought you back. Our best healers tended you, and did what they could.’

Dogo nodded. ‘I hoped you would aid us against Chatu,’ he said, in a low voice.

Yeduza sat down slowly. It seemed her healing came at a price. But who was Chatu? Another pygmy?

‘Chatu is a python,’ said the pygmy elder when she asked. ‘He is a tyrant, who oppresses us, and demands our children as sacrifices, or takes them himself.’

‘A python?’ Yeduza asked. ‘A snake?’

The elder shook his head. ‘More than a snake,’ he said. ‘Chatu is a demon. He was set to lord it over us when the evil ones marched through our lands. They had fled from the south, where they had seen much fighting. There is a kingdom of people like you in the south, and it was from there that our oppressors came. They took our youths and maidens and enslaved them. Young Dogo was forced to cut wood and carry burdens for them. Our maidens were ravished. Others of our people they ate as if they were beasts. The oppression was woeful.

‘I spoke to the elders of the other clans, and we went before their leader, a snake-eyed sorcerer, to beg him to end his oppression. He told us that his people were moving north, but that they would set one of their gods to watch over us. Now we must make offerings to this god, Chatu. He is a huge serpent who dwells among the rocks near our camp, and it is there that we must leave our sacrifices.’

Dogo added; ‘They took me and the other slaves along on their march north. They devoured many of us. I escaped with barely my life and returned here to find that all was as it is now. We are powerless against the python, but I know that your people are strong, and mighty warriors. You can prevail where our people would be slain.’

Yeduza studied them abstractedly. ‘A snake-eyed sorcerer?’ she asked. ‘Did his warriors daub themselves with white?’

Dogo nodded. ‘They follow him under a spell.’

‘Chinja!’ Yeduza said, with a curse. ‘I know him. He gave me this wound. And he set this python to oppress you?’

‘You know of the sorcerer?’ the elder asked. Yeduza nodded.

‘He attacked my people too,’ she said. ‘They killed many people in their raids. Where they are now, I do not know.’ She rose. ‘It seems we have a common enemy. Well, I owe you a debt for healing my leg. I shall fight against your python, though whether I will succeed now that I am a cripple, I cannot say.’

The rocks beyond the pygmies' camp were a wilderness of boulders in a great barren clearing near a swamp. Yeduza stood at their edge, with her assegai in one hand and her shield in the other. Dogo, who had led her there, stood at her side, watching her silently.

Her heart was heavy with doubt. Could she prevail over a demonic python? She must try, for the sake of these tiny people who had taken her in and healed her when she was wounded and alone. She looked down at Dogo.

'Chatu dwells among those rocks,' the pygmy told her.

She nodded. 'I shall find him.' She left his side and advanced, picking her way across the loose shale and squeezing between boulders. Soon the pygmy had been swallowed up by the darkness of the trees.

Yeduza saw no signs of life, but as she advanced through the barren stretch, she caught a whiff of a strange, musky scent. The rocks seemed to tower over her as she moved through them, assegai poised and ready.

She whirled round at a noise from behind her, heart thudding in her chest. The rocks she had traversed were bare and empty. The forest was a distant wall of gloom. She studied the rocks for some time, but saw nothing. Then she turned and walked on.

Again, a slither from her right. She turned, assegai poised. Nothing. She began to back away, her eyes vigilant as she searched the rocks. The slither came again, from behind her, and she spun on the balls of her feet, her assegai thrust out in front of her. She caught a glimpse of a dark, scaled form slithering away into the cover of the rocks.

The wind moaned among the boulders. Dust swirled in the sunlight. Yeduza paced across the sand towards the rocks where she had seen something move. If her glimpse was anything to go on, Chatu must be huge... Her heart pounded in her chest. Could she hope to defeat such an unnatural being?

She scrambled to the top of the rocks and looked down. To her mixed disappointment and relief, she saw nothing. As she stood looking down, she heard a scrape from the direction from which she had come. She turned, overbalanced and half jumped, half fell to the sand. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of a dark, scaled tail slithering into cover again.

Leaning on her assegai, she limped towards the spot. A short defile led into another sandy stretch. It was empty.

Yeduza turned to go back, and halted. Her blood froze despite the baking heat of the sun. Winding rapidly down the rocks ahead of her was the scaly length of the largest snake Yeduza had ever seen. It reared up at her, jaws gaping.

Yeduza brought up her shield, and deflected Chatu's blunt head. It swayed back and forth, and flung itself at her again, trying to envelop her in its coils. She realised the snake had been accustomed to regular offerings, pygmy children who put up no resistance, not a Nago Amazon. She stabbed at Chatu with her assegai but it swarmed up the shaft. She dropped the assegai with a clatter.

The snake slithered forward and as Yeduza turned to run, her lame leg crumpled beneath her and she toppled to the rocky ground. Then the snake was on her, wrapping its smooth, scaly coils around her body. She struggled desperately, but now the snake was encircling her upper arms, pinioning them with its incredible strength.

Now it was looping round her neck, tightening until stars were exploding in the growing darkness of her mind. Dimly, she saw its gaping jaws opening above her head, widening to an incredible extent, wide enough to swallow her.... The snake was about to swallow her and she could do nothing. Its tongue flickered in and out, and then its jaws sank down to envelop Yeduza's head.

It started back suddenly, lashing about in pain, releasing its grip on Yeduza. Blood spewed from its fanged mouth. Its long black tongue protruded from Yeduza's own mouth. The Amazon had bitten off its tongue.

The snake writhed and twisted, flinging Yeduza to one side. She spat the tongue out and scabbled at the rocky ground until her hand closed on the worn shaft of her assegai. Desperately, clumsily, she brought it up alongside her face and rammed it into the writhing serpent. The creature's spasms tore the assegai from her hand. A chance flick of its huge tail sent Yeduza flying across the rocks. She lay there, dazed; listening to the creature's dying spasms. When at last it was still, Yeduza got unsteadily to her feet. She went to look at where the serpent lay, and halted.

Lying among the rocks, where the snake had been, was an immensely tall, thin man with blood dribbling from his tongueless mouth. The assegai projected from his chest. As Yeduza dragged it free, she noticed the familiar white paint that daubed his bloody face. She leant on her assegai and pondered. Thoughts of vengeance were on her mind.

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Forty-Four ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE BURNING OF VARNEY'S HOUSE.—A NIGHT SCENE.—POPULAR SUPERSTITION.

The officer ceased to speak, and then the party whom he had sent round the house and grounds returned, and gained the main body orderly enough, and the sergeant went forward to make his report to his superior officer.

After the usual salutation, he waited for the inquiry to be put to him as to what he had seen.

"Well, Scott, what have you done?"

"I went round the premises, sir, according to your instructions, but saw no one either in the vicinity of the house, or in the grounds around it."

"No strangers, eh?"

"No, sir, none."

"You saw nothing at all likely to lead to any knowledge as to who it was that has caused this catastrophe?"

"No, sir."

"Have you learnt anything among the people who are the perpetrators of this fire?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, that will do, unless there is anything else that you can think of."

"Nothing further, sir, unless it is that I heard some of them say that Sir Francis Varney has perished in the flames."

"Good heavens!"

"So I heard, sir."

"That must be impossible, and yet why should it be so? Go back, Scott, and bring me some person who can give me some information upon this point."

The sergeant departed toward the people, who looked at him without any distrust, for he came single-handed, though they thought he came with the intention of learning what they knew of each other, and so stroll about with the intention of getting up accusations against them. But this was not the case, the officer didn't like the work well enough; he'd rather have been elsewhere.

At length the sergeant came to one man, whom he accosted, and said to him,—

"Do you know anything of yonder fire?"

"Yes: I do know it is a fire."

"Yes, and so do I."

"My friend," said the sergeant, "when a soldier asks a question he does not expect an uncivil answer."

"But a soldier may ask a question that may have an uncivil end to it."

"He may; but it is easy to say so."

"I do say so, then, now."

"Then I'll not trouble you any more."

The sergeant moved on a pace or two more, and then, turning to the mob, he said,—

"Is there any one among you who can tell me anything concerning the fate of Sir Francis Varney?"

"Burnt!"

"Did you see him burnt?"

"No; but I saw him."

"In the flames?"

"No; before the house was on fire."

"In the house?"

"Yes; and he has not been seen to leave it since, and we conclude he must have been burned."

"Will you come and say as much to my commanding officer? It is all I want."

"Shall I be detained?"

"No."

"Then I will go," said the man, and he hobbled out of the crowd towards the sergeant. "I will go and see the officer, and tell him what I know, and that is very little, and can prejudice no one."

"Hurrah!" said the crowd, when they heard this latter assertion; for, at first, they began to be in some alarm lest there should be something wrong about this, and some of them get identified as being active in the fray.

The sergeant led the man back to the spot, where the officer stood a little way in advance of his men.

"Well, Scott," he said, "what have we here?"

"A man who has volunteered a statement, sir."

"Oh! Well, my man, can you say anything concerning all this disturbance that we have here?"

"No, sir."

"Then what did you come here for?"

"I understood the sergeant to want some one who could speak of Sir Francis Varney."

"Well?"

"I saw him."

"Where?"

"In the house."

"Exactly; but have you not seen him out of it?"

"Not since; nor any one else, I believe."

"Where was he?"

"Upstairs, where he suddenly disappeared, and nobody can tell where he may have gone to. But he has not been seen out of the house since, and they say he could not have gone bodily out if they had not seen him."

"He must have been burnt," said the officer, musingly; "he could not escape, one would imagine, without being seen by some one out of such a mob."

"Oh, dear no, for I am told they placed a watch at every hole, window, or door however high, and they saw nothing of him—not even fly out!"

"Fly out! I'm speaking of a man!"

"And I of a vampire!" said the man carelessly.

"A vampyre! Pooh, pooh!"

"Oh no! Sir Francis Varney is a vampyre! There can be no sort of doubt about it. You have only to look at him, and you will soon be satisfied of that. See his great sharp teeth in front, and ask yourself what they are for, and you will soon find the answer. They are to make holes with in the bodies of his victims, through which he can suck their blood!"

The officer looked at the man in astonishment for a few moments, as if he doubted his own ears, and then he said,—

"Are you serious?"

"I am ready to swear to it."

"Well, I have heard a great deal about popular superstition, and thought I had seen something of it; but this is decidedly the worst case that ever I saw or heard of. You had better go home, my man, than, by your presence, countenance such a gross absurdity."

"For all that," said the man, "Sir Francis Varney is a vampyre—a blood-sucker—a human blood-sucker!"

"Get away with you," said the officer, "and do not repeat such folly before any one."

The man almost jumped when he heard the tone in which this was spoken, for the officer was both angry and contemptuous, when he heard the words of the man.

"These people," he added, turning to the sergeant, "are ignorant in the extreme. One would think we had got into the country of vampires, instead of a civilised community."

The day was going down now; the last rays of the setting sun glimmered upwards, and still shone upon the tree-tops. The darkness of night was still fast closing around them. The mob stood a motley mass of human beings, wedged together, dark and sombre, gazing upon the mischief that had been done—the work of their hands. The military stood at ease before the burning pile, and by their order and regularity, presented a contrast to the mob, as strongly by their bright gleaming arms, as by their dress and order.

The flames now enveloped the whole mansion. There was not a window or a door from which the fiery element did not burst forth in clouds, and forked flames came rushing forth with a velocity truly wonderful.

The red glare of the flames fell upon all objects around for some distance—the more especially so, as the sun had sunk, and a bank of clouds rose from beneath the horizon and excluded all his rays; there was no twilight, and there was, as yet, no moon.

The country side was enveloped in darkness, and the burning house could be seen for miles around, and formed a rallying-point to all men's eyes.

The engines that were within reach came tearing across the country, and came to the fire; but they were of no avail. There was no supply of water, save from the ornamental ponds. These they could only get at by means that were tedious and unsatisfactory, considering the emergency of the case.

The house was a lone one, and it was being entirely consumed before they arrived, and therefore there was not the remotest chance of saving the least article. Had they ever such a supply of water, nothing could have been effected by it.

Thus the men stood idly by, passing their remarks upon the fire and the mob.

Those who stood around, and within the influence of the red glare of the flames, looked like so many demons in the infernal regions, watching the progress of lighting the fire, which we are told by good Christians is the doom of the unfortunate in spirit, and the woefully unlucky in circumstances.

It was a strange sight that; and there were many persons who would, without doubt, have rather been snug by their own fire-side than they would have remained there but it happened that no one felt inclined to express his inclination to his neighbour, and, consequently, no one said anything on the subject.

None would venture to go alone across the fields, where the spirit of the vampyre might, for all they knew to the contrary, be waiting to pounce upon them, and worry them.

No, no; no man would have quitted that mob to go back alone to the village; they would sooner have stood there all night through. That was an alternative that none of the number would very willingly accept.

The hours passed away, and the house that had been that morning a noble and well-furnished mansion, was now a smouldering heap of ruins. The flames had become somewhat subdued, and there was now more smoke than flames.

The fire had exhausted itself. There was now no more material that could serve it for fuel, and the flames began to become gradually enough subdued.

Suddenly there was a rush, and then a bright flame shot upward for an instant, so bright and so strong, that it threw a flash of light over the country for miles; but it was only momentary, and it subsided.

The roof, which had been built strong enough to resist almost anything, after being burning for a considerable time, suddenly gave way, and came in with a tremendous crash, and then all was for a moment darkness.

After this the fire might be said to be subdued, it having burned itself out; and the flames that could now be seen were but the result of so much charred wood, that would probably smoulder away for a day or two, if left to itself to do so. A dense mass of smoke arose from the ruins, and blackened the atmosphere around, and told the spectators the work was done.

CHAPTER II: WILD ANIMALS

When the ancients departed, great numbers of their cattle perished. It was not so much the want of food as the inability to endure exposure that caused their death; a few winters are related to have so reduced them that they died by hundreds, many mangled by dogs. The hardiest that remained became perfectly wild, and the wood cattle are now more difficult to approach than deer.

There are two kinds, the white and the black. The white (sometimes dun) are believed to be the survivors of the domestic roan-and-white, for the cattle in our enclosures at the present day are of that colour. The black are smaller, and are doubtless little changed from their state in the olden times, except that they are wild. These latter are timid, unless accompanied by a calf, and are rarely known to turn upon their pursuers. But the white are fierce at all times; they will not, indeed, attack man, but will scarcely run from him, and it is not always safe to cross their haunts.

The bulls are savage beyond measure at certain seasons of the year. If they see men at a distance, they retire; if they come unexpectedly face to face, they attack. This characteristic enables those who travel through districts known to be haunted by white cattle to provide against an encounter, for, by occasionally blowing a horn, the herd that may be in the vicinity is dispersed. There are not often more than twenty in a herd. The hides of the dun are highly prized, both for their intrinsic value, and as proofs of skill and courage, so much so that you shall hardly buy a skin for all the money you may offer; and the horns are likewise trophies. The white or dun bull is the monarch of our forests.

Four kinds of wild pigs are found. The most numerous, or at least the most often seen, as it lies about our enclosures, is the common thorn-hog. It is the largest of the wild pigs, long-bodied and flat-sided, in colour much the hue of the mud in which it wallows. To the agriculturist it is the greatest pest, destroying or damaging all kinds of crops, and routing up the gardens. It is with difficulty kept out by palisading, for if there be a weak place in the wooden framework, the strong snout of the animal is sure to undermine and work a passage through.

As there are always so many of these pigs round about inhabited places and cultivated fields, constant care is required, for they instantly discover an opening. From their habit of haunting the thickets and bush which come up to the verge of the enclosures, they have obtained the name of thorn-hogs. Some reach an immense size, and they are very prolific, so that it is impossible to destroy them. The boars are fierce at a particular season, but never attack unless

provoked to do so. But when driven to bay they are the most dangerous of the boars, on account of their vast size and weight. They are of a sluggish disposition, and will not rise from their lairs unless forced to do so.

The next kind is the white hog, which has much the same habits as the former, except that it is usually found in moist places, near lakes and rivers, and is often called the marsh-pig. The third kind is perfectly black, much smaller in size, and very active, affording by far the best sport, and also the best food when killed. As they are found on the hills where the ground is somewhat more open, horses can follow freely, and the chase becomes exciting. By some it is called the hill-hog, from the locality it frequents. The small tusks of the black boar are used for many ornamental purposes.

These three species are considered to be the descendants of the various domestic pigs of the ancients, but the fourth, or grey, is thought to be the true wild boar. It is seldom seen, but is most common in the south-western forests, where, from the quantity of fern, it is called the fern-pig. This kind is believed to represent the true wild boar, which was extinct, or merged in the domestic hog among the ancients, except in that neighbourhood where the strain remained.

With wild times, the wild habits have returned, and the grey boar is at once the most difficult of access, and the most ready to encounter either dogs or men. Although the first, or thorn-hog, does the most damage to the agriculturist because of its numbers, and its habit of haunting the neighbourhood of enclosures, the others are equally injurious if they chance to enter the cultivated fields.

The three principal kinds of wild sheep are the horned, the thyme, and the meadow. The thyme sheep are the smallest, and haunt the highest hills in the south, where, feeding on the sweet herbage of the ridges, their flesh is said to acquire a flavour of wild thyme. They move in small flocks of not more than thirty, and are the most difficult to approach, being far more wary than deer, so continuously are they hunted by the wood-dogs. The horned are larger, and move in greater numbers; as many as two hundred are sometimes seen together.

They are found on the lower slopes and plains, and in the woods. The meadow sheep have long shaggy wool, which is made into various articles of clothing, but they are not numerous. They haunt river sides, and the shores of lakes and ponds. None of these are easily got at, on account of the wood-dogs; but the rams of the horned kind are reputed to sometimes turn upon the pursuing pack, and butt them to death. In the extremity of their terror whole flocks of wild sheep have been driven over precipices and into quagmires and torrents.

Besides these, there are several other species whose haunt is local. On the islands, especially, different kinds are found. The wood-dogs will occasionally, in calm weather, swim out to an island and kill every sheep upon it.

From the horses that were in use among the ancients the two wild species now found are known to have descended, a fact confirmed by their evident resemblance to the horses we still retain. The largest wild horse is almost black, or inclined to a dark colour, somewhat less in size than our present waggon horses, but of the same heavy make. It is, however, much swifter, on account of having enjoyed liberty for so long. It is called the bush-horse, being generally distributed among thickets and meadow-like lands adjoining water.

The other species is called the hill-pony, from its habitat, the hills, and is rather less in size than our riding-horse. This latter is short and thick-set, so much so as not to be easily ridden by short persons without high stirrups. Neither of these wild horses are numerous, but neither are they uncommon. They keep entirely separate from each other. As many as thirty mares are sometimes seen together, but there are districts where the traveller will not observe one for weeks.

Tradition says that in the olden times there were horses of a slender build whose speed outstripped the wind, but of the breed of these famous racers not one is left. Whether they were too delicate to withstand exposure, or whether the wild dogs hunted them down is uncertain, but they are quite gone. Did but one exist, how eagerly it would be sought out, for in these days it would be worth its weight in gold, unless, indeed, as some affirm, such speed only endured for a mile or two.

It is not necessary, having written thus far of the animals, that anything be said of the birds of the woods, which everyone knows were not always wild, and which can, indeed, be compared with such poultry as are kept in our enclosures. Such are the bush-hens, the wood-turkeys, the galenæ, the peacocks, the white duck and the white goose, all of which, though now wild as the hawk, are well known to have been once tame.

There were deer, red and fallow, in numerous parks and chases of very old time, and these, having got loose, and having such immense tracts to roam over unmolested, went on increasing till now they are beyond computation, and I have myself seen a thousand head together. Within these forty years, as I learn, the roe-deer, too, have come down from the extreme north, so that there are now three sorts in the woods. Before them the pine-marten came from the same direction, and, though they are not yet common, it is believed they are increasing. For the first few years after the change took place there seemed a danger lest the foreign wild beasts that had been confined as curiosities in menageries should multiply and remain in the woods. But this did not happen.

Some few lions, tigers, bears, and other animals did indeed escape, together with many less furious creatures, and it is related that they roamed about the fields for a long time. They were seldom met with, having such an extent of country to wander over, and after a while entirely disappeared. If any progeny were born, the winter frosts must have destroyed it, and the same fate awaited the monstrous serpents which had been collected for exhibition. Only one such animal now exists which is known to owe its origin to those which escaped from the dens of the ancients. It is the beaver, whose dams are now occasionally found upon the streams by those who traverse the woods. Some of the aquatic birds, too, which frequent the lakes, are thought to have been originally derived from those which were formerly kept as curiosities.

In the castle yard at Longtover may still be seen the bones of an elephant which was found dying in the woods near that spot.