



This Edition

This week's cover illustration is "The Light Bringer" by Gonzalo Canedo. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

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The Trollwife's Fosterling by Gavin Chappell

- After fleeing the conquest of his land, Halfdan is wrecked on a barren, icy shore...

MYTHOLOGY

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Crom, I was still in the cavern! SWORD AND SORCERY

Ayame's Love - Part Five by Thomas C Hewitt - In that forest Ranzo was found... EPIC
POEM

A Picture from Harriett - Part One by John L Campbell - A murdered child in the Mississippi
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A Small Sacrifice by Todd Nelsen - Humbert the wizard has a small problem... FANTASY

Mind Slip by Nathan Rowark - My old and ancient, puzzling box... POETRY

The House of Skulls - Part Four by Gavin Chappell - A ravaged land... FANTASY/HORROR

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Forty-Five ascribed to Thomas Preskett
Prest. Before Twilight... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney... GOTHIC
HORROR

Schlock! Classic Serial: After London Part Three by Richard Jefferies - Post-apocalyptic
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EDITORIAL

*...welcome March! and though I die ere June,
Yet for the hope of life I give thee praise,
Striving to swell the burden of the tune
That even now I hear thy brown birds raise,
Unmindful of the past or coming days;
Who sing: 'O joy! a new year is begun:
What happiness to look upon the sun!'*

*Ah, what begetteth all this storm of bliss
But Death himself, who crying solemnly,
E'en from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness,
Bids us 'Rejoice, lest pleasureless ye die.
Within a little time must ye go by.
Stretch forth your open hands, and while ye live
Take all the gifts that Death and Life may give.'*

William Morris

Suddenly it's Spring! Winter is but a fading memory. Hard to believe that it's eleven months or so since Schlock! made its first, tentative beginnings. But here we are, going strong, and preparing to celebrate our anniversary next month.

This week we have more poetry from Nathan Rowark; the continuation of *Ayame's Love*; the end of *People of the Dark* and the close of this selection from *Days of High Adventure*; the beginning of *A Picture from Harriett*, another story from the pen of John L Campbell; a short fantasy story entitled *A Small Sacrifice* by Todd Nelsen (whose story *Master Apprentice* is featured in Aphelion's 'best of' selection this month); more Norse myth from me and the next instalment in *House of Skulls*. And *After London* continues with a description of the tribes of the post-apocalyptic world.

-Gavin Chappell

THE TROLLWIFE'S FOSTERLING by Gavin Chappell

There was a king over Rugen named Hring who had three children; two sons, Halfdan and Asmund, and a daughter named Ingibjorg. Hring ruled with the aid and counsel of two men, Earl Thorfinn, who was foster-father to his children, and Earl Thorir the Strong, a mighty warrior who had been cursed by a trollwife so that he could not see blood.

One morning, Princess Ingibjorg awoke from a restless sleep. She had been dreaming, and she told her foster father, Earl Thorfinn that in her dream she had been by the shore.

‘I saw what looked like ducks out to sea, but when they came closer, I recognised them as ships. From out of the ships came a pack of wolves, led by two foxes, and the wolves and the foxes had ravaged the land.’

She asked the Earl what this dream signified. He told her: ‘It means war is coming, and I will soon no longer be the king’s counsellor.’

That evening, when the king was feasting in his hall, Thorir the Strong entered followed by his men, and he reported that Vikings had landed.

‘Two brothers, Soti and Snaekol, lead them and Soti wishes to marry the princess.’

The king asked Thorir the Strong to describe his daughter’s suitor, and the earl said, ‘He is a berserk, and is bald, except for a single hair on top of his head: he wears no clothes and his body is blue on one side and red on the other.’

The king did not think Soti was a suitable match for the princess, and said, ‘It would be better to fight him than let him carry her off.’

When they heard that the king was resolved to fight them, Soti and Snaekol gave him two days to gather troops and then they would fight. The evening before the battle, the king’s son Halfdan told his brother Asmund, ‘I want to go down to the ships and see what Soti looked like.’

Asmund did not like the idea, since he thought it would lead to his death, but when Halfdan taunted him for his cowardice, he grudgingly agreed to accompany his brother.

They came to the Vikings' camp where Soti received Halfdan hospitably and spoke courteously with him, giving the brothers silver. When Halfdan and Asmund returned to the town and told people of this, all were impressed. The next day, the Vikings attacked.

They split their forces in three and attacked the town's three gates. The king was defending one gate, with Thorfinn at another (accompanied by Halfdan) and Thorir the Strong at the third. Soti led the forces against the king, while Snaekol attacked Thorir the Strong. Thorir fought well but when he saw blood shed, he fled back into the town where Snaekol slew him.

Thorfinn saw this and led some of his men to defend this gate, leaving Halfdan behind. The battle grew furious, and Thorfinn saw that Soti intended to kill the king. He went to King Hring's aid, and went to defend him but Soti split his shield and then cut off the king's feet. Then he slew the king and Thorfinn fell among the corpses, weary and wounded. Night fell and the Vikings returned to their ships.

Earl Thorfinn awoke among the slain. He searched the bodies and found that the king was dead, as was his son Asmund. Halfdan, however, still lived but he had fallen through weariness. Thorfinn led him to Ingibjorg's bower, where they told the princess what had happened. Thorfinn took them away from the town and concealed them at the farm of a woman named Grima. Earl Thorfinn returned to the town.

Soti and his men came ashore the next morning and when they came to the town, they searched the bodies, plundering them and discovering that Halfdan was missing. Then Soti went to Ingibjorg's bower and found that she had gone, too. They questioned Thorfinn about the missing children, but he would not cooperate, even when Soti threatened to tear him limb from limb. The Viking did not carry out this threat, but made himself king of the land, although he was unpopular with his subjects. Soti searched for Halfdan and Ingibjorg but could not find them.

In the spring, Earl Thorfinn went to Grima's farm and took the children down to the shore where they saw a fleet of ships. One ship belonged to Thorfinn, and he told the two children that they would go in it to his brother, Ottar, who was an earl in Permia. He gave them a token to prove to Ottar that they were Thorfinn's foster children. Halfdan said he would do so as long as Thorfinn came with them but the earl refused. He kissed them farewell and they went aboard.

After a long voyage around Scandinavia, they came to Permia where Earl Ottar received them and asked for news. They told him of all that had happened and asked for succour. Ottar

seemed unwilling to do so until they gave him Thorfinn's token. He had Halfdan sit beside him on the high seat and sent Ingibjorg to the bower of his daughter Thora.

One day Halfdan asked the earl, 'Will you give me ships and men so I can go on a voyage?'

The earl agreed, and Halfdan and his sister spent that summer at sea before heading back towards Permia in the autumn. But as they sailed home, they ran into difficulties. A storm blew up and scattered the ships, sinking all but Halfdan's own vessel, a large dragon-ship, which was blown off course. They found themselves driven onto a mysterious shore beneath a great cliff.

Halfdan told his companions, 'We must stay here for the while.' They made a hut out of driftwood they found. His followers asked him where they could be and Halfdan said, 'It must be a land uninhabited by men.'

One day he went up onto a glacier in search of food. Here he discovered a path that he followed to a cave mouth where a fire was burning. Coming closer he saw two trolls, a male and a female, who were eating from a cauldron that contained both horseflesh and human flesh. The man had a hook in his nose while the woman wore a ring, and they passed the time by pulling each other back and forth by the hook and ring. When the male troll suddenly slipped his hook out of the ring, the female fell flat on her back.

She got up and said, 'I will not play that game again.'

Then the male troll, whose name was Jarnnef, asked the female, Sleggja, to go and get him some of the men he had brought here that winter by sorcery. She went into the back of the cave and returned clutching two men in her hands. Putting them down by the fire, she commented on their taciturnity. Halfdan saw that they were fine-looking men, apparently twins.

Before Jarnnef could put the two men in the pot, Halfdan rushed forward and hacked his head off with an axe. Sleggja rose and attacked him a knife, but Halfdan evaded her attack and they began to wrestle. She dragged him across the cave floor to the edge of a chasm where they fought again and her legs slipped over the edge. Halfdan grabbed her by her hair and cut her head off with the knife.

Now Halfdan explored the cave, finding a side-cave where there was a woman sitting on a chair, with her hair tied to the chair post and nothing to eat or drink except icy water.

When she saw him, she said, 'You must have killed Jarnnef to be here.'

Halfdan said, 'I killed Jarnnef and Sleggja as well. What is your name?'

She said, 'I am called Hild and my father was a Scottish earl named Angantyr. With my twin brothers Sigmund and Sigurd I went sailing the previous year but Jarnnef bewitched us and we ran aground on the shore nearby.'

Jarnnef had wanted to possess her, but Hild added that she wished Halfdan had not killed Sleggja.

Halfdan released her and they went to find the two brothers, who they revived. Sigmund and Sigurd asked, 'Who do we have to thank for saving us?'

Hild introduced Halfdan. They remained there five days and nights before they went back to join Halfdan's men, Halfdan taking much gold, silver and jewels from the cave. His men were overjoyed to see him return safely, but happiest was his sister.

They spent the rest of the winter there, and they set sail in the spring but were driven against the cliffs on the far side of the fjord. Here they had to settle again, and Halfdan, Sigurd, and Sigmund went up onto the glacier every day to look for food. One day they encountered three trollwives, one, who wore a red kirtle, also had the form of a human, while the other two did not.

The trollwife in the red kirtle said, 'I am delighted to see the people from the ships. Surely you are a prince, boy?' She introduced herself as Brana, and her two sisters were Mold and Mana. Halfdan spoke insultingly of her sisters and they fought, wrestling for a long time, while Sigurd and Sigmund fought the sisters. Brana mocked Halfdan for his youth but then he threw her.

She told him, 'I helped you in Sleggja's cave by pulling the trollwife's feet from under her.'

Halfdan told her to bend down while he attended to her sisters. He went to where they were fighting the brothers and he flung the trollwives one after the other down a crevasse. Brana was grateful for this, since her sisters had worked great shame, and she offered to give

Halfdan a ship if he would accompany her back to her cave while the brothers returned to the rest. Halfdan did as he was asked, and several days later, the brothers came to Brana's cave. Brana asked Halfdan to kill her father, Jarnhauss, and Halfdan agreed. Brana ensured that Jarnhauss and his fellow trolls were all drunk and then Halfdan and the two brothers entered the cave bearing iron-shod clubs and laid about them. Many two-headed trolls died there, and then they came to Jarnhauss. The trio attacked him but he grabbed Sigurd and lifted him into the air. Then Halfdan knocked the troll down but did not know how to kill him, so Brana hacked off his head with a knife. Then she disposed of the other troll corpses by throwing them down a trapdoor the led to the sea. She asked Halfdan to remain with her that winter and he did so, accompanied by Hild, Ingibjorg and the twins.

There was a day when Brana set out in the morning and did not return until dusk. Another day, she asked Halfdan how long it was until summer, and he told her that six weeks remained.

She told him, 'You should leave on the first day of summer. I will not be lonely since soon I will bear your son.'

Halfdan said, 'Send the child to me if you have a son, but keep it if it is a girl.'

Brana agreed and told Halfdan that he should sail to England, where a king called Olaf ruled. Brana told Halfdan about Olaf's daughter Marsibil, who was the most beautiful woman alive, and said that Halfdan should marry her. She gave Halfdan some magic grass, which she said he should place upon Marsibil while visiting her in the guise of a merchant. If the princess laid her head upon it, she would love him eternally.

Brana also gave Halfdan magical clothes that would make him invulnerable to all edged weapons apart from his own knife, and would ensure that he never tired while swimming. She also gave him a ring named Hnitud, which was in three parts. It would show him if his enemies were near and when they intended to kill him. If it turned red then they would attack him with weapons, but if it went black then they intended to poison him.

Next, she took him down to the strand where he saw a large dragon-ship. Brana said this was his also, that she had made it during the winter, and that he would always get a favourable wind when he sailed in it. The name of the ship was *Skrauti*. Halfdan thanked her for her gifts, and she told him that from now on he would be known as Halfdan, Brana's Fosterling. She went on to warn him about King Olaf's counsellor, a man named Aki who was skilled in sport and exercises, and would betray Halfdan if he could. Halfdan thanked her again, and they returned to the cave for the night.

Next day Halfdan and his men went to the ship *Skrauti*, which Brana had prepared for him. Halfdan bade Brana farewell, and his foster-brothers helped him carry his box of gold onto the ship. Brana pushed the ship out into the surf and they sailed away. They had a good wind, which Brana brewed with her magic, and it took them to the Hladey islands, where the woman who ruled them, who was called Hladgerd, greeted them. They stayed there in honour for some time, and when they departed for England, Hladgerd told them they would be welcome at any time.

They reached England and came to the city of King Olaf. Halfdan gained an audience with the king who asked him who he was.

Halfdan said, 'I am a merchant and I seek shelter over the winter.'

The king granted him this boon, and he secured his treasure in his ship, leaving his men to guard over it before going ashore again with Sigurd and Sigmund.

One day they were walking in the city when they came to a wooden fence. Inside it was a beautiful garden and at the centre of the garden was a well-built bower. Halfdan asked his friends if they could run across the garden, and they tried. Sigurd got a third of the way across, Sigmund got halfway across, but Halfdan crossed the garden and came to the bower where he saw a young woman playing catch with a gold bauble. She dropped the bauble and couldn't find it however hard she searched. Halfdan went up to her and gave her a large piece of gold.

She thanked him, and said, 'You are a very handsome man.' She added, 'I wish my kinswoman, Marsibil, knew you because you have a lot in common.'

She returned to her bower and Halfdan rejoined the brothers.

The maiden was Alfifa, daughter of Sigurd, king of Scarborough, King Olaf's uncle. She gave her mistress, Princess Marsibil, the gold she had got from Halfdan and described him to her, saying, 'He is your equal.' Angry with this, Princess Marsibil boxed her ear. Alfifa burst into tears and they spoke no more.

Halfdan returned to the bower another day, when he saw the princess herself, combing her hair with a comb of gold. She told him to go away, but he gave her the grass Brana had given

him. He went away, and she went to her bedchamber, where she put the grass on her pillow and slept.

In the morning, she summoned Alfifa and commanded her: 'Go to Halfdan and bring him to me.'

Alfifa was resentful but did as she was told. When Halfdan came before the princess, she admitted that she could not stop thinking of him. She asked him to visit her often.

By now, Halfdan was so popular with Olaf that the king had him sit beside him on the dais. When the landwarden Aki returned, he was jealous of Halfdan's popularity, and tried to turn the king against the foreigner.

One night, when the king had his retinue had been drinking, and the king was asleep, Aki challenged Halfdan to a swimming contest. The contest was set for next day and everyone came, including the king. Halfdan wore his mailcoat, Brana's gift. Aki leapt in, and then Halfdan came after him. Halfdan held Aki under the water so long that when he let the landwarden go, Aki scrambled from the water and went home with all his men. Halfdan played many swimming games in the water and then returned with the king to the hall. The next day Halfdan told the princess about this, and she warned him to beware of Aki. 'He will try to deceive you.' Halfdan was sanguine about this.

Aki next challenged Halfdan to a joust, to which Halfdan agreed. Aki had a horse named Longant, which was one of the best in England; only the princess's horse, Spoliant, was better. When Halfdan told the princess what he had agreed to, she let him ride her own horse, but asked him to keep this secret. She sent Alfifa to the farmer who kept her horse, and the girl brought Spoliant back shortly after.

In the joust, Halfdan unhorsed Aki and he became well-regarded because of this, while Aki fretted night and day, trying to think of ways to cut Halfdan down to size. He learnt of Halfdan's sister, Ingibjorg, and decided that he would attack Halfdan by dishonouring her. When he came to her bower, however, she called on Brana, and Aki found himself stuck to the doorpost, and had to stand there all night, despite the cold wind and frost that came. In the morning, Halfdan learnt of this and came to see Aki, whereupon Aki found he could move. He left in anger, and plotted all the harder against Halfdan.

Aki invited the king to a feast, and Halfdan and his friends Sigmund and Sigurd accompanied him. The king and his immediate retinue drank in one place, while Halfdan and the others drank in a castle nearby. Aki plied them with drink. When they were all sleeping, he was

going to set fire to the building and kill them all. When the foster-brothers' clothes were beginning to burn, a woman came out from the woods, entered the burning castle, and carried the sleeping men away. Halfdan awoke to discover Brana had rescued him.

She scolded him for being fooled by Aki, but told him. 'I cannot stay, since I have a week-old baby girl to care for back home.'

She left him in anger, and the foster brothers awoke. They went to the king and told him what had happened. When Aki saw Brana, he and his men fled into the woods.

The king returned home and prepared a great feast for Yule. One of the guests was Sigurd of Scarborough, and on the first night Princess Marsibil entered followed by her handmaidens, and Hild and Ingibjorg who sat beside her.

King Sigurd asked Alfifa the name of the woman who sat on the princess's right hand and Alfifa said, 'She is called Ingibjorg and is sister of the merchant who came to the king that summer.'

Her father told her, 'Go to Princess Marsibil and arrange my marriage with Ingibjorg.'

Alfifa did so, and Princess Marsibil asked him to discuss the match with Halfdan.

The next day, the princess, King Sigurd and Halfdan met and the king asked Halfdan for his sister's hand, which Marsibil encourage him to accept.

Halfdan said, 'I think it would be a good match if Sigurd married Hild.'

He agreed to this, and Hild's brothers agreed upon the courtship. The Yule feast became a wedding, and lasted for two weeks. King Sigurd gave gifts to many of the guests before returning to Scarborough with Hild, now his queen. Hild's brother Sigurd accompanied them but Sigmund remained with Halfdan.

Halfdan decided to leave England in the summer to avenge his father, and he told the princess of his intentions. She offered to give him twenty ships she owned, which were in the harbour. Halfdan thanked her, told his sister to remain Marsibil, to which she assented, and took her

leave of them both. He went to the king, thanked him for sheltering him over the winter, and took his leave, going with Sigmund to the ships he had received from the princess.

When Halfdan had gone, Aki came to the king and told him, 'Halfdan slept with Princess Marsibil and she is with child.'

The king believed him and angrily sent him with many men in pursuit of Halfdan.

Halfdan and Sigmund were travelling through the forest when Aki rode to attack them. Halfdan and Sigmund stood back to back and defended themselves but Aki cut Sigmund's feet from under him. Wrathful at Sigmund's death, Halfdan slew all Aki's men and took Aki prisoner, mutilating him horrifically and sending his broken but still living form on horseback to the king. Halfdan buried Sigmund in a mound and went to his ships where he told his men what he had done to Aki, and they approved. Then he set sail from England with his fleet, with his own dragon-ship *Skrauti* in the vanguard. He reached the Hladey islands where Hladgerd gave him a warm reception and provided another twenty ships and crews to add to his fleet. Meanwhile, Aki returned to King Olaf with all his usual arrogance stripped from him. The king took one look at him and drove him from the court.

Halfdan sailed away from the Hladey islands with his fleet and descended on Rugen. Soti and the other Viking invaders hurried to battle on hearing of Halfdan's approach, though none of the people of the island joined them. The two sides met on a level plain and then began a fierce battle. The Vikings forced ferociously and slew many of Halfdan's warriors. Halfdan told them to defend themselves and not expose themselves to so much injury. They advanced and the tide of battle turned. Halfdan met Snaekoll, Soti's brother, and slew him. When Soti saw this, he attacked Halfdan, swinging at him with his sword. Halfdan leapt into the air and Soti missed, his sword plunging into the earth, bowing him. Halfdan cut his legs from under him and he fell, mortally wounded. With his dying breath, Soti cursed Halfdan to forget all about Princess Marsibil.

Halfdan and his men won the victory that day, but the curse was fulfilled. He became king but Princess Marsibil vanished from his thoughts.

He was lying in bed one night when Brana came to him and told him to rise.

'King Eirek of Miklagard has come to England to sue for Princess Marsibil's hand. The princess has shut herself in the bower and the king cannot reason with her.'

It all came back to Halfdan, and it was as if he had awoken from a dream. Alone he went to his dragon-ship *Skrauti* and set sail for England. A favourable wind blew up at once and Halfdan did not stop until he reached the harbour in England where he had weighed anchor before.

It was evening when he landed and he went ashore, coming to the princess' bower. He climbed the fence and knocked on the door. Marsibil and Ingibjorg heard it, and Ingibjorg said, 'I like the sound of that. I want to let our visitor in.'

Marsibil gave her assent and Ingibjorg opened the door to her brother.

The next day Halfdan went to the king and asked to marry Marsibil. King Olaf agreed and it was arranged for King Eirek of Miklagard to marry Ingibjorg. King Sigurd of Scarborough was at court, and with him his daughter Alfifa and Halfdan's blood-brother Sigurd, who were also getting married. The weddings were all held together. They all remained at court for two weeks in much splendour and the kings gave each other many gifts.

King Eirek and his wife Ingibjorg travelled back to Miklagard where they ruled until they were old. Sigurd took Alfifa back to his home in Scotland to find that his father Angantyr was dead. He took the throne and they ruled the kingdom until their deaths, when Sigurd's son Angantyr succeeded them.

Halfdan took Marsibil back to his kingdom and they ruled there until King Olaf died. Then they ruled over England also and later Halfdan added Russia to his domain. They had a son named Richard, but Halfdan made his son-in-law Astro ruler of England.

PEOPLE OF THE DARK by Robert E Howard

Part Two

And I wheeled as a hideous horde swept up the tunnel and burst into the dim light, a flying nightmare of streaming snaky hair, foam-flecked lips and glaring eyes. Thundering my war-cry I sprang to meet them and my heavy sword sang and a head spun grinning from its shoulder on an arching fountain of blood. They came upon me like a wave and the fighting madness of my race was upon me. I fought as a maddened beast fights and at every stroke I clove through flesh and bone, and blood spattered in a crimson rain.

Then as they surged in and I went down beneath the sheer weight of their numbers, a fierce yell cut the din and Vertorix's ax sang above me, splattering blood and brains like water. The press slackened and I staggered up, trampling the writhing bodies beneath my feet.

"A stair behind us!" the Briton was screaming. "Half-hidden in an angle of the wall! It must lead to daylight! Up it, in the name of Il-marenin!"

So we fell back, fighting our way inch by inch. The vermin fought like blood-hungry devils, clambering over the bodies of the slain to screech and hack. Both of us were streaming blood at every step when we reached the mouth of the shaft, into which Tamera had preceded us.

Screaming like very fiends the Children surged in to drag us down. The shaft was not as light as had been the corridor, and it grew darker as we climbed, but our foes could only come at us from in front. By the gods, we slaughtered them till the stair was littered with mangled corpses and the Children frothed like mad wolves! Then suddenly they abandoned the fray and raced back down the steps.

"What portends this?" gasped Vertorix, shaking the bloody sweat from his eyes.

"Up the shaft, quick!" I panted. "They mean to mount some other stair and come at us from above!"

So we raced up those accursed steps, slipping and stumbling, and as we fled past a black tunnel that opened into the shaft, far down it we heard a frightful howling. An instant later we emerged from the shaft into a winding corridor, dimly illumined by a vague gray light filtering in from above, and somewhere in the bowels of the earth I seemed to hear the thunder of rushing water. We started down the corridor and as we did so, a heavy weight smashed on my shoulders, knocking me headlong, and a mallet crashed again and again on my head, sending dull red flashes of agony across my brain. With a volcanic wrench I dragged my attacker off and under me, and tore out his throat with my naked fingers. And his fangs met in my arm in his death-bite.

Reeling up, I saw that Tamera and Vertorix had passed out of sight. I had been somewhat behind them, and they had run on, knowing nothing of the fiend which had leaped on my shoulders. Doubtless they thought I was still close on their heels. A dozen steps I took, then halted. The corridor branched and I knew not which way my companions had taken. At blind venture I turned into the left-hand branch, and staggered on in the semidarkness. I was weak from fatigue and loss of blood, dizzy and sick from the blows I had received. Only the thought of Tamera kept me doggedly on my feet. Now distinctly I heard the sound of an unseen torrent.

That I was not far underground was evident by the dim light which filtered in from somewhere above, and I momentarily expected to come upon another stair. But when I did, I halted in black despair; instead of up, it led down. Somewhere far behind me I heard faintly the howls of the pack, and I went down, plunging into utter darkness. At last I struck a level and went along blindly. I had given up all hope of escape, and only hoped to find Tamera--if she and her lover had not found a way of escape--and die with her. The thunder of rushing

water was above my head now, and the tunnel was slimy and dank. Drops of moisture fell on my head and I knew I was passing under the river.

Then I blundered again upon steps cut in the stone, and these led upward. I scrambled up as fast as my stiffening wounds would allow--and I had taken punishment enough to have killed an ordinary man. Up I went and up, and suddenly daylight burst on me through a cleft in the solid rock. I stepped into the blaze of the sun. I was standing on a ledge high above the rushing waters of a river which raced at awesome speed between towering cliffs. The ledge on which I stood was close to the top of the cliff; safety was within arm's length. But I hesitated and such was my love for the golden-haired girl that I was ready to retrace my steps through those black tunnels on the mad hope of finding her. Then I started.

Across the river I saw another cleft in the cliff-wall which fronted me, with a ledge similar to that on which I stood, but longer. In olden times, I doubt not, some sort of primitive bridge connected the two ledges--possibly before the tunnel was dug beneath the riverbed. Now as I watched, two figures emerged upon that other ledge--one gashed, dust-stained, limping, gripping a bloodstained ax; the other slim, white and girlish.

Vertorix and Tamera! They had taken the other branch of the corridor at the fork and had evidently followed the windows of the tunnel to emerge as I had done, except that I had taken the left turn and passed clear under the river. And now I saw that they were in a trap. On that side the cliffs rose half a hundred feet higher than on my side of the river, and so sheer a spider could scarce have scaled them. There were only two ways of escape from the ledge: back through the fiend-haunted tunnels, or straight down to the river which raved far beneath.

I saw Vertorix look up the sheer cliffs and then down, and shake his head in despair. Tamara put her arms about his neck, and though I could not hear their voices for the rush of the river, I saw them smile, and then they went together to the edge of the ledge. And out of the cleft swarmed a loathsome mob, as foul reptiles writhe up out of the darkness, and they stood blinking in the sunlight like the night-things they were. I gripped my sword-hilt in the agony of my helplessness until the blood trickled from under my fingernails. Why had not the pack followed me instead of my companions?

The Children hesitated an instant as the two Britons faced them, then with a laugh Vertorix hurled his ax far out into the rushing river, and turning, caught Tamera in a last embrace. Together they sprang far out, and still locked in each other's arms, hurtled downward, struck the madly foaming water that seemed to leap up to meet them, and vanished. And the wild river swept on like a blind, insensate monster, thundering along the echoing cliffs.

A moment I stood frozen, then like a man in a dream I turned, caught the edge of the cliff above me and wearily drew myself up and over, and stood on my feet above the cliffs, hearing like a dim dream the roar of the river far beneath.

I reeled up, dazedly clutching my throbbing head, on which dried blood was clotted. I glared wildly about me. I had clambered the cliffs--no, by the thunder of Crom, I was still in the cavern! I reached for my sword--

The mists faded and I stared about dizzily, orienting myself with space and time. I stood at the foot of the steps down which I had fallen. I who had been Conan the reaver, was John O'Brien. Was all that grotesque interlude a dream? Could a mere dream appear so vivid? Even in dreams, we often know we are dreaming, but Conan the reaver had no cognizance of any other existence. More, he remembered his own past life as a living man remembers, though in the waking mind of John O'Brien, that memory faded into dust and mist. But the adventures of Conan in the Cavern of the Children stood clear-etched in the mind of John O'Brien.

I glanced across the dim chamber toward the entrance of the tunnel into which Vertorix had followed the girl. But I looked in vain, seeing only the bare blank wall of the cavern. I crossed the chamber, switched on my electric torch--miraculously unbroken in my fall--and felt along the wall.

Ha! I started, as from an electric shock! Exactly where the entrance should have been, my fingers detected a difference in material, a section which was rougher than the rest of the wall. I was convinced that it was of comparatively modern workmanship; the tunnel had been walled up.

I thrust against it, exerting all my strength, and it seemed to me that the section was about to give. I drew back, and taking a deep breath, launched my full weight against it, backed by all the power of my giant muscles. The brittle, decaying wall gave way with a shattering crash and I catapulted through in a shower of stones and falling masonry.

I scrambled up, a sharp cry escaping me. I stood in a tunnel, and I could not mistake the feeling of similarity this time. Here Vertorix had first fallen foul of the Children, as they dragged Tamera away, and here where I now stood the floor had been awash with blood.

I walked down the corridor like a man in a trance. Soon I should come to the doorway on the left--aye, there it was, the strangely carven portal, at the mouth of which I had slain the unseen being which reared up in the dark beside me. I shivered momentarily. Could it be possible that remnants of that foul race still lurked hideously in these remote caverns?

I turned into the doorway and my light shone down a long, slanting shaft, with tiny steps cut into the solid stone. Down these had Conan the reaver gone groping and down them went I, John O'Brien, with memories of that other life filling my brain with vague phantasms. No light glimmered ahead of me but I came into the great dim chamber I had known of yore, and I shuddered as I saw the grim black altar etched in the gleam of my torch. Now no bound figures writhed there, no crouching horror gloated before it. Nor did the pyramid of skulls support the Black Stone before which unknown races had bowed before Egypt was born out of time's dawn. Only a littered heap of dust lay strewn where the skulls had upheld the hellish thing. No, that had been no dream: I was John O'Brien, but I had been Conan of the reavers in that other life, and that grim interlude a brief episode of reality which I had relived.

I entered the tunnel down which we had fled, shining a beam of light ahead, and saw the bar of gray light drifting down from above--just as in that other, lost age. Here the Briton and I, Conan, had turned at bay. I turned my eyes from the ancient cleft high up in the vaulted roof, and looked for the stair. There it was, half-concealed by an angle in the wall.

I mounted, remembering how hurriedly Vertorix and I had gone up so many ages before, with the horde hissing and frothing at our heels. I found myself tense with dread as I approached the dark, gaping entrance through which the pack had sought to cut us off. I had snapped off the light when I came into the dim-lit corridor below, and now I glanced into the well of blackness which opened on the stair. And with a cry I started back, nearly losing my footing on the worn steps. Sweating in the semidarkness I switched on the light and directed its beam into the cryptic opening, revolver in hand.

I saw only the bare rounded sides of a small shaftlike tunnel and I laughed nervously. My imagination was running riot; I could have sworn that hideous yellow eyes glared terribly at me from the darkness, and that a crawling something had scuttered away down the tunnel. I was foolish to let these imaginings upset me. The Children had long vanished from these caverns; a nameless and abhorrent race closer to the serpent than the man, they had centuries ago faded back into the oblivion from which they had crawled in the black dawn ages of the Earth.

I came out of the shaft into the winding corridor, which, as I remembered of old, was lighter. Here from the shadows a lurking thing had leaped on my back while my companions ran on, unknowing. What a brute of a man Conan had been, to keep going after receiving such savage wounds! Aye, in that age all men were iron.

I came to the place where the tunnel forked and as before I took the left-hand branch and came to the shaft that led down. Down this I went, listening for the roar of the river, but not hearing it. Again the darkness shut in about the shaft, so I was forced to have recourse to my

electric torch again, lest I lose my footing and plunge to my death. Oh, I, John O'Brien, am not nearly so sure-footed as was I, Conan the reaver; no, nor as tigerishly powerful and quick, either.

I soon struck the dank lower level and felt again the dampness that denoted my position under the riverbed, but still I could not hear the rush of the water. And indeed I knew that whatever mighty river had rushed roaring to the sea in those ancient times, there was no such body of water among the hills today. I halted, flashing my light about. I was in a vast tunnel, not very high of roof, but broad. Other smaller tunnels branched off from it and I wondered at the network which apparently honeycombed the hills.

I cannot describe the grim, gloomy effect of those dark, low-roofed corridors far below the earth. Over all hung an overpowering sense of unspeakable antiquity. Why had the little people carved out these mysterious crypts, and in which black age? Were these caverns their last refuge from the onrushing tides of humanity, or their castles since time immemorial? I shook my head in bewilderment; the bestiality of the Children I had seen, yet somehow they had been able to carve these tunnels and chambers that might balk modern engineers. Even supposing they had but completed a task begun by nature, still it was a stupendous work for a race of dwarfish aborigines.

Then I realized with a start that I was spending more time in these gloomy tunnels than I cared for, and began to hunt for the steps by which Conan had ascended. I found them and, following them up, breathed again deeply in relief as the sudden glow of daylight filled the shaft. I came out upon the ledge, now worn away until it was little more than a bump on the face of the cliff. And I saw the great river, which had roared like a prisoned monster between the sheer walls of its narrow canyon, had dwindled away with the passing eons until it was no more than a tiny stream, far beneath me, trickling soundlessly among the stones on its way to the sea.

Aye, the surface of the earth changes; the rivers swell or shrink, the mountains heave and topple, the lakes dry up, the continents alter; but under the earth the work of lost, mysterious hands slumbers untouched by the sweep of Time. Their work, aye, but what of the hands that reared that work? Did they, too, lurk beneath the bosoms of the hills?

How long I stood there, lost in dim speculations, I do not know, but suddenly, glancing across at the other ledge, crumbling and weathered, I shrank back into the entrance behind me. Two figures came out upon the ledge and I gasped to see that they were Richard Brent and Eleanor Bland. Now I remembered why I had come to the cavern and my hand instinctively sought the revolver in my pocket. They did not see me. But I could see them, and hear them plainly, too, since no roaring river now thundered between the ledges.

"By gad, Eleanor," Brent was saying, "I'm glad you decided to come with me. Who would have guessed there was anything to those old tales about hidden tunnels leading from the cavern? I wonder how that section of wall came to collapse? I thought I heard a crash just as we entered the outer cave. Do you suppose some beggar was in the cavern ahead of us, and broke it in?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I remember--oh, I don't know. It almost seems as if I'd been here before, or dreamed I had. I seem to faintly remember, like a far-off nightmare, running, running, running endlessly through these dark corridors with hideous creatures on my heels..."

"Was I there?" jokingly asked Brent.

"Yes, and John, too," she answered. "But you were not Richard Brent, and John was not John O'Brien. No, and I was not Eleanor Bland, either. Oh, it's so dim and far-off I can't describe it at all. It's hazy and misty and terrible."

"I understand, a little," he said unexpectedly. "Ever since we came to the place where the wall had fallen and revealed the old tunnel, I've had a sense of familiarity with the place. There was horror and danger and battle--and love, too."

He stepped nearer the edge to look down in the gorge, and Eleanor cried out sharply and suddenly, seizing him in a convulsive grasp.

“Don’t, Richard, don’t! Hold me, oh, hold me tight!”

He caught her in his arms. “Why, Eleanor, dear, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she faltered, but she clung closer to him and I saw she was trembling. “Just a strange feeling--rushing dizziness and fright, just as if I were falling from a great height. Don’t go near the edge, Dick; it scares me.”

“I won’t, dear,” he answered, drawing her closer to him, and continuing hesitantly: “Eleanor, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a long time--well, I haven’t the knack of putting things in an elegant way. I love you, Eleanor; always have. You know that. But if you don’t love me, I’ll take myself off and won’t annoy you any more. Only please tell me one way or another, for I can’t stand it any longer. Is it I or the American?”

“You, Dick,” she answered, hiding her face on his shoulder. “It’s always been you, though I didn’t know it. I think a great deal of John O’Brien. I didn’t know which of you I really loved. But today as we came through those terrible tunnels and climbed those fearful stairs, and just now, when I thought for some strange reason we were falling from the ledge, I realized it was you I loved--that I always loved you, through more lives than this one. Always!”

Their lips met and I saw her golden head cradled on his shoulder. My lips were dry, my heart cold, yet my soul was at peace. They belonged to each other. Eons ago they lived and loved, and because of that love they suffered and died. And I, Conan, had driven them to that doom.

I saw them turn toward the cleft, their arms about each other, then I heard Tamera--I mean Eleanor--shriek. I saw them both recoil. And out of the cleft a horror came writhing, a loathsome, brain-shattering thing that blinked in the clean sunlight. Aye, I knew it of old--vestige of a forgotten age, it came writhing its horrid shape up out of the darkness of the Earth and the lost past to claim its own.

What three thousand years of retrogression can do to a race hideous in the beginning, I saw, and shuddered. And instinctively I knew that in all the world it was the only one of its kind, a monster that had lived on. God alone knows how many centuries, wallowing in the slime of its dank subterranean lairs. Before the Children had vanished, the race must have lost all human semblance, living as they did, the life of the reptile.

This thing was more like a giant serpent than anything else, but it had aborted legs and snaky arms with hooked talons. It crawled on its belly, writhing back mottled lips to bare needlelike fangs, which I felt must drip with venom. It hissed as it reared up its ghastly head on a horribly long neck, while its yellow slanted eyes glittered with all the horror that is spawned in the black lairs under the earth.

I knew those eyes had blazed at me from the dark tunnel opening on the stair. For some reason the creature had fled from me, possibly because it feared my light, and it stood to reason that it was the only one remaining in the caverns, else I had been set upon in the darkness. But for it, the tunnels could be traversed in safety.

Now the reptilian thing writhed toward the humans trapped on the ledge. Brent had thrust Eleanor behind him and stood, face ashy, to guard her as best he could. And I gave thanks silently that I, John O’Brien, could pay the debt I, Conan the reaver, owed these lovers since long ago.

The monster reared up and Brent, with cold courage, sprang to meet it with his naked hands. Taking quick aim, I fired once. The shot echoed like the crack of doom between the towering cliffs, and the Horror, with a hideously human scream, staggered wildly, swayed and pitched headlong, knotting and writhing like a wounded python, to tumble from the sloping ledge and fall plummetlike to the rocks far below.

THE END

Ayame's Love - Part Five by Thomas C Hewitt

5.

Ranzo had long strayed from the forest track
he could see little and hear only birds

He was beginning to regret the fact
that he moved on by himself free from care
as the land that inspired him held him back
the trees were like grim guards with angry stares
keeping land that dropped quickly with no tact
and leaves like canopies darkened the air

The sound of birds in the dark amazed him
calls like excited whispers, faint and slim
and branches brushed like taps on his shoulder
leaves rustled as though secrets were told there
in the heightened place that lead him astray
until stuffed with exhaustion down he lay

Ranzo would sleep over thirty times more
before the light burnt his eyes in contrast
his body dirty and his clothes ignored
unpicked by the branches, half torn to rags

The trees ended arched in sunlight a door
between two frames of mind and existence
Ranzo left the woods nervy, scared and unsure
the longed for norm now seemed rudely different

in such a small time his mind had altered
used to the close trees comfort and soft air
he was almost moved to step warmly back
but too fixed and certain to change his track

Across the open land he ran unmoved
by jagged stones, hills, streams or sun stained blue

For another ten days he ran full pace
like a slavers drum sounded his panting
with the sun and the stars to keep him straight
nothing else to see, nothing else, nothing

For ten days he ran until he was faint
and his leaden limbs dissolved beneath him
then he lay down still for another day
his fingers engaged soil like a rock cliff

When he rose it was tired and slow, no hope
of the village but wild grass and yarrow
he ploughed miserably forward so empty
his eyes met the land like an enemy
but his enemy fed and gave him warmth
though enough for him that it seemed endless

He shuddered grimly as not far away
the land was again hindered by the trees
which he headed towards with some disdain
moving only because he had such need
of another human voice or kind face

And so he walked on hoping for relief
his agile legs feeling virtually lame
but those tired legs moved with good speed to reach
the shelter of trees and the warmth of leaves
the cosy dankness that a woodland breaths
the closest prospect he had of embrace
he approached mouth filling, eyes gently glazed
the branches like arms that opened to kiss
the smile that slowly grew broad on his lips

It was in that forest Ranzo was found,
his mud crusted face looking strangely proud.

A PICTURE FROM HARRIETT by John L Campbell

Part One

The Terrell County Sheriff's cruiser slowed as the road flared and the deputy standing on the blacktop came into view. Beyond, a collection of patrol cars, fire trucks and one of the county ambulances were pulled to both sides of the two lane road where it rounded a gentle curve through the forest. Red and blue emergency lights flashed against the twilight.

A murdered child in the Mississippi woods. It was going to be a long night.

Sheriff Cecil Hamilton eased his cruiser up to the deputy in the road, the flashers of his own roof rack reflecting off the man's yellow safety vest, and lowered his window, letting the air conditioning escape into the humid evening. At even a few yards, a ghostly steam could be seen clinging to the asphalt.

"Hey, Ham," said the deputy, leaning on the doorframe and taking in the cool air. He was sweating, the collar and armpits of his uniform shirt stained dark. A wad of tobacco puffed out his lower lip.

"Gary," said the Sheriff. He nodded up towards the cluster of vehicles. "Tobias has the scene?"

"Yessir," the deputy nodded. "Got the tape up and being a real bitch about not letting anyone inside. Got her kit out, says nobody touches nothing until you get here."

"That's why she's the sergeant," Hamilton said, then thought, *And that's why you're out here sweating on the blacktop.*

Gary spit to one side, careful not to get any on the sheriff's car. He had his own opinion about that. "Won't let nobody talk to the witness, neither."

Hamilton frowned. "We've got a witness?" Before Gary could respond, he had dropped the cruiser into drive and gunned away, leaving his deputy waving at exhaust and a cloud of gnats which had lowered slowly onto the road. The sheriff maneuvered his car around the other vehicles and stopped at their center, shutting off his light bar. There were enough of those going as it was. On foot he wound through the deputy cruisers and around the firetruck, where four volunteer firemen half dressed in their turnout gear were gathered, talking quietly. They gave the sheriff a nod as he passed, but didn't speak. Their expressions told him they'd seen the body, and that spoke for itself.

As he reached the gravel shoulder, Deputy Jeff Hooper met him coming out of the thick woods, carrying a flashlight. "Evening, Ham." He handed over the light. "Maggie's already put up one set of lights, you'll see 'em in a bit, but you'll need this to get there. Watch out for a big bitch of a fallen tree." He gestured at a torn knee of his uniform trousers. Blood had started soaking the surrounding fabric.

Sheriff Hamilton gave his deputy a gentle squeeze on the shoulder. Jeff was one of his hardest-working and most dependable men, destined to wear sergeant's stripes if a slot

opened up, and he had seen plenty of horror in his years with the department; car accidents, hunting accidents, child abuse, domestic arguments turned to homicide. But the murder of a child was something different, enough to shake the most jaded, and Hamilton could see it on the deputy's face as he had with the firemen. "Get someone to take a look at that, Jeff. It gets infected and your leg goes bum, you're no good to anyone. Won't have you slackin' off on Worker's Comp, hear?"

The deputy grinned and nodded as he limped towards the ambulance, and Hamilton headed into the woods, the powerful Maglite beam leading the way. About forty yards in he could see the white glow of Maggie Tobias's crime scene lights, slashed with the black vertical stripes of intervening trees. In here the humidity wrapped itself close around him like a barber's shaving cloth, the late July air heavy and hard to breathe. Twilight mosquitoes descended for a sweaty meal, and he brushed them from his bare arms, taking off his ballcap to wipe his brow. The woods crowded in on him, and while brambles tugged at his trousers, mud sucked at his boots and threatened to pull them off as he picked his way towards the lights.

What a miserable place to die.

It had rained for over two hours late this afternoon, and although it had done nothing to suppress the heat, it had succeeded in softening up the ground pretty well. He found the fallen tree Jeff Hooper had warned him about, and climbed over it carefully, but a snapped-off branch still dug a red line across one elbow, and a tangle of weeds and muck on the other side threatened to throw him onto his face. He managed to stay on his feet, planting a hand on a mossy tree trunk, and even held onto the flashlight. Ahead, the blue-white flash of a camera lit the woods for an instant. He continued, reminding himself to have Patricia check him for ticks when he got home.

The scene was a tight little clearing – a loose term in these woods – with a giant, rotted stump at its center. Tough grass was matted as if by the passage of many feet, and the ground was littered with trash, mostly beer and liquor bottles, many of them half sunk in the earth with time. Yellow crime scene tape ringed the clearing, wound back and forth among the trees, and Sheriff Hamilton ducked under it as he entered. He saw the body at once.

"Stop," said a woman's voice, the tone one of authority not to be argued with. Cecil Hamilton did as he was told and froze in mid-step. Maggie Tobias, five feet five and a hundred twenty pounds, stood to the left of the stump. She wore her uniform trousers bloused into black combat-style boots and a bright yellow shirt with SHERIFF'S DEPT. emblazoned on the back, sergeant's stripes on each short sleeve. A 9mm in a paddle holster rode one hip, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. In one hand she held a large camera, and with the other she pointed at her boss.

"Walk to the right, around that side of the stump," her finger traced the route he was to take, "and come up behind me." Her finger stopped, pointing at a spot next to her. Then she hoisted the camera, aimed, and lit the woods with another flash.

Sheriff Hamilton followed her instructions, seeing several pieces of evidence already bagged and left in place where they had been found; a couple of Budweiser cans, a crumpled cigarette pack, a condom, several cigarette butts and a hardback Dr. Seuss book. A tripod with a pair of high intensity, battery powered lamps sat off to Maggie's right, illuminating the

area. The sheriff was careful not to step on anything important, and his eyes roamed the ground for something she might have missed. He didn't see anything. Not that it would have helped. The late day rain would have already done a fine job erasing a considerable amount of evidence.

He completed his route and ended up beside her while she crouched and took another picture. Up close he could see she had sweat right through the back of her shirt, and it hung on her like a damp skin. Mosquitoes fed on her neck, but she seemed not to notice. She took three steps to the right, crossing in front of her boss, and snapped another picture.

Sheriff Hamilton looked at the body and shoved his hands in his pockets, shaking his head.

"Black female," Maggie began, not pausing in her work as she made a slow circle, taking pictures from every angle, "age approximately twelve years. Blunt force trauma to the head, the forehead." She pointed at a rock sticking out of the flattened grass that looked as if someone had painted it red. Even the rain hadn't washed it clean. "That's your cause of death right there." Several mosquitoes crawled over the rock's surface. "The rock's stuck in the ground, so best bet is either she tripped and fell and hit her head on it..." she pointed at the panties around the girl's ankles. It would have been hard to run like that. "...or someone grabbed the back of her head and bashed it into the rock. There's a depression in the ground near her upper body, could be a knee mark, can't say."

"Sexual assault." Hamilton didn't say it like a question.

"Doc Fulcrum's gonna have to say for sure, but yeah, I'd say so from the bruising." The girl's red and white patterned dress was turned inside out up to the waist. "Looks like sodomy too. Can't say what else, but we're gonna have to have the doc check her mouth for..."

Hamilton held up a hand. "Yeah, I know, Maggie. He will."

Maggie looked at him, and for a moment the professional mask she wore, the one which allowed her to do such a gruesome task, the one which every cop in America was familiar with, slipped just a little out of place. Revealed was a woman, a human being struggling with pain and disgust and rage. Then the mask returned and she was a sergeant again, working a scene without emotion.

"I'd put time of death somewhere between ten a.m. and two, maybe three. Before the rain, that's for sure."

"She put up a fight?" Hamilton was hoping she had, because then her fingernails might be a wealth of evidence.

Tobias sighed. "Not what I'd expect, not from a first look. Who knows? But I could smell liquor when I got close to her face. Her eyes are wide open, so I'd say she was conscious when it happened. Can't tell how aware she might have been, though."

"How many?"

She frowned as she thought. "More than one."

The sheriff contemplated several men doing this to a child, then quickly buried that one down deep. He had a mask of his own, and it was better than most. “What’s the witness say?”

Tobias nearly dropped her camera. “We got a witness?”

“*You* got a witness.”

“Who?”

The sheriff scowled and held up a hand. “Hold on. You’re holding a witness and won’t let anyone talk to them.”

“Says who?”

“Says Gary. He told me when I got here.”

It was Maggie’s turn to shake her head. “Boss, that dumbass don’t have a brain in his head, and most days can’t tell rain from piss.” Maggie had a BA in criminal justice, and was half way to her Masters in business administration, but when she got fired up her Mississippi was revealed in all its glory.

“So what’s he talking about?”

“No witness, that’s for sure. He must mean Tyler Coffey, got him sittin’ in the back of my unit with the AC on, drinking a diet Coke. He’s the one found the body.” She held up a hand and corrected herself. “Well, his dog found it, I guess, and he found the dog.”

The sheriff knew a witness was too much to hope for. Tyler Coffey was a local, seventy years old and retired from the mill, living in a shack down County Road 17 and spending his days drinking away his pension. When he wasn’t prowling the sides of the county’s roads for redeemable cans.

“He gonna be of any use?”

Maggie shook her head. “Doubt it. I was hoping maybe he saw a car or someone on foot, but he said he couldn’t remember seeing anyone. He’s mostly in the bag, anyway. I’ll get a formal statement from him later.”

Hamilton looked at the little girl again, stretched out face-down on the damp ground, arms down at her sides. She hadn’t even braced before hitting the rock and sailing off to whatever came next. He hoped it was someplace peaceful. His Pentecostal mother claimed it was. That is, in the unlikely event you escaped the fiery torment of Hell.

“You call the State Police yet?”

Maggie crouched behind her camera. “Nope.”

“Goddamn it, Maggie Lynn, you know the procedure!”

She looked over her camera, her chin thrust out. “Yessir, I do, and the God almighty SBI boys are more than welcome to come in and mess up this scene right after I’ve processed it. This is my case, Ham, and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let whoever did this get off on a technicality because some state fool can’t tell a jackass north from south!”

The sheriff glared back at his sergeant for a long moment, then sighed and shoved his hands back in his pockets. “Alright, do it your way, but I’m going to have to call.” Tobias started to object, but he silenced her with a stern look. “It’ll take ‘em two, three hours to get here, time enough for you to finish. I’ll square things with Johnny Lee.”

Cecil Hamilton and Johnny Lee Reed had grown up in Jasper together, had played high school football together – where Johnny Lee had given him the nickname Ham, due to his beefy physique – and had both started taking police entry exams as soon as they were old enough. They had even dropped out of college the same year when Cecil had been accepted to the sheriff’s department and Johnny to the state police. Weddings, births, and law enforcement had kept their lives linked ever since, and Johnny Lee was now the commanding lieutenant at State Police Barracks D over in Hawley.

The sheriff pointed a finger at his sergeant. “And don’t you give his boys no grief when they get here, Maggie Lynn Tobias. They start in on you, you just walk away. Soon as they get here you can turn over the scene and get on home to a shower.”

“Not goin’ home, Ham. Gonna stay with the girl until Doc Fulcrum has a look at her. There’s things I gotta know.”

He knew it was no use to argue. “Fine. Gonna put Don on this with you, give you a hand.”

That sat well with her. Don Havermeyer was a young sheriff’s detective who usually worked narcotics cases – a busy job in this county – but he was shaping up to be a fine investigator. Some of the deputies, the old-timers mostly, disliked him for his youth and eagerness. Tobias knew what it meant to be disliked.

Hamilton looked at the girl once more, wishing he could cover her up, knowing it wasn’t yet time for that. “That’s Harriett LaCroix, isn’t it?” He already knew the answer. He had recognized the dress, and the Dr. Seuss book was a giveaway. Harriett loved Dr. Seuss.

Tobias stood from her crouch and nodded, also looking at the still body. “Yessir, gotta be.” Then she looked up at Sheriff Hamilton and the detached attitude which had helped get her through the evening was gone. Tears streaked both cheeks, and Hamilton realized he had never once seen Maggie Tobias cry in the eleven years he’d known her. “And what I wanna know, Ham, is what the hell is this little girl – this little *retarded* girl - doing out here in the woods, and her mama ain’t banging down our door wanting to know why her baby didn’t come home?” The fury behind her words was like a slap. “I’ll tell you why,” she continued, her voice shaking as she pointed at her boss. “Because her worthless whore of a mama is sleepin’ on her damn sofa cracked out of her mind, that’s why!”

Hamilton was torn, wanting to put his arms on her shoulders and calm her, a paternal instinct to somehow shield her from something so heinous, yet knowing he could not, it was her job, chosen of her own will, and something she had to face on her own. Instead he did the best he could.

“You do a good job here, Maggie, and we’ll get who did this. I’ll take care of her mama.”

It was almost two in the morning by the time Cecil Hamilton pulled his cruiser up the long dirt driveway that led from the blacktop to his house, a big two story place on plenty of land, enough room for Patricia's horses. The headlights picked out his wife's silver Buick, David's pick-up, and a muddy quad parked near the garage. In the dark to the right was the silhouette of his boat, covered in a tarp and sitting on its trailer. A soft glow came from the kitchen window. Patricia had left the stove light on for him.

He shut off the engine and sat there for a while, listening to the big V8 tick as it cooled. He'd quit smoking five years earlier, but tonight he caught himself craving again. He popped a mint instead and eased slowly out of the front seat, groaning at the pulled muscle in his back as he straightened. His dark green trousers were bloody and he was wearing only his white t-shirt, the khaki uniform shirt a torn scrap in an ER trash can. A white bandage was wrapped around his left forearm, and the bite mark hurt like hell. Jeff Hooper had gotten off easy with just a black eye, but Gary had caught a solid kick to the groin, followed by a broken nose after a direct hit from a glass ashtray.

Miracle Falls was the unlikely name of the trailer park where Topaz Martin lived, just about a mile outside Jasper along Younger Creek Road. It was a place the department knew well, home to a mostly transient population of paroled felons and folks for whom public assistance was a third and fourth generation family business. Even Cecil Hamilton, with a reputation for holding his ground against any and all comers, regardless of their prison muscles or badass attitudes, knew better than to go there alone, especially at night. He'd brought along Gary and Jeff, partly because he didn't know who might be cribbing at Topaz's trailer, and partly to keep watch on the cruisers so no one tried to steal the shotgun or radio while they were inside.

Topaz Martin (originally Topaz LaCroix), was twenty-six, and had a criminal record that went back well into her childhood, everything from car theft and prostitution to felony assault and possession with intent. Her current occupation centered mostly on a shoplifting-for-refund operation she ran with the help of her two sisters, Cinnamon and Eternity LaCroix. That trio was the scourge of retailers across lower Mississippi, and all three had been banned from the Chestnut Farms Mall on the edge of the county. She had six kids of varying ages, all different daddies, all placed in different foster homes. Except for her oldest, twelve-year old Harriett. No matter how many times Topaz was arrested and Harriett taken out of the home by CPS, the state always returned the girl to her mother. Topaz would serve her thirty or sixty days, get clean for a while in a mandatory program, and then a state worker would drop the girl off and watch as Topaz showered her special-needs child with affection and promises that *this* time things would be different.

As Tobias had predicted, Topaz was high. She said she had sent Harriett out in the morning with some money to get her mama cigarettes, and "that damn stupid girl ain't come back yet." When she had been told of her daughter's murder, she had paused, then wondered aloud if that meant the state was going to cut down on her assistance.

The sheriff had never wanted to slap a woman so badly in his life, but instead, Jeff had nudged him and pointed at the coffee table. There in plain sight was the pipe, the

baggies, the crack, and half a dozen credit cards which most certainly did not belong to Topaz Martin.

“Hook her up,” the sheriff said, and that had set it off.

Losing her daughter might not have shaken Topaz, but being deprived of her crack turned the scrawny woman into a demon. At the sounds of battle, Gary had come bursting in from outside in time to take the full force of her attack, which had spilled out into the muddy drive before they managed to subdue her. She was being held overnight for observation in the security unit at Fredericks Hospital, pending transfer to Hamilton’s lockup in the morning.

Sheriff Hamilton leaned against the fender of his cruiser and looked up at the star-filled Mississippi night. It was clear, and the humidity had dropped mercifully, so he took a moment, intending to clear his head before going in to join his wife in bed. Instead, his thoughts kept turning back to the hospital.

After he and his men had gotten stitched up and he had sent them home to their own families, Hamilton had gone down to the hospital basement, where Doc Fulcrum, the county medical examiner, had his offices and labs. The hallways had been dark, and he had found a nurse who told him Doctor Fulcrum was in Jackson at a conference, and wasn’t due back until midday tomorrow. Then he’d gone looking for Maggie Tobias, and found her sleeping on a vinyl sofa outside the morgue. He didn’t wake her, and instead hunted through several rooms until he’d found a blanket, and covered her up before leaving.

It was in the parking lot just outside the ER, where his car was parked in a space reserved for law enforcement, that he’d encountered Wisdom LaCroix. The old man was leaning against the cruiser’s fender, just as he himself was now, dressed in thrift shop clothes that hung on his bony frame like bad drapes. Unmoving, he stared at the sheriff as he crossed to his car.

“Mistah Hamilton,” the old man said, inclining his head slightly, but never taking his eyes away. At eighty-six, Wisdom LaCroix looked like a skeleton wrapped tightly by a wrinkled, brown paper bag, with runny, nicotine yellow eyes and only a few remaining teeth, also yellow. He was stooped and his head hung low and a little off-center. But what nobody failed to notice about Wisdom were his hands, which he kept cradled together against his belly, a pair of spidery things which advanced arthritis had twisted into claws. He didn’t offer to shake hands.

“Wisdom,” Hamilton offered, looking the man over without realizing he did it. The patriarch of the LaCroix family – which numbered in the hundreds, as Wisdom had been siring young well into his seventies - was no stranger to the law, or more precisely to breaking it, often violently, and in his youth had been a true terror. In 1956 he had earned a fourteen year stretch for a killing during a knife fight, and during his life had spent more years inside correctional facilities than out. These days, however, Cecil Hamilton suspected his criminal activity was limited indeed.

“How are the hands?”

“Pretty bad most times. Miz Partidge over to da bank gots to help me sign my disability checks. I’d have muh girls do it, but they’s usually busy.”

Hamilton nodded, but he knew Wisdom LaCroix was far too smart to ever let one of his daughters anywhere near one of his checks. “You here by yourself, Wisdom?”

“Yessir.”

“I’m so sorry about Harriett. I know she meant a lot to you.”

“She’s muh favoritest grandbaby, suh.”

Hamilton knew that to be true, and often when Topaz had been in jail or out on a spree with her sisters or simply too high to look after her daughter, it had been Wisdom who had quietly collected the girl and kept her at his little house in town. He had even fixed up a room just for her, a place of stuffed animals and bright colors, a haven for a girl with a sad life, who although might have been twelve in age, was closer to six in maturity and emotions. Cecil wasn’t even sure what Harriett’s actual disability had been, whether Downs or Autism or something else, and for that he was ashamed. He’d find out now, though. The case would require it.

“You know I had to lock up her mama. Didn’t have no choice.”

The old man made a face. “I ain’t here for her, Sheriff. And I ain’t gonna try to see muh grandbaby. I come to see you.”

Cecil waited.

“I come to make sure you gonna see justice done for that little one. I come to have your word on it, suh.”

“Wisdom, me and my people, we’re gonna do everything we can to find out who did this, and bring down all the retribution the law allows. I give you my word on that. And I know it probably don’t help much, but I want you to find some peace knowing she’s resting with the Lord now.”

Wisdom LaCroix pulled himself slowly off the cruiser’s fender to a standing position and stepped close, close enough that Cecil could smell the cheap cigarettes the man smoked. The old felon stared at him with those rheumy eyes for a long moment, unblinking, and then in a soft voice said, “That just ain’t so, Sheriff. My grandbaby’s in another place, a darker place, an’ she ain’t gonna have no rest till justice is done.”

Then he raised one claw and painfully extended a finger, touching it to Cecil Hamilton’s chest. “And neither will you.”

Without another word he had cradled his hands together once more, turned, and shuffled away into the darkened parking lot, leaving the sheriff unsettled and strangely chilled for a July night. Now, here in the dark outside his house, Hamilton grimaced at his back, wished again for a cigarette, and slowly made his own way home.

A week later, Doc Fulcrum had completed his examinations and collected all available evidence, hounded daily by Maggie Tobias, and then Harriett LaCroix’s body had been released for burial. Services were held at the First Baptist Church of Jasper, and most of the community turned up to pay their respects for a little girl most had known, if not to talk

to, by seeing her frequently as she walked through town. Sheriff Hamilton was there with his wife and his seventeen-year-old son David, and although Cecil had little love for the LaCroix clan, it was the respectful thing to do. The county selectmen showed up as well, mostly because all but one were up for re-election in the fall, as was the sheriff, and it would be good for them to be seen showing such care and compassion. Cecil doubted a single one would have attended if he hadn't felt politically obligated.

There were only a few actual LaCroix's at the service – many were locked up in assorted facilities across Mississippi and neighboring states, or were wanted on active warrants. Topaz was there, out on bail and sitting in the front pew wearing a glassy expression. And Wisdom was there as well, dressed in a baggy black suit, perched next to his daughter, his eyes fixed on the flower-ringed casket at the front of the church.

Afterwards, Cecil again expressed his condolences. Topaz made a sullen noise and just looked at the floor, but Wisdom locked eyes fiercely. "Don't you forget 'bout muh grandbaby, Sheriff," he said.

The graveside service was short, and immediately followed by a rapid exodus of mourners seeking to escape the late July heat and sun. Only Wisdom remained, standing hunched and watching as the casket was lowered into the earth.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

A Small Sacrifice

by Todd Nelsen

On a weathered hilltop sat a castle. In the castle were many towers. In the highest of the towers was a window, and beneath the window was a chair. On the chair, sat a not so young man, a wizard. On the wizard's lap, nestled between his wrinkled hands, was an ornate box of the finest craftsmanship. In the box, was the tiniest of mirrors. And beside the mirror -

-

She was no larger than a thimble.

“Don't watch,” she said. “Close your eyes.”

Begrudgingly, the wizard did as she asked and closed his eyes, not as tightly as she would have liked, of course, but closed them just the same. Outside the window, it began to rain. Moments passed. “Can I look now?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she said.

He sighed. She did this every morning, he thought.

“How about now?” he asked, again, some seconds later.

“You need to learn to be patient, Humbert. Don't you know it's unbecoming for a man your age to be in such a hurry?”

The wizard scoffed at this.

“I am patient,” he replied, opening one of his eyes and catching a flash of white, as she bounded into the shadows, “just not as patient as you'd like, perhaps.”

“I told you not to peek!”

“There’s nothing wrong with just a little looksy, is there?” He bent down and peered into the mirror, his eyeball large and filling its reflective surface. With a smile, he took one of his fingers and began to gently push the mirror to one side. But before he had moved it little more than half a finger --

“Ta-da!” The girl leapt out from behind it, dressed and fully clothed. “Beat ya!” she said, teasing him.

“You look lovely.”

“Do I?” She twirled herself around and around like a tiny top, her dress lifting with the uplift, exposing her well-shaped legs. “You truly think so?”

“Yes,” he said with a sad smile, watching her. The dress fit her perfectly, from head-to-toe. Lovely, he thought. A touch of longing filled his voice. “If only I were younger --”

“And not so tall,” she giggled.

“Yes, and not so tall,” he agreed.

She gazed up and looked long and hard into his face. “You seem different today, Humbert,” she said.

He returned her gaze, his eyes peering at her through his spectacles, an old man’s spectacles that rested far too low on the bridge of his nose.

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do.”

She bounded up to her bed, a bed he had fashioned for her, and continued to observe him. She was as light as a feather. The bed was much too large for the girl -- from her perspective, standing nearly five feet from the ground -- but as Humbert knew, when it came

to comfort, better to be too large than too sm --

His brow wrinkled; suddenly he felt more clumsy than usual. How could he tell her?

“Anna,” he began.

“Yes?” Her tiny legs were swinging back and forth on the edge of the mattress; she didn’t have a care in the world, he thought.

“Anna, I’ve found a way --” He stopped, fumbling for the words. This was so very difficult!

The rain was falling heavier now.

“You’ve found,” she prompted. “Yes? Yes?”

Oh, bat dung! Just tell the girl! “A way for you to be like me,” he spat out finally.

She giggled at this. “Like you, Humbert? Why on earth would I want to be like you?” Then it dawned on her. Her face brightened. “You mean --?”

“Yes, I’ve found a way to make you right, again, Anna.”

“Oh, Humby!” she cried, leaping from the bed and wrapping herself around one of his fingers. “How I have so longed for this! But how can this be?” she asked. “You yourself said it wasn’t possible.”

“A spell,” he said, muttering it under his breath like it was a bad taste in his mouth.

“A simple spell.”

“But you said there was no spell in all the world that could --” She let loose of his finger and looked up at him suspiciously. “What’s the catch?”

He started to say something, stammered, then went silent.

She put her hands on her hips. “Humbert? *What’s the catch?*”

The old wizard sighed and looked down on her with the same, sad smile. She looked as beautiful as the first day he’d seen her, he thought. He would always remember her like this: in miniature. He knew from the first moment he had set eyes on the tiny girl that he would do anything for her. Yes, he was sure of it now. He was an old man and wouldn’t be around to look after her much longer; it was a small sacrifice on his part to guarantee the girl’s happiness.

“There is no catch, Anna,” he replied; she would never agree if she knew the truth. “It’s a spell. Something I overlooked, is all. I thought you would be happy.”

“Oh, I am, Humbert!” she cried. “I am! You’ve made me the happiest girl in the whole wide world today!”

* * *

Anna awoke the following morning with a start.

For there, on the windowsill, was a bird, and birds were something she feared. Then she realized she was out of her box, and the bird was no larger than her own hand. It had worked! But how? When? She glanced around the room.

But Humbert was nowhere to be found.

Then she heard a sound, a small sound, not unlike the squeaking of a mouse, coming to her from an ornate box, a box of the finest craftsmanship. She wrapped herself in a blanket and walked over to it and peered inside. And inside was --

“Just a little looksy?”

Anna smiled and a tear came to her eye.

“Oh, Humby,” she said.

And without even a second thought, she let the blanket fall from her shoulders and stood as naked as the pouring rain before it.

MIND SLIP by Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

Hear the snapping pins behind rusted locks
Of my old and ancient puzzling box.
Twisting wheel that moves the screw;
Knocking cogs turn to ignite my stew.

Light sears, it appears somebody's home;
Beneath tired veneer sits damage known.
An out of date computer, bugs or two to boot;
Like opening of a wardrobed shirt years estranged from suit.

Supposed to drive the vehicle, but it has no hands, nor feet;
Sits high above my shoulder blades, this king to form effete.
With dust removed, it runs along twelve thoughts to the dozen,
But often this is not the case; little more than a brand's new cousin.

Chemically addled, it may not last life's long haul,
So step right up and get your fill from my cortex's sideshow stall.
The letters spun as artisan must wind down on their spring,
As another mind slips dreaming now, for a whole new part to sing.

THE HOUSE OF SKULLS by Gavin Chappell

4 A Ravaged Land

Yeduza stood in the midst of the pygmy camp. Her friends sat beneath the towering trunks and gazed worshipfully up at her. Dogo regarded her with an appraising look. The elder, whose name was Mkongwe, looked on as a group of pygmy girls came shyly forth to place a garland of blossoms around their saviours' neck.

'This is a great honour,' she said, and she meant it, though the pygmies' adulation was a meagre thing compared with that she had once met from the Nago. 'But Chatu's death will not make the lands safe from the Kikwenzi. I fought Chinja, their chief, and could not kill him. Even now, his silent raiders may be ravaging the Nago Empire. I want to stop him. Maybe if I did, my lord the Emperor would accept me as his general again.'

'Then you will not stay with us?' Dogo asked, suddenly. 'I... We hoped you would remain. As an honoured guest.'

Yeduza smiled at the little man. 'I thank you,' she said with good grace. 'But I cannot remain here while my people suffer. If there was only some way I could defeat Chinja.'

'You could not kill him last time,' Dogo said. 'What hope will you have now?'

Yeduza looked down at the leaf litter at her feet. 'But I must try,' she muttered fiercely.

Mkongwe spoke. 'We are indebted to you,' he said. 'And though he does not say, Dogo has knowledge that is vital to your ambition. You freed us from the scourge of Chatu. Now Dogo must tell you what you need to know – how Chinja may be killed.'

Yeduza looked at the young pygmy angrily. 'You know this?' she demanded. 'How? And why did you not say earlier?'

Dogo looked briefly ashamed. 'I had hoped you would stay...' he said. 'Very well, I will tell you what I discovered when I was a slave of the Kikwenzi.'

'Before they attacked your lands, they skirted them to the north to find easier pickings, and to amass a larger army. They fall upon unsuspecting villages and slaughter all but the young and fit. The girls become camp followers; the youths become bearers or warriors. The warriors are ensorcelled by Chinja. They become zombies, in his thrall, killing and looting at his command, with no will of their own. That is why they are silent.'

'North of your country they came to a great wasteland of sand, where little grew and few lived. Those who lived there were pale skinned folk who wrapped themselves in white robes. They rode on creatures like your own steed, or stranger beasts, and attacked with weapons that killed from afar with a great thunderclap. Against these warriors, the Kikwenzi could not prevail, and even Chinja, whose magic makes him invulnerable to spears or swords, was wounded in the battle. As soon as he had been struck, he ordered a retreat and the mighty Kikwenzi horde fled in confusion. It was during that rout that I seized my chance to escape, and return here.'

Yeduza listened to his account, electrified.

‘When was this?’ she demanded.

‘The moon has waxed and waned only nine times since I fled the Kikwenzi,’ Dogo replied.

‘Nine moons,’ Yeduza murmured to herself. ‘Then shortly after, they began their assault on Nago... The deserts of the North? Yes, I had heard that the Tiburi nomads raid the caravans with these muskets, as they are called. We have never ridden against them in my lifetime. But perhaps now is the time to forge links between their folk and ours.’

She took up her assegai and shield from where she had propped them against a tree. ‘I thank you, Mbilikimo, for all you have done for me. I think I have fulfilled my obligations to you also. Now I must travel north, and find if I cannot trade with the Tiburi, gain one of these muskets – and use it against Chinja. Farewell.’

She turned to leave the clearing in haste. Dogo looked at Mkongwe then bounded after her.

‘But you will not go alone?’ he asked. ‘Let me guide you through the jungle at least.’ He looked hesitantly at Mkongwe again. ‘That is, if the elder allows it.’

Mkongwe nodded. ‘Let Dogo guide you,’ he begged Yeduza. She looked down at the young pygmy.

‘Very well,’ she said impatiently. ‘But we must make haste. The empire is at stake.’

A broad grin bloomed on Dogo’s face.

Several days later, they came out of the jungle. Beyond them, the flat, wide, sun-scorched expanse of the savannah stretched to a distant and dusty horizon.

‘We are now in your lands,’ the pygmy said, leaning on the blowpipe he had brought with him for hunting -- and for defence. ‘What do you wish to do?’

Yeduza turned to look down at her smaller companion with an expression of respect. He had proved an expert guide as they had journeyed under the dark, lowering eaves of the trees, leading her away from the many dangers that lurked in the depths of the jungle, helping her cross crocodile-infested rivers and navigate bottomless swamps. A bond had been created by their shared hardships.

‘I must travel on to the northern deserts,’ she told him. ‘This is where we must say farewell.’

Dogo stared in the direction of the forest wall, disconsolate. ‘Perhaps,’ he said after a while, ‘perhaps I...’

But Yeduza was ignoring him, scanning the horizon with her keen eyes. She pointed.

‘Look!’ she said. She was indicating a smoke trail that reached up into the cobalt blue skies. Dogo turned to look. His eyes flickered back and forth.

‘And over there,’ he said. Yeduza saw he was pointing at two more thick black smoke trails to the west. She cursed, knowing what this meant.

‘Chinja has returned,’ she muttered.

They reached the closest village towards evening, and discovered a scene that was grimly familiar to Yeduza. Bodies lay strewn about the mud streets, huts were guttering shells. Near the middle of the village, they found an old woman who lay moaning pitifully near a pile of butchered bodies. Yeduza went to her side and pressed a calabash of water to her lips.

The old woman’s eyes cleared after she had drunk thirstily for some time. It was clear that she was dying; there was a deep wound in her belly. Dogo stood back, looking around uncertainly as Yeduza pillowed the old woman’s grey head on her knee.

‘What happened here, old woman?’ Yeduza asked. ‘Was it the Kikwenzis? Led by the man who calls himself Chinja?’

‘I do not know their names,’ the old woman whispered. ‘They entered the village at dawn, spearing the people as they tried to run. Silent warriors, their faces daubed white. In a brief space, all lay dead except the young people who were dragged off. The raiders feasted on the bodies of the villagers they killed, eating them like beasts. One speared me and left me for dead.’

‘Has the Emperor not sent warriors to defend your villages?’ Yeduza demanded. If Chinja’s forces still raided Nago, it was Mtogo’s duty to send out his army to patrol the plains.

The old woman shook her head.

‘The Emperor does not concern himself with us,’ she wheezed. ‘It is said that he has gone mad. He remains in his city and has dismissed his general. The army is leaderless. He holds executions every day, people he blames for the raids. They say... A trader from the city said that he is rebuilding the House of Skulls...’

Yeduza’s blood ran cold.

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LV.

THE RETURN OF THE MOB AND MILITARY TO THE TOWN.—THE MADNESS OF THE MOB.—THE GROCER'S REVENGE.

On the termination of the conflagration, or, rather, the fall of the roof, with the loss of grandeur in the spectacle, men's minds began to be free from the excitement that chained them to the spot, watching the progress of that element which has been truly described as a very good servant, but a very bad master; and of the truth of this every one must be well satisfied.

There was now remaining little more than the livid glare of the hot and burning embers; and this did not extend far, for the walls were too strongly built to fall in from their own weight; they were strong and stout, and intercepted the little light the ashes would have given out.

The mob now began to feel fatigued and chilly. It had been standing and walking about many hours, and the approach of exhaustion could not be put off much longer, especially as there was no longer any great excitement to carry it off.

The officer, seeing that nothing was to be done, collected his men together, and they were soon seen in motion. He had been ordered to stop any tumult that he might have seen, and to save any property. But there was nothing to do now; all the property that could have been saved was now destroyed, and the mob were beginning to disperse, and creep towards their own houses.

The order was then given for the men to take close order, and keep together, and the word to march was given, which the men obeyed with alacrity, for they had no good-will in stopping there the whole of the night.

The return to the village of both the mob and the military was not without its vicissitudes; accidents of all kinds were rife amongst them; the military, however, taking the open paths, soon diminished the distance, and that, too, with little or no accidents, save such as might have been expected from the state of the fields, after they had been so much trodden down of late.

Not so the townspeople or the peasantry; for, by way of keeping up their spirits, and amusing themselves on their way home, they commenced larking, as they called it, which often meant the execution of practical jokes, and these sometimes were of a serious nature.

The night was dark at that hour, especially so when there was a number of persons traversing about, so that little or nothing could be seen.

The mistakes and blunders that were made were numerous. In one place there were a number of people penetrating a path that led only to a hedge and deep ditch; indeed it was a brook very deep and muddy.

Here they came to a stop and endeavoured to ascertain its width, but the little reflected light they had was deceptive, and it did not appear so broad as it was.

"Oh, I can jump it," exclaimed one.

"And so can I," said another. "I have done so before, and why should I not do so now."

This was unanswerable, and as there were many present, at least a dozen were eager to jump.

"If thee can do it, I know I can," said a brawny countryman; "so I'll do it at once.

"The sooner the better," shouted some one behind, "or you'll have no room for a run, here's a lot of 'em coming up; push over as quickly as you can."

Thus urged, the jumpers at once made a rush to the edge of the ditch, and many jumped, and many more, from the prevailing darkness, did not see exactly where the ditch was, and taking one or two steps too many, found themselves up above the waist in muddy water.

Nor were those who jumped much better off, for nearly all jumped short or fell backwards into the stream, and were dragged out in a terrible state.

"Oh, lord! oh, lord!" exclaimed one poor fellow, dripping wet and shivering with cold, "I shall die! oh, the rheumatiz, there'll be a pretty winter for me: I'm half dead."

"Hold your noise," said another, "and help me to get the mud out of my eye; I can't see."

"Never mind," added a third, "considering how you jump, I don't think you want to see."

"This comes a hunting vampyres."

"Oh, it's all a judgment; who knows but he may be in the air: it is nothing to laugh at as I shouldn't be surprised if he were: only think how precious pleasant."

"However pleasant it may be to you," remarked one, "it's profitable to a good many."

"How so?"

"Why, see the numbers, of things that will be spoiled, coats torn, hats crushed, heads broken, and shoes burst. Oh, it's an ill-wind that blows nobody any good."

"So it is, but you may benefit anybody you like, so you don't do it at my expence."

In one part of a field where there were some stiles and gates, a big countryman caught a fat shopkeeper with the arms of the stile a terrible poke in the stomach; while the breath was knocked out of the poor man's stomach, and he was gasping with agony, the fellow set to laughing, and said to his companions, who were of the same class—

"I say, Jim, look at the grocer, he hasn't got any wind to spare, I'd run him for a wager, see how he gapes like a fish out of water."

The poor shopkeeper felt indeed like a fish out of water, and as he afterwards declared he felt just as if he had had a red hot clock weight thrust into the midst of his stomach and there left to cool.

However, the grocer would be revenged upon his tormentor, who had now lost sight of him, but the fat man, after a time, recovering his wind, and the pain in his stomach becoming less intense, he gathered himself up.

"My name ain't Jones," he muttered, "if I don't be one to his one for that; I'll do something that shall make him remember what it is to insult a respectable tradesman. I'll never forgive such an insult. It is dark, and that's why it is he has dared to do this."

Filled with dire thoughts and a spirit of revenge, he looked from side to side to see with what he could effect his object, but could espy nothing.

"It's shameful," he muttered; "what would I give for a little retort. I'd plaster his ugly countenance."

As he spoke, he placed his hands on some pales to rest himself, when he found that they stuck to them, the pales had that day been newly pitched.

A bright idea now struck him.

"If I could only get a handful of this stuff," he thought, "I should be able to serve him out for serving me out. I will, cost what it may; I'm resolved upon that. I'll not have my wind knocked out, and my inside set on fire for nothing. No, no; I'll be revenged on him."

With this view he felt over the pales, and found that he could scrape off a little only, but not with his hands; indeed, it only plastered them; he, therefore, marched about for something to scrape it off with.

"Ah; I have a knife, a large pocket knife, that will do, that is the sort of thing I want."

He immediately commenced feeling for it, but had scarcely got his hand into his pocket when he found there would be a great difficulty in either pushing it in further or withdrawing it altogether, for the pitch made it difficult to do either, and his pocket stuck to his hands like a glove.

"D—n it," said the grocer, "who would have thought of that? here's a pretty go, curse that fellow, he is the cause of all this; I'll be revenged upon him, if it's a year hence."

The enraged grocer drew his hand out, but was unable to effect his object in withdrawing the knife also; but he saw something shining, he stooped to pick it up, exclaiming as he did so, in a gratified tone of voice,

"Ah, here's something that will do better."

As he made a grasp at it, he found he had inserted his hand into something soft.

"God bless me! what now?"

He pulled his hand hastily away, and found that it stuck slightly, and then he saw what it was.

"Ay, ay, the very thing. Surely it must have been placed here on purpose by the people."

The fact was, he had placed his hand into a pot of pitch that had been left by the people who had been at work at pitching the pales, but had been attracted by the fire at Sir Francis Varney's, and to see which they had left their work, and the pitch was left on a smouldering peat fire, so that when Mr. Jones, the grocer, accidentally put his hand into it he found it just warm.

When he made this discovery he dabbed his hand again into the pitch-pot, exclaiming,—

"In for a penny, in for a pound."

And he endeavoured to secure as large a handful of the slippery and sticky stuff as he could, and this done he set off to come up with the big countryman who had done him so much indignity and made his stomach uncomfortable.

He soon came up with him, for the man had stopped rather behind, and was larking, as it is called, with some men, to whom he was a companion.

He had slipped down a bank, and was partially sitting down on the soft mud. In his bustle, the little grocer came down with a slide, close to the big countryman.

"Ah—ah! my little grocer," said the countryman, holding out his hand to catch him, and drawing him towards himself. "You will come and sit down by the side of your old friend."

As he spoke, he endeavoured to pull Mr. Jones down, too; but that individual only replied by fetching the countryman a swinging smack across the face with the handful of pitch.

"There, take that; and now we are quits; we shall be old friends after this, eh? Are you satisfied? You'll remember me, I'll warrant."

As the grocer spoke, he rubbed his hands over the face of the fallen man, and then rushed from the spot with all the haste he could make.

The countryman sat a moment or two confounded, cursing, and swearing, and spluttering, vowing vengeance, believing that it was mud only that had been plastered over his face; but when he put his hands up, and found out what it was, he roared and bellowed like a town-bull.

He cried out to his companions that his eyes were pitched: but they only laughed at him, thinking he was having some foolish lark with them.

It was next day before he got home, for he wandered about all night: and it took him a week to wash the pitch off by means of grease; and ever afterwards he recollected the pitching of his face; nor did he ever forget the grocer.

Thus it was the whole party returned a long while after dark across the fields, with all the various accidents that were likely to befall such an assemblage of people.

The vampyre hunting cost many of them dear, for clothes were injured on all sides: hats lost, and shoes missing in a manner that put some of the rioters to much inconvenience. Soon afterwards, the military retired to their quarters; and the townspeople at length became tranquil and nothing more was heard or done that night.

CHAPTER III: MEN OF THE WOODS

So far as this, all that I have stated has been clear, and there can be no doubt that what has been thus handed down from mouth to mouth is for the most part correct. When I pass from trees and animals to men, however, the thing is different, for nothing is certain and everything confused. None of the accounts agree, nor can they be altogether reconciled with present facts or with reasonable supposition; yet it is not so long since but a few memories, added one to the other, can bridge the time, and, though not many, there are some written notes still to be found. I must attribute the discrepancy to the wars and hatreds which sprang up and divided the people, so that one would not listen to what the others wished to say, and the truth was lost.

Besides which, in the conflagration which consumed the towns, most of the records were destroyed, and are no longer to be referred to. And it may be that even when they were proceeding, the causes of the change were not understood. Therefore, what I am now about to describe is not to be regarded as the ultimate truth, but as the nearest to which I could attain after comparing the various traditions. Some say, then, that the first beginning of the change was because the sea silted up the entrances to the ancient ports, and stopped the vast commerce which was once carried on. It is certainly true that many of the ports are silted up, and are now useless as such, but whether the silting up preceded the disappearance of the population, or whether the disappearance of the population, and the consequent neglect caused the silting, I cannot venture to positively assert.

For there are signs that the level of the sea has sunk in some places, and signs that it has become higher in others, so that the judicious historian will simply state the facts, and refrain from colouring them with his own theory as Silvester has done. Others again maintain that the supply of food from over the ocean suddenly stopping caused great disorders, and that the people crowded on board all the ships to escape starvation, and sailed away, and were no more heard of.

It has, too, been said that the earth, from some attractive power exercised by the passage of an enormous dark body through space, became tilted or inclined to its orbit more than before, and that this, while it lasted, altered the flow of the magnetic currents, which, in an imperceptible manner, influence the minds of men. Hitherto the stream of human life had directed itself to the westward, but when this reversal of magnetism occurred, a general desire arose to return to the east. And those whose business is theology have pointed out that the wickedness of those times surpassed understanding, and that a change and sweeping away of the human evil that had accumulated was necessary, and was effected by supernatural means. The relation of this must be left to them, since it is not the province of the philosopher to meddle with such matters.

All that seems certain is, that when the event took place, the immense crowds collected in cities were most affected, and that the richer and upper classes made use of their money to escape. Those left behind were mainly the lower and most ignorant, so far as the arts were concerned; those that dwelt in distant and outlying places; and those who lived by agriculture. These last at that date had fallen to such distress that they could not hire vessels to transport

themselves. The exact number of those left behind cannot, of course, be told, but it is on record that when the fields were first neglected (as I have already described), a man might ride a hundred miles and not meet another. They were not only few, but scattered, and had not drawn together and formed towns as at present.

Of what became of the vast multitudes that left the country, nothing has ever been heard, and no communication has been received from them. For this reason I cannot conceal my opinion that they must have sailed either to the westward or to the southward where the greatest extent of ocean is understood to exist, and not to the eastward as Silvester would have it in his work upon the "Unknown Orb", the dark body travelling in space to which I have alluded. None of our vessels in the present day dare venture into those immense tracts of sea, nor, indeed, out of sight of land, unless they know they shall see it again so soon as they have reached and surmounted the ridge of the horizon. Had they only crossed to the mainland or continent again, we should most likely have heard of their passage across the countries there.

It is true that ships rarely come over, and only to two ports, and that the men on them say (so far as can be understood) that their country is equally deserted now, and has likewise lost its population. But still, as men talk unto men, and we pass intelligence across great breadths of land, it is almost certain that, had they travelled that way, some echo of their footsteps would yet sound back to us. Regarding this theory, therefore, as untenable, I put forward as a suggestion that the ancients really sailed to the west or to the south.

As, for the most part, those who were left behind were ignorant, rude, and unlettered, it consequently happened that many of the marvellous things which the ancients did, and the secrets of their science, are known to us by name only, and, indeed, hardly by name. It has happened to us in our turn as it happened to the ancients. For they were aware that in times before their own the art of making glass malleable had been discovered, so that it could be beaten into shape like copper. But the manner in which it was accomplished was entirely unknown to them; the fact was on record, but the cause lost. So now we know that those who to us are the ancients had a way of making diamonds and precious stones out of black and lustreless charcoal, a fact which approaches the incredible. Still, we do not doubt it, though we cannot imagine by what means it was carried out.

They also sent intelligence to the utmost parts of the earth along wires which were not tubular, but solid, and therefore could not transmit sound, and yet the person who received the message could hear and recognise the voice of the sender a thousand miles away. With certain machines worked by fire, they traversed the land swift as the swallow glides through the sky, but of these things not a relic remains to us. What metal-work or wheels or bars of iron were left, and might have given us a clue, were all broken up and melted down for use in other ways when metal became scarce.

Mounds of earth are said to still exist in the woods, which originally formed the roads for these machines, but they are now so low, and so covered with thickets, that nothing can be learnt from them; and, indeed, though I have heard of their existence, I have never seen one. Great holes were made through the very hills for the passage of the iron chariot, but they are now blocked by the falling roofs, nor dare any one explore such parts as may yet be open. Where are the wonderful structures with which the men of those days were lifted to the skies, rising above the clouds? These marvellous things are to us little more than fables of the giants and of the old gods that walked upon the earth, which were fables even to those whom we call the ancients.

Indeed, we have fuller knowledge of those extremely ancient times than of the people who immediately preceded us, and the Romans and the Greeks are more familiar to us than the men who rode in the iron chariots and mounted to the skies. The reason why so many arts and sciences were lost was because, as I have previously said, the most of those who were left in the country were ignorant, rude, and unlettered. They had seen the iron chariots, but did not understand the method of their construction, and could not hand down the knowledge they did not themselves possess. The magic wires of intelligence passed through their villages, but they did not know how to work them.

The cunning artificers of the cities all departed, and everything fell quickly into barbarism; nor could it be wondered at, for the few and scattered people of those days had enough to do to preserve their lives. Communication between one place and another was absolutely cut off, and if one perchance did recollect something that might have been of use, he could not confer with another who knew the other part, and thus between them reconstruct the machine. In the second generation even these disjointed memories died out.

At first it is supposed that those who remained behind existed upon the grain in the warehouses, and what they could thresh by the flail from the crops left neglected in the fields. But as the provisions in the warehouses were consumed or spoiled, they hunted the animals, lately tame and as yet but half wild. As these grew less in number and difficult to overtake, they set to work again to till the ground, and cleared away small portions of the earth, encumbered already with brambles and thistles. Some grew corn, and some took charge of sheep. Thus, in time, places far apart from each other were settled, and towns were built; towns, indeed, we call them to distinguish them from the champaign, but they are not worthy of the name in comparison with the mighty cities of old time.

There are many that have not more than fifty houses in the enclosure, and perhaps no other station within a day's journey, and the largest are but villages, reckoning by antiquity. For the most part they have their own government, or had till recently, and thus there grew up many provinces and kingdoms in the compass of what was originally but one. Thus separated and divided, there came also to be many races where in the first place was one people. Now, in briefly recounting the principal divisions of men, I will commence with those who are everywhere considered the lowest. These are the Bushmen, who live wholly in the woods.

Even among the ancients, when every man, woman, and child could exercise those arts which are now the special mark of nobility, *i.e.* reading and writing, there was a degraded class of persons who refused to avail themselves of the benefits of civilization. They obtained their food by begging, wandering along the highways, crouching around fires which they lit in the open, clad in rags, and exhibiting countenances from which every trace of self-respect had disappeared. These were the ancestors of the present men of the bushes.

They took naturally to the neglected fields, and forming "camps" as they call their tribes, or rather families, wandered to and fro, easily subsisting upon roots and trapped game. So they live to this day, having become extremely dexterous in snaring every species of bird and animal, and the fishes of the streams. These latter they sometimes poison with a drug or a plant (it is not known which), the knowledge of which has been preserved among them since the days of the ancients. The poison kills the fishes, and brings them to the surface, when they can be collected by hundreds, but does not injure them for eating.

Like the black wood-dogs, the Bushmen often in fits of savage frenzy destroy thrice as much as they can devour, trapping deer in wickerwork hedges, or pitfalls, and cutting the miserable animals in pieces, for mere thirst of blood. The oxen and cattle in the enclosures are occasionally in the same manner fearfully mutilated by these wretches, sometimes for amusement, and sometimes in vengeance for injuries done to them. Bushmen have no settled home, cultivate no kind of corn or vegetable, keep no animals, not even dogs, have no houses or huts, no boats or canoes, nothing that requires the least intelligence or energy to construct.

Roaming to and fro without any apparent aim or object, or any particular route, they fix their camp for a few days wherever it suits their fancy, and again move on, no man knows why or whither. It is this uncertainty of movement which makes them so dangerous. To-day there may not be the least sign of any within miles of an enclosure. In the night a "camp" may pass, slaughtering such cattle as may have remained without the palisade, or killing the unfortunate shepherd who has not got within the walls, and in the morning they may be nowhere to be seen, having disappeared like vermin. Face to face the Bushman is never to be feared; a whole "camp" or tribal family will scatter if a traveler stumbles into their midst. It is from behind a tree or under cover of night that he deals his murderous blow.

A "camp" may consist of ten or twenty individuals, sometimes, perhaps, of forty, or even fifty, of various ages, and is ruled by the eldest, who is also the parent. He is absolute master of his "camp", but has no power or recognition beyond it, so that how many leaders there may be among them it is not possible even to guess. Nor is the master known to them as king, or duke, nor has he any title, but is simply the oldest or founder of the family. The "camp" has no law, no established custom; events happen, and even the master cannot be said to reign. When he becomes feeble, they simply leave him to die.

They are depraved, and without shame, clad in sheep-skins chiefly, if clad at all, or in such clothes as they have stolen. They have no ceremonies whatever. The number of these "camps" must be considerable, and yet the Bushman is seldom seen, nor do we very often hear of their depredations, which is accounted for by the extent of country they wander over. It is in severe winters that the chief danger occurs; they then suffer from hunger and cold, and are driven to the neighbourhood of the enclosures to steal. So dexterous are they in slipping through the bushes, and slinking among the reeds and osiers, that they will pass within a few yards without discovering their presence, and the signs of their passage can be detected only by the experienced hunter, and not always by him.

It is observed that whatever mischief the Bushman commits, he never sets fire to any ricks or buildings; the reason is because his nature is to slink from the scene of his depredations, and flame at once attracts people to the spot. Twice the occurrence of a remarkably severe winter has caused the Bushmen to flock together and act in an approach to concert in attacking the enclosures. The Bushmen of the north, who were even more savage and brutal, then came down, and were with difficulty repulsed from the walled cities. In ordinary times we see very little of them. They are the thieves, the human vermin of the woods.

Under the name of gipsies, those who are now often called Romany and Zingari were well known to the ancients. Indeed, they boast that their ancestry goes back so much farther than the oldest we can claim, that the ancients themselves were but modern to them. Even in that age of highest civilization, which immediately preceded the present, they say (and there is no doubt of it) that they preserved the blood of their race pure and untainted, that they never dwelt under permanent roofs, nor bowed their knees to the prevalent religion. They remained

apart, and still continue after civilization has disappeared, exactly the same as they were before it commenced.

Since the change their numbers have greatly increased, and were they not always at war with each other, it is possible that they might go far to sweep the house people from the land. But there are so many tribes, each with its king, queen, or duke, that their power is divided, and their force melts away. The ruler of the Bushman families is always a man, but among the gipsies a woman, and even a young girl, often exercises supreme authority, but must be of the sacred blood. These kings and dukes are absolute autocrats within their tribe, and can order by a nod the destruction of those who offend them. Habits of simplest obedience being enjoined on the tribe from earliest childhood, such executions are rare, but the right to command them is not for a moment questioned.

Of the sorcerers, and particularly the sorceresses, among them, all have heard, and, indeed, the places where they dwell seem full of mystery and magic. They live in tents, and though they constantly remove from district to district, one tribe never clashes with or crosses another, because all have their especial routes, upon which no intrusion is ever made. Some agriculture is practiced, and flocks and herds are kept, but the work is entirely done by the women. The men are always on horseback, or sleeping in their tents.

Each tribe has its central camping-place, to which they return at intervals after perhaps wandering for months, a certain number of persons being left at home to defend it. These camps are often situated in inaccessible positions, and well protected by stockades. The territory which is acknowledged to belong to such a camp is extremely limited; its mere environs only are considered the actual property of the tribe, and a second can pitch its tents with a few hundred yards. These stockades, in fact, are more like store-houses than residences; each is a mere rendezvous.

The gipsies are everywhere, but their stockades are most numerous in the south, along the sides of the green hills and plains, and especially round Stonehenge, where, on the great open plains, among the huge boulders, placed ages since in circles, they perform strange ceremonies and incantations. They attack every traveller, and every caravan or train of waggons which they feel strong enough to master, but they do not murder the solitary sleeping hunter or shepherd like the Bushmen. They will, indeed, steal from him, but do not kill, except in fight. Once, now and then, they have found their way into towns, when terrible massacres have followed, for, when excited, the savage knows not how to restrain himself.

Vengeance is their idol. If any community has injured or affronted them, they never cease endeavouring to retaliate, and will wipe it out in fire and blood generations afterwards. There are towns which have thus been suddenly harried when the citizens had forgotten that any cause of enmity existed. Vengeance is their religion and their social law, which guides all their actions among themselves. It is for this reason that they are continually at war, duke with duke, and king with king. A deadly feud, too, has set Bushman and gipsy at each other's throat, far beyond the memory of man. The Romany looks on the Bushman as a dog, and slaughters him as such. In turn, the despised human dog slinks in the darkness of the night into the Romany's tent, and stabs his daughter or his wife, for such is the meanness and cowardice of the Bushman that he would always rather kill a woman than a man.

There is also a third class of men who are not true gipsies, but have something of their character, though the gipsies will not allow that they were originally half-breeds. Their habits

are much the same, except that they are foot men and rarely use horses, and are therefore called the foot gipsies. The gipsy horse is really a pony. Once only have the Romany combined to attack the house people, driven, like the Bushmen, by an exceedingly severe winter, against which they had no provision.

But, then, instead of massing their forces and throwing their irresistible numbers upon one city or territory, all they would agree to do was that, upon a certain day, each tribe should invade the land nearest to it. The result was that they were, though with trouble, repulsed. Until lately, no leader ventured to follow the gipsies to their strongholds, for they were reputed invincible behind their stockades. By infesting the woods and lying in ambush they rendered communication between city and city difficult and dangerous, except to bodies of armed men, and every waggon had to be defended by troops.

The gipsies, as they roam, make little secret of their presence (unless, of course, intent upon mischief), but light their fires by day and night fearlessly. The Bushmen never light a fire by day, lest the ascending smoke, which cannot be concealed, should betray their whereabouts. Their fires are lit at night in hollows or places well surrounded with thickets, and, that the flame may not be seen, they will build screens of fir boughs or fern. When they have obtained a good supply of hot wood coals, no more sticks are thrown on, but these are covered with turf, and thus kept in long enough for their purposes. Much of their meat they devour raw, and thus do not need a fire so frequently as others.