

Schlock! webzine

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Welcome to Schlock! the new webzine for science fiction, fantasy and horror.

Issue 1, Volume 9

4 June 2011

Schlock! is an exciting new weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels and novellas within the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of schlock fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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Schlock! Publishing

This Edition

Featured in this edition is a collection of stories and articles, new and old.

[Babbage Must Die - Part Three](#) by Gavin Chappell - Brian gets to see the time machine itself...

[The Dark Place: Prologue](#) by James Talbot

[Super Duper: Part Six](#) by James Rhodes - Biggy and Jon kill go on a hilarious killing spree.

[Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Nine](#) ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest. Before Twilight... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney..

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Chapter Two](#) by Rex Mundy - Arthur draws the Sword of Power.

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 3\)](#) by Ray Cummings

[The Summer Country - Part Three by Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways learn the terrible fate of the Isle of Abalos. Fifth in the Going Underground series.

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part One](#) by J. Sheridan LeFanu - the original lesbian vampire...

Babbage Must Die

Chapter Four

Brian and Ada stood beneath the wormhole projector. Brian stared up at it in trepidation. It was glowing brightly and throbbing. Percy flicked a switch and suddenly the light was impossibly bright, burning into Brian's brain. Everything around him seemed to shimmer and distort and he felt his temples throb and his blood pound and his stomach lurch as everything seemed to shimmer in a monochrome kaleidoscope. He hadn't felt this bad since dropping acid when he was a youngster. Gradually, helplessly, he fainted.

He awoke in darkness. His head was throbbing, his tongue was dry, and there was a strange coppery smell in his nostrils. For a while, he lay there listening to a distant groaning sound. Eventually he realised that it was him.

'Who's that?' came Ada's voice.

'Ada?' he said. 'What happened? Are we still in the cellar? What's happened to the light?'

'You were right about not planning this through,' Ada said, chagrined. 'Have you got a light?'

Brian had only ever really smoked dope, and he'd given up on it years ago. Still, he carried a Zippo about with him because he thought it made him look cool. He scabbled in his frock coat pockets, into which he had transferred his belongings, and his fingers closed on the cold smooth metal of the lighter.

He took it out and flicked it on. A long wavering flame illuminated the bare walls of the cellar. Ada was lying on the floor beside him, looking at him groggily.

Brian looked about him. 'Where's Percy?' he asked. 'What's happened to all his junk?'

Ada sighed deeply, and pushed herself up into a sitting position.

'Isn't it obvious?' she asked. 'We made it.'

Brian couldn't understand what she was saying. It was something to do with the booming sound in his head and the fact that he wanted to throw up. 'Made what?' he croaked.

Ada gestured around her. 'Welcome to 1812, Brian,' she said.

Against his better judgement, Brian sat up. The room seemed to sway around him as he did so. He leant against the nearby wall and put his hands to his head.

'1812?' he asked. 'We're where we were before. It's just Percy's vamoosed and taken all his gadgets with him.'

Ada shook her head. She got up, dusted off her gown and went over to the door.

‘We’re in 1812, Brian,’ she said dogmatically, and tried the door handle. It turned out that the door was locked. Brian got up and joined her.

‘I wonder who lives in your house,’ he said. He lifted his lighter higher and scanned the cellar, noticing a few piles of junk in the corners. ‘Something else you didn’t think about,’ he added. ‘How do we get out of here? Don’t you reckon people will be a bit surprised to find us in their cellar?’

Ada gave him a panicked look. ‘We’ve got to get out of here,’ she said, and rattled the doorknob. Brian put his hand on hers.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said. ‘You’ll attract attention.’

‘I want to attract attention,’ she said. ‘I want to get out of here. We’ve got to get out of here, track down Babbage and assassinate him and then get back here for this time next year.’

‘We’ve got to get back here as well as get out?’ Brian asked.

‘Yes, if we want to get back to the 21st century,’ Ada replied. ‘Percy will reopen the wormhole at that point. Weren’t you listening?’

‘Look, love,’ said Brian, ‘we’re going to have problems getting out of here. We’ll have even more trouble getting back in. even if we can get out, I don’t reckon that whoever owns this house will be too chuffed to find us trying to get back in his cellar a year later. Why did Percy have to set up the time machine in a cellar anyway?’

‘You’re supposed to be the burglar,’ Ada said. ‘Can’t you get us in and out of here? Security systems must be a lot simpler in the early nineteenth century.’

‘Hold this,’ said Brian, handing her his lighter. ‘Careful, it’s getting hot,’ he said. ‘And it might be an idea to see if you can’t find some candles or something. The fuel won’t last much longer.’ Already the flame was beginning to flicker.

He crouched down and looked at the keyhole, while Ada went rooting in the piles of junk. As far as he could see, it was an old fashioned lock, pre-Yale kind of thing. Not that he was any kind of locksmith, but he was pretty sure he could pick it, given a piece of wire.

‘See if you can find some wire over there, while you’re at it,’ he added. Quite what they’d do once they got through the door was another matter, but at least this problem had a solution. He didn’t fancy their chances once they’d got past the door. Then things would get a lot more complicated....

Ada couldn’t find any candles, but she managed to rig up a lantern with a small dish, some of the remaining lighter fluid and a wick made from a piece of cloth. She also found a piece of rusty wire, which Brian inspected with some misgivings before

poking into the lock and feeling around.

‘I might be some time,’ he said, kneeling at the door and probing the keyhole inexpertly. Ada held her lamp up and waited patiently.

A quarter of an hour later, the wick of the lantern fizzed out and the cellar went black. Brian was sweating despite the cellar’s cold and he had got no closer to picking the lock.

‘Here, let me try,’ Ada said impatiently, pushing him to one side and snatching the wire from his hand. But as she did so, Brian heard footsteps from the other side of the door, as if someone was coming down the steps. Then voices, and a line of flickering light appeared at the bottom of the door. Then a key scraped in the lock and the door was flung open.

Ada and Brian stood in the light of a candle lantern held by a tall, ruddy-faced man wearing dark breeches and a baggy white shirt. Behind him was a younger man whose face held a family resemblance, and a third man in shabby clothes. On the faces of all three men were expressions of shock and bewilderment.

‘You were right, son!’ the ruddy-faced man exclaimed. ‘Not rats, indeed! A dandy, and a bluestocking! What be you doing in my cellar, sir?’

Brian felt his mouth flopped open. It would be difficult enough to explain under normal circumstances, but he doubted people in 1812 had even heard of time machines. He looked to Ada for help.

She stepped forward coolly.

‘I realise that our presence must seem incongruous, but there is an explanation. My colleague and I are on a mission of vital importance for the future of the universe...’

Brian groaned. She wasn’t going to tell the truth, was she? But the ruddy-faced man interrupted suddenly.

‘French!’ he shouted. ‘French spies! Talking their own dirty lingo in my cellar! Call the constable!’ The shabbily-clad man turned and raced up the steps.

‘I assure you, we are not French,’ Ada began. ‘I am speaking English...’

‘You must be spies,’ the younger man said. ‘Why else are you in our cellar?’

‘Oh, come on!’ Brian said. ‘Where’s the logic in that? Why should we be spies, just because we’re in your cellar?’

‘Well, what are you, if you’re not spies?’ the older man demanded. ‘Why are you in my cellar, speaking French, if you’re not spies?’

‘Ada wasn’t speaking French,’ Brian explained. ‘She just talks like that. What comes of having a proper education.’

‘Oh, she’s an educated miss, is she?’ the ruddy-faced man said, looking suspiciously at her. ‘I thought she looked like a bluestocking. In the pay of the French, then.’

‘Look,’ Brian said, ‘I promise you we’re nothing to do with the French. I’m sorry we turned up in your cellar; we won’t do it again, well, not for a few months anyway. Why don’t you just let us go and we won’t trouble you again. Well, not for a while...’

There was a clatter from the cellar steps and Brian looked up to see the shabby man returning with another man who wore a tall hat and carried a long pole in one hand. He swaggered up to Brian and Ada.

‘I’m the parish constable,’ he announced. ‘Benjamin Pagnell’s the name. What are you doing trespassing in Oates’s cellar? How did you get in here?’

‘The explanation would only perplex you, officer,’ Ada told him. He drew back and looked at the ruddy-faced man, Oates, presumably.

Oates nodded meaningfully. ‘Young lady’s been talking French like that since we found them. This overdressed dandy chap speaks English, but speaks it funny though.’

‘You can talk!’ Brian said.

‘Now now,’ said the constable. ‘I hope we won’t be getting any trouble from you, young fellow. You’d better come quietly down to the lockup. The magistrate can decide what to do about you in the morning, what to do about both of you.’ He grabbed Brian’s arm. Brian gagged at the smell of unwashed body overlaid with cheap scent that emanated from the man.

Brian shook him off and stepped back. ‘Bloody pigs!’ he shouted. ‘Get your hands off me!’

Ada turned to him. ‘Brian, I think we should do what they say. The magistrate will be more intelligent than these yokels. We can explain the situation to him and then he’ll let us go.’

Brian stared at her incredulously. Then he looked round the cellar and regarded the single exit, where four men were now clustered, all eager to drag them out. Really, there wasn’t much he could do.

‘Alright officer,’ he said. ‘It’s a fair cop.’

With the aid of Oates, his son, and the man Brian assumed was a servant, the constable dragged them out of the cellar, up the steps, through a dark, grubby, smoky, candle-lit house that Brian hardly recognised as Ada’s place, where women and children stared at them in horror, then out into the road.

It was night, just as it had been in the 21st century. But the tarmac had vanished from the road and it looked like a farm track, packed earth scarred with wheel tracks. Very

few of the houses that had been there in the future were standing, and something Brian found even stranger, there were no trees. Oates and his household helped the constable hustle them down the track in the direction of where the supermarket would be in Brian's day. A strange bell-shaped building not much bigger than a bus shelter stood against the wall on the left hand side. There was a heavy oak door in it, and as they approached, Constable Pagnell took out a huge ring of keys. After propping his staff against the wall, he put one in the lock and opened the door.

Something stirred within, and Pagnell shouted, 'Stay in there! Not time for you to leave, my fine gentleman. We've got some guests for you. French spies!'

He turned to Brian and Ada and jerked his head towards the interior of the lockup. 'In,' he barked.

Brian and Ada entered the small space, and Pagnell slammed the door behind them. Seconds later, Brian heard the key in the lock.

'Who's that?' came a frightened voice, and someone moved in the darkness. Brian gagged at the smell. Pagnell and the others had all been pretty pungent, but they'd worn some kind of scent to mask it. This guy just stank. 'French spies?'

'We're not French spies,' Brian said tiredly. 'We're English, same as you. Why's everyone got a problem with the French all of a sudden?'

'Brian,' said Ada testily. 'We're in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars.' Even now, she couldn't resist the chance to lecture him. 'England is at war with France.'

'Everyone knows we're at war with the French,' said their companions. 'Where've you been, not to know that? We've been fighting the French as long as I can remember, apart from a few truces.'

'Okay, okay,' Brian said sulkily. 'I didn't do well in history at school.'

He heard their companion moving again, and the man's face came into the dim light that fell from the doorway. Long and thin, clean shaven; it was the face of a man in his early thirties.

'Who are you?' the man asked.

Brian introduced himself and Ada. 'Who are you, then?' he asked. 'And what are you in here for?'

'My name is Will Yates,' the man replied. 'I'm afraid I'm in here for vagrancy. I lost my job and I've been looking for another position. But there aren't any jobs to be found.'

'I know how you feel, mate,' Brian told him gloomily.

'Why are you two in here?' Will asked.

Brian looked at Ada. 'It's difficult to explain,' he said.

'We're from the future,' Ada said. 'We've travelled back in time to save the human race from destruction.'

'From the future?' Will laughed. 'You're from the future? How is that possible? Why have you come here, then?'

'In our time,' Brian explained, 'no one can find a job. Unemployment is worse than it is in your time. Machines have put everyone out of work. Ada here reckons it was back in your time that it all started.'

Will looked searchingly at them both. 'Machines have put everyone out of work?' he said. 'You sound like my brother-in-law. Are you a Luddite?'

Brian grinned. 'Yeah, you could say so,' he replied. 'I hate computers.'

Will's face fell. He looked confused. 'What's that got to do with it?' he asked. 'I thought you hated machines. What do you have against computers?'

Brian could see he had offended the man. He remembered they were back in the past, before computers had been invented. Did the word have some other meaning in 1812?

'Sorry, mate,' he said. 'Have I said something wrong?'

Will shrugged. 'It's just that... I'm a computer,' he said.

Brian stared at him in utter confusion.

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The Dark Place

Prologue

Dmitri Stefanovich and Vladimir Vukovic watched the family as they made their way into the village on the way to church.

There were seven of them. The parents, Giorgi and Valentina Borosov, were accompanied by their three sons and their daughter Vasilisa. The boys were Alexi, named after his grandfather, Giorgi, named after his father and Andrei. The boys were aged twenty-two, eighteen and fifteen. Vasilisa was twenty years old and beautiful. She was tall and slim with long blonde hair.

Valentina Borosov was also carrying a young baby boy, Ivan. The boy was two years old but small for his age and sickly. He had been born to Valentina's sister Antonina, who had been killed during the persecution of the 'old believers' before the family had left their home city of Novgorod. Antonina's husband had disappeared at the same time she had been killed, so the Borosov family had become the child's surrogate parents.

Dmitri and Vladimir stared at Vasilisa with envious eyes. She walked with confidence and looked both men in the eye before dismissing them with a contemptuous swing of her head. As they watched her go, Dmitri said quietly, 'I hear she uses three fingers to cross herself instead of two.'

The religious dictates of Nikita Minin insisted that the rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church be aligned with the Greek Orthodox Church. Traditionally, when performing the blessing, the Russian Orthodox Church had used two fingers, symbolising the divine and human natures of Christ. In the new ritual, the thumb and first two fingers were held outstretched together to symbolize the Trinity, while the remaining two fingers were bent to signify Christ's two natures. The introduction of the new rituals led to the persecution of traditionalists, who had been burned at the stake for what was now seen as heresy. The persecution had led to many families moving to more remote parts of Russia such as Siberia, while others left Russia for other countries where they could practice the old rituals safely.

The village of Kallaste in Estonia had become a haven for old believers fleeing Russia. They had begun to arrive slowly at first, but now they dominated the village. The old architecture had started to disappear as the newcomers made their mark on the village. Dmitri and Vladimir had grown up in the village. Their parents had fled Russia because of the persecution and the two men eyed all newcomers with suspicion.

'If she crosses herself with three fingers,' said Vladimir, 'perhaps we need to show her the error of her ways?'

Giorgi and Valentina Borosov lived just outside the village. They had built a large house for themselves and the family further along the banks of Lake Peipus, which formed part of the border between Estonia and Russia. The Borosov family kept to themselves and in the two years they had lived in Kallaste, nobody knew much about

them. They attended church regularly and farmed a small area of land, which barely managed to keep the family fed. Giorgi was a big man and his sons took after him. Alexi was of a similar size as his father and young Giorgi was almost as big. Andrei was only fifteen but promised to at least as big as his father and brothers. The men of the Borosov family were protective of Valentina and they all doted on their little sister Vasilisa.

Dmitri and Vladimir quietly made their way through the undergrowth at the side of the lake towards the Borosov house. The weather was unseasonably warm for June and very humid.

Dmitri suddenly crouched down and gestured to Vladimir to do the same. Through the trees, they could see Vasilisa making her way towards the lakeside. She carried a basket of clothes, which she proceeded to wash in the shallow water at the edge of the lake.

Vasilisa heard the twig break behind her as the two shadows loomed over her. As she turned, Dmitri clasped a hand over her mouth and gripped her by the waist. Vladimir caught hold of her legs and together the two men carried her into the dim shadows of the trees. Vasilisa fought and struggled but she could not break the grip in which she was held. The two men carried Vasilisa through the trees and along the lakeshore until they were well away from the Borosov house. In a clearing, they threw Vasilisa on the floor and she lay there stunned, as the two men caught their breath.

‘What now?’ Vladimir asked.

Dmitri took a stout tree branch and pushed it under both Vasilisa’s arms before threading the rope he carried attached to his belt around her waist. He then tied her hands securely behind her back and secured them to the rope round her waist. Vasilisa could not move her arms but she forced herself to get to her knees.

‘What do you want with me, you pigs?’ she hissed at her captors.

‘Is it true you have adopted the foul blessings forced on the Russian Church by Nikita Minin?’ asked Dmitri calmly.

‘What business is it of yours?’ asked Vasilisa defiantly.

‘Our families came here to escape the foulness you call religion,’ said Vladimir from behind Vasilisa.

‘Whatever you plan to do to me will not be as bad as the vengeance my father and brothers will have on you,’ said Vasilisa quietly.

Vladimir looked away as Dmitri slapped Vasilisa hard across her face, knocking her to her side. She gasped as the tree branch dug into the ground and forced her arms tight against the ropes that bound her.

She turned her head towards Dmitri and said, ‘I curse you, Dmitri Stefanovich, and I vow to hunt down your family and take the life from each of them, all their loved ones

and everyone that loves them from now till the end of eternity.’

Vladimir moaned and crossed himself in fear as Dmitri advanced on Vasilisa.

‘I don’t fear you,’ he said as he pushed her backwards against the leaf-strewn floor.

The basket of clothes Vasilisa had taken to the lakeshore was found by her mother later that day but there was no sign of her daughter. The whole village turned out to search for her but they could find no trace of her. Dmitri and Vladimir could not be found either and it didn’t take long for the people of the village to connect their absence to Vasilisa’s disappearance. Two days later Giorgi Borosov and his three sons found Vladimir hiding in the woods. He had refused to talk at first. Giorgi Borosov regarded Vladimir with a cold murderous stare.

‘Hold him down,’ he ordered his sons.

Once Vladimir’s right hand had been removed and one of his eyes gouged out, he told the Borosovs about what had happened to Vasilisa and exactly what Dmitri had done to her. They slowly roasted him over a large open fire in the middle of the forest but despite all the pain they subjected him to, Vladimir would not disclose the whereabouts of Vasilisa’s body. By the time the heat from the fire had crisped his skin, Vladimir was insane, and lost in his own mind. The Borosovs added extra fuel to the fire and left Vladimir to die.

In the clearing where Vasilisa died, an emerald green fern grew. It thrust its leaves upward towards the sky and its fronded leaves swayed and danced as they caught the breeze blowing gently through the surrounding trees. At the tips of the topmost fronds, small diamond white flowers had bloomed as Vasilisa’s life had ended, on the eve of Ivan Kupala’s day. The flowers were two days old and now they were beginning to wither as they also died.

Dmitri left Estonia. He crossed the Baltic Sea on a merchant ship bound first for Helsinki and then England. He had very little money and was working as a deck hand to cover the cost of his passage, but before he left he had taken what he could from the family home. In a rough sack he had his few clothes, but at the bottom, wrapped in muslin, was his mother’s emerald necklace.

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Super Duper

Chapter Six

Corrine found herself at a loose end. Whether it was caring for her father or for Smith, she was used to caring for someone. She often complained about it but in doing so she was often forced to admit to herself that she thrived on it. It gave her a purpose. She was the one that held things together for the hopeless men. Now, Smith had gone off somewhere and her father was not really acting himself.

He kept saying to her, ‘I’m sorry for all I’ve put you through - your mother started it in me but it’s my fault.’

The house was universally tidy. He was there at the dishes before she had even finished eating. It was lovely to see him doing so well and fantastic to be able to hold proper conversations with him, but in truth she was getting bored and, shit, it had only been three days. Food was still a consideration, but her dad was sneaking out at night to go fishing so it wasn’t really a problem. They had fewer vegetables that she’d have liked but she picked up a few from a nearby allotment. Spinach and potatoes; not much variety but solid nutrition.

Breakfast cereal was easy to come by, as was UHT milk. The backroom of the local co-op had been stacked full of it - another find of her dad’s. He had undergone a complete reversal, which gave her hope for the rest of the country. Of course, there was still a chance that it might swing back the other way and if it didn’t she would have to start taking care of herself - which was just no challenge.

Her father walked in to the room holding a rainbow trout.

“I’ve just met the most charming lady,” he said.

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Jon opened his eyes. It was like prying open an old tin of golden syrup. The sound above him was unmistakable.

“Biggy! Biggy!” He frantically shook at his sleeping friend.

“What the fuck?”

”Can’t you hear it, Corporal?”

“Fuck me!”

It was a helicopter. Not the one that they had been sleeping in since the nights turned cold but one that was in the air, flying. They rushed out, their hands saluting the sun to squint at the craft.

“What nationality is that?”

Jon shrugged. "Not one of ours. What do you think?"

"I think this fair country of ours has been given the cold cock by some devious bastards!"

Jon was waving at the craft.

"Get your hand down, you bloody idiot. We're not equipped to return fire on that."

The helicopter did not seem to notice them. It was quite obviously of military design, painted green and long enough to carry at least twenty people. It looked deeply out of place skimming over the terraced houses of Northampton, but it all made sense to Biggy.

"Biological warfare," he spat. "They've killed off the country and now they invade."

The deep brows at the top of his huge frame gritted together as they always did when he was showing his sincerity.

"Cowards, Jon! Couldn't take us in a fair fight."

"No sir," Jon barked as if answering an order (that was his way of showing sincerity).

"Well, I know two bulldogs who can still bite - what do you say, Private!?"

"I say it's high time we saw some proper action."

There's very little of interest about the immediate events following Jon's last statement. They packed up some stuff, guns, ammo and knives. As much as they could fix in a kit bag. A few provisions, but nothing that would weigh them down, and they were all set.

"Where do you think they'll have their base?"

Biggy was stumped; he hadn't thought that far yet. He scratched his head.

"Our best chance is to start out by disabling any rural outposts they have, cut down the supply chain and interrogate anyone we can capture. I suggest we find the most manoeuvrable form of transport we can as we'll probably have to off-road."

And that was all they needed. Jon found a pair of dirt bikes under a dust sheet on one of the houses on Kettering Road and they headed out by the rural route towards Leicester. It took a bit of weaving but they managed to stay to the country lanes. The sign posts indicated that they were not far away from Towcester and they entered the hamlet of Nether Heyford.

Biggy and Jon found it impossible not to race each other on the open roads. Jon, who had the least bulk and lowest centre of gravity, was holding the lead by a considerable margin. Biggy saw him hit a blind corner and spin his bike around. He headed back towards Biggy, holding his hand up signifying that he should stop. The two of them

dismounted.

“What is it?” hissed Biggy.

“There’s a military installation just around the corner. I saw two men in orange berets leading a group of prisoners into a farm.”

Biggy took a handgun and an automatic riffle out of his kit bag.

“Shame we’ve got no grenades,” he said. “Lock and load.”

As the two of them crept up towards the corner, two of the enemy soldiers, presumably alerted to them by the sound of their bikes, strolled over to investigate.

“Play friendly, then use your knife,” whispered Biggy. He did not want to compromise their position.

The two soldiers in orange berets spotted immediately that Biggy and Jon were heavily armed. They turned and fled. Biggy strafed their legs with his automatic rifle, just a short burst of fire. Then, he ran over to finish them off with his boot knife. As he did so, the rest of the farm camp came pouring out of its gates, each of them wearing an orange beret and holding a sturdy stick in one hand. They charged towards Biggy and Jon.

“Cut ‘em down,” barked Biggy.

They did. Within a minute every last one of them was injured or dying. As they marched over the bodies, one of them began to scream. Jon silenced him with a quick boot to the temple.

“What kind of a fucking army only has sticks?” asked Jon.

“It’s the virus; they’re not expecting any resistance.”

They entered the farm with the arrogance of conquerors, expecting to find a guarded military installation ready for defeat. It did surprise them a little when the first thing that they saw was a huge and distinctly camp purple crucifix towering over a series of tents.

Behind the crucifix sat a large luxurious farmhouse across which was strewn a large banner reading - THE JESUS BRIGADE.

“Ooops,” chuckled Biggy.

“Don’t worry,” laughed Jon. “At least we know they’ll forgive us.”

The two of them fell over laughing while horrified eyes peered out from the tents, too scared to speak up. Biggy spotted one of them and pulled himself together.

“Who’s in charge here?”

The woman stepped out of the tent. She looked undernourished and heavily medicated. She pointed towards the farmhouse.

The whole thing reminded Jon of something he'd studied in history; it was like the medieval feudal shirehouse standing over a village of peasant hovels. The stench of poverty was quite distinct and it turned Jon's stomach.

"Corporal, I know these aren't the foreigners, but would you mind if I killed them anyway?"

"I'm Anglican, Jon," replied Biggy.

They walked into the main building. The ground floor of the farmhouse looked like a farmhouse should. Its floors were dirty and the scent of a woodburning stove drowned out the stink of the tent people. The kitchen had a full complement of workers, talking and active. Some of them were even laughing.

Upstairs was a very different matter. At the top of the stairs was a locked door. It was built of such sturdy oak that they had to give up trying to shoot the lock off and use a knife to undo all the screws and slowly dismantle the mechanism. The room inside was like a palace, thick red carpets against ancient wood panelling. The walls were adorned with what looked like expensive oil paintings. Most of the paintings contained scenes of apocalyptic retribution. Satan figured heavily in them all. As they kicked open the doors to each room they universally found the same thing - empty opulence. Large mahogany desks sat adorned with ledgers and PCs, but no sign of life.

They reached the door at the very end of the corridor. Inside was a luxurious four poster bed on which lay the mess of corpses that Biggy and Jon were accustomed to finding everywhere. Jon opened the bedroom window and they threw the corpses out onto the lawn. Then Biggy sent him out of the window to cut down the banner from the building. It drifted down over the dead bodies. As they walked back to their bikes past the shanty town of tents Biggy turned to the nervous onlookers.

"Get in there and tidy that shit up," he ordered.

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"So this is Madeline."

Three days later, Corrine's father was still going strong. His new found girlfriend Madeline was far from the way Corrine had expected her to be. In other words, she was completely normal.

Madeline was around the same age as her father but had kept her figure rather better than him. She was soft spoken and neatly dressed. Before the council had closed down she had been a ranger at the country park in Thurstaston. Now she was living in the visitors' centre because she had a prepaid electricity meter in her house and when all the shops closed she wasn't able to top it up any more. Corrine's father had met

her there when it occurred to him that the pond there was full of docile, easily caught and delicious fish. He was trying, not too hard, to convince Corrine to move in with them. Corrine had been a little suspicious but figured that any woman who would walk from Thurstaston to Birkenhead just to meet their boyfriend's daughter couldn't be all bad. Her dad seemed happy with her: not in the driven apologetic way that he was around Corrine but in a peaceful, comfortable way.

Madeline was holding his hand on the couch. She looked up at Corrine. "I know you probably don't want to live with someone you've only just met, but the air is so clear there."

Given that almost everywhere else smelled like rotting corpses, that was a pretty compelling argument. But, as bored as she already was, the idea of moving to an idyllic country park with neighbouring farms and a good amount of fresh produce tipped her towards the sleepier side of not interested. Three cups of tea later and Corrine had come to a decision. She was going to find Smith. She could always check up on her dad in a few weeks. Smith had a week and a half's head start on her and she had no clear idea of where he was going. However, she figured that if anyone would know it would be The Don. In the morning when her Father and Madeline set out, Corrine got on to Smith's bike and headed toward The Don's house.

[ToC](#)

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ADMIRAL'S OPINION.—THE REQUEST OF CHARLES.

Charles then sought the admiral, whom he found with his hands behind him, pacing to and fro in one of the long walks of the garden, evidently in a very unsettled state of mind. When Charles appeared, he quickened his pace, and looked in such a state of unusual perplexity that it was quite ridiculous to observe him.

“I suppose, uncle, you have made up your mind thoroughly by this time?”

“Well, I don't know that.”

“Why, you have had long enough surely to think over it. I have not troubled you soon.”

“Well, I cannot exactly say you have, but, somehow or another, I don't think very fast, and I have an unfortunate propensity after a time of coming exactly round to where I began.”

“Then, to tell the truth, uncle, you can come to no sort of conclusion.”

“Only one.”

“And what may that be?”

“Why, that you are right in one thing, Charles, which is, that having sent a challenge to this fellow of a vampyre, you must fight him.”

“I suspect that that is a conclusion you had from the first, uncle?”

“Why so?”

“Because it is an obvious and a natural one. All your doubts, and trouble, and perplexities, have been to try and find some excuse for not entertaining that opinion, and now that you really find it in vain to make it, I trust that you will accede as you first promised to do, and not seek by any means to thwart me.”

“I will not thwart you, my boy, although in my opinion you ought not to fight with a vampyre.”

“Never mind that. We cannot urge that as a valid excuse, so long as he chooses to deny being one. And after all, if he be really wrongfully suspected, you must admit that he is a very injured man.”

“Injured!—nonsense. If he is not a vampyre, he's some other out-of-the-way sort of fish, you may depend. He's the oddest-looking fellow ever I came across in all my born days, ashore or afloat.”

“Is he?”

“Yes, he is: and yet, when I come to look at the thing again in my mind, some droll sights that I have seen come across my memory. The sea is the place for wonders and for mysteries. Why, we see more in a day and a night there, than you landsmen could contrive to make a whole twelvemonth’s wonder of.”

“But you never saw a vampyre, uncle?”

“Well, I don’t know that. I didn’t know anything about vampyres till I came here; but that was my ignorance, you know. There might have been lots of vampyres where I’ve been, for all I know.”

“Oh, certainly; but as regards this duel, will you wait now until to-morrow morning, before you take any further steps in the matter?”

“Till to-morrow morning?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Why, only a little while ago, you were all eagerness to have something done off-hand.”

“Just so; but now I have a particular reason for waiting until to-morrow morning.”

“Have you? Well, as you please, boy—as you please. Have everything your own way.”

“You are very kind, uncle; and now I have another favour to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“Why, you know that Henry Bannerworth receives but a very small sum out of the whole proceeds of the estate here, which ought, but for his father’s extravagance, to be wholly at his disposal.”

“So I have heard.”

“I am certain he is at present distressed for money, and I have not much. Will you lend me fifty pounds, uncle, until my own affairs are sufficiently arranged to enable you to pay yourself again?”

“Will I! of course I will.”

“I wish to offer that sum as an accommodation to Henry. From me, I dare say he will receive it freely, because he must be convinced how freely it is offered; and, besides, they look upon me now almost as a member of the family in consequence of my engagement with Flora.”

“Certainly, and quite correct too: there’s a fifty-pound note, my boy; take it, and do

what you like with it, and when you want any more, come to me for it.”

“I knew I could trespass thus far on your kindness, uncle.”

“Trespass! It’s no trespass at all.”

“Well, we will not fall out about the terms in which I cannot help expressing my gratitude to you for many favours. To-morrow, you will arrange the duel for me.”

“As you please. I don’t altogether like going to that fellow’s house again.”

“Well, then, we can manage, I dare say, by note.”

“Very good. Do so. He puts me in mind altogether of a circumstance that happened a good while ago, when I was at sea, and not so old a man as I am now.”

“Puts you in mind of a circumstance, uncle?”

“Yes; he’s something like a fellow that figured in an affair that I know a good deal about; only I do think as my chap was more mysterious by a d——d sight than this one.”

“Indeed!”

“Oh, dear, yes. When anything happens in an odd way at sea, it is as odd again as anything that occurs on land, my boy, you may depend.”

“Oh, you only fancy that, uncle, because you have spent so long a time at sea.”

“No, I don’t imagine it, you rascal. What can you have on shore equal to what we have at sea? Why, the sights that come before us would make you landmen’s hairs stand up on end, and never come down again.”

“In the ocean, do you mean, that you see those sights, uncle?”

“To be sure. I was once in the southern ocean, in a small frigate, looking out for a seventy-four we were to join company with, when a man at the mast-head sung out that he saw her on the larboard bow. Well, we thought it was all right enough, and made away that quarter, when what do you think it turned out to be?”

“I really cannot say.”

“The head of a fish.”

“A fish!”

“Yes! a d——d deal bigger than the hull of a vessel. He was swimming along with his head just what I dare say he considered a shaving or so out of the water.”

“But where were the sails, uncle?”

“The sails?”

“Yes; your man at the mast-head must have been a poor seaman not to have missed the sails.”

“All, that’s one of your shore-going ideas, now. You know nothing whatever about it. I’ll tell you where the sails were, master Charley.”

“Well, I should like to know.”

“The spray, then, that he dashed up with a pair of fins that were close to his head, was in such a quantity, and so white, that they looked just like sails.”

“Oh!”

“Ah! you may say ‘oh!’ but we all saw him—the whole ship’s crew; and we sailed alongside of him for some time, till he got tired of us, and suddenly dived down, making such a vortex in the water, that the ship shook again, and seemed for about a minute as if she was inclined to follow him to the bottom of the sea.”

“And what do you suppose it was, uncle?”

“How should I know?”

“Did you ever see it again?”

“Never; though others have caught a glimpse of him now and then in the same ocean, but never came so near him as we did, that ever I heard of, at all events. They may have done so.”

“It is singular!”

“Singular or not, it’s a fool to what I can tell you. Why, I’ve seen things that, if I were to set about describing them to you, you would say I was making up a romance.”

“Oh, no; it’s quite impossible, uncle, any one could ever suspect you of such a thing.”

“You’d believe me, would you?”

“Of course I would.”

“Then here goes. I’ll just tell you now of a circumstance that I haven’t liked to mention to anybody yet.”

“Indeed! why so?”

“Because I didn’t want to be continually fighting people for not believing it; but here

you have it:—”

We were outward bound; a good ship, a good captain, and good messmates, you know, go far towards making a prosperous voyage a pleasant and happy one, and on this occasion we had every reasonable prospect of all.

Our hands were all tried men—they had been sailors from infancy; none of your French craft, that serve an apprenticeship and then become land lubbers again. Oh, no, they were stanch and true, and loved the ocean as the sluggard loves his bed, or the lover his mistress.

Ay, and for the matter of that, the love was a more enduring and a more healthy love, for it increased with years, and made men love one another, and they would stand by each other while they had a limb to lift—while they were able to chew a quid or wink an eye, leave alone wag a pigtail.

We were outward bound for Ceylon, with cargo, and were to bring spices and other matters home from the Indian market. The ship was new and good—a pretty craft; she sat like a duck upon the water, and a stiff breeze carried her along the surface of the waves without your rocking, and pitching, and tossing, like an old wash-tub at a mill-tail, as I have had the misfortune to sail in more than once afore.

No, no, we were well laden, and well pleased, and weighed anchor with light hearts and a hearty cheer.

Away we went down the river, and soon rounded the North Foreland, and stood out in the Channel. The breeze was a steady and stiff one, and carried us through the water as though it had been made for us.

“Jack,” said I to a messmate of mine, as he stood looking at the skies, then at the sails, and finally at the water, with a graver air than I thought was at all consistent with the occasion or circumstances.

“Well,” he replied.

“What ails you? You seem as melancholy as if we were about to cast lots who should be eaten first. Are you well enough?”

“I am hearty enough, thank Heaven,” he said, “but I don’t like this breeze.”

“Don’t like the breeze!” said I; “why, mate, it is as good and kind a breeze as ever filled a sail. What would you have, a gale?”

“No, no; I fear that.”

“With such a ship, and such a set of hearty able seamen, I think we could manage to weather out the stiffest gale that ever whistled through a yard.”

“That may be; I hope it is, and I really believe and think so.”

“Then what makes you so infernally mopish and melancholy?”

“I don’t know, but can’t help it. It seems to me as though there was something hanging over us, and I can’t tell what.”

“Yes, there are the colours, Jack, at the masthead; they are flying over us with a hearty breeze.”

“Ah! ah!” said Jack, looking up at the colours, and then went away without saying anything more, for he had some piece of duty to perform.

I thought my messmate had something on his mind that caused him to feel sad and uncomfortable, and I took no more notice of it; indeed, in the course of a day or two he was as merry as any of the rest, and had no more melancholy that I could perceive, but was as comfortable as anybody.

We had a gale off the coast of Biscay, and rode it out without the loss of a spar or a yard; indeed, without the slightest accident or rent of any kind.

“Now, Jack, what do you think of our vessel?” said I.

“She’s like a duck upon water, rises and falls with the waves, and doesn’t tumble up and down like a hoop over stones.”

“No, no; she goes smoothly and sweetly; she is a gallant craft, and this is her first voyage, and I predict a prosperous one.”

“I hope so,” he said.

Well, we went on prosperously enough for about three weeks; the ocean was as calm and as smooth as a meadow, the breeze light but good, and we stemmed along majestically over the deep blue waters, and passed coast after coast, though all around was nothing but the apparently pathless main in sight.

“A better sailer I never stepped into,” said the captain one day; “it would be a pleasure to live and die in such a vessel.”

Well, as I said, we had been three weeks or thereabouts, when one morning, after the sun was up and the decks washed, we saw a strange man sitting on one of the water-casks that were on deck, for, being full, we were compelled to stow some of them on deck.

You may guess those on deck did a little more than stare at this strange and unexpected apparition. By jingo, I never saw men open their eyes wider in all my life, nor was I any exception to the rule. I stared, as well I might; but we said nothing for some minutes, and the stranger looked calmly on us, and then cocked his eye with a nautical air up at the sky, as if he expected to receive a twopenny-post letter from St. Michael, or a billet doux from the Virgin Mary.

“Where has he come from?” said one of the men in a low tone to his companion, who

was standing by him at that moment.

“How can I tell?” replied his companion. “He may have dropped from the clouds; he seems to be examining the road; perhaps he is going back.”

The stranger sat all this time with the most extreme and provoking coolness and unconcern; he deigned us but a passing notice, but it was very slight.

He was a tall, spare man—what is termed long and lathy—but he was evidently a powerful man. He had a broad chest, and long, sinewy arms, a hooked nose, and a black, eagle eye. His hair was curly, but frosted by age; it seemed as though it had been tinged with white at the extremities, but he was hale and active otherwise, to judge from appearances.

Notwithstanding all this, there was a singular repulsiveness about him that I could not imagine the cause, or describe; at the same time there was an air of determination in his wild and singular-looking eyes, and over their whole there was decidedly an air and an appearance so sinister as to be positively disagreeable.

“Well,” said I, after we had stood some minutes, “where did you come from, shipmate?”

He looked at me and then up at the sky, in a knowing manner.

“Come, come, that won’t do; you have none of Peter Wilkins’s wings, and couldn’t come on the aerial dodge; it won’t do; how did you get here?”

He gave me an awful wink, and made a sort of involuntary movement, which jumped him up a few inches, and he bumped down again on the water-cask.

“That’s as much as to say,” thought I, “that he’s sat himself on it.”

“I’ll go and inform the captain,” said I, “of this affair; he’ll hardly believe me when I tell him, I am sure.”

So saying, I left the deck and went to the cabin, where the captain was at breakfast, and related to him what I had seen respecting the stranger. The captain looked at me with an air of disbelief, and said,—

“What?—do you mean to say there’s a man on board we haven’t seen before?”

“Yes, I do, captain. I never saw him afore, and he’s sitting beating his heels on the water-cask on deck.”

“The devil!”

“He is, I assure you, sir; and he won’t answer any questions.”

“I’ll see to that. I’ll see if I can’t make the lubber say something, providing his tongue’s not cut out. But how came he on board? Confound it, he can’t be the devil,

and dropped from the moon.”

“Don’t know, captain,” said I. “He is evil-looking enough, to my mind, to be the father of evil, but it’s ill bespeaking attentions from that quarter at any time.”

“Go on, lad; I’ll come up after you.”

I left the cabin, and I heard the captain coming after me. When I got on deck, I saw he had not moved from the place where I left him. There was a general commotion among the crew when they heard of the occurrence, and all crowded round him, save the man at the wheel, who had to remain at his post.

The captain now came forward, and the men fell a little back as he approached. For a moment the captain stood silent, attentively examining the stranger, who was excessively cool, and stood the scrutiny with the same unconcern that he would had the captain been looking at his watch.

“Well, my man,” said the captain, “how did you come here?”

“I’m part of the cargo,” he said, with an indescribable leer.

“Part of the cargo be d——d!” said the captain, in sudden rage, for he thought the stranger was coming his jokes too strong. “I know you are not in the bills of lading.”

“I’m contraband,” replied the stranger; “and my uncle’s the great chain of Tartary.”

The captain stared, as well he might, and did not speak for some minutes; all the while the stranger kept kicking his heels against the water-casks and squinting up at the skies; it made us feel very queer.

“Well, I must confess you are not in the regular way of trading.”

“Oh, no,” said the stranger; “I am contraband—entirely contraband.”

“And how did you come on board?”

At this question the stranger again looked curiously up at the skies, and continued to do so for more than a minute; he then turned his gaze upon the captain.

“No, no,” said the captain; “eloquent dumb show won’t do with me; you didn’t come, like Mother Shipton, upon a birch broom. How did you come on board my vessel?”

“I walked on board,” said the stranger.

“You walked on board; and where did you conceal yourself?”

“Below.”

“Very good; and why didn’t you stay below altogether?”

“Because I wanted fresh air. I’m in a delicate state of health, you see; it doesn’t do to stay in a confined place too long.”

“Confound the binnacle!” said the captain; it was his usual oath when anything bothered him, and he could not make it out. “Confound the binnacle!—what a delicate-looking animal you are. I wish you had stayed where you were; your delicacy would have been all the same to me. Delicate, indeed!”

“Yes, very,” said the stranger, coolly.

There was something so comic in the assertion of his delicateness of health, that we should all have laughed; but we were somewhat scared, and had not the inclination.

“How have you lived since you came on board?” inquired the captain.

“Very indifferently.”

“But how? What have you eaten? and what have you drank?”

“Nothing, I assure you. All I did while was below was—”

“What?”

“Why, I sucked my thumbs like a polar bear in its winter quarters.”

And as he spoke the stranger put his two thumbs into his mouth, and extraordinary thumbs they were, too, for each would have filled an ordinary man’s mouth.

“These,” said the stranger, pulling them out, and gazing at them wistfully, and with a deep sigh he continued,—

“These were thumbs at one time; but they are nothing now to what they were.”

“Confound the binnacle!” muttered the captain to himself, and then he added, aloud,—

“It’s cheap living, however; but where are you going to, and why did you come aboard?”

“I wanted a cheap cruise, and I am going there and back.”

“Why, that’s where we are going,” said the captain.

“Then we are brothers,” exclaimed the stranger, hopping off the water-cask like a kangaroo, and bounding towards the captain, holding out his hand as though he would have shaken hands with him.

“No, no,” said the captain; “I can’t do it.”

“Can’t do it!” exclaimed the stranger, angrily. “What do you mean?”

“That I can’t have anything to do with contraband articles; I am a fair trader, and do all above board. I haven’t a chaplain on board, or he should offer up prayers for your preservation, and the recovery of your health, which seems so delicate.”

“That be—”

The stranger didn’t finish the sentence; he merely screwed his mouth up into an incomprehensible shape, and puffed out a lot of breath, with some force, and which sounded very much like a whistle: but, oh, what thick breath he had, it was as much like smoke as anything I ever saw, and so my shipmate said.

“I say, captain,” said the stranger, as he saw him pacing the deck.

“Well.”

“Just send me up some beef and biscuit, and some coffee royal—be sure it’s royal, do you hear, because I’m partial to brandy, it’s the only good thing there is on earth.”

I shall not easily forget the captain’s look as he turned towards the stranger, and gave his huge shoulders a shrug, as much as to say,—

“Well, I can’t help it now; he’s here, and I can’t throw him overboard.”

The coffee, beef, and biscuit were sent him, and the stranger seemed to eat them with great gout, and drank the coffee with much relish, and returned the things, saying,

“Your captain is an excellent cook; give him my compliments.”

I thought the captain would think that was but a left-handed compliment, and look more angry than pleased, but no notice was taken of it.

It was strange, but this man had impressed upon all in the vessel some singular notion of his being more than he should be—more than a mere mortal, and not one endeavoured to interfere with him; the captain was a stout and dare-devil a fellow as you would well met with, yet he seemed tacitly to acknowledge more than he would say, for he never after took any further notice of the stranger nor he of him.

They had barely any conversation, simply a civil word when they first met, and so forth; but there was little or no conversation of any kind between them.

The stranger slept upon deck, and lived upon deck entirely; he never once went below after we saw him, and his own account of being below so long.

This was very well, but the night-watch did not enjoy his society, and would have willingly dispensed with it at that hour so particularly lonely and dejected upon the broad ocean, and perhaps a thousand miles away from the nearest point of land.

At this dread and lonely hour, when no sound reaches the ear and disturbs the wrapt

stillness of the night, save the whistling of the wind through the cordage, or an occasional dash of water against the vessel's side, the thoughts of the sailor are fixed on far distant objects—his own native land and the friends and loved ones he has left behind him.

He then thinks of the wilderness before, behind, and around him; of the immense body of water, almost in places bottomless; gazing upon such a scene, and with thoughts as strange and indefinite as the very boundless expanse before him, it is no wonder if he should become superstitious; the time and place would, indeed unbidden, conjure up thoughts and feelings of a fearful character and intensity.

The stranger at such times would occupy his favourite seat on the water cask, and looking up at the sky and then on the ocean, and between whiles he would whistle a strange, wild, unknown melody.

The flesh of the sailors used to creep up in knots and bumps when they heard it; the wind used to whistle as an accompaniment and pronounce fearful sounds to their ears.

The wind had been highly favourable from the first, and since the stranger had been discovered it had blown fresh, and we went along at a rapid rate, stemming the water, and dashing the spray off from the bows, and cutting the water like a shark.

This was very singular to us, we couldn't understand it, neither could the captain, and we looked very suspiciously at the stranger, and wished him at the bottom, for the freshness of the wind now became a gale, and yet the ship came through the water steadily, and away we went before the wind, as if the devil drove us; and mind I don't mean to say he didn't.

The gale increased to a hurricane, and though we had not a stitch of canvass out, yet we drove before the gale as if we had been shot out of the mouth of a gun.

The stranger still sat on the water casks, and all night long he kept up his infernal whistle. Now, sailors don't like to hear any one whistle when there's such a gale blowing over their heads—it's like asking for more; but he would persist, and the louder and stronger the wind blew, the louder he whistled.

At length there came a storm of rain, lightning, and wind. We were tossed mountains high, and the foam rose over the vessel, and often entirely over our heads, and the men were lashed to their posts to prevent being washed away.

But the stranger still lay on the water casks, kicking his heels and whistling his infernal tune, always the same. He wasn't washed away nor moved by the action of the water; indeed, we heartily hoped and expected to see both him and the water cask floated overboard at every minute; but, as the captain said,—

“Confound the binnacle! the old water tub seems as if it were screwed on to the deck, and won't move off and he on the top of it.”

There was a strong inclination to throw him overboard, and the men conversed in low

whispers, and came round the captain, saying,—

“We have come, captain, to ask you what you think of this strange man who has come so mysteriously on board?”

“I can’t tell what to think, lads; he’s past thinking about—he’s something above my comprehension altogether, I promise you.”

“Well, then, we are thinking much of the same thing, captain.”

“What do you mean?”

“That he ain’t exactly one of our sort.”

“No, he’s no sailor, certainly; and yet, for a land lubber, he’s about as rum a customer as ever I met with.”

“So he is, sir.”

“He stands salt water well; and I must say that I couldn’t lay a top of those water casks in that style very well.”

“Nor nobody amongst us, sir.”

“Well, then, he’s in nobody’s way, it he?—nobody wants to take his berth, I suppose?”

The men looked at each other somewhat blank; they didn’t understand the meaning at all—far from it; and the idea of any one’s wanting to take the stranger’s place on the water casks was so outrageously ludicrous, that at any other time they would have considered it a devilish good joke and have never ceased laughing at it.

He paused some minutes, and then one of them said,—

“It isn’t that we envy him his berth, captain, ‘cause nobody else could live there for a moment. Any one amongst us that had been there would have been washed overboard a thousand times over.”

“So they would,” said the captain.

“Well, sir, he’s more than us.”

“Very likely; but how can I help that?”

“We think he’s the main cause of all this racket in the heavens—the storm and hurricane; and that, in short, if he remains much longer we shall all sink.”

“I am sorry for it. I don’t think we are in any danger, and had the strange being any power to prevent it, he would assuredly do so, lest he got drowned.”

“But we think if he were thrown overboard all would be well.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, captain, you may depend upon it he’s the cause of all the mischief. Throw him overboard and that’s all we want.”

“I shall not throw him overboard, even if I could do such a thing; and I am by no means sure of anything of the kind.”

“We do not ask it, sir.”

“What do you desire?”

“Leave to throw him overboard—it is to save our own lives.”

“I can’t let you do any such thing; he’s in nobody’s way.”

“But he’s always a whistling. Only hark now, and in such a hurricane as this, it is dreadful to think of it. What else can we do, sir?—he’s not human.”

At this moment, the stranger’s whistling came clear upon their ears; there was the same wild, unearthly notes as before, but the cadences were stronger, and there was a supernatural clearness in all the tones.

“There now,” said another, “he’s kicking the water cask with his heels.”

“Confound the binnacle!” said the captain; “it sounds like short peals of thunder. Go and talk to him, lads.”

“And if that won’t do, sir, may we—”

“Don’t ask me any questions. I don’t think a score of the best men that were ever born could move him.”

“I don’t mind trying,” said one.

Upon this the whole of the men moved to the spot where the water casks were standing and the stranger lay.

There was he, whistling like fury, and, at the same time, beating his heels to the tune against the empty casks. We came up to him, and he took no notice of us at all, but kept on in the same way.

“Hilloa!” shouted one.

“Hilloa!” shouted another.

No notice, however, was taken of us, and one of our number, a big, herculean fellow, an Irishman, seized him by the leg, either to make him get up, or, as we thought, to

give him a lift over our heads into the sea.

However, he had scarcely got his fingers round the calf of the leg, when the stranger pinched his leg so tight against the water cask, that he could not move, and was as effectually pinned as if he had been nailed there. The stranger, after he had finished a bar of the music, rose gradually to a sitting posture, and without the aid of his hands, and looking the unlucky fellow in the face, he said,—

“Well, what do you want?”

“My hand,” said the fellow.

“Take it then,” he said.

He did take it, and we saw that there was blood on it.

The stranger stretched out his left hand, and taking him by the breech, he lifted him, without any effort, upon the water-cask beside him.

We all stared at this, and couldn't help it; and we were quite convinced we could not throw him overboard, but he would probably have no difficulty in throwing us overboard.

“Well, what do you want?” he again exclaimed to us all.

We looked at one another, and had scarce courage to speak; at length I said,—

“We wish you to leave off whistling.”

“Leave off whistling!” he said. “And why should I do anything of the kind?”

“Because it brings the wind.”

“Ha! ha! why, that's the very reason I am whistling, to bring the wind.”

“But we don't want so much.”

“Pho! pho! you don't know what's good for you—it's a beautiful breeze, and not a bit too stiff.”

“It's a hurricane.”

“Nonsense.”

“But it is.”

“Now you see how I'll prove you are wrong in a minute. You see my hair, don't you?” he said, after he took off his cap. “Very well, look now.”

He got up on the water-cask, and stood bolt upright; and running his fingers through

his hair, made it all stand straight on end.

“Confound the binnacle!” said the captain, “if ever I saw the like.”

“There,” said the stranger, triumphantly, “don’t tell me there’s any wind to signify; don’t you see, it doesn’t even move one of my grey hairs; and if it blew as hard as you say, I am certain it would move a hair.”

“Confound the binnacle!” muttered the captain as he walked away. “D—n the cabouse, if he ain’t older than I am—he’s too many for me and everybody else.”

“Are you satisfied?”

What could we say?—we turned away and left the place, and stood at our quarters—there was no help for it—we were impelled to grin and abide by it.

As soon as we had left the place he put his cap on again and sat down on the water-casks, and then took leave of his prisoner, whom he set free, and there lay at full length on his back, with his legs hanging down. Once more he began to whistle most furiously, and beat time with his feet.

For full three weeks did he continue at this game night and day, without any interruption, save such as he required to consume enough coffee royal, junk, and biscuit, as would have served three hearty men.

Well, about that time, one night the whistling ceased and he began to sing—oh! it was singing—such a voice! Gog and Magog in Guildhall, London, when they spoke were nothing to him—it was awful; but the wind calmed down to a fresh and stiff breeze. He continued at this game for three whole days and nights, and on the fourth it ceased, and when we went to take his coffee royal to him he was gone.

We hunted about everywhere, but he was entirely gone, and in three weeks after we safely cast anchor, having performed our voyage in a good month under the usual time; and had it been an old vessel she would have leaked and stinted like a tub from the straining; however, we were glad enough to get in, and were curiously inquisitive as to what was put in our vessel to come back with, for as the captain said,—

“Confound the binnacle! I’ll have no more contraband articles if I can help it.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MEETING BY MOONLIGHT IN THE PARK.—THE TURRET WINDOW IN THE HALL.—THE LETTERS.

The old admiral showed such a strong disposition to take offence at Charles if he should presume, for a moment, to doubt the truth of the narrative that was thus communicated to him, that the latter would not anger him by so doing, but confined his observations upon it to saying that he considered it was very wonderful, and very extraordinary, and so on, which very well satisfied the old man.

The day was now, however, getting far advanced, and Charles Holland began to think of his engagement with the vampyre. He read and read the letter over and over again, but he could not come to a correct conclusion as to whether it intended to imply that he, Sir Francis Varney, would wish to fight him at the hour and place mentioned, or merely give him a meeting as a preliminary step.

He was rather, on the whole, inclined to think that some explanation would be offered by Varney, but at all events he persevered in his determination of going well armed, lest anything in the shape of treachery should be intended.

As nothing of any importance occurred now in the interval of time till nearly midnight, we will at once step to that time, and our readers will suppose it to be a quarter to twelve o'clock at night, and young Charles Holland on the point of leaving the house, to keep his appointment by the pollard oak, with the mysterious Sir Francis Varney.

He placed his loaded pistols conveniently in his pocket, so that at a moment's notice he could lay hands on them, and then wrapping himself up in a travelling cloak he had brought with him to Bannerworth Hall, he prepared to leave his chamber.

The moon still shone, although now somewhat on the wane, and although there were certainly many clouds in the sky they were but of a light fleecy character, and very little interrupted the rays of light that came from the nearly full disc of the moon.

From his window he could not perceive the spot in the park where he was to meet Varney, because the room in which he was occupied not a sufficiently high place in the house to enable him to look over a belt of trees that stopped the view. From almost any of the upper windows the pollard oak could be seen.

It so happened now that the admiral had been placed in a room immediately above the one occupied by his nephew, and, as his mind was full of how he should manage with regard to arranging the preliminaries of the duel between Charles and Varney on the morrow, he found it difficult to sleep; and after remaining in bed about twenty minutes, and finding that each moment he was only getting more and more restless, he adopted a course which he always did under such circumstances.

He rose and dressed himself again, intending to sit up for an hour and then turn into bed and try a second time to get to sleep. But he had no means of getting a light, so he drew the heavy curtain from before the window, and let in as much of the moonlight as he could.

This window commanded a most beautiful and extensive view, for from it the eye could carry completely over the tops of the tallest trees, so that there was no interruption whatever to the prospect, which was as extensive as it was delightful.

Even the admiral, who never would confess to seeing much beauty in scenery where water formed not a large portion of it, could not resist opening his window and looking out, with a considerable degree of admiration, upon wood and dale, as they were illuminated by the moon's rays, softened, and rendered, if anything, more

beautiful by the light vapours, through which they had to struggle to make their way.

Charles Holland, in order to avoid the likelihood of meeting with any one who would question him as to where he was going, determined upon leaving his room by the balcony, which, as we are aware, presented ample facilities for his so doing.

He cast a glance at the portrait in the panel before he left the apartment, and then saying,—

“For you, dear Flora, for you I essay this meeting with the fearful original of that portrait,” he immediately opened his window, and stepped out on to the balcony.

Young and active as was Charles Holland, to descend from that balcony presented to him no difficulty whatever, and he was, in a very few moments, safe in the garden of Bannerworth Hall.

He never thought, for a moment, to look up, or he would, in an instant, have seen the white head of his old uncle, as it was projected over the sill of the window of his chamber.

The drop of Charles from the balcony of his window, just made sufficient noise to attract the admiral’s attention, and, then, before he could think of making any alarm, he saw Charles walking hastily across a grass plot, which was sufficiently in the light of the moon to enable the admiral at once to recognise him, and leave no sort of doubt as to his positive identity.

Of course, upon discovering that it was Charles, the necessity for making an alarm no longer existed, and, indeed, not knowing what it was that had induced him to leave his chamber, a moment’s reflection suggested to him the propriety of not even calling to Charles, lest he should defeat some discovery which he might be about to make.

“He has heard something, or seen something,” thought the admiral, “and is gone to find out what it is. I only wish I was with him; but up here I can do nothing at all, that’s quite clear.”

Charles, he saw, walked very rapidly, and like a man who has some fixed destination which he wishes to reach as quickly as possible.

When he dived among the trees which skirted one side of the flower gardens, the admiral was more puzzled than ever, and he said—

“Now where on earth is he off to? He is fully dressed, and has his cloak about him.”

After a few moments’ reflection he decided that, having seen something suspicious, Charles must have got up, and dressed himself, to fathom it.

The moment this idea became fairly impressed upon his mind, he left his bedroom, and descended to where one of the brothers he knew was sitting up, keeping watch during the night. It was Henry who was so on guard; and when the admiral came into the room, he uttered an expression of surprise to find him up, for it was now some

time past twelve o'clock.

"I have come to tell you that Charles has left the house," said the admiral.

"Left the house?"

"Yes; I saw him just now go across the garden."

"And you are sure it was he?"

"Quite sure. I saw him by the moonlight cross the green plot."

"Then you may depend he has seen or heard something, and gone alone to find out what it is rather than give any alarm."

"That is just what I think."

"It must be so. I will follow him, if you can show me exactly which way he went."

"That I can easily. And in case I should have made any mistake, which it is not at all likely, we can go to his room first and see if it is empty."

"A good thought, certainly; that will at once put an end to all doubt upon the question."

They both immediately proceeded to Charles's room, and then the admiral's accuracy of identification of his nephew was immediately proved by finding that Charles was not there, and that the window was wide open.

"You see I am right," said the admiral.

"You are," cried Henry; "but what have we here?"

"Where?"

"Here on the dressing-table. Here are no less than three letters, all laid as it on purpose to catch the eye of the first one who might enter the room."

"Indeed!"

"You perceive them?"

Henry held them to the light, and after a moment's inspection of them, he said, in a voice of much surprise,—

"Good God! what is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?"

“The letters are addressed to parties in the house here. Do you not see?”

“To whom?”

“One to Admiral Bell—”

“The deuce!”

“Another to me, and the third to my sister Flora. There is some new mystery here.”

The admiral looked at the superscription of one of the letters which was handed to him in silent amazement. Then he cried,—

“Set down the light, and let us read them.”

Henry did so, and then they simultaneously opened the epistles which were severally addressed to them. There was a silence, as of the very grave, for some moments, and then the old admiral staggered to a seat, as he exclaimed,—

“Am I dreaming—am I dreaming?”

“Is this possible?” said Henry, in a voice of deep emotion, as he allowed the note addressed to him to drop on to the floor.

“D—n it, what does yours say?” cried the old admiral, in a louder tone.

“Read it—what says yours?”

“Read it—I’m amazed.”

The letters were exchanged, and read by each with the same breathless attention they had bestowed upon their own; after which, they both looked at each other in silence, pictures of amazement, and the most absolute state of bewilderment.

Not to keep our readers in suspense, we at once transcribe each of these letters.

The one to the admiral contained these words,—

“MY DEAR UNCLE,

“Of course you will perceive the prudence of keeping this letter to yourself, but the fact is, I have now made up my mind to leave Bannerworth Hall.

“Flora Bannerworth is not now the person she was when first I knew her and loved her. Such being the case, and she having altered, not I, she cannot accuse me of fickleness.

“I still love the Flora Bannerworth I first knew, but I cannot make my wife one who is subject to the visitations of a vampyre.

“I have remained here long enough now to satisfy myself that this vampyre business is no delusion. I am quite convinced that it is a positive fact, and that, after death, Flora will herself become one of the horrible existences known by that name.

“I will communicate to you from the first large city on the continent whither I am going, at which I make any stay, and in the meantime, make what excuses you like at Bannerworth Hall, which I advise you to leave as quickly as you can, and believe me to be, my dear uncle, yours truly,

“CHARLES HOLLAND.”

Henry’s letter was this:—

“MY DEAR SIR,

“If you calmly and dispassionately consider the painful and distressing circumstances in which your family are placed, I am sure that, far from blaming me for the step which this note will announce to you I have taken, you will be the first to give me credit for acting with an amount of prudence and foresight which was highly necessary under the circumstances.

“If the supposed visits of a vampyre to your sister Flora had turned out, as first I hoped they would, a delusion and been in any satisfactory manner explained away I should certainly have felt pride and pleasure in fulfilling my engagement to that young lady.

“You must, however, yourself feel that the amount of evidence in favour of a belief that an actual vampyre has visited Flora, enforces a conviction of its truth.

“I cannot, therefore, make her my wife under such very singular circumstances.

“Perhaps you may blame me for not taking at once advantage of the permission given me to forego my engagement when first I came to your house; but the fact is, I did not then in the least believe in the existence of the vampyre, but since a positive conviction of that most painful fact has now forced itself upon me, I beg to decline the honour of an alliance which I had at one time looked forward to with the most considerable satisfaction.

“I shall be on the continent as fast as conveyances can take me, therefore, should you entertain any romantic notions of calling me to an account for a course of proceeding I think perfectly and fully justifiable, you will not find me.

“Accept the assurances of my respect for yourself and pity for your sister, and believe me to be, my dear sir, your sincere friend,

“CHARLES HOLLAND.”

These two letters might well make the admiral stare at Henry Bannerworth, and Henry stare at him.

An occurrence so utterly and entirely unexpected by both of them, was enough to make them doubt the evidence of their own senses. But there were the letters, as a damning evidence of the outrageous fact, and Charles Holland was gone.

It was the admiral who first recovered from the stunning effect of the epistles, and he, with a gesture of perfect fury, exclaimed,—

“The scoundrel—the cold-blooded villain! I renounce him for ever! he is no nephew of mine; he is some d——d imposter! Nobody with a dash of my family blood in his veins would have acted so to save himself from a thousand deaths.”

“Who shall we trust now,” said Henry, “when those whom we take to our inmost hearts deceive us thus? This is the greatest shock I have yet received. If there be a pang greater than another, surely it is to be found in the faithlessness and heartlessness of one we loved and trusted.”

“He is a scoundrel!” roared the admiral. “D—n him, he’ll die on a dunghill, and that’s too good a place for him. I cast him off—I’ll find him out, and old as I am, I’ll fight him—I’ll wring his neck, the rascal; and, as for poor dear Miss Flora, God bless her! I’ll—I’ll marry her myself, and make her an admiral.—I’ll marry her myself. Oh, that I should be uncle to such a rascal!”

“Calm yourself,” said Henry, “no one can blame you.”

“Yes, you can; I had no right to be his uncle, and I was an old fool to love him.”

The old man sat down, and his voice became broken with emotion as he said,—

“Sir, I tell you I would have died willingly rather than this should have happened. This will kill me now,—I shall die now of shame and grief.”

Tears gushed from the admiral’s eyes and the sight of the noble old man’s emotion did much to calm the anger of Henry which, although he said but little, was boiling at his heart like a volcano.

“Admiral Bell,” he said, “you have nothing to do with this business; we can not blame you for the heartlessness of another. I have but one favour to ask of you.”

“What—what can I do?”

“Say no more about him at all.”

“I can’t help saying something about him. You ought to turn me out of the house.”

“Heaven forbid! What for?”

“Because I’m his uncle—his d——d old fool of an uncle, that always thought so much of him.”

“Nay, my good sir, that was a fault on the right side, and cannot discredit you. I

thought him the most perfect of human beings.”

“Oh, if I could but have guessed this.”

“It was impossible. Such duplicity never was equalled in this world—it was impossible to foresee it.”

“Hold—hold! did he give you fifty pounds?”

“What?”

“Did he give you fifty pounds?”

“Give me fifty pounds! Most decidedly not; what made you think of such a thing?”

“Because to-day he borrowed fifty pounds of me, he said, to lend to you.”

“I never heard of the transaction until this moment.”

“The villain!”

“No, doubt, sir, he wanted that amount to expedite his progress abroad.”

“Well, now, damme, if an angel had come to me and said ‘Hilloa! Admiral Bell, your nephew, Charles Holland, is a thundering rogue,’ I should have said ‘You’re a liar!’”

“This is fighting against facts, my dear sir. He is gone—mention him no more; forget him, as I shall endeavour myself to do, and persuade my poor sister to do.”

“Poor girl! what can we say to her?”

“Nothing, but give her all the letters, and let her be at once satisfied of the worthlessness of him she loved.”

“The best way. Her woman’s pride will then come to her help.”

“I hope it will. She is of an honourable race, and I am sure she will not condescend to shed a tear for such a man as Charles Holland has proved himself to be.”

“D—n him, I’ll find him out, and make him fight you. He shall give you satisfaction.”

“No, no.”

“No? But he shall.”

“I cannot fight with him.”

“You cannot?”

“Certainly not. He is too far beneath me now. I cannot fight on honourable terms with

one whom I despise as too dishonourable to contend with. I have nothing now but silence and contempt.”

“I have though, for I’ll break his neck when I see him, or he shall break mine. The villain! I’m ashamed to stay here, my young friend.”

“How mistaken a view you take of this matter, my dear sir. As Admiral Bell, a gentleman, a brave officer, and a man of the purest and most unblemished honour, you confer a distinction upon us by your presence here.”

The admiral wrung Henry by the hand, as he said,—

“To-morrow—wait till to-morrow; we will talk over this matter to-morrow—I cannot to-night, I have not patience; but to-morrow, my dear boy, we will have it all out. God bless you. Good night.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE NOBLE CONFIDENCE OF FLORA BANNERWORTH IN HER LOVER.— HER OPINION OF THE THREE LETTERS.—THE ADMIRAL’S ADMIRATION.

To describe the feelings of Henry Bannerworth on the occasion of this apparent defalcation from the path of rectitude and honour by his friend, as he had fondly imagined Charles Holland to be, would be next to impossible.

If, as we have taken occasion to say, it be a positive fact, that a noble and a generous mind feels more acutely any heartlessness of this description from one on whom it has placed implicit confidence, than the most deliberate and wicked of injuries from absolute strangers, we can easily conceive that Henry Bannerworth was precisely the person to feel most acutely the conduct which all circumstances appeared to fix upon Charles Holland, upon whose faith, truth, and honour, he would have staked his very existence but a few short hours before.

With such a bewildered sensation that he scarcely knew where he walked or whither to betake himself, did he repair to his own chamber, and there he strove, with what energy he was able to bring to the task, to find out some excuses, if he could, for Charles’s conduct. But he could find none. View it in what light he would, it presented but a picture of the most heartless selfishness it had ever been his lot to encounter.

The tone of the letters, too, which Charles had written, materially aggravated the moral delinquency of which he had been guilty; belief, far better, had he not attempted an excuse at all than have attempted such excuses as were there put down in those epistles.

A more cold blooded, dishonourable proceeding could not possibly be conceived.

It would appear, that while he entertained a doubt with regard to the reality of the visitation of the vampyre to Flora Bannerworth, he had been willing to take to himself abundance of credit for the most honourable feelings, and to induce a belief in the minds of all that an exalted feeling of honour, as well as a true affection that would

know no change, kept him at the feet of her whom he loved.

Like some braggart, who, when there is no danger, is a very hero, but who, the moment he feels convinced he will be actually and truly called upon for an exhibition of his much-vaunted prowess, had Charles Holland deserted the beautiful girl who, if anything, had now certainly, in her misfortunes, a far higher claim upon his kindly feeling than before.

Henry could not sleep, although, at the request of George, who offered to keep watch for him the remainder of the night he attempted to do so.

He in vain said to himself, "I will banish from my mind this most unworthy subject. I have told Admiral Bell that contempt is the only feeling I can now have for his nephew, and yet I now find myself dwelling upon him, and upon his conduct, with a perseverance which is a foe to my repose."

At length came the welcome and beautiful light of day, and Henry rose fevered and unrefreshed.

His first impulse now was to hold a consultation with his brother George, as to what was to be done, and George advised that Mr. Marchdale, who as yet knew nothing of the matter, should be immediately informed of it, and consulted, as being probably better qualified than either of them to come to a just, a cool, and a reasonable opinion upon the painful circumstance, which it could not be expected that either of them would be able to view calmly.

"Let it be so, then," said Henry; "Mr. Marchdale shall decide for us."

They at once sought this friend of the family, who was in his own bed-room, and when Henry knocked at the door, Marchdale opened it hurriedly, eagerly inquiring what was the matter.

"There is no alarm," said Henry. "We have only come to tell you of a circumstance which has occurred during the night, and which will somewhat surprise you."

"Nothing calamitous, I hope?"

"Vexatious; and yet, I think it is a matter upon which we ought almost to congratulate ourselves. Read those two letters, and give us your candid opinion upon them."

Henry placed in Mr. Marchdale's hands the letter addressed to himself, as well as that to the admiral.

Marchdale read them both with marked attention, but he did not exhibit in his countenance so much surprise as regret.

When he had finished, Henry said to him,—

"Well, Marchdale, what think you of this new and extraordinary episode in our

affairs?”

“My dear young friends,” said Marchdale, in a voice of great emotion, “I know not what to say to you. I have no doubt but that you are both of you much astonished at the receipt of these letters, and equally so at the sudden absence of Charles Holland.”

“And are not you?”

“Not so much as you, doubtless, are. The fact is, I never did entertain a favourable opinion of the young man, and he knew it. I have been accustomed to the study of human nature under a variety of aspects; I have made it a matter of deep, and I may add, sorrowful, contemplation, to study and remark those minor shades of character which commonly escape observation wholly. And, I repeat, I always had a bad opinion of Charles Holland, which he guessed, and hence he conceived a hatred to me, which more than once, as you cannot but remember, showed itself in little acts of opposition and hostility.”

“You much surprise me.”

“I expected to do so. But you cannot help remembering that at one time I was on the point of leaving here solely on his account.”

“You were so.”

“Indeed I should have done so, but that I reasoned with myself upon the subject, and subdued the impulse of the anger which some years ago, when I had not seen so much of the world, would have guided me.”

“But why did you not impart to us your suspicions? We should at least, then, have been prepared for such a contingency as has occurred.”

“Place yourself in my position, and then yourself what you would have done. Suspicion is one of those hideous things which all men should be most specially careful not only how they entertain at all, but how they give expression to. Besides, whatever may be the amount of one’s own internal conviction with regard to the character of any one, there is just a possibility that one may be wrong.”

“True, true.”

“That possibility ought to keep any one silent who has nothing but suspicion to go upon, however cautious it may make him, as regards his dealings with the individual. I only suspected from little minute shades of character, that would peep out in spite of him, that Charles Holland was not the honourable man he would fain have had everybody believe him to be.”

“And had you from the first such a feeling?”

“I had.”

“It is very strange.”

“Yes; and what is more strange still, is that he from the first seemed to know it; and despite a caution which I could see he always kept uppermost in his thoughts, he could not help speaking tartly to me at times.”

“I have noticed that,” said George.

“You may depend it is a fact,” added Marchdale, “that nothing so much excites the deadly and desperate hatred of a man who is acting a hypocritical part, as the suspicion, well grounded or not, that another sees and understands the secret impulses of his dishonourable heart.”

“I cannot blame you, or any one else, Mr. Marchdale,” said Henry, “that you did not give utterance to your secret thoughts, but I do wish that you had done so.”

“Nay, dear Henry,” replied Mr. Marchdale, “believe me, I have made this matter a subject of deep thought, and have abundance of reasons why I ought not to have spoken to you upon the subject.”

“Indeed!”

“Indeed I have, and not among the least important is the one, that if I had acquainted you with my suspicions, you would have found yourself in the painful position of acting a hypocritical part yourself towards this Charles Holland, for you must either have kept the secret that he was suspected, or you must have shewn it to him by your behaviour.”

“Well, well. I dare say, Marchdale, you acted for the best. What shall we do now?”

“Can you doubt?”

“I was thinking of letting Flora at once know the absolute and complete worthlessness of her lover, so that she could have no difficulty in at once tearing herself from him by the assistance of the natural pride which would surely come to her aid, upon finding herself so much deceived.”

“The test may be possible.”

“You think so?”

“I do, indeed.”

“Here is a letter, which of course remains unopened, addressed to Flora by Charles Holland. The admiral rather thought it would hurt her feelings to deliver her such an epistle, but I must confess I am of a contrary opinion upon that point, and think now the more evidence she has of the utter worthlessness of him who professed to love her with so much disinterested affection, the better it will be for her.”

“You could not, possibly, Henry, have taken a more sensible view of the subject.”

“I am glad you agree with me.”

“No reasonable man could do otherwise, and from what I have seen of Admiral Bell, I am sure, upon reflection, he will be of the same opinion.”

“Then it shall be so. The first shock to poor Flora may be severe, but we shall then have the consolation of knowing that it is the only one, and that in knowing the very worst, she has no more on that score to apprehend. Alas, alas! the hand of misfortune now appears to have pressed heavily upon us indeed. What in the name of all that is unlucky and disastrous, will happen next, I wonder?”

“What can happen?” said Marchdale; “I think you have now got rid of the greatest evil of all—a false friend.”

“We have, indeed.”

“Go, then, to Flora; assure her that in the affection of others who know no falsehood, she will find a solace from every ill. Assure her that there are hearts that will place themselves between her and every misfortune.”

Mr. Marchdale was much affected as he spoke. Probably he felt deeper than he chose to express the misfortunes of that family for whom he entertained so much friendship. He turned aside his head to hide the traces of emotion which, despite even his great powers of self-command, would shew themselves upon his handsome and intelligent countenance. Then it appeared as if his noble indignation had got, for a few brief moments, the better of all prudence, and he exclaimed,—

“The villain! the worse than villain! who would, with a thousand artifices, make himself beloved by a young, unsuspecting, and beautiful girl, but then to leave her to the bitterness of regret, that she had ever given such a man a place in her esteem. The heartless ruffian!”

“Be calm, Mr. Marchdale, I pray you be calm,” said George; “I never saw you so much moved.”

“Excuse me,” he said, “excuse me; I am much moved, and I am human. I cannot always, let me strive my utmost, place a curb upon my feelings.”

“They are feelings which do you honour.”

“Nay, nay, I am foolish to have suffered myself to be led away into such a hasty expression of them. I am accustomed to feel acutely and to feel deeply, but it is seldom I am so much overcome as this.”

“Will you accompany us to the breakfast room at once, Mr. Marchdale, where we will make this communication to Flora; you will then be able to judge by her manner of receiving it, what it will be best to say to her.”

“Come, then, and pray be calm. The least that is said upon this painful and harassing subject, after this morning, will be the best.”

“You are right—you are right.”

Mr. Marchdale hastily put on his coat. He was dressed, with the exception of that one article of apparel, when the brothers came to his chamber, and then he came to the breakfast-parlour where the painful communication was to be made to Flora of her lover’s faithlessness.

Flora was already seated in that apartment. Indeed, she had been accustomed to meet Charles Holland there before others of the family made their appearance, but, alas! this morning the kind and tender lover was not there.

The expression that sat upon the countenances of her brothers, and of Mr. Marchdale, was quite sufficient to convince her that something more serious than usual had occurred, and she at the moment turned very pale. Marchdale observed this change of change of countenance in her, and he advanced towards her, saying,—

“Calm yourself, Flora, we have something to communicate to you, but it is a something which should excite indignation, and no other feeling, in your breast.”

“Brother, what is the meaning of this?” said Flora, turning aside from Marchdale, and withdrawing the hand which he would have taken.

“I would rather have Admiral Bell here before I say anything,” said Henry, “regarding a matter in which he cannot but feel much interested personally.”

“Here he is,” said the admiral, who at that moment had opened the door of the breakfast room. “Here he is, so now fire away, and don’t spare the enemy.”

“And Charles?” said Flora, “where is Charles?”

“D—n Charles!” cried the admiral, who had not been much accustomed to control his feelings.

“Hush! hush!” said Henry; “my dear sir, hush! do not indulge now in any invectives. Flora, here are three letters; you will see that the one which is unopened is addressed to yourself. However, we wish you to read the whole three of them, and then to form your own free and unbiased opinion.”

Flora looked as pale as a marble statue, when she took the letters into her hands. She let the two that were open fall on the table before her, while she eagerly broke the seal of that which was addressed to herself.

Henry, with an instinctive delicacy, beckoned every one present to the window, so that Flora had not the pain of feeling that any eyes were fixed upon her but those of her mother, who had just come into the room, while she was perusing those documents which told such a tale of heartless dissimulation.

“My dear child,” said Mrs. Bannerworth, “you are ill.”

“Hush! mother—hush!” said Flora, “let me know all.”

She read the whole of the letters through, and then, as the last one dropped from her grasp, she exclaimed,—

“Oh, God! oh, God! what is all that has occurred compared to this? Charles—Charles—Charles!”

“Flora!” exclaimed Henry, suddenly turning from the window. “Flora, is this worthy of you?”

“Heaven now support me!”

“Is this worthy of the name you bear Flora? I should have thought, and I did hope, that woman’s pride would have supported you.”

“Let me implore you,” added Marchdale, “to summon indignation to your aid, Miss Bannerworth.”

“Charles—Charles—Charles!” she again exclaimed, as she wrung her hands despairingly.

“Flora, if anything could add a sting to my already irritated feelings,” said Henry, “this conduct of yours would.”

“Henry—brother, what mean you? Are you mad?”

“Are you, Flora?”

“God, I wish now that I was.”

“You have read those letters, and yet you call upon the name of him who wrote them with frantic tenderness.”

“Yes, yes,” she cried; “frantic tenderness is the word. It is with frantic tenderness I call upon his name, and ever will.—Charles! Charles!—dear Charles!”

“This surpasses all belief,” said Marchdale.

“It is the frenzy of grief,” added George; “but I did not expect it of her. Flora—Flora, think again.”

“Think—think—the rush of thought distracts. Whence came these letters?—where did you find these most disgraceful forgeries?”

“Forgeries!” exclaimed Henry; and he staggered back, as if some one had struck him a blow.

“Yes, forgeries!” screamed Flora. “What has become of Charles Holland? Has he been murdered by some secret enemy, and then these most vile fabrications made up in his name? Oh, Charles, Charles, are you lost to me for ever?”

“Good God!” said Henry; “I did not think of that”

“Madness!—madness!” cried Marchdale.

“Hold!” shouted the admiral. “Let me speak to her.”

He pushed every one aside, and advanced to Flora. He seized both her hands in his own, and in a tone of voice that was struggling with feeling, he cried,—

“Look at me, my dear; I’m an old man old enough to be your grandfather, so you needn’t mind looking me steadily in the face. Look at me, I want to ask you a question.”

Flora raised her beautiful eyes, and looked the old weather-beaten admiral full in the face.

Oh! what a striking contrast did those two persons present to each other. That young and beautiful girl, with her small, delicate, childlike hands clasped, and completely hidden in the huge ones of the old sailor, the white, smooth skin contrasting wonderfully with his wrinkled, hardened features.

“My dear,” he cried, “you have read those—those d——d letters, my dear?”

“I have, sir.”

“And what do you think of them?”

“They were not written by Charles Holland, your nephew.”

A choking sensation seemed to come over the old man, and he tried to speak, but in vain. He shook the hands of the young girl violently, until he saw that he was hurting her, and then, before she could be aware of what he was about, he gave her a kiss on the cheek, as he cried,—

“God bless you—God bless you! You are the sweetest, dearest little creature that ever was, or that ever will be, and I’m a d——d old fool, that’s what I am. These letters were not written by my nephew, Charles. He is incapable of writing them, and, d—n me, I shall take shame to myself as long as I live for ever thinking so.”

“Dear sir,” said Flora, who somehow or another did not seem at all offended at the kiss which the old man had given her; “dear sir, how could you believe, for one moment, that they came from him? There has been some desperate villany on foot. Where is he?—oh, find him, if he be yet alive. If they who have thus striven to steal from him that honour, which is the jewel of his heart, have murdered him, seek them out, sir, in the sacred name of justice, I implore you.”

“I will—I will. I don’t renounce him; he is my nephew still—Charles Holland—my own dear sister’s son; and you are the best girl, God bless you, that ever breathed. He loved you—he loves you still; and if he’s above ground, poor fellow, he shall yet tell you himself he never saw those infamous letters.”

“You—you will seek for him?” sobbed Flora, and the tears gushed from her eyes. “Upon you, sir, who, as I do, feel assured of his innocence, I alone rely. If all the world say he is guilty, we will not think so.”

“I’m d——d if we do.”

Henry had sat down by the table, and, with his hands clasped together, seemed in an agony of thought.

He was now roused by a thump on the back by the admiral, who cried,—

“What do you think, now, old fellow? D—n it, things look a little different now.”

“As God is my judge,” said Henry, holding up his hands, “I know not what to think, but my heart and feelings all go with you and with Flora, in your opinion of the innocence of Charles Holland.”

“I knew you would say that, because you could not possibly help it, my dear boy. Now we are all right again, and all we have got to do is to find out which way the enemy has gone, and then give chase to him.”

“Mr. Marchdale, what do you think of this new suggestion,” said George to that gentleman.

“Pray, excuse me,” was his reply; “I would much rather not be called upon to give an opinion.”

“Why, what do you mean by that?” said the admiral.

“Precisely what I say, sir.”

“D—n me, we had a fellow once in the combined fleets, who never had an opinion till after something had happened, and then he always said that was just what he thought.”

“I was never in the combined, or any other fleet, sir,” said Marchdale, coldly.

“Who the devil said you were?” roared the admiral.

Marchdale merely hawed.

“However,” added the admiral, “I don’t care, and never did, for anybody’s opinion, when I know I am right. I’d back this dear girl here for opinions, and good feelings, and courage to express them, against all the world, I would, any day. If I was not the old hulk I am, I would take a cruise in any latitude under the sun, if it was only for the

chance of meeting with just such another.”

“Oh, lose no time!” said Flora. “If Charles is not to be found in the house, lose no time in searching for him, I pray you; seek him, wherever there is the remotest probability he may chance to be. Do not let him think he is deserted.”

“Not a bit of it,” cried the admiral. “You make your mind easy, my dear. If he’s above ground, we shall find him out, you may depend upon it. Come along master Henry, you and I will consider what had best be done in this uncommonly ugly matter.”

Henry and George followed the admiral from the breakfast-room, leaving Marchdale there, who looked serious and full of melancholy thought.

It was quite clear that he considered Flora had spoken from the generous warmth of her affection as regarded Charles Holland, and not from the convictions which reason would have enforced her to feel.

When he was now alone with her and Mrs. Bannerworth, he spoke in a feeling and affectionate tone regarding the painful and inexplicable events which had transpired.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Two: The Sword of Power

Cringing at the idea of embarrassing his successful sportsman brother, Arthur blundered out of the arena grounds and hurried through the streets towards the Hotel Astolat. Beyond the arena itself, the city was eerily quiet; Merlin's plan was clearly bringing together the people of the city in general celebration. Arthur had even seen heathens queuing up to see the sporting events at the arena, and it seemed that most of the people still living in the city had piled into the arena.

They had seen very little fun in recent decades, and were adamant that they would have a good time today. And Arthur's stupidity had meant that Kay's bout in the games would be held up, maybe cancelled.

Arthur berated himself savagely as he sprinted through Central London. Kay had told him quite plainly to find his sword yesterday. Somehow it had become his responsibility. He wasn't quite sure how, but if it was his responsibility he was gong to make sure Kay got it before he needed it.

With sore calves and blistered feet and a horrible awareness of the passing of time, he reached the Astolat Hotel. After racing up the steps he entered the vestibule. It was empty.

He rang the bell on the front desk and waited, sweating. He was spoiling his brother's big day! It was all his fault.

And still no one appeared. He looked around in panic. He couldn't even see the rather worrying heathen security contractor. Listening, he realised that the hotel was silent. The street outside was silent. It was almost as if the world had come to an end.

He laughed at himself. Obviously, everyone had gone to the arena to see the games. It was, after all, the biggest event since the civil wars had begun. Then guilt stabbed him. That made it even more imperative that he find Kay's sword. But the receptionist had the key to their room. He didn't know where it was kept. Again, he wiped sweat from his brow. Should he go behind the counter and look for it? What if someone found him there? They'd think he was a thief. His father would be mortified. Then again, his brother would be ashamed if he couldn't compete in the fencing.

What a dilemma! He could hardly go rooting about behind the receptionist's desk. That said, she shouldn't have left her post. He fumed. Well, there was nothing for it. He had tried. He would have to tell Kay. Again, he wiped the sweat from his brow. No point stalling. Surely someone could lend Kay a foil! The longer he put off owning up, the worse it would be. He turned and ran out of the hotel.

He was passing St Paul's Cathedral when he saw something that halted him, despite his dismay. Glimmering in the mid morning sunshine was an upright blade, sticking up from a strange construction of anvil and stone. He halted by the lichgate and stared at it. His brow creased with a calculating frown. Obviously it was some kind of complicated piece of modern art. How the artist had got the sword into the stone was hardly Arthur's business: he wasn't an art critic, and it was amazing what they could do with modern day technology. Surely they wouldn't mind Kay lending the blade, though. It was hardly serving a useful function. Anyway, the churchyard was empty. Nervously, Arthur hurried towards the construction.

Closer up, he almost changed his mind. Obviously, the artist had somehow hammered the sword into the stone. Maybe it was concrete, the stone, though it didn't look like it. But it was clear that Arthur would never draw the sword from the stone.

He sobbed a little with frustration. Why had everything gone wrong today? Why did these things always happen to him? To his shame, little tears pricked in his eyes and mingled with the cold sweat of shame that slicked his skin. Dammit, he might as well try it! Knowing his luck, he'd probably get caught and arrested for vandalising a national monument!

He grabbed the hilt of the sword, and to his surprise the entire blade came free from the stone with ease.

He gazed abstractedly at the shimmering blade he had taken from the stone then looked at his watch. Almost 10.00 am. Kay was due to appear in five minutes. Cursing, clutching the sword hilt, Arthur rushed away in the direction of the arena.

He paid little attention to the homeless old man by the churchyard gates. But the man certainly noticed Arthur, and he watched with rheumy eyes as the youth hurried away towards the arena. He was the only person to see Arthur's act of cultural vandalism. He seemed unconcerned; even pleased...

'Here's your sword,' Arthur panted as he burst into the dressing room.

Kay, wearing his fencing gear apart from the mask, turned to greet him irritably. 'You certainly took your time...' he began, before his eyes focussed on the sword Arthur had brought him. He seized it and examined the blade.

'Where's the carrying case?' he began. 'This isn't my foil! Arthur...!' He paused, and studied the blade in silence. Finally, he looked up. 'Do you know what this is?'

Arthur shook his head. 'I couldn't get into the hotel room,' he explained in confusion. 'I... There was... I found this...'

'Never mind,' said Kay excitedly. He brushed past Arthur and ran from the changing room.

Arthur followed him to the turnstiles, where their father was still waiting to take his seat. Kay had concealed the sword in a piece of material.

'Father,' he said.

'Kay!' exclaimed Ector. 'Shouldn't you be on now?'

'There's something I must show you,' Kay said. 'More important than the tournament. Come with me.'

Frowning, bewildered, his father followed him into the street outside. Away from prying eyes, Kay showed his father the sword.

'This is the sword from the stone,' he said. 'That means I must be king, father!'

Ector looked at him as only a father can look at a son. 'How did you come by this?'

Arthur looked from one to the other as Kay said nothing. 'What's this about?' he asked. 'Why does Kay think he's king?'

'Didn't you watch the news last night?' Kay asked. 'This is the sword from the stone! They found it before Christmas, in a stone and an anvil that says *Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anyvyl is rightwys kynge borne of all Englonde*. Lots of people from the House of Lords have tried to pull it out, without succeeding.'

Arthur couldn't understand. He remembered an inscription but he hadn't taken the time to read it. And he had drawn the sword from the stone easily. That showed what rubbish it all was; there was no way he could be king of England.

Ector sighed sadly. 'We'd better go back to the churchyard,' he said. 'Put it back in the stone, Kay, and show me how you drew it out.'

Kay looked stricken. Arthur was starting to understand. Kay was trying to take

the credit for his own achievement. But why the fuss? The sword had come out as if it was oiled. He followed his father and brother as they walked in silence up the street back in the direction of St Paul's.

'Here is the stone,' said Ector grimly. 'Put the sword back in, son.'

Without his usual swagger, Kay approached the stone and anvil, and searched for the place where the sword had been before. Arthur was about to show him when Kay lifted the sword high and brought it down with a clang. It slid into the iron of the anvil and the stone itself with as much ease as Arthur had experienced drawing it forth. Arthur scratched his head. The thing couldn't be what it seemed. Kay let go of the sword with a more confident shrug of his shoulders and looked questioningly at his father. Ector inclined his head.

'Now draw it forth,' he said.

Kay grinned, and seized the hilt in both hands. His face purpled as he struggled to draw it back out again. Arthur watched in amazement. Was Kay joking with them? His brother had replaced the sword as easily as Arthur had drawn it. The whole thing was a joke, a conjuring trick.

Kay's hands slipped from the hilt. He cursed angrily, and dashed sweat from his forehead. Then he turned to his father.

'Alright! I can't take it out,' he said angrily.

Ector shook his head. 'You never did,' he said sadly. 'I knew it. Much as I love you, Kay, I knew you weren't king. Who drew the sword?'

Shamefaced, Kay indicated Arthur. 'It was my brother,' he said, looking at the ground.

Ector looked at Arthur and in that look Arthur felt an immense sense of distance between himself and his father. It seemed to him that it had always been there, but he had never felt it so profoundly before. It seemed that light years extended between himself and the man who had brought him up.

'Draw the sword from the stone,' said Ector.

Arthur shrugged and sighed. He didn't know what the fuss was about. He didn't know why Kay was pretending that he couldn't draw the sword; obviously anyone could draw it and put it back. Arthur had taken it out, and he was nowhere near as strong as Kay. Kay had put it back in; there was no reason why he couldn't take it out again. What was he playing at?

'Alright, father,' he said, and he gripped the hilt in both hands and drew it effortlessly from the stone. 'It's easy,' he said. 'I don't know what Kay's up to. But he could pull it out, or anyone. You could!'

He frowned, as his father and Kay both knelt down before him. He looked around him, flushing. Why were they joking with him like this? He tugged at his father's shoulder.

'Get up,' he muttered. 'What's all this about? Get up, father!'

'No, Arthur,' his father said. Arthur's heart broke to see Ector's eyes on the ground. He seemed unable to look up. 'I was never your father. No son of mine could draw the sword from the stone.'

'Well, who is my father, then?' Arthur heard himself ask.

Ector shook his head sadly. 'I don't know,' he replied. 'An old man came to the house a few months after Kay was born. He brought with him a newborn baby. He told me that the boy's father couldn't bring him up and he asked me to raise you, Arthur.'

'So you don't know who my father is?' Arthur asked in disappointment.

'I intended to tell you this when you were younger,' Ector said, 'but since I

didn't know who your father was, it seemed better that you should remain ignorant. I did my best to raise you well, boy...'

Arthur looked uncertainly at the sword in his hands. 'But what about this?'

At that moment several religious policemen entered the churchyard. They hurried forward. 'What's going on here?' one demanded. 'No one's supposed to come here until the Lords gather to see who can draw the sword!'

Arthur and the others turned to them. Arthur still held the sword. Kay looked arrogantly at them. 'They'd be wasting their time,' he said proudly. 'My brother drew the sword.'

The religious policemen looked at him in confusion. 'The Archbishop needs to hear about this,' said their leader.

The men hustled Arthur, Kay and Ector into the presence of Brice, Archbishop of Canterbury, who listened to the account and eyed the sword that Arthur carried with a rheumy eye. He shook his head and his brow creased.

'I don't know how the Lords will react to this,' he said doubtfully. 'Then again, I haven't known what to make of matters since the sword appeared in the churchyard. God knows that Britain has needed a king to unite it since King Uther died without heirs. But that the son of a minor landowner should draw the sword forth... The Lord Protector won't like this. Nor will his followers.'

Ector coughed. 'Your grace,' he said. 'I have explained that although I raised the boy, he is not my son. His father is unknown.'

The Archbishop shook his head again. 'The only man who might know what to do about all this is Merlin,' he said. 'However, the Lords must be told. If Providence gives us a fifteen year old boy of mysterious origins to be king, then we should accept it. But the Lord Protector has had power too long to relinquish it without a struggle.'

Arthur folded his arms. 'I'm sure it's all a mistake,' he said. 'Why should pulling the sword from the stone make me king? I don't want to be king. Kay would do a better job than me.'

The Archbishop pursed his lips. 'The people believe this,' he said. 'They expect whoever draws the sword from the stone to become king. If you are the king, and God has chosen you, then we must accept it.'

'No!

Lot of Lothian, Lord Protector, stared in incredulity at Arthur. Other Lords stood on either side of him, facing the Archbishop and Arthur himself. Security men stood discreetly around the room.

'I can't believe it,' Lot added with a dour glare at the Archbishop, his face flaming as red as his hair. 'Is this some trick of Merlin's? This boy can't be our king!'

Arthur studied the Lord Protector in silence, a little awed to be facing so famous a man. 'I drew the sword from the stone,' he said. 'It was easy. I'm not boasting. I mean, I think anyone could do it.'

'Then what did you do it for?' Lot demanded. 'Put it back! The whole thing's going to be televised before the state opening of Parliament. Whoever draws the stone is king; so whoever draws it forth will open Parliament. Then we can see a return to democracy.' As he spoke, he was turning away from Arthur, addressing the room in general.

One of the Lords clapped Lot on the shoulder. 'Truly said,' he replied with a

grin. 'That'll keep the people quiet. Then they'll work all the harder.'

'Aye, Urien,' Lot said. 'Then we'll hear no more of this agitating. If this is a trick of Merlin's, it should work to our advantage if drawing the sword out is as easier as this lad says.' He turned back to Arthur. 'Put the sword back! Then we can get on with it.'

Arthur allowed himself to be led from the room. Kay and Ector followed after.

It was with a pang that he slid the sword back into the stone. He had no wish to become king although he knew the country needed someone who could control these burly, scheming warlords. From their cynical words he gathered that they saw the sword as an opportunity to achieve power for their own ends. The country needed a king, Arthur realised. But Lord Lothian and his cronies were right that it couldn't be a boy like him.

Half an hour later, and St Paul's Churchyard swarmed with cameramen, film crews and reporters. A lighting rig had been erected above the sword in the stone, and it made the sword blade flash and glitter as the Lords assembled to draw the blade under the eyes of the onlooking crowd and the television viewers.

Arthur, Ector, and Kay had returned to the hotel as the place filled up with spectators. Kay had been disqualified for failing to attend the tournament, and he was in a foul mood. Happily, his anger was not directed at Arthur.

Kay lay on the bed, watching the proceedings on TV in the hotel lounge. 'You should be king by rights, Arthur,' he said.

Ector nodded. 'If the Lord Protector draws the sword from the stone, he'll make himself king. He's king in all but name now, but he's done nothing to protect his people and everything to line his pockets since King Uther was assassinated.'

Arthur said nothing. Privately he reflected that even Lot would make a better king than he could ever be. Then Lot strode forward, bowed to the cameras, and gripped the sword hilt in both hands.

His face went purple as he tried to draw it forth. After a moment the Archbishop, who stood nearby, said gently: 'It's time you let another try.'

Lot let go, gave the man a glower, and looked round at the other men. The man he had called Urien, who Arthur had heard was the Earl of Moray, stepped forward.

'I shall try,' he said. Lot stamped away. Lord Urien heaved at the sword but with no success. A commentator began to discuss the event in solemn tones, and Ector turned down the volume. As lord after lord stepped forward to try the sword, Ector said: 'It seems that your accomplishment was not as easy as you maintain, Arthur!'

Bedivere, who had joined them in the lounge, grinned at Arthur. 'You're stronger than the Lord Protector!' he said.

Arthur shrugged. 'I don't get it,' he admitted. 'It came out easily enough when I tried it.' A thought struck him. 'Maybe I put it back the wrong way,' he said worriedly.

The programme ended without any of the Lords drawing the sword from the stone, and returned without any discussion to the sports tournament. Kay watched dolefully. 'You're the only one who can draw the sword from the stone,' he told Arthur without taking his eyes from the screen.

'It's true, Arthur,' said Ector. Bedivere nodded. Arthur shrugged. It was difficult to deny. But he couldn't understand it.

How could he be king? It was hard enough coming to terms with not being Ector's son. Well, perhaps the two facts were connected. If he wasn't Ector's son, and providence had shown that he was king... He shied away from the thought. Too

much had happened too quickly.

The room was silent, but Arthur could tell that everyone was secretly watching him. They wanted to know how he would react to the awful fact that was slowly impinging on him. Why did this have to happen to him? It was a terrible decision to make: he couldn't believe it, and nor could the Lord Protector and his friends. But the miracle of the sword in the stone showed it must be true.

'I must go back,' he said at last. 'I must go back to St Paul's, and show everyone that I can draw the sword from the stone. If...' He paused to swallow. 'If I can do it, if I'm the only one, then I must be king. I'll have to do it.'

Kay rolled over and applauded. Bedivere grinned. Ector gave a sigh. Kay got up, and slapped Arthur on the back.

'I knew you'd see it,' he said enthusiastically. 'Come on, we'll call a taxi and go there at once. I might not have been in the tournament, but my brother has proved himself to be king. This is a great day!'

Ector looked troubled. 'Don't forget, you don't have the backing of the Lords yet,' he said. But Kay brushed his father's objections aside.

A few minutes later they pulled up outside St Paul's, and Ector paid the taxi driver before hustling everyone into the churchyard. It was still crowded; the TV crews were still there. As Arthur and his friends approached, Lot was heaving at the sword again. Defeated, he let go and staggered back.

'Who will try next?' the Archbishop asked. Kay looked at Arthur, and pushed him when he didn't move. Arthur stumbled into the glare of the lighting rig. Everyone turned to look at him. A cameraman told him to get out of the way. The Archbishop seemed to recognise Arthur. He looked nervously at Lot. Arthur walked forward, dodging a security man who tried to grapple him.

In full view of the TV cameras, he drew the sword from the stone.

Shouting broke out. Lot barged forward, gesturing threateningly at Arthur. 'Get this brat out of here,' the Lord Protector told the security guard, who was staring at Arthur's sword. 'He can't possibly be king.'

'Don't be so certain, Lord Lothian,' said an old man who appeared from out of the crowd. Arthur recognised him as the homeless man who had seen him first draw the sword from the stone.

'Merlin!' Lord Lothian exclaimed.

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Brigands of the Moon

Chapter Three

At six a.m., Earth Eastern time, which we were still carrying, Snap Dean and I were alone in his instrument room, perched in the network over the Planetara's deck. The bulge of the dome enclosed us; it rounded like a great observatory window some twenty feet above the ceiling of this little metal cubbyhole.

The Planetara was still in Earth's shadow. The firmament—black, interstellar space with its blazing white, red and yellow stars—lay spread around us. The Moon, with nearly all its disc illumined, hung, a great silver ball, over our bow quarter. Behind it, to one side, Mars floated like the red tip of a smoldering cigar in the blackness. The Earth, behind our stern, was dimly, redly visible—a giant sphere, etched with the configurations of its oceans and continents. Upon one limb a touch of sunlight hung on the mountain tops with a crescent red-yellow sheen.

And then we plunged from the cone shadow. The Sun with the leaping corona, burst through the blackness behind us. The Earth lighted into a huge, thin crescent with hooked cusps.

To Snap and me, the glories of the heavens were too familiar to be remarked. And upon this voyage particularly we were in no mood to consider them. I had been in the radio room several hours. When the Planetara started, and my few routine duties were over, I could think of nothing save Halsey's and Carter's admonition: "Be on your guard. And particularly—watch George Prince."

I had not seen George Prince. But I had seen his sister, whom Carter and Halsey had not bothered to mention. My heart was still pounding with the memory.

Dr. Frank evidently was having little trouble with pressure sick passengers. The Planetara's equalizers were fairly efficient. Prowling through the silent metal lounges and passages, I went to the door of A22. It was on the deck level, in a tiny transverse passage just off the main lounging room. Its name-grid glowed with the letters: Anita Prince. I stood in my short white trousers and white silk shirt, like a cabin steward staring. Anita Prince! I had never heard the name until this night. But there was magic music in it now, as I murmured it.

She was here, doubtless asleep, behind this small metal door. It seemed as though that little oval grid were the gateway to a fairyland of my dreams.

I turned away. Thought of the Grantline Moon Expedition stabbed at me. George Prince—Anita's brother—he whom I had been warned to watch. This renegade—associate of dubious Martians, plotting God knows what.

I saw, upon the adjoining door, A20, George Prince. I listened. In the humming stillness of the ship's interior there was no sound from these cabins. A20 was without windows, I knew. But Anita's room had a window and a door which gave upon the deck. I went through the lounge, out its arch and walked the deck length. The deck

door and window of A22 were closed and dark.

The deck was dim with white starlight from the side ports. Chairs were here but they were all empty. From the bow windows of the arching dome a flood of moonlight threw long, slanting shadows down the deck. At the corner where the superstructure ended, I thought I saw a figure lurking as though watching me. I went that way, but it vanished.

I turned the corner, went the width of the ship to the other side. There was no one in sight save the observer on his spider bridge, high in the bow network, and the second officer, on duty on the turret balcony almost directly over me.

As I stood and listened, I suddenly heard footsteps. From the direction of the bow a figure came. Purser Johnson.

He greeted me. "Cooling off, Gregg?"

"Yes," I said.

He passed me and went into the smoking room door nearby.

I stood a moment at one of the deck windows, gazing at the stars; and for no reason at all I realized I was tense. Johnson was a great one for his regular sleep—it was wholly unlike him to be roaming about the ship at such an hour. Had he been watching me? I told myself it was nonsense. I was suspicious of everyone, everything, this voyage. I heard another step. Captain Carter appeared from his chart room which stood in the center of the narrowing open deck space near the bow. I joined him at once.

"Who was that?" he half whispered.

"Johnson."

"Oh, yes." He fumbled in his uniform; his gaze swept the moonlit deck. "Gregg—take this." He handed me a small metal box. I stuffed it at once into my shirt.

"An insulator," he added swiftly. "Snap is in his office. Take it to him, Gregg. Stay with him—you'll have a measure of security—and you can help him to make the photographs." He was barely whispering. "I won't be with you—no use making it look as though we were doing anything unusual. If your graphs show anything—or if Snap picks up any message—bring it to me." He added aloud, "Well, it will be cool enough presently, Gregg."

He sauntered away toward his chart room.

"By heavens, what a relief!" Snap murmured as the current went on. We had wired his cubby with the insulator; within its barrage we could at least talk with a degree of freedom.

"You've seen George Prince, Gregg?"

“No. He’s assigned A20. But I saw his sister. Snap, no one ever mentioned—”

Snap had heard of her, but he hadn’t known that she was listed for this voyage. “A real beauty, so I’ve heard. Accursed shame for a decent girl to have a brother like that.”

I could agree with him there....

It was now six a.m. Snap had been busy all night with routine cosmos-radios from the Earth, following our departure. He had a pile of them beside him.

“Nothing queer looking?” I suggested.

“No. Not a thing.”

We were at this time no more than sixty-five thousand miles from the Moon’s surface. The Planetara presently would swing upon her direct course for Mars. There was nothing which could cause passenger comment in this close passing of the Moon; normally we used the satellite’s attraction to give us additional starting speed.

It was now or never that a message would come from Grantline. He was supposed to be upon the Earthward side of the Moon. While Snap had rushed through with his routine, I searched the Moon’s surface with our glass.

But there was nothing. Copernicus and Kepler lay in full sunlight. The heights of the lunar mountains, the depths of the barren, empty seas were etched black and white, clear and clean. Grim, forbidding desolation, this unchanging Moon. In romance, moonlight may shimmer and sparkle to light a lover’s smile; but the reality of the Moon is cold and bleak. There was nothing to show my prying eyes where the intrepid Grantline might be.

“Nothing at all, Snap.”

And Snap’s instruments, attuned for an hour now to pick up the faintest signal, were motionless.

“If he has concentrated any appreciable amount of ore,” said Snap. “We should get an impulse from its rays.”

But our receiving shield was dark, untouched. Our mirror grid gave the magnified images; the spectro, with its wave length selection, pictured the mountain levels and slowly descended into the deepest seas.

There was nothing.

Yet in those Moon caverns—a million million recesses amid the crags of that tumbled, barren surface—the pin point of movement which might have been Grantline’s expedition could so easily be hiding! Could he have the ore insulated, fearing its rays would betray its presence to hostile watchers?

Or might disaster have come to him? He might not be on this hemisphere of the Moon at all....

My imagination, sharpened by fancy of a lurking menace which seemed everywhere about the Planetara this voyage, ran rife with fears for Johnny Grantline. He had promised to communicate this voyage. It was now, or perhaps never. Six-thirty came and passed. We were well beyond the Earth's shadow now. The firmament blazed with its vivid glories; the Sun behind us was a ball of yellow-red leaping flames. The Earth hung, a huge, dull red half sphere.

We were within forty thousand miles of the Moon. A giant white ball—all of its disc visible to the naked eye. It poised over the bow, and presently, as the Planetara swung upon its course for Mars, it shifted sidewise. The light of it glared white and dazzling in our windows.

Snap, with his habitual red celluloid eyeshade shoved high on his forehead, worked over our instruments.

“Gregg!”

The receiving shield was glowing a trifle. Rays were bombarding it! It glowed, gleamed phosphorescent, and the audible recorder began sounding its tiny tinkling murmurs.

Gamma rays! Snap sprang to the dials. The direction and strength were soon obvious. A richly radioactive ore body was concentrated upon this hemisphere of the Moon! It was unmistakable.

“He's got it, Gregg! He's—”

The tiny grids began quivering. Snap exclaimed triumphantly, “Here he comes! By God, the message at last!”

Snap decoded it.

Success! Stop for ore on your return voyage. Will give you our location later. Success beyond wildest hopes.

Snap murmured, “That's all. He's got the ore!”

We were sitting in darkness, and abruptly I became aware that across our open window, where the insulation barrage was flung, the air was faintly hissing. An interference there! I saw a tiny swirl of purple sparks. Someone—some hostile ray from the deck beneath us, or from the spider bridge that led to our little room—someone out there was trying to pry in!

Snap impulsively reached for the absorbers to let in the outside light. But I checked him.

“Wait!” I cut off our barrage, opened our door and stepped to the narrow metal

bridge.

“You stay there, Snap!” I whispered. Then I added aloud, “Well, Snap, I’m going to bed. Glad you’ve cleaned up that batch of work.”

I banged the door upon him. The lacework of metal bridges seemed empty. I gazed up to the dome, and forward and aft. Twenty feet beneath me was the metal roof of the cabin superstructure. Below it, both sides of the deck showed. All patched with moonlight.

No one visible down there. I descended a ladder. The deck was empty. But in the silence something was moving! Footsteps moving away from me down the deck! I followed; and suddenly I was running. Chasing something I could hear, but could not see. It turned into the smoking room.

I burst in. And a real sound smothered the phantom. Johnson the purser was sitting here alone in the dimness. He was smoking. I noticed that his cigar held a long frail ash. It could not have been him I was chasing. He was sitting there quite calmly. A thick-necked, heavy fellow, easily out of breath. But he was breathing calmly now.

He sat up in amazement at my wild-eyed appearance, and the ash jarred from his cigar.

“Gregg! What in the devil—”

I tried to grin. “I’m on my way to bed—worked all night helping Snap.”

I went past him, out the door into the main corridor. It was the only way the invisible prowler could have gone. But I was too late now—I could hear nothing. I dashed forward into the main lounge. It was empty, dim and silent, a silence broken presently by a faint click, a stateroom door hastily closing. I swung and found myself in a tiny transverse passage. The twin doors of A20 and A22 were before me.

The invisible eavesdropper had gone into one of these rooms! I listened at each of the panels, but there was only silence within.

The interior of the ship was suddenly singing with the steward’s siren—the call to awaken the passengers. It startled me. I moved swiftly away. But as the siren shut off, in the silence I heard a soft, musical voice:

“Wake up, Anita, I think that’s the breakfast call.”

And her answer, “All right, George.”

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The Summer Country

PART THREE

‘Tybalt Kohl?’

Urquhart nodded. ‘Much maligned and misunderstood,’ he replied ironically. ‘All he wishes is to return Europa to its true state - as Empire of the Aryans.’

Higgins sighed. ‘The theory of the Aryans is a very outdated one - unfashionable, not to mention based on very dubious grounds. These days we prefer to see the Indo-European language as something disseminated culturally, rather than an indication of a specific racial grouping...’

Urquhart swung round. ‘Your pedantry is no longer something I need to bear!’ he snarled. ‘Dare to disagree with me - and I’ll have the Toutones blood-eagle you!’

Higgins went silent at this threat: to have his ribs hacked away from his spine and the lungs drawn out through the gaps to flap viscerally on his back like the bloody wings of an eagle. In this barbaric land, in the red dawn of prehistory, it seemed all too credible.

He stumbled onwards.

‘Kohl learnt ancient Germanic from Mengeles, the Nazi geneticist, in the depths of the Brazilian rain-forest,’ Urquhart went on.

‘I knew he was in the area when I was on my expedition,’ Higgins interrupted. ‘The authorities cautioned me about him - it seemed they feared him rather more than they did the Indians...’

‘So they should!’ Urquhart grunted approvingly. ‘Mengeles was the last surviving member of the Nazi elite and the last man to speak the true language of the ancient Germans, recreated by spiritualistic mediums in contact with the dead warrior chieftains of Germany’s heroic past.

‘A cranky notion, no doubt. But it worked. And Kohl also knew when Abalos would reappear from the waters, when the dimensional gate would appear linking our time with that of prehistory. Which is why he demanded that I join the mission...’

With the Germanic warriors at their very heels, Nick and Siara ran across the dark valley towards the hill-fort - the “dunos”, as Siara seemed to call it. As they rushed up the winding road that led between the ramparts, the sound of pursuit thundering close behind them, a voice hailed them from above and a spear flashed down to land thrumming in the turf between them.

They stopped in their tracks. Siara shouted up at the guard. It seemed that he was refusing to allow them to enter. Despairing, Nick turned to peer into the darkness. Their pursuers were out there somewhere; he caught the flash of moonlight from their arms and armour in the murk before him.

‘Better hurry up and convince him,’ he said, ‘or else we’re dead meat.’

The warriors sped across the valley. Siara continued her violent but apparently futile argument with the unseen sentry, while Nick closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable end.

‘Aros!’

At the shouted command from the white-robed man behind them, the Celtic warriors stopped their rush. Their leader turned and spoke angrily with the man - a

druid, Eloise assumed. The druid replied with quiet authority and the warrior shrugged, then turned to Eloise and Hamish and bowed humbly. A stream of seeming apologies flowed from his lips.

Eloise and Hamish glanced warily at each other. What was going on now?

‘He’s apologising to you. We didn’t realise who it was. We thought you were more of these Toutones.’

The speaker was the tall druid. He smiled genially at the two teenagers.

‘How...’ Eloise stammered.

The druid smiled again.

‘Come with us,’ he said invitingly. ‘I’ll explain everything to you when we reach Pretanodunon.’

Surrounding them now as an honour guard rather than a threat, the Celtic warriors hurried them away.

Higgins glared at his companion.

‘You blew up the survey vessel?’ he demanded.

Urquhart shrugged. ‘It was the only way to ensure that our stay on Abalos would be long enough for me to secure the Spear of Lugus,’ he replied. ‘Without it, we will never be able to bring about the Fourth Reich... Ah! We’ve arrived.’

They stumbled out of the woods into a large area of open ground. Directly before them loomed a large wooden hall, surrounded by a high stockade. The Toutones marched them rapidly across the rank grass, through a wooden gate and across the muddy yard beyond. The hall ahead of them resounded with the roar of drunken feasting, though from the paling sky Higgins could tell that it was nearly dawn.

He felt exhausted. But there was no time to pause. Roughly, his captors dragged him forward.

The druid, who had introduced himself as Meniuos, led Eloise and Hamish through the trees and into a wide valley, at the end of which dawn illuminated a large hill-fort. This was Pretanodunon, capital of the Pretani of Abalos and chief fortress of their king, Pretanos map Æduos. The druid led them up the hill to the gate, at the foot of which Eloise was sickened to see a pile of stiffening Toutonic corpses.

Within the palisade they found the entire hill-top cluttered with huts and outbuildings. Near the centre was a high hall towards which Meniuos led his charge after dismissing the warriors.

‘Here is the hall of Pretanos, king of the Pretani,’ he told them. ‘Here all will be revealed to you.’

Eloise and Hamish, still in something of a daze, followed the tall figure across the muddy ground to the entrance. Two sentries bowed their heads to the druid as he passed them.

‘Feels like being royalty,’ Eloise whispered wonderingly.

‘What’s it gonna be like inside?’ Hamish said in an awe-stricken tone. They passed through into the main hall.

‘Come in, come in, sit down, make yourselves at home,’ said Nick, grinning at them from the far side. He was sitting beside a young girl at the foot of a throne, surrounded by armoured Celtic warriors, lounging lazily and looking extremely pleased with himself.

On the throne itself sat a tall, widely-built man dressed in bright reds, blacks and yellows. His blond hair was braided, his long moustaches elegantly combed and upon his head he wore a ceremonial horned helmet. As Meniuos and the two teenagers entered the hall, he rose from his throne.

‘Kroiso i Pretanodunon,’ he said in ringing tones. The druid glanced at Hamish and Eloise.

‘He’s talking to you,’ he hissed. They both looked self-conscious and responded as best they could; Eloise bobbed a curtsy, Hamish managed a respectful nod.

The king said something else, which Eloise failed to catch and beckoned them forward. Meniuos pulled forward a few stools and they sat in front of the dais. Nick grinned cheekily down at them as King Pretanos spoke and the druid translated his words.

‘We heard of your imminent arrival from the oracle of the gods,’ the king said, his words being relayed through Meniuos. ‘Esus the Mighty told us that it was imperative that we find the visitors from the Otherworld and bring them to my palace.

‘He also said that our island is doomed to sink beneath the seas in the next few days; we must depart and settle in the Isle of Albion. He will aid our flight, but in return desires that you take the Spear of Lugus from the cavern beneath Mount Lauscos, the volcano and return with it to your own world and time. He will explain the reason for this later.’

‘Now just a minute,’ said Hamish and the king broke off. ‘Why should we do this? And how the fuck can you speak English anyway?’

Meniuos smiled.

‘Esus appeared to me,’ he said quietly. ‘And with his divine powers, he taught me your language and told me of your mission.’

‘Our mission?’ Eloise asked, looking confused.

‘Why, your quest for the four-cornered castle,’ Meniuos replied in matter of fact tones.

‘Och, Ah think ye’ve got the wrong people here,’ Hamish said, bewildered, after a brief pause.

Meniuos looked briefly uncertain.

‘Caer Pedryfan?’ he said. ‘Surely you were heading for Caer Pedryfan?’

‘Well, yes...’ said Eloise, amazed. ‘But how did you know? And what’s this Spear of Lugus got to do with it anyway?’

Meniuos looked pensive. ‘I am unsure,’ he admitted. ‘But Esus has spoken and we Pretani have always obeyed his word.’

‘Is he your chief god?’ Eloise asked.

‘Indeed,’ Meniuos replied. ‘Our chief god and father of our folk.’

King Pretanos said something to the druid and Meniuos turned back from him to Eloise.

‘Will you accept?’ he asked. ‘We understand that one of your party is also on this quest but for evil reasons. You must take the Spear before your companion Dr. Urquhart finds it.’

Eloise glanced at Hamish, then at Nick, sitting up on the dais. So many questions! Why did a Celtic god want them to take this spear back home, anyway? But at least that suggested that they were going to get home. She had never heard of Esus - the Goddess and the Horned God were her deities and she’d always thought they were Celtic.... But it was nice to know that the gods were on their side.

She shrugged. ‘We’ll do it. But who else is after the Spear, did you say? Dr. Urquhart?’

‘Yes,’ Meniuos replied. ‘He’s a member of an occult lodge called the Temple of Typhon. An individual named Tybalt Kohl sent him here, I understand.’

‘Och, Ah ayeways thought he was a sneaky keech,’ Hamish said. ‘What are you grinning at anyway, Nick?’

Nick laughed. ‘Don’t you remember Tybalt Kohl? The one who jumped into a sewer full of alligators? Looks like he survived.’

‘Of course, the Neo-Nazi,’ said Eloise. ‘And the Temple of Typhon - that was Samaël Anghelides’ occult lodge...’ Eloise looked puzzled again. ‘Either I’m getting paranoid, or there’s more to this than meets the eye.’

‘And who is this fool?’ the red-haired woman demanded, indicating Higgins.

Urquhart grinned broadly as the professor stared around at the warriors in the hall. Queen Theodochildis was a feisty woman, strong enough to keep her men under control, and they looked a tough bunch. The professor stood out in this manly gathering like a sheep among wolves and it was clear that he felt more than a little uncomfortable.

‘Well?’ The queen’s voice cracked again like a lash. ‘You have told me of your quest, Urquhart. But you have not told me where your companions fit in.’

‘Well,’ said Urquhart coolly, ‘these are the people who brought me here, your majesty. Unwittingly, of course. They know nothing of the destiny of the race.’

‘The destiny of my race is to wipe out the Valsk and take over the amber trade,’ snarled the queen, using the Toutonic name for the Pretani. ‘And you claim that taking this Spear of Lugus from Mount Lauscos will help this?’

Urquhart smiled smugly. ‘Eventually,’ he said, nodding. He neglected to say that it would not occur for approximately one hundred generations and as for the amber trade that had been the source of Abalos’ wealth for centuries... He thought it would be undiplomatic to mention that the island itself was doomed to imminent destruction.

The queen looked thoughtful. ‘The fire-mountain is in Pretanos’ country,’ she said broodingly. ‘Every year we try to conquer their lands, where the amber is so much more plentiful, but we have yet to gain control over them. How will you get there?’

Urquhart laughed. ‘That bit’s easy. This is my plan...’

Nick was happy.

He’d never met with much success with girls, not back home in Garston, not even with other crusties, and he had learnt to live with the fact that he was nowhere near as handsome as he’d like to be. So it had come as something of a shock to him to find Siara following him around, tending to his every need, doing her utmost to communicate her admiration despite the language barrier. But now they were preparing for this quest to Mount Lauscos he was afraid that he might not see her again.

‘So what do we do after we’ve got the Spear?’ he asked the druid. They were in a chamber of the main hall, where they were gathering supplies for the journey, which would take them about half a day.

‘As soon as you have taken the Spear, Esus will release his control on the forces of nature and our island will descend beneath the waters,’ Meniuos told them. ‘King Pretanos is aware of this and had a fleet prepared to ferry his folk to Albion as soon as

this happens.'

'Er, what about us?' Eloise broke in, looking uneasy.

'Esus will transport you back to your own time,' the druid replied. 'But you must first return to Pretanodunon and set sail from here. The gateway to your own era will be located out to sea.'

Nick glanced at Siara, who was sitting close to him. Tentatively, he put an arm around her and she smiled shyly up at him.

'Can, er...' Nick broke off. He tried again. 'Can Siara...' He broke off a second time as Hamish leapt to his feet.

'What's that?' the Scot demanded. Everyone paused to listen. From outside came the now-familiar roar of battle and it increased in volume as they listened. The druid turned and rushed out into the hall, while Hamish and Eloise quickly followed him.

Nick glanced at Siara. She said something in a tender voice, while gazing at him with watery blue eyes. Nick gulped, unsure of how to react and went after his friends.

Shrugging, Siara followed.

Outside the hall, they found the hill-fort under siege. Toutonic warriors were pouring over the palisade in a red wave, to fall upon the ranks of Celts who awaited them. Nearby, King Pretanos and his chieftains were directing the battle. Meniuos hurried over to them and a brief, hurried conversation ensued.

'Cool,' said Hamish. 'Another barnie. Ah like this fucking place - it's like Glesga on a Saturday night! Och, Ah could stay here forever!'

'So could I,' said Nick dreamily, gazing back at Siara as the girl approached them.

Eloise folded her arms resolutely. 'Well, we don't have forever,' she murmured. 'This place is going to sink in a couple of days.'

Meniuos hurried back to them.

'The Toutones are attacking us again,' he said angrily. 'They want to take over the amber trade with the South that has made our people so rich.' He shook his head. 'Greed-fuelled materialists. Now there's no way we can get to the volcano! And if we don't get there in the next few days, Abalos will sink beneath us and even the future will be doomed.'

Nick looked up from his rapt contemplation of Siara.

'Can't we sneak out the back way?' he suggested. The druid stared at him. 'Hop over the back wall and skedaddle,' the Scouser expanded. Siara giggled. The druid looked thoughtful.

'Come on, we don't have much time,' said Hamish decisively. Pausing only to grab a spare sword from a nearby pile in the lea of a hut, he strode towards the palisade that protected the side of the fort furthest from the attackers. The others followed.

Professor Higgins stumbled over the rise and stared down through the heat haze into the pumice-strewn valley below. Above him towered the rugged slopes of the volcano Mount Lauscos and its main crater smoked gently in the heat. Behind him Urquhart and four Germanic warriors gazed down at the scene from ponyback.

It was no use. He couldn't stand a second longer. He flopped to the ground with a moan.

Higgins was a changed man. Gone was the overweight, smugly arrogant academic; a forced march through the baking heat of the central lava desert of Abalos,

with the constant threat of searing pain at the whips of the Toutones, had sloughed away all these traits. His lips were cracked, his body was aching and the dim fire of his spirit glowed feebly from somewhere far within him.

‘Getting some exercise at last, are we, professor?’ gloated Urquhart from the pony. He had taken to dressing in Toutonic armour, which sat rather absurdly on his skinny frame; a large axe hung from his belt. Higgins was sure that the man had no idea how to use the weapon, but the other warriors were all hardened veterans. They had fought off numerous threats as they journeyed up the River Abona and into the interior; Celts, wolves, bears, and at one point a prehistoric reptile whose presence had offended Higgins’ sense of historical accuracy.

He turned towards his tormentor.

‘Why have you dragged me here with you?’ he croaked.

Urquhart leapt lithely down from his mount.

‘Why, old man,’ he grinned. ‘I’ve done you a favour. Didn’t I save you from suffering the same fate as the soldiers?’

Higgins nodded. Indeed, Urquhart had asked the queen to spare him from joining the sacrifice she had made to the god Wodhanaz in return for victory against the Pretani; unlike the two marines. Their grisly, throttled corpses still dangled from a tree in Higgins’ horror-numbed mind. But he found it hard to believe that Urquhart’s reasons for saving him were entirely altruistic.

‘So stop complaining,’ Urquhart smiled, viciously kicking the motionless professor in the groin. ‘You know I hate the way you moan all the time. You should look on the bright side, like I do. I’ve been optimistic throughout this entire expedition - even cooped up in the survey vessel with you, I kept smiling, knowing that one day I’d have you at my mercy. Now get up. We’re going down into the valley.’

Groaning, the professor stumbled to his feet. The warriors joined them after tethering their ponies. Slowly they picked their way down the slope towards a large gaping volcanic vent that opened in the side of the cliff-face.

As Eloise trudged across the baking pumice sands at the head of their party, she glanced worriedly at her companions. Hamish was striding along happily, ready for battle with a Celtic sword slung over his shoulder; no worries there. Behind him came the druid, who - despite his age and general resemblance to Getafix - was a spry old fellow and kept the pace surprisingly well; he wasn’t the problem either.

‘Keep up, Nick!’ Eloise called, looking angrily at the two stragglers.

Nick and Siara glanced up guiltily and quickened their pace. Eloise shook her head and continued.

‘Sweet, isn’t it?’ Hamish growled cynically. Eloise shook her head.

‘They just don’t seem to realise how important this is. I mean, I appreciate how nice it must be for Nick to meet someone he really cares about, but...’

They spun round at a noise from a nearby scree-slide. A flash of movement caught their eyes at the top of a cliff.

‘What was that?’ Hamish demanded. After a moment, Eloise shrugged.

‘I don’t know, Hamish, but I think we’d better get moving.’ She turned to the others. ‘Come on, everyone - hurry!’

They scrambled rapidly across the pumice, desperate to put some miles between them and whatever it was that was pursuing them. Over the shifting, unstable landscape they fled, kicking up a grey and flaky dust all around them. Ahead, the

looming peak of the volcano inched nearer.

They turned a corner and found themselves confronted by a dark hole in the ground, rimmed round by grey powdery rock. Meniuos came to a halt.

‘Here is the entrance to the cavern,’ he said, panting.

‘Look!’ said Hamish. He was pointing at a nearby hillside, where four ponies were tethered.

‘Someone’s got here before us,’ Eloise said ominously.

A clatter of stone rang out from behind them.

‘Enemies behind and ahead.’ Hamish scowled. ‘Och, well - come on.’

He pulled out his sword and headed into the cavern. Cautiously, the others followed.

Inside, the cave was dark, dry and dusty. A sulphurous stench made them cough and choke as they entered. Soon they were too far from the entrance to be able to see anything.

‘Shit!’ Hamish said.

‘Do not despair,’ Meniuos called. A sudden flash of light illuminated the cavern ahead. In its glow they saw the druid standing with an orb of fire in his hand. They gasped.

‘Fuck me,’ Hamish said. Eloise glanced admiringly at the druid.

‘How do you do that?’ she murmured.

Meniuos shrugged. ‘It’s only magic,’ he replied modestly.

‘Ssh,’ hissed Nick, who was finally beginning to take an interest in their situation. ‘I can hear voices. From up ahead.’

At the far end of the cavern, a passage led off into the darkness. From it echoed a furious conversation.

‘Come on,’ Hamish said and he strode towards the passage.

The others followed him. They walked for about thirty metres down a winding, serpentine passageway with the voice getting louder as they progressed. Suddenly, they came out onto a ledge above another wide cavern. Meniuos’s light lit up the scene below.

On a stone altar in the centre of the cavern lay a spear. Dr. Urquhart was reaching for it, holding a cigarette lighter in his hand to illuminate the treasure, but beside him stood Professor Higgins, arguing with him.

‘No, professor!’ Urquhart was shouting as they entered. ‘With this I shall return Europa to its true destiny!’ He pushed the professor aside and Higgins fell weakly back. ‘What’s that?’ Urquhart spun round as the druid’s light burst into the darkness of the cave and dropped his lighter. Shouting something in Proto-Germanic, he turned and grabbed the Spear.

Hamish leapt down the side of the cavern and rushed towards him. The others followed, but as they did so four Toutonic warriors stepped out of the shadows to bar their path.

Eloise looked at Meniuos. ‘We’re unarmed,’ she whispered. ‘Isn’t there anything you can do?’

Meniuos’s lips parted to chant the words of a spell, but before he could do so, one warrior rammed an axe-haft into his belly. He doubled up, wheezing and collapsed to the cavern floor. The warriors surrounded them.

Meniuos’ light went out.

Hamish, meanwhile, was fighting for his life. He had reached the altar just as Urquhart grabbed the lance. Hamish had set upon the marine biologist with the sword and Urquhart had fought back, using a Toutonic axe with considerable expertise.

Round and round the altar they fought, until suddenly the cavern went black.

Hamish heard Urquhart's axe swish past his ear. He snarled something incoherent and threw himself at the marine biologist. They collapsed to the ground in a flurry of limbs, struggling tooth and nail for supremacy.

As they did so, a clipped, military voice rapped out from above.

'Get down, chaps - I'm going to deal with these natives!'

'No!' shouted Urquhart, but his voice was drowned out by the deafening roar of small arms fire. The cave was briefly lit up to reveal Commander Johnstone in the entrance, blazing away at the Toutones while Eloise and other others cowered on the ground.

The gunfire ended, the cavern went dark and Hamish returned to the attack.

Up on the ledge, Eloise was getting stiffly to her feet, flinging a bullet-riddled corpse off her back as she did so. A lighter flame flared up nearby and Eloise found herself face to face with the Commander. Nick and Siara were getting up nearby, with the Celtic girl clinging to the crustie and eyeing their rescuer warily. Meniuos was slowly recovering beside him and he also looked uncertain.

'Commander!' said Eloise. 'We thought the Toutones had got you.'

'They got my men, miss,' he said grimly, his rugged features sombre. 'And I thought you'd all gone up with the survey vessel. I returned to the river to find no sign of you, so I decided to forge my way inland, find some means of getting off this island. I found the plane, but it had crashed in the hills to the west of here and the Kraut pilot was a goner, poor fellow. I ended up here. I can see you've had a few run-ins with the natives yourselves...' He broke off. 'What are Dr. Urquhart and the Scots boy doing down there?'

They turned to look down at the dimly-lit cavern floor.

'Urquhart's a traitor,' Eloise murmured. 'He betrayed us to these, er, natives. Looks like Hamish is fighting him - He's got him!'

As they watched, Hamish feinted towards Urquhart's head and the marine biologist raised his axe to defend himself. Swiftly, Hamish reversed his attack and stabbed at the man's belly, but Urquhart stepped back only to trip over the prone figure of the professor. Hamish leapt forward.

A few seconds later, he stood up again, his sword bloody.

Higgins was weakly trying to rise and Hamish helped him to his feet. The others hurried down the steep slope towards them. Suddenly, they halted in their tracks.

Behind Hamish, a light was coalescing over the altar stone. Hamish whirled round with his sword at the ready, but then he halted, staring in wonder at the face of light that appeared before him.

'Welcome, child.'

The voice was thunderous and it seemed to come from all around them, though it seemed that the face was speaking. 'Welcome to Abalos.'

'Who are you?' the Scot demanded.

'I am Esus the Mighty,' the voice replied, 'chief god of the Brythonic people. And - your ultimate ancestor.'

Hamish frowned.

'Och - Ah don't understand!' he replied. 'What do you mean?'

'I am ancestor of the royal house of Abalos - King Pretanos' dynasty, who are destined to rule Albion; Britain, as you will know it in your own time. You, Hamish Wallis, are a direct descendant of the king and thus it is your destiny to preserve the eternal struggle of the Pretani in your own age.'

'What struggle?' Hamish asked. 'Ah'll fight anyone, but..'

‘In your own age, the Nazi occultist Tybalt Kohl is preparing to thrust Europe back into the darkness of Nazi domination. To this end he hopes to recover the Cauldron of Rebirth, which lies deep beneath the Welsh town of Caer Pedryfan and with which he intends to bring back the Nazis from beyond the grave. If you foil Kohl’s attempt to find the Cauldron, he will be defeated.’

As if in a dream, Hamish reached out and picked up the weapon.

The light disappeared, but the thundering continued, from all around them. The floor began to shake and drifts of dust started to shower them from the roof.

‘What’s happening?’ yelled Nick.

‘It’s the volcano,’ Meniuos gasped. ‘We must get away!’

A few seconds later, they stumbled out of the cave - Eloise, Hamish, Nick, Siara, Meniuos, Commander Johnstone and Professor Higgins - and stood staring wildly around them. Up above, flame was beginning to erupt from the volcano crater and glowing lava oozed over the edge, gathering momentum as it began to pour down the slope.

‘The ponies!’ Higgins shouted. ‘Up on the ridge!’

They staggered up the pumice slope as the land around them rumbled and collapsed into itself. The tethered ponies were screaming with fear, but Higgins managed to soothe them. He leapt astride one pony and the others followed his example, two to a pony.

‘Make for Pretanodunon!’ Meniuos shouted above the rumble of the volcano.

In a cloud of dust, they cantered off across the crumbling desert.

Back at the hill-fort, things were getting desperate. They had been fighting for hours and King Pretanos was on the brink of despair. The Toutones had taken much of the hill-fort and the Pretani lines were behind the main hall. Furthermore, in the distance, the fire-mountain was beginning to belch lava and grey clouds and there was no sign of the ancient druid.

‘My lord, is it not time we retreated to the galleys?’ demanded Corionos, one of the king’s advisers. Pretanos gave him a helpless look.

‘Where is Meniuos?’ he shouted. ‘We must wait for him!’

Corionos glanced at the erupting volcano on the horizon. Suddenly the ground shook with a brief earth tremor that left both the Pretani and the Toutones scattered across the turf.

His head ringing, the king got back to his feet to find the battlefield around him in a state of disarray; divisions everywhere fallen to the ground. He looked at Corionos, staggering to his feet beside him.

‘Father!’ shouted his son Locrinos from nearby, ‘We can’t wait for the druid!’

Pretanos nodded to Corionos.

‘Sound the retreat,’ he said resolutely. ‘We can’t afford to wait.’

Eloise and her companions had crossed the desert of ash and were cantering through the forest. Behind them, a sea of lava flowed rapidly across the hills, burning up the trees behind them; every so often, chasms opened up across their route and they would be forced to ride around them. The stench of sulphur filled the air and Eloise’s eyes were watering.

‘How far now?’ she choked to Meniuos, who rode next to her.

‘We’ll soon be there,’ he replied comfortingly.

Another chasm tore open a few metres ahead of them, ripping trees and boulders apart as it did so. Eloise cursed as they were forced to slow down and pick their way around the bubbling hole.

Pretanos and his people had reached the wharves below the hill-fort by now; here twenty galleys lay at anchor. The sea around them bubbled and boiled like water in a cauldron and great waves crashed against the nearby cliffs. Parts of the coast were already crumbling into the agitated waters.

‘Into the ships!’ the king ordered, having to shout to be heard over the roaring noise. His heart was torn by the destruction of his fair country. He glanced back to see a torrent of Toutones dashing hectically down the slope from the top of the hill-fort towards them. ‘And hurry!’ he added.

Queen Theodochildis had been overjoyed to see the Valsk fleeing before, but before her warriors had time to celebrate their conquest of the hill-fort, the fire-mountain erupted without warning and all hell broke loose. The air boiled and the skies rained down fire and rock as if the Doom of the Gods was upon them.

Was that it? Was the world to end just as victory was finally within their grasp? Her people had been struggling for control of Abalos ever since they were forced out of Thule by a stronger tribe and had come to settle on the island. Theodochildis had been born into a world of constant tribal warfare, where only the strong and the cunning survived; her domineering father, disappointed to have no sons, had bred her to be a fighter - to win. Here she was, within a finger’s breadth of the victory her life had been dedicated to, and the Fates were pulling it away.

She pelted down the slopes towards her ancient enemies with her army at her back. The Valsk had clearly been aware of the doom of their island and had prepared for it. No thought for their poor neighbours, Theodochildis thought bitterly.

‘Come!’ she yelled to her charging men. ‘We must take their ships! The island is doomed!’

They had almost reached the galleys, which were in the process of casting off from the shore, when four over-burdened ponies cantered round the headland. As the cliffs crumbled around them, their riders forced them onwards towards the galleys. The ponies cut across in front of the Toutonic army.

‘Archers!’ Theodochildis screamed, desperate to stop any more Valsk escaping. She turned to her army and froze in horror.

The cliff behind them was crumbling. She tried to speak, but her throat seemed like a block of ice. The cliffs crashed down on her men, flattening them in an instant.

Queen Theodochildis dodged a fallen boulder twice the size of her own hall and fell to her knees. Scrambling up again, she turned to see the riders dismount and start to run towards the only galley that had not yet set out across the boiling sea. She watched them pile into the small ship. They were about to cast off.

She couldn’t die here, all her ambitions unfulfilled! Behind her, her homeland was collapsing into the tempestuous ocean; ahead of her lay her only chance of escape. She dashed towards the galley and leapt into it, grabbing at the nearest man to throw him overboard and take his place - a scruffy fellow, almost a lad, with thick, ugly locks. A druid stood by the sail and as she plunged into the ship, it began to move off.

Theodochildis grappled with the boy and though he struggled in her grasp, she knew that she had the mastery. But then a Valsk girl flung herself at her, throwing her off the boy and flinging her back against the side of the ship.

‘You’ll die for that!’ Theodochildis snarled.

The girl attacked her again. They struggled on the edge of the boat.

Theodochildis overbalanced - seized the girl by the hair - toppled over into the boiling waters.

‘Siara!’ Nick screamed as he saw her fall over the side, struggling with the Toutonic woman who had appeared from nowhere.

But already the ship had moved on; strong winds plucked at the sails and their progress was rapid.

‘We’ve got to go back for her!’ he sobbed. He stared in agony over the rail, watching as the Isle of Abalos collapsed into the foaming waters and vast tidal waves crashed across the sea. He felt soft, warm arms around him.

‘I’m so sorry, Nick,’ Eloise said in a choked voice. ‘But she couldn’t have survived that.’

Nick stared back bleakly, tears running down his cheeks.

‘Now I must leave you,’ said Meniuos. They had almost caught up with the fleet as it sailed towards the far-off island of Albion. Ahead of their own vessel, a glowing red light stained the waters and a portal in the very fabric of space gaped across their path. ‘If you continue into that,’ the druid told them, indicating the portal, ‘it will lead you back to your own time. But I cannot come with you.’ He smiled mysteriously. ‘However, it is possible that I will see some of you again one day. Till then, farewell.’

The druid stripped off his robes, walked to the side and dived in. Strongly and rapidly, he swam towards the Brythonic fleet. After a while, they saw him reach a ship safely and climb up the side, helped abroad by the sailors. Then the red light was playing about their deck and in seconds they were plunging headlong towards the gateway into their own world.

Hamish sat in the stern with the Spear of Lugus over his knee. Nearby, Commander Johnstone was using his first-aid skills on Professor Higgins, who had fared badly during their adventure. In the bow, Eloise had her arms around a still sobbing Nick.

Hamish looked at the girl and Eloise glanced up. Their eyes met.

‘We’re going home,’ Eloise murmured, in disbelief. ‘We’re finally going home.’

Behind them, all that remained of Abalos was a tiny volcanic rock in the sea upon which the waves battered. All around them, the sea was empty.

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Carmilla

PROLOGUE

Upon a paper attached to the Narrative which follows, Doctor Hesselius has written a rather elaborate note, which he accompanies with a reference to his Essay on the strange subject which the MS. illuminates.

This mysterious subject he treats, in that Essay, with his usual learning and acumen, and with remarkable directness and condensation. It will form but one volume of the series of that extraordinary man's collected papers.

As I publish the case, in this volume, simply to interest the "laity," I shall forestall the intelligent lady, who relates it, in nothing; and after due consideration, I have determined, therefore, to abstain from presenting any précis of the learned Doctor's reasoning, or extract from his statement on a subject which he describes as "involving, not improbably, some of the profoundest arcana of our dual existence, and its intermediates."

I was anxious on discovering this paper, to reopen the correspondence commenced by Doctor Hesselius, so many years before, with a person so clever and careful as his informant seems to have been. Much to my regret, however, I found that she had died in the interval.

She, probably, could have added little to the Narrative which she communicates in the following pages, with, so far as I can pronounce, such conscientious particularity.

I

An Early Fright

In Styria, we, though by no means magnificent people, inhabit a castle, or schloss. A small income, in that part of the world, goes a great way. Eight or nine hundred a year does wonders. Scantly enough ours would have answered among wealthy people at home. My father is English, and I bear an English name, although I never saw England. But here, in this lonely and primitive place, where everything is so marvelously cheap, I really don't see how ever so much more money would at all materially add to our comforts, or even luxuries.

My father was in the Austrian service, and retired upon a pension and his patrimony, and purchased this feudal residence, and the small estate on which it stands, a bargain.

Nothing can be more picturesque or solitary. It stands on a slight eminence in a forest. The road, very old and narrow, passes in front of its drawbridge, never raised in my time, and its moat, stocked with perch, and sailed over by many swans, and floating on its surface white fleets of water lilies.

Over all this the schloss shows its many-windowed front; its towers, and its Gothic chapel.

The forest opens in an irregular and very picturesque glade before its gate, and at the right a steep Gothic bridge carries the road over a stream that winds in deep shadow through the wood. I have said that this is a very lonely place. Judge whether I say truth. Looking from the hall door towards the road, the forest in which our castle stands extends fifteen miles to the right, and twelve to the left. The nearest inhabited village is about seven of your English miles to the left. The nearest inhabited schloss of any historic associations, is that of old General Spielsdorf, nearly twenty miles away to the right.

I have said “the nearest inhabited village,” because there is, only three miles westward, that is to say in the direction of General Spielsdorf’s schloss, a ruined village, with its quaint little church, now roofless, in the aisle of which are the moldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstein, now extinct, who once owned the equally desolate chateau which, in the thick of the forest, overlooks the silent ruins of the town.

Respecting the cause of the desertion of this striking and melancholy spot, there is a legend which I shall relate to you another time.

I must tell you now, how very small is the party who constitute the inhabitants of our castle. I don’t include servants, or those dependents who occupy rooms in the buildings attached to the schloss. Listen, and wonder! My father, who is the kindest man on earth, but growing old; and I, at the date of my story, only nineteen. Eight years have passed since then.

I and my father constituted the family at the schloss. My mother, a Styrian lady, died in my infancy, but I had a good-natured governess, who had been with me from, I might almost say, my infancy. I could not remember the time when her fat, benignant face was not a familiar picture in my memory.

This was Madame Perrodon, a native of Berne, whose care and good nature now in part supplied to me the loss of my mother, whom I do not even remember, so early I lost her. She made a third at our little dinner party. There was a fourth, Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, a lady such as you term, I believe, a “finishing governess.” She spoke French and German, Madame Perrodon French and broken English, to which my father and I added English, which, partly to prevent its becoming a lost language among us, and partly from patriotic motives, we spoke every day. The consequence was a Babel, at which strangers used to laugh, and which I shall make no attempt to reproduce in this narrative. And there were two or three young lady friends besides, pretty nearly of my own age, who were occasional visitors, for longer or shorter terms; and these visits I sometimes returned.

These were our regular social resources; but of course there were chance visits from “neighbors” of only five or six leagues distance. My life was, notwithstanding, rather a solitary one, I can assure you.

My gouvernantes had just so much control over me as you might conjecture such sage persons would have in the case of a rather spoiled girl, whose only parent allowed her pretty nearly her own way in everything.

The first occurrence in my existence, which produced a terrible impression upon my mind, which, in fact, never has been effaced, was one of the very earliest incidents of my life which I can recollect. Some people will think it so trifling that it should not be recorded here. You will see, however, by-and-by, why I mention it. The nursery, as it was called, though I had it all to myself, was a large room in the upper story of the castle, with a steep oak roof. I can't have been more than six years old, when one night I awoke, and looking round the room from my bed, failed to see the nursery maid. Neither was my nurse there; and I thought myself alone. I was not frightened, for I was one of those happy children who are studiously kept in ignorance of ghost stories, of fairy tales, and of all such lore as makes us cover up our heads when the door cracks suddenly, or the flicker of an expiring candle makes the shadow of a bedpost dance upon the wall, nearer to our faces. I was vexed and insulted at finding myself, as I conceived, neglected, and I began to whimper, preparatory to a hearty bout of roaring; when to my surprise, I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed.

I was now for the first time frightened, and I yelled with all my might and main. Nurse, nursery maid, housekeeper, all came running in, and hearing my story, they made light of it, soothing me all they could meanwhile. But, child as I was, I could perceive that their faces were pale with an unwonted look of anxiety, and I saw them look under the bed, and about the room, and peep under tables and pluck open cupboards; and the housekeeper whispered to the nurse: "Lay your hand along that hollow in the bed; someone did lie there, so sure as you did not; the place is still warm."

I remember the nursery maid petting me, and all three examining my chest, where I told them I felt the puncture, and pronouncing that there was no sign visible that any such thing had happened to me.

The housekeeper and the two other servants who were in charge of the nursery, remained sitting up all night; and from that time a servant always sat up in the nursery until I was about fourteen.

I was very nervous for a long time after this. A doctor was called in, he was pallid and elderly. How well I remember his long saturnine face, slightly pitted with smallpox, and his chestnut wig. For a good while, every second day, he came and gave me medicine, which of course I hated.

The morning after I saw this apparition I was in a state of terror, and could not bear to be left alone, daylight though it was, for a moment.

I remember my father coming up and standing at the bedside, and talking cheerfully, and asking the nurse a number of questions, and laughing very heartily at one of the answers; and patting me on the shoulder, and kissing me, and telling me not to be

frightened, that it was nothing but a dream and could not hurt me.

But I was not comforted, for I knew the visit of the strange woman was not a dream; and I was awfully frightened.

I was a little consoled by the nursery maid's assuring me that it was she who had come and looked at me, and lain down beside me in the bed, and that I must have been half-dreaming not to have known her face. But this, though supported by the nurse, did not quite satisfy me.

I remembered, in the course of that day, a venerable old man, in a black cassock, coming into the room with the nurse and housekeeper, and talking a little to them, and very kindly to me; his face was very sweet and gentle, and he told me they were going to pray, and joined my hands together, and desired me to say, softly, while they were praying, "Lord hear all good prayers for us, for Jesus' sake." I think these were the very words, for I often repeated them to myself, and my nurse used for years to make me say them in my prayers.

I remembered so well the thoughtful sweet face of that white-haired old man, in his black cassock, as he stood in that rude, lofty, brown room, with the clumsy furniture of a fashion three hundred years old about him, and the scanty light entering its shadowy atmosphere through the small lattice. He kneeled, and the three women with him, and he prayed aloud with an earnest quavering voice for, what appeared to me, a long time. I forget all my life preceding that event, and for some time after it is all obscure also, but the scenes I have just described stand out vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness.

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