



Schlock!

WEBZINE
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DAYS OF HIGH ADVENTURE:
THE SHADOW KINGDOM, PT. 2
By ROBERT E HOWARD

ALSO FEATURING:
THE MIRROR
By NICK GRANT
PRETTY CRUCIFIXION
By OBSIDIAN M. TESLA

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THE NEW WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

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EDITORIAL

Well, the Apocalypse hasn't happened yet. Let the Schlock! continue.

This week we have the continuation of *Days of High Adventure*, in which Kull of Atlantis encounters the Pictish ambassador Ka-nu and learns of the horrific secret of the Valusian kings. We also continue our *Conversations With Dead People* by C Priest Brumley, who has also contributed the design of the cover from a bed of sickness and pain. Meanwhile, *State of Emergency* reaches its penultimate chapter.

This issue sees writing by newcomers Chris Friend (an article about household fairies) and Nick Grant (a story in which a small girl looks through the looking glass to see something monstrous).

In *Thieves from the Stars*, our Anglo-Saxon hero discovers what lurks in the Caledonian Forest. Rounded off by more poetry from Obsidian Tesla, and the continuation of *Varney the Vampyre* and *Brigands of the Moon*.

Gavin Chappell

Days of High Adventure: The Shadow Kingdom

Chapter II: Thus Spoke the Silent Halls of Valusia

The moon had not risen, and the garden was lighted with torches aglow in silver cressets when Kull sat down on the throne before the table of Ka-nu, ambassador of the western isles. At his right hand sat the ancient Pict, as much unlike an emissary of that fierce race as a man could be. Ancient was Ka-nu and wise in statecraft, grown old in the game. There was no elemental hatred in the eyes that looked at Kull appraisingly; no Tribal traditions hindered his judgments.

Long associations with the statesmen of the civilized nations had swept away such cobwebs. Not: who and what is this man? was the question ever foremost in Ka-nu's mind, but: can I use this man, and how? Tribal prejudices he used only to further his own schemes. And Kull watched Ka-nu, answering his conversation briefly, wondering if civilization would make of him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy.

Many years had stridden across the sky-rim since Ka-nu had wielded a sword. True, he was old, but Kull had seen men older than he in the forefront of battle. The Picts were a long-lived race.

A beautiful girl stood at Ka-nu's elbow, refilling his goblet, and she was kept busy. Meanwhile Ka-nu kept up a running fire of jests and comments, and Kull, secretly contemptuous of his garrulity, nevertheless missed none of his shrewd humor.

At the banquet were Pictish chiefs and statesmen, the latter jovial and easy in their manner, the warriors formally courteous, but plainly hampered by their tribal affinities. Yet Kull, with a tinge of envy, was cognizant of the freedom and ease of the affair as contrasted with like affairs of the Valusian court. Such freedom prevailed in the rude camps of Atlantis—Kull shrugged his shoulders. After all, doubtless Ka-nu, who had seemed to have forgotten he was a Pict as far as time-hoary custom and prejudice went, was right and he, Kull, would better become a Valusian in mind as in name.

At last when the moon had reached her zenith, Ka-nu, having eaten and drunk as much as any three men there, leaned back upon his divan with a comfortable sigh and said, "Now, get you gone, friends, for the king and I would converse on such matters as concern not children. Yes, you too, my pretty; yet first let me kiss those ruby lips—so; no, dance away, my rose-bloom." Ka-nu's eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

"You are thinking, Kull," said the old statesman, suddenly, "that Ka-nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!" In fact, this remark was so much in line with his actual thoughts, and so plainly put, that Kull was rather startled, though he gave no sign. Ka-nu gurgled and his paunch shook with his mirth.

"Wine is red and women are soft," he remarked tolerantly. "But—ha! ha!—think not old Ka-nu allows either to interfere with business." Again he laughed, and Kull moved restlessly. This seemed much like being made sport of, and the king's scintillating eyes began to glow

with a feline light. Ka-nu reached for the wine-pitcher, filled his beaker and glanced questioningly at Kull, who shook his head irritably.

"Aye," said Ka-nu equably, "it takes an old head to stand strong drink. I am growing old, Kull, so why should you young men begrudge me such pleasures as we oldsters must find? Ah me, I grow ancient and withered, friendless and cheerless." But his looks and expressions failed far of bearing out his words. His rubicund countenance fairly glowed, and his eyes sparkled, so that his white beard seemed incongruous. Indeed, he looked remarkably elfin, reflected Kull, who felt vaguely resentful. The old scoundrel had lost all of the primitive virtues of his race and of Kull's race, yet he seemed more pleased in his aged days than otherwise.

"Hark ye, Kull," said Ka-nu, raising an admonitory finger, "'tis a chancy thing to laud a young man, yet I must speak my true thoughts to gain your confidence."

"If you think to gain it by flattery—"

"Tush. Who spake of flattery? I flatter only to disguard." There was a keen sparkle in Ka-nu's eyes, a cold glimmer that did not match his lazy smile. He knew men, and he knew that to gain his end he must smite straight with this tigerish barbarian, who, like a wolf scenting a snare, would scent out unerringly any falseness in the skein of his wordweb.

"You have power, Kull," said he, choosing his words with more care than he did in the council rooms of the nation, "to make yourself mightiest of all kings, and restore some of the lost glories of Valusia. So. I care little for Valusia—though the women and wine be excellent—save for the fact that the stronger Valusia is, the stronger is the Pict nation. More, with an Atlantean on the throne, eventually Atlantis will become united—"

Kull laughed in harsh mockery. Ka-nu had touched an old wound.

"Atlantis made my name accursed when I went to seek fame and fortune among the cities of the world. We—they—are age-old foes of the Seven Empires, greater foes of the allies of the Empires, as you should know." Ka-nu tugged his beard and smiled enigmatically.

"Nay, nay. Let it pass. But I know whereof I speak. And then warfare will cease, wherein there is no gain; I see a world of peace and prosperity—man loving his fellow man—the good supreme. All this can you accomplish— if you live!"

"Ha!" Kull's lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden movement of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu, who fancied men as some men fancy blooded horses, felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka, what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel and fire, bound together with the perfect co-ordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

But none of Ka-nu's enthusiasm showed in his mildly sarcastic tone.

"Tush. Be seated. Look about you. The gardens are deserted, the seats empty, save for ourselves. You fear not me?" Kull sank back, gazing about him warily.

"There speaks the savage," mused Ka-nu. "Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much

to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis, and you despise me in your secret mind because I am a Pict. Tush. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean, leader of the raiders who harried the western isles. So you should see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?"

"Kaanuub, baron of Blaal."

"Even so. I object to Kaanuub for many reasons, yet most of all for the fact that he is but a figure-head."

"How so? He was my greatest opponent, but I did not know that he championed any cause but his own."

"The night can hear," answered Ka-nu obliquely.

"There are worlds within worlds. But you may trust me and you may trust Brule, the Spear-slayer. Look!" He drew from his robes a bracelet of gold representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head.

"Examine it closely. Brule will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that you may know him. Trust Brule as you trust yourself, and do what he tells you to. And in proof of trust, look ye!" And with the speed of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, and which he replaced in an instant.

"The stolen gem!" exclaimed Kull recoiling. "The green jewel from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?"

"To save your life. To prove my trust. If I betray your trust, deal with me likewise. You hold my life in your hand. Now I could not be false to you if I would, for a word from you would be my doom." Yet for all his words the old scoundrel beamed merrily and seemed vastly pleased with himself.

"But why do you give me this hold over you?" asked Kull, becoming more bewildered each second.

"As I told you. Now, you see that I do not intend to deal you false, and tomorrow night when Brule comes to you, you will follow his advice without fear of treachery. Enough. An escort waits outside to ride to the palace with you, lord." Kull rose.

"But you have told me nothing."

"Tush. How impatient are youths!" Ka-nu looked more like a mischievous elf than ever. "Go you and dream of thrones and power and kingdoms, while I dream of wine and soft women and roses. And fortune ride with you, King Kull." As he left the garden, Kull glanced back to see Ka-nu still reclining lazily in his seat, a merry ancient, beaming on all the world with jovial fellowship.

A mounted warrior waited for the king just without the garden and Kull was slightly surprised to see that it was the same that had brought Ka-nu's invitation.

No word was spoken as Kull swung into the saddle nor as they clattered along the empty streets. The color and the gayety of the day had given way to the eerie stillness of night. The city's antiquity was more than ever apparent beneath the bent, silver moon. The huge pillars of the mansions and palaces towered up into the stars. The broad stairways, silent and deserted, seemed to climb endlessly until they vanished in the shadowy darkness of the upper realms. Stairs to the stars, thought Kull, his imaginative mind inspired by the weird grandeur of the scene.

Clang! clang! clang! sounded the silver hoofs on the broad, moon-flooded streets, but otherwise there was no sound. The age of the city, its incredible antiquity, was almost oppressive to the king; it was as if the great silent buildings laughed at him, noiselessly, with unguessable mockery. And what secrets did they hold?

"You are young," said the palaces and the temples and the shrines, "but we are old. The world was wild with youth when we were reared. You and your tribe shall pass, but we are invincible, indestructible. We towered above a strange world, ere Atlantis and Lemuria rose from the sea; we still shall reign when the green waters sigh for many a restless fathom above the spires of Lemuria and the hills of Atlantis and when the isles of the Western Men are the mountains of a strange land."

"How many kings have we watched ride down these streets before Kull of Atlantis was even a dream in the mind of Ka, bird of Creation? Ride on, Kull of Atlantis; greater shall follow you; greater came before you. They are dust; they are forgotten; we stand; we know; we are. Ride, ride on, Kull of Atlantis; Kull the king, Kull the fool!" And it seemed to Kull that the clashing hoofs took up the silent refrain to beat it into the night with hollow re-echoing mockery; "Kull-the-king! Kull-the-fool!"

Glow, moon; you light a king's way! Gleam, stars; you are torches in the train of an emperor! And clang, silver-shod hoofs; you herald that Kull rides through Valusia.

Ho! Awake, Valusia! It is Kull that rides, Kull the king! "We have known many kings," said the silent halls of Valusia.

And so in a brooding mood Kull came to the palace, where his bodyguard, men of the Red Slayers, came to take the rein of the great stallion and escort Kull to his rest. There the Pict, still sullenly speechless, wheeled his steed with a savage wrench of the rein and fled away in the dark like a phantom; Kull's heightened imagination pictured him speeding through the silent streets like a goblin out of the Elder World.

There was no sleep for Kull that night, for it was nearly dawn and he spent the rest of the night hours pacing the throne-room, and pondering over what had passed. Ka-nu had told him nothing, yet he had put himself in Kull's complete power. At what had he hinted when he had said the baron of Blaal was naught but a figurehead? And who was this Brule who was to come to him by night, wearing the mystic armet of the dragon? And why? Above all, why had Ka-nu shown him the green gem of terror, stolen long ago from the temple of the Serpent, for which the world would rock in wars were it known to the weird and terrible keepers of that

temple, and from whose vengeance not even Ka-nu's ferocious tribesmen might be able to save him?

But Ka-nu knew he was safe, reflected Kull, for the statesman was too shrewd to expose himself to risk without profit. But was it to throw the king off his guard and pave the way to treachery? Would Ka-nu dare let him live now? Kull shrugged his shoulders.

Conversations With Dead People by C Priest Brumley

Part 2: Specimen 1610

He knew something was wrong when he woke up. The air was supposed to be... off, somehow... more sterile than this, the usual musty scent of an apartment's main bedroom. The man shook his head in denial, as though it would cure the improbable thoughts running around unbidden. He'd had the most vivid dream of his life last night - something about being strapped to a table with his mouth sewn shut -and the shock of waking up with those images in his mind's eye frightened him to no end. He wiped the rolling sweat from his brow with the nearest pillow (his girlfriend's) and sat upright, intending on making his way to the bathroom. Instead, he was cut short.

"Mornin' Tiger!" It was his girlfriend Jerrika. She stood at the end of the bed, dressed in her favorite hip-huggers and a New Orleans Saints jersey. Her smile, as it always did, lit up the air around her, as though she were the only source of luminescence in the area.

"Mornin' baby! What you doin' up so early?" he slurred in reply, swinging his legs over the side of the bed in an effort towards movement. "Lemme guess: you've been up for hours, have accomplished everything I was supposed to do today, and now want to tell me this in an effort to be nice and circumvent my shame at sleeping in, right?"

Jerrika let a shocked look roll across her face.

"How did..." she stammered, looking all the more like a playful child whose parents had predicted her next move. However, the look was brief, and it left her face just seconds after it arrived there. She then sat down next to him on the bed and slapped his thigh in her usual playful manner.

"Correct-a-mundo, baby," she started, "I've been out all mornin'. Went to your Mom's, the drugstore, the grocery, and even found time to run by the damned Krawfish King and pick up the twenty pounds for the Atlanta game that *you* were supposed to run out and get an *hour* ago." She smiled wide. "Y'know, you need to be a damn psychic or sumthin'. That's *too* creepy someday."

John groaned. He just *knew* it. *Maybe that's why the bad dream*, he mused. *Maybe I am psychic... Is there some kind of test for that, or...*

"Baby, I..." he started, but was shut down in an instant by Jerrika's lips kissing him with a brief and fierce passion. He loved the feel of her lips on his, that primal feeling she incited in him...

"Listen here, John-boy," Jerrika cooed after disengaging herself, "I did it so you could get

some sleep. No one expects you to work until Seven AM and be up and raring to go at Eleven, baby. You're only human. As far as your runnin' goes, I took care of everything 'cept Wal-Mart. Now," she declared, slapping her hand on John's thigh and getting up from her spot with her typical burst of energy, "I need you to come on and get up! Boilmaster time!"

* * * * *

Specimen sixteen-ten awoke from the nightmare of his last day alive.

It all seemed so *vivid*- The sound of Jerrika's voice, the taste of the crawfish on the air around her, the feel of her lips on his - that he almost tried to delude himself about his situation. He wanted that day to start over again so badly... And yet, here he was, lying on an examination table, waiting for the doctor to make sure he was okay after that crazy asshole attacked him. Funniest damned thing, too; the son of a bitch tried to *bite* him in the midst of it all...

John tried to roll his head to the side, wanting to catch a glimpse of the Doctor's office.

It wouldn't move.

He tried shaking, thrashing tossing, and still nothing. He tried to remove the thing restraining his head, only to find that his arms, too, were restrained. Moving them around and feeling the sharp edges slice his flesh revealed that they were pinned to his sides by what felt like a metal band wrapped across his chest and tightened to an almost painful level.

John felt hopeless. He was completely restrained- an attempt at kicking proved it fact -and he didn't even know why...

Then, something changed. The florescent lights running along the ceiling went out, leaving the residual dull imprints burnt on his retina. John blinked several times, trying to adjust his eyes to the new light level, but before they would, he was blinded. A large, powerful laboratory light came on above him, causing him physical pain with its intensity. He wanted to cry out, to scream for help, for *anyone* to help him. Instead, he found his mouth as unable to move as the rest of him, bound shut by some unknown force.

Then, the voices started. They came slowly at first, trickling in like the water from a touch of the tap, then faster, an avalanche of voices all at once, all screaming from pain, all longing: longing for loved ones, for mercy, for God to strike their assailants down. He knew, too, what they all looked like, faces of pain and suffering accompanying each new voice in a never-ending slideshow of hell.

John did not know what was happening, did not know how, or why. He closed his eyes from the barrage of light and sound, trying to sort out the voices, quantify what he knew, but it

was in vain. After some time (*Hours? Minutes? Time is foreign here*, he thought with a chuckle), he gave up, letting the sensation of the voices take over, listening to what sounded closest and trying desperately to ignore the rest.

A new voice entered his thoughts, louder and clearer than any other he experienced. It was young and female, professional-sounding. He formed a mental image of her as the voice came through; short but not too much so, broad shoulders and hips, a slight chest, glasses and brown curls, all in a lab coat and Doc Martins. He focused in on her voice and found, to his mingled horror and delight, that he could hear her as clear as she was standing next to him.

"... old bastard expects me to do all his effing dirty work..." followed by images of a lonely life, of the same woman eating a heat-and-serve pizza in front of a television tuned to an inane reality program, of her crying noisy tears while she watched a man drive away, of her talking to a therapist, her med school days, the months spent searching for a job, meeting a tall old man that reminded John quite forcibly of Donald Sutherland... And in the flash of an instant, he knew Sarah Peterson as though he'd known her his entire life. Her hopes, dreams, failures, successes, romances, all free for him to explore at will.

John thought on what to do next. He knew that he was invading Dr. Peterson's thoughts, but didn't know how. He knew, too, that she was here to dissect him; a thought that filled him with an eerie sense of dread yet steadied him at the same time. Pictures of her previous victims filled his head as before, each face mingling with the next until he saw his own face reflected in her vision.

Perhaps I can persuade her to let me go?

He didn't know if it would work, but he had seen enough movies to know the basic principles involved. All he had to do was focus in and think what he wanted to say, right? John concentrated on Dr. Peterson's thoughts, praying that this worked.

Good evening, Sarah.

John registered shock and amazement through the mental link with Dr. Peterson. She had no clue what was happening, looking around dumbfoundedly for the source of the voice. Fear, now, bitter on her tongue like battery acid. Slowly, she looked down at Specimen Sixteen-Ten.

That's right, Sarah. Here I am.

She jumped once more, not being used to mental communication as of yet. John heard, physically, the crackle of a speaker box and a low, authoritative voice.

"Doctor Peterson? What's going on? Anything to report?"

Sarah gasped from the mental intrusion whilst making her way to the speaker panel on the wall. John watched her progress through her own eyes, casually flicking images of her dissected victims back at her through the mental link the entire time. Finally, she reached her goal and jammed the microphone button.

"Doctor Swanhurst! Specimen Sixteen-Ten is conscious and a mental dominant!"

John received a flash of a smug smile coming from somewhere above him. The shadowed figure then leaned forward and pressed a red, lighted button on the panel before him, laughter emanating from the darkness in the room.

The resounding 'click' sounded like a death toll in Sarah's ears. She jammed the com button again.

"Doctor Swanhurst?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Peterson," the solemn voice on the other end of the speaker intoned, "This *is* in the interest of science, you know."

Sarah Peterson went as white as a sheet. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes and fell like streams.

He won't let you go, Sarah. He intends to leave you here with me.

Sarah moaned in terror, sending waves of palpable fear through the link. John smiled again, this time externally. He saw his own face reflected in her vision as she looked over her shoulder, a thin smile creeping over graying skin and sunken eyes under tangled yellow hair. Her terror was increasing, slowly yet surely, as he bared his teeth and displayed the thick black sutures holding his mouth shut.

You should release me, Sarah, John whispered to her. You hurt me, Sarah. If you don't release me I will make you suffer, too, do you understand?

Sarah jammed the microphone button again repeatedly, desperation forcing her actions into erration.

"Let me out of here you son of a bitch HE'SGONNAFUCKINGKILLME!" Sarah screamed at the microphone on the wall, praying Dr. Swanhurst would hear and show mercy. Her tears fell faster, streams turning into waterfalls as the thought of death by the specimen on the table reached her conscious mind.

No response came.

Let me go, Sarah.

She turned to John in full, her face a mask of terror and its resulting anger.

"No."

Let me go, Sarah. Now.

"Fuck you."

Do you want to die, Sarah? I can make it easy for you. As painless as possible.

"Fuck you!"

Have it your way, then.

John reached out through the established link, praying it would work. He wasn't disappointed.

Sarah's left arm began to move of its own accord. She screamed once, briefly, before the invisible force held her mouth shut and muffled the piercing sound. The hand worked its way to her coat's buttons, joined by her other hand, and started undoing the jacket bit by bit. When it was fully unbuttoned, they slid the jacket off, a mass of white cotton lying on the floor.

The hands then pulled off her shirt over her head, leaving her in a bra and loose skirt in the center of the room. Sarah's tears fell as silent as ever, the torrent of water coming forth the only outward sign of her internal torment. John relished his thrall over her, toying briefly with the thought of making her strip naked, but opted against it in favor of the end game.

Are you ready for the end, Sarah? Have you said goodbye to all you love?

He was answered by a flood of memories from her childhood and upbringing: her kindly mother helping Sarah up after falling down off her bike, her father mowing the yard with the old push-mower, her brother getting beat up by the neighborhood bullies, the shock when the bruising didn't heal, laying her brother to rest when he was just seven... On and on they went. A lifetime in a heartbeat.

John had had enough.

He made her hands scratch her stomach. Soft, at first, then harder, scratching until the top layer of her skin was gone. Her cries of pain were muffled by the thrall holding her mouth shut, fingers stained by the blood flowing from the wound. Still she scratched, removing

layer after layer, chunks of flesh falling to the floor as she dug down in to her own abdomen, all against her will.

When she reached the fat under her skin, the hands stopped.

Are you still sure you want to die, Sarah? Are you positive?

She bent at the waist. The mass of fat exposed to the air fell to the ground, followed by her stomach, then the upper intestines, then the lower, all in a rush. The hands came alive again, breaking the lower intestine at the body, then slowly wrapping the resulting mess around her neck, once, twice, again, and again, pulling tighter as she turned blue. The flashes of memory grew duller for John, fading to black as the young woman ceased to be.

Within minutes, it was over. The body of Sarah Peterson was huddled on the floor, a tangled heap of internal organs splayed underneath the carcass.

John turned his attention upward.

Doctor Swanhurst...

The Hettford Witch Hunt by James Rhodes

will return shortly ...

State of Emergency by David Christopher

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Twenty One: Security

The police handcuffed Will and hustled him out of the public library and towards a waiting squad car. The roar and boom of the nearby battle made it impossible for the men to communicate except by gestures. As one man opened the back door and another put his hand on Will's head and pushed him inside, the only thought Will had was that he was utterly alone.

He had seen the way his friends had stared at him; they knew the truth now. He wasn't the Messiah... he was an assassin. A gunman. The man who had tipped the country into anarchy with his shooting of the home secretary. He could have sworn he had heard their faith in him breaking.

He sat on the back seat, his manacled hands uncomfortable twisted behind him. This was just like it had been that drunken night years ago, as a student, when he'd told a passing copper that he was a fascist pig and spent a night in the cells for drunk and disorderly. Except... this time he didn't think he'd get away with a fine.

Dawson sat in the front, in the passenger seat. He looked back briefly to check that Will was in, then told the driver to get moving. It was a brief journey, but the whistle and boom of explosives and the distant chatter of small arms made it tense. But Will was too deeply sunk in gloom to pay attention to the dangers outside.

Twice the driver swerved to go round new shell craters in the road surface. Then they were pulling up outside a police station. Dawson and the police leapt out and one man opened Will's door. They dragged him out and led him up the steps.

Inside, the police station bustled with uniformed officers who seemed to be in the process of evacuation. Dawson spoke briefly with a sergeant who confirmed that they had been ordered to pull back from the front.

'Your boss is waiting down in the custody suite,' the sergeant added. 'A prison van is on its way, but it's been delayed. You can keep the prisoner in a cell until it's time to move him on.'

Dawson nodded, and Will was taken down a flight of steps into the underground passages of the custody suite.

Down here, too, the police were in the process of evacuation, but it didn't deter them from following procedure. Will was freed from the handcuffs, forced to strip to his boxer shorts and told to wear a dark blue version of the jumpsuits the prisoners wore in Guantanamo Bay. His clothes and possessions were neatly placed in plastic bags, including the pendrive that had once meant so much but now meant nothing at all.

Then they swabbed him for DNA, informed him that for his comfort and welfare smoking was forbidden, and marched him down a short passage to his cell. A policeman opened the door with a passkey, and unceremoniously bundled Will inside.

The door slammed behind him and Will heard the snick of the electronic lock. Feeling depressed, he looked around the cold, bare little room. He shivered. This paper jumpsuit wouldn't keep out the cold. The bare floor felt icy to his bare feet. He went to the mattress that was the only concession to comfort and gingerly sat down. Other than the toilet, which looked like it was blocked, the cell was empty.

A frosted glass window at the far end offered no escape. Since they were underground, it probably led up to a shaft before reaching the outside wall. But how was he to get out that way? He could break the glass, maybe, but it was probably too tough. Besides, there was a CCTV camera in the far corner, watching his every move.

How long was he going to have to wait?

The last time he'd been in a police cell, once the initial horror of being treated like a common criminal had worn off the thing that had most impressed him was how tedious it was. Oppressively tedious, like nothing he had known since leaving school. It might seem fatuous, but the experience really had brought back to him how boring school had been; boredom like a physical weight pressing down on him. Except even in school, he had had something to do; schoolwork, if nothing else. Here there was nothing. Nothing except waiting.

And fear.

He lay down on the bare mattress and shivered uncontrollably. It was cold in the cell, particularly if you were wearing a paper jumpsuit, but he didn't think that was what was making him shiver. They had got him.

What would happen next? Dawson's boss was waiting for him. What did this mysterious 'boss' want? Why was he taking so long about it? The police themselves were evacuating the building. How long before the battle got this far? How long before shells tore through the walls? He couldn't hear anything down here, but that didn't mean the place was bombproof. Would the underground custody suite survive bombardment? Why didn't Dawson's boss come and get him?

Except... that would be even worse. At least nothing was happening now. What was the security service planning to do with him? Would they take him to Verlaine? He remembered the chilling computer voice he had heard on the radio. Terrifying. It had sounded as if Verlaine was no longer human.

He sat up. He couldn't get comfortable, and it was too cold. Rising, he began to pace back and forwards. Like a caged beast. Like a prisoner in a movie. What a cliché, he thought ruefully. But now he knew why they did it. His muscles were spasming with adrenalin, the fight-or-flight reactions burning away in vain. There was nowhere he could run to and nothing he could fight. All he could do was wait. But for what?

He sat back against the wall and crossed his legs. He stared up at the blank ceiling, then at the opposite wall. He rubbed his arms to warm himself up. He sighed deeply.

He lay down again and tried to get to sleep. Futile. When was Dawson's boss going to come? He sat up again.

Maybe the place had been evacuated without him.

He got up again and went to the door. There was an intercom. He pressed the button.

'Hello, Mr Youds,' said a woman's voice. 'What can we do for you?'

'When's this guy coming to see me?'

'All in good time, Mr Youds. All in good time. Is there anything else you want?'

'Better accommodation,' Will snapped. 'I don't think much of the beds in this hotel.'

With a chuckle, the intercom flicked off.

Will went back to sit on the mattress.

The door clicked open and Will looked up in surprise. Standing there was a tall, lean man with a harsh face and chilly blue eyes. Will knew him from somewhere.

'Mr Youds,' the man sniffed. 'I don't know if you remember me. My name is Tarrant. I work for the security services.'

'I know you,' Will said slowly. 'You spoke to me and the Professor. Dropped a lot of unsubtle threats, like a gangster. Then the Professor was dead. Died in the cells.'

Tarrant laughed.

'Don't worry, you're not going to share the same fate,' he said, reassuringly. 'I want to thank you for the work you've done for me.'

Will stared up at him in utter confusion.

'May I come in?' Tarrant added.

Will gestured vaguely. 'Be my guest,' he said. 'I can't offer you coffee or anything...'

Tarrant laughed again, easily, urbanely. He entered the cell and a policeman locked it behind him. Tarrant came to sit on the mattress beside Will, who moved over uncomfortably.

'You want to thank me?' Will asked.

Tarrant nodded. 'It was touch and go,' he said. 'I was afraid you'd be successful. That would have caused problems, although it would still have served my purpose in the long term. But you just winged the woman. Well done!'

Will rubbed his eyes tiredly. 'Winged what woman?'

'Verlaine, of course,' Tarrant said in surprise. 'Unless you've been shooting other people.' He sniffed. 'Daresay you might have,' he added. 'The land has been under the rule of the gun since your assassination attempt!'

Will narrowed his eyes. 'You *wanted* me to shoot Verlaine?'

Tarrant sniffed again. 'I planned the whole operation and provided the hardware,' he boasted. 'It certainly put the wind up her. Made her pliable in my hands.'

Will remembered his horror on discovering that Rex didn't know the man who ran the "organisation." It had been Tarrant all along! It had been a front for the security services.

'Are you telling me that you were behind it all?' he demanded.

Tarrant sighed heavily. 'That *is* what I've been telling you,' he said. 'You're one of my most useful agents. Such a pity the home secretary wants your head.'

Will hugged himself and looked at the man miserably.

'Have you come to take me back to her?' he asked in a small voice.

Tarrant looked at his elegantly manicured fingernails.

'I was told to keep you securely confined until she has the time to deal with you,' he said. 'Still, considering the confusion... it was quite possible that I couldn't find you.'

‘What do you mean?’ Will felt a glimmer of hope.

Tarrant looked at him levelly. ‘You’re a promising lad,’ he said, ‘and in the world we’ve created between us, I think you’ll fulfil that promise. We can forget that old, tired, false world of liberal democracy. Between us, we’ve seen the back of it. It sickened me. Didn’t it sicken you? Deep down? The farce, the pretence. The demos, the media-approved riots. Weak governments who allow subversive elements free reign to indulge their criminal activities.

‘The state has hampered itself with all this meaningless liberal nonsense. It was you who created a situation where I could bend the home secretary to my own will, where she was even willing to sanction my own assassination attempt – on the government who wanted her to resign.

‘Now we can face an honest world, a world where the rule of the gun decides all issues, where might is indisputably right. A world where bleeding heart liberal politicians bleed in the gutter and the likes of you and I fulfil our true potential.

‘What I mean is, Mr Youds, that I can help you get free, give you a new identity. Ensure that you never have to face the home secretary or her “justice.” Because I like you. And I owe you that much.’

‘Just like that?’ Will asked. ‘No catches?’

Tarrant laughed. ‘In return for your freedom and a new identity, you will work for me,’ he said. ‘You’ve proved yourself an able gunman, in South Ruislip if not in Central London. I could find a use for you. But only on occasion. Otherwise, you’d live in total security, total luxury.’

‘Security?’ Will asked. Tarrant nodded.

Will looked down at the ground.

‘Thing is, mate,’ he said haltingly, ‘I’m not really interested in security. If there’s anything I want, it’s got to be liberty.’ He looked up, and his eyes blazed.

'You made me your tool!' he snarled. 'You created this disaster! I want nothing to do with you! If I've got to face up to what I've done, I'll do it. You can stuff your offer. Take me to the home secretary. I'll face justice.'

Tarrant rose, his face betraying incredulity. He paced the cell while Will watched him.

'This puts me in a difficult situation,' he admitted. 'I never thought you'd be fool enough to refuse my offer.'

'You'll just have to kill me,' Will said.

Tarrant turned to face him. 'I would do that, and willingly,' he said. 'But I can't. Verlaine doesn't know I've caught up with you, but word will get back to her. I was intending to let you escape on the way; make it look like an accident. I can't just kill you here and now, in this cell. The police wouldn't like it.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Will replied.

'I'll have to take you back to London,' Tarrant said, thinking aloud. 'But instead of letting you escape... yes, that's it.'

'What is?' Will said, alarmed.

'Shot while attempting to escape!' Tarrant said triumphantly. 'That'll be the story. Slight modification to my plan, but it means I won't have to pay for your upkeep.' He beamed. 'Well, about time we got going, Mr Youds. I'll tell the sergeant to return your clothes.'

Despite the presence of the pendrive in his sock, when Tarrant's security men marched Will out of the custody suite to a waiting prison van he felt nothing but a numb despair.

Household Faeries by Chris Friend

Household Faeries

We often hear of ghostly hauntings, but what of the fey? In olden times, it was believed that fairies could take up residence in a home, as well as take up domestic duties. Belief in such spirits can be found in every corner of the world, but mostly in the British Isles. The familial hearth seems to be a popular center of family life, but of fairy activity as well. The hearth has a long history of being connected to ghosts and domestic spirits as well. At Halloween, when the dead were allowed to wander, it was the family hearth that they would visit before completing their long trip to the next world. This sacred center of the home was also the way Santa Claus would enter and leave the home.

House fairies are known for taking care of home and hearth, but they are easily offended. Notoriously, the house fairy can become a poltergeist, tossing dishes, breaking objects and flinging furniture in "Exorcist" style. House fairies can be insulted by the presence of a cat or dog, or easily offended if offered a suit of clothes.

Very likely, the house fairy started out as a house spirit or deity in which offerings were left out for them. In some regions, these household gods were pacified with blood sacrifices from either animals or humans. Occasionally human remains will be found buried under the hearth, a clear indication of a blood sacrifice being made to the household spirit.

Shattering wine bottles on the side of a ship maybe a relic of such more brutal offerings. The concept of household fairies may have led the way to the idea of haunted houses and ghosts.

Chris Friend

THE MIRROR by Nick Grant

It watched as the girl charged screaming out of her bedroom, down the hallway and into her mother's bedroom. Its teeth grinded with disgust at the noise that resonated from the small girl child's vocal chords, it despised the racket she was making and all in all, it despised the girl! Yet it continued to watch as Jessica charged back out of her mother's bedroom along the hallway and into the bathroom with 100 decibels of noise belting out of her lungs. Jessica ran back down the hallway back into her own bedroom, she ran around her bed then charged out again. It continued watching the 6 year old girl charge from room to room. Although it despised her, it recognised that she was a very pretty girl. It admired her long blonde curls in her hair, cute rosy cheeks, and bright blue eyes. But despite its admiration for some of the beauty it had seen in the girl, its overriding feeling was that the girl was fucking annoying.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long," Jessica sang, arms swinging at her sides, motioning wheels going round and round.

"The wheels on the bus go beep, beep, beep, all day long," she continued to sing, as she again ran out of her mother's bedroom and into her own, not caring that she had the words wrong.

The creature waited as the girl entered her bedroom. She stopped in front of the mirror and her singing ceased. Jessica stared into the mirror, smiling at her reflection, a big smile. She examined her bright teeth smiling back at her.

"Sing a happy, happy, happy, happy, happy, happy song. Sing a happy, happy, happy, happy, happy song." She began to sing again.

The creature cringed. It lifted its rotten green hand and moved it forward slowly in front of its face as its razor sharp teeth started to grind again, saliva and blood dribbled out of its mouth and down its chin. Sharp yellow claws touched the glass. It ran them down it, and thin white scratches appeared beneath where they ran. Ear-piercing scrapes rang out like a fork being dragged across a dinner plate. Its hand got closer to the girl's face. The creature's breathing increased with its excitement and steaming rancid air expelled from its nostrils. Tiny droplets of the steam clung to the glass, the sickly thick moisture began slowly to streak its way down following the path of the scratches. It was almost there, she was almost in its reach.

"Jessie, sweetie, can you come down now?" Jessica's mother called her from down stairs. Jessica remained unmoving and continued to stare into the mirror. Her attentions had moved from her teeth to a strange mark on the mirror. The curious mark near the top of her 6ft tall mirror twinkled in the sunlight that beamed through the window. It looked like a crack that she had seen once on mummy's car windscreen, but there appeared to be no damage to the outer surface.

"Jessie, come down now, your lunch is ready." Her mother called again. This time the lure of food was beyond her control and Jessica spun round and charged out of her room and to the top of the stairs.

"NO!" The creature snarled in disgust as it slammed its hands against the glass. A barely audible thud echoed; Jessica turned and looked back curiously at the mirror that stood in the corner of her room. The creature's eyes widened. It thought for that split second that the girl had heard it; but unfortunately not as much as the creature had wanted. Disappointment filled its eyes as the girl turned round and descended the stairs for her lunch. The creature's head bowed, a sick grin quivered across its brown, wrinkled dead lips, it closed its eyes and sank back into the darkness.

Jessica finished her lunch, spent the afternoon playing under the sun in the garden, and had dinner with her family. The day passed by in a blink, the sun faded orange gold into the horizon as the first star of the night twinkled in the darkening sky. The clouds that floated above the sun had become wispy and they themselves began to fade away with the day.

Jessica was now climbing the stairs to go to bed. Jessica's mother escorted the young child to her bedroom and stripped her daughter of her clothes.

"It's got quite late now little one, we shall bath you tomorrow." Her mother said as she proceeded to assist her into her bedclothes.

"But mum..." She began to protest.

"No buts, Jessie, it's too late now," her mother interrupted.

"But I'm not tired though, mummy, please." Jessie smiled cutely at her mother, holding the 'please' a little bit longer than necessary, her cheeks exaggerating her puppy dog look that she had been practising

"No buts Jessie; come on." Her mother smiled back, pulling Jessie's arms through the pyjama top.

It was almost impossible for Jessica's mother to stay stern with her daughter, every puppy dog look made her smile and any anger that was present would vanish

"OK, mummy, promise?" Jessie replied as she hopped up onto the bed and pulled the covers over her body, her head nestled down on the pillows.

“Sure sweetie, I love you monster tum tum.” Her mum replied, tucked the covers tight around her daughter, and kissed her on the forehead.

Jessie giggled, felt the warm kiss on her head, and snuggled down further into the bedding. She watched her mum walk towards the door, dim the light down to a soft orange glow and leave the room; she pulled the door behind her, leaving the tiniest of gaps. Jessie looked at the gap in the door at the landing light that lay beyond her bedroom; she felt a little uneasy. She listened to her mother’s footsteps descend the stairs; she was now left all alone in silence.

Jessica lay still on her bed in the gloom of her bedroom. She spent a long time just staring at her ceiling counting the circles in the Artex, a ploy that she normally used to assist with getting herself to sleep. Tonight it didn’t work. She looked around her room and she looked at her wardrobe to her right. Bored with that, her eyes continued to circle anti-clockwise around the room. She looked at her shelves that held all of her dolls and her ponies all neatly rowed up. Her eyes soon met the window and the dark curtains. She did not want to look there so she turned her head the left and started looking around the room clockwise instead. This time she followed her pretty pink animal border until she stopped at her dresser; she counted the knobs on the drawers. She looked at her hair brush on top of the dresser and her television that she wished was turned on to help her sleep. She thought of her old Tweenies videos for a moment, they had always helped her to fall asleep when she was little. She knew she would have no luck in asking her mum for the television on so she looked back up at her pink animal border and continued to trace it round the room. Her eyes widened as they met the dark corner where her mirror stood. She gulped, afraid of the darkness that engulfed the mirror, yet she continued to look.

Her eyes were wide and searching everywhere for the crack that she thought she saw earlier in that day. She had forgotten about the white line until now; she had also forgotten about that tiny thud that she thought she had heard echoing from inside the mirror. She couldn’t see it anywhere so she got out of bed. Her feet sunk gently into her soft carpet; she loved the feel of the cushiony material between her toes. She padded gently across the room to the mirror, and she hardly noticed that she was moving away from the light and into the darkness that engulfed her in the corner of her room. She stood before the mirror. She could see her bed behind her and her reflection cast in the eerie, dull light. The world in the reflection distorted for a brief second as if the mirror was bent.

The creature smelt the girl coming and approached the glass.

“Hello, reflection, how are you?” Jessica said to the mirror.

“Not very talkative, reflection?” she said as she stood before it in the mirror.

“That’s OK, Jessica number two, I know you are shy.” She giggled.

She waved at her reflection and it waved back at her.

“Hello, are you Jessica number one?” The reflection spoke back to her mimicking her own voice.

“Yes, I am, I knew you were there,” she answered. “What is your real name?” she asked.

“Well, Jessica, my name is Jessica too,” said the reflection, smiling back at her.

“Nice to meet you!” Jessica smiled back. “How did you get in there?” she asked curiously.

“Well, Jessica, I will tell you a little story. A long, long time ago as a little girl like you and I lived in a place called London. I made a few little mistakes and was a bit of a bad girl.”

“Why? What did you do?” she interrupted.

“See, the thing is Jessie, people are afraid of things they don’t understand. I once made a couple of medicines to make people better; but it unfortunately made them ill. The skin on their face burnt and bubbled, their bodies cooked from the inside out,” it continued, grinning its evil smile, subtle changes appeared in its facial features; its eyes became black and lifeless like a bottomless pit, its teeth started to become razor sharp. But it was all in such a quick instant and barely noticeable to Jessica.

“But I didn’t mean to, Jessica, you must understand I tried to help, but they wouldn’t believe me, they took me and...” it paused briefly, acting like it was holding back tears.

“What did they do to you?” interrupted Jessica, engrossed in the story.

The creature sniffed as it continued the story as if it felt sad for itself.

“They took me to a field; they beat me first, very hard,” it sniffed. “And then held my head underwater til the air almost ran out. Pulling me from the river half dead they chained me up to a pyre and set me on fire.” It sobbed, hiding its agenda behind its Jessica disguise.

“Oh you poor thing!” Jessica said, bringing her hand to her mouth in shock. “So how did you end up in my mirror?” she asked

"I don't know. All I remember was everything went black and then I was here watching this cute little girl running around her house and I wished that I could play with her," it answered with the most convincing sincerity. It chuckled quietly to itself; it struggled to keep it inside.

"I was wondering if you would help me get out?" it asked, trying to push the boundaries further.

"How would I do that?" Jessica asked

"Well, Jessica, I believe that if you try to hold my hand you should be able to pull me out," it replied, excitement again rising in its chest.

"I don't know if I should," Jessica replied, fear and anxiety beginning to build up inside of her.

"Oh please, Jessica, we could be such good friends!" it began to beg, not yet giving up hope but realised that there was a chance that this may not go as it had planned.

"I don't think I should, my mum won't be happy if she found out!" Jessica said as she began to sink into herself and become slightly afraid.

"Fuck your mum," it shouted, baring all of its razor-sharp teeth.

Jessica jumped back in shock

“I am sorry, Jessica; truly sorry. It has been so long since I have spoken to anyone I forgot how to behave,” it begged again, putting on its cutest Jessica puppy dog look that it could, playing on the naivety of the small child.

“OK, my mum swears sometimes too. I don’t like it, though,” Jessica replied.

She hadn’t noticed the sharp teeth that glistened at her when her reflection shouted.

“I am sorry, I won’t do it again, I promise,” it said, as Jessica nodded in acceptance. “I am sure your mother won’t mind if you let me out, I’m sure she will be glad for you to have a friend to play with.” It tried to convince her again, a hint of desperation now crept in.

“OK, if you really think I can do it, I will try,” Jessica said as she stepped forward, closer and closer to the mirror.

“Yes,” it replied.

“Yes, that’s it,” it hissed slightly. “Just a little further this way.”

Jessica stepped forward a little more, small steady steps. A hint of anxiety began to creep over her with every step. The creature waited inside the mirror, willing her on yes, yes, yesss, it whispered to itself lower than Jessica could hear. It raised its hand and rested it on

the glass, fingers itching to become claws and to grab the girl, but it knew it couldn't, it needed to wait. It watched as the girl approached closer slowly, too slowly for its liking, its patience was beginning to wear thin. Finally, Jessica was right up close to the mirror, she saw her reflection looking back at her smiling, its hand resting on the mirror facing her. She raised her left hand and slowly moved it forward toward the mirror; she paused for a moment, and then proceeded. Her hand touched the cool smooth surface of the mirror; it felt no different from any smooth surface, not really what she expected. Nothing happened. There was a look of disappointment in both of the Jessica's as they looked into each other's eyes.

Suddenly the whole of her room bowed and distorted, ripples formed in great round circles in the centre of the room like when a stone is dropped into water. The room began to shake all around her; Jessica looked up and around the room, fascinated by what was going on. A high pitched whirring noise started filling up the whole room. She became even more afraid now, not yet afraid for her life but afraid that her mum might hear.

"Shhh," she said. "Will this finish soon? I cannot bear to be in trouble for not being in bed," she asked her gaze returning to the reflection, she began to wish she hadn't!

The Jessica reflection was gone. There in its place stood a creature that was beyond her own imagination, its eyes were ablaze, a fiery red and yellow that appeared to burn into her soul. Its face became elongated with a large green bulbous shaped forehead that pulsated and bubbled thick yellow pus from multiple sores. It had a sharp thin nose, its mouth was wide open displaying its mouth full of razor sharp and rotting teeth. Tendrils of drool clung to its upper incisors that linked up with their corresponding teeth on its lower jaw. Blood bubbled at the corner of its mouth, oozing down its chin, it gargled with laughter; its face leaning forward showing its grotesque mouth and roared. Jessica tried to scream but nothing came out. She looked at her hand but it was being held tight in the grip of a monstrous hand that dripped green pus and had been burnt to the bone in multiple places. The rotten skin felt slimy and cold in her hand. She would have tried to slip her hand out but she felt the inch long yellow claws that dug into her hand. Blood seeped out and ran down her arm.

The air in her room became putrid, thick with a rotten stench that filled her nostrils and invaded her lungs. She coughed and spluttered, sucking all around her trying to breathe

fresh air. The air was almost solid and it smelt like a mountain of dead rats. The creature in the mirror hissed and spat, a green mist flowed from its lungs. The room continued to bend and mould like molten glass, the high pitch whirring continued, but her mum did not come. Jessica overcame her initial shock and disgust at the creature that held her hand and she decided to fight back. She needed to fight back, she didn't want to die, she had seen death before when her favourite kitten had been run over and she didn't want to end up like that. She remembered her tears and the tears of her mother, she could not put her mother through that again.

The creature still gargled and laughed spitting out words that were unrecognised by Jessica, possibly an ancient language, she ignored them. Instead, she began to pull backwards; she pulled her hand back harder and harder trying to free it from the monsters grip. She bore the pain in her hand as the claws dug deeper, the creature desperate not to lose its grip on the girl.

"I will eat you all up, you stupid girl," the creature shouted at Jessica, its eyes growing wide and round.

"I will suck the blood from your puny body and swallow you whole, so you better stop your fucking struggling, bitch!" The creature's rage grew as large as its bulbous pulsating head.

"No, let me go, let me go!" Jessica shouted as she continued to pull backwards.

Jessica looked around her and saw that she was close to her bed; she saw the wooden bed post. She reached to grab it with her free hand, fingers at full stretch, touching the wood but failing to grip it. She felt the tug of the creature on her left hand and she almost slipped on the thick carpet below her bare feet. She regained her balance and reached again for the bedpost, this time making full contact with it. She gripped the wood as tight as she could. Her mother had still not come up, so was fully aware that calling for her would be a waste of breath. The creature roared louder behind her, she could not bear to look and she felt the pain in her hand and felt the warm blood running to her armpit. She took a deep gulp of the

thick rancid air and pulled hard with the help of the wooden bed post, she felt her left hand that was in the grip of the monster begin to move. She heard it scream at her. The hand continued to slip, skin tearing from the creature in her grip as she gained more purchase on the wooden bed post.

The room began to spin. It appeared to be the last vain attempt of the creature to get what it wanted. A whirlwind exploded in the centre of the room above her bed, great gusts of wind making her hair flap around her face and into her eyes. Spittle from the jaws of the creature was sucked out into the room and rained down on her face; she finally managed to scream as she gave one final tug. The room flashed with bright light and the noise rose to a crescendo and in an instant, stopped, the din echoed for a brief moment and everything became still and silent.

Jessica found herself lying back on the floor at the base of her bed, head resting on the soft carpet below her. Her right hand still held tightly to the wooden bed post knuckles white and drained with the tension of her grip. She sat up, legs splayed on the floor; she looked down at her hand and counted the four holes on her skin where the claws had once been. She sniffed back the tears and stood up, and looked round her room. Everything was where it was supposed to be, her bed, the soft orange glow from her light above her head. She checked the animal border and the hair brush on the dresser; she counted the knobs, and they were all there. She looked at her collection of ponies and dolls, and sighed with relief. The only thing that bothered her was the stench still in her nostrils. But she knew it would eventually fade.

Feeling particularly brave after her fight with that creature, she decided to take a look at the mirror. She told herself that she would not touch it but only look, she would tell her mum to get rid of it tomorrow morning. She advanced to the mirror to see her own reflection staring back at her, she looked curiously and tentatively. The reflection was as it should be; she smiled and then again sighed with relief. She knew that this would haunt her nightmares for the next few weeks but she was glad she had survived, although she must not tell her mother. She was about to look away from the reflection when she noticed that it did not smile back at her. Her reflection grinned that evil grin that she had not so long ago witnessed. The reflection began to shift, the eyes began to blaze yellow and red again, its mouth began to open unnaturally wide exposing its full collection of razor sharp teeth. Its head started to pulsate and bubble again before her very eyes.

“I could not eat you, but I’m sure your mother will be very tasty!” the creature growled at Jessica as it laughed and turned towards the door.

Confusion swelled inside her and her head began to swim as the room in which she stood began to drip and rot, deep thick red blood oozed down the walls all around her. Her bed crumbled into fiery embers and the light began to fade. The room rotted away and the darkness fully engulfed her. She realised in that brief moment that she was not actually in her room after all; she and the creature had somehow swapped places. She could only watch with tear studded eyes through the glass at her own real bedroom as she was left powerless inside the mirror. She screamed for help but the thick rotten air did not carry her voice, the darkness behind her crept forward and engulfed her. The creature disguised as Jessica looked back at the mirror behind it one last time. Grinning, it chuckled through its teeth and closed the bedroom door behind it.

Thieves From The Stars by Rex Mundy

2 The Wild Men

'Aroo-AROO-aroo!'

The wild, unearthly cry broke into Theodric's confused mind. His eyes flickered open, and he glimpsed a skein of branches above him, moving rapidly past. Around him was that hideous animal stench. Something incredibly strong gripped him by his hands and feet.

He blacked out again.

When he came round for a second time, he was lying on hard rock, in darkness. He moved his head slightly, and a glancing beam of light struck him. He winced as a bolt of pain shot through his head, and he ducked back.

He turned slowly to see that the light came from a cave mouth ahead of him. Beyond it, he could see the morning sun rising over the pines of Coit Celidon. He sniffed. That hideous animal smell was all around him, weaker than before, but still rank. And with it, something that reminded him of a badly-kept larder. Rotting meat?

Raising himself up on his elbows, Theodric looked around him. He was alone in a high-roofed cave, the floor of which was strewn with debris. At first he thought most of the broken fragments around him were sticks, but on closer inspection he discovered that they were bones. Human bones, all of them cracked open as if something had wanted to get at the marrow. Was he in a wolf's den? But wolves never crack bones. As far as Theodric was aware, only men did that.

He heard a scuff from the entrance, and glanced up.

Silhouetted against the rising sun stood a creature, seven foot high, shaped like a man but covered in dark fur, and with a brutish face. Two baleful animal eyes glared down at

Theodric from beneath sloping brows. The breeze changed, and the animal stench wafted towards him.

Theodric stared at the creature, and the creature stared at him. The Saxon frowned. Was it an ape? he wondered. He'd heard of such man-like creatures dwelling in the far South, beyond the lands of the Romans and the Greeks. But this thing was almost like a man, and lived in the forests of Britannia.

Was it a wood-wose? He'd always discounted stories about the wild men of the woods as fable, but this ape-man facing him followed the traditional description. Seven foot tall, living in the woods, black-furred, and stinking like a week-old carcass...

Suddenly, Theodric's meditations were cut short when the wood-wose charged.

Theodric threw himself backward, and scrambled in the dirt for his sword. It wasn't there! Desperately, he grabbed hold of an ornate metal tube lying beside a strange, twisted skeleton, and swung it at the charging wose.

The tube clanged down across the wose's sloping brow and sent it spinning to the cave floor. Theodric scrambled to his feet. At the same moment, the wose scuttled away towards the cave entrance. It opened its fanged mouth.

'Gu-gu-gu-gu!' it cried, and its voice echoed out across the wide wooded valley beyond the cave entrance. Gritting his teeth, Theodric brought the strange metal tube crashing down on the wood-wose's head. The creature slumped face-down into the dirt, blood welling from a shallow gash in the top of its skull. It did not stir.

Theodric wiped his hand across his brow, and glanced out of the cave, across the valley. Had the creature been crying to its mate, or its tribe? The valley was still and silent. No deer came crashing through the brakes, no boar grunted or turned the forest soil in search of food. And no birds wheeled in the open blue skies above.

Theodric sat down on a rock, and tried to gather his thoughts. What had happened? Presumably the wood-wose and its fellows had attacked his men last night – or whenever it had been – and had dragged him off to its lair to devour at its leisure. The stories of wood-

woses he'd heard as a child had specified that they ate children – bad children especially, but perhaps that had been poetic license.

He examined the creature's larder again. From the bones, he deduced that the woses' diet consisted of rather more than wicked children – he recognised the bones of adult humans, mixed in with those of bears, boars, wolves and less recognisable creatures. Spotting his sword in one corner, he went to pick it up.

As he sheathed the weapon, he remembered the metal tube with which he had brained the wose. He picked it up from where he had dropped it, and studied it. One end of the ornate tube curved down to form something resembling a hand-grip, the other terminated in an opening. He looked down this to see nothing but darkness. There was enough metal in the thing to make a short-sword, or a sax, one of the large knives that gave his people, the Saxons, their name.

He returned to the area where he had found the enigmatic tube. The skeleton that had been holding it caught his attention. He couldn't work out what it had been in life. It was too small to be a mature human, although it seemed to have been a biped of some sort. But the set of the bones was strange, and the skull itself was unearthly – deformed, twisted, like a mockery of a human's. The brain pan was long and tapering, the mouth tiny, the wide eyes and small nose cramped down towards the end of its snout. He shook his head. Another mystery. Still, the tube was what had really caught his attention. He wanted to take it apart, find out what it was for.

But right now, his first priority was to get out of this stinking cave, out of this forest and join up with his men – if they still lived. His nostrils twitched. The smell had increased recently. He turned to go, and stopped dead in his tracks.

About a score of wood-woses stood silently in the entrance to the cave. All bore clubs or cudgels. The central figure, a mighty wose with greying fur, bared its fangs, and howled; 'Aroo-AROO-aroo!'

The woses charged.

Thrusting the tube into his sword-belt, Theodric drew his blade and awaited their advance. He didn't rate his chances highly, and cursed the fate that had doomed him to die here, unsung, at the hands of monsters from a fairy-tale.

'Ha!' he shouted, and sent another wose tumbling to the ground with a thrust of his sword. Ducking a swipe from a cudgel, he slashed open a second wose's belly. It sank to the ground gurgling, as its guts poured out like writhing purple serpents.

Another wose leapt at him, and managed to evade his sword-thrusts. It wrapped its long hairy arms around him and tried to crush him. It was incredibly strong, and Theodric found himself gagging at its stench. Desperately, he tried to knock the thing away, but he tripped over a fallen wose and tumbled to the floor.

As luck would have it, he landed on top of his assailant, knocking the breath from its lungs. Quickly, he forced himself to his feet, in time to sheath his blade in the breast of another wose attacker. Panting, he wrenched the sword out and the corpse fell bloodily to the floor. He turned to evade another rush from a third wose.

A pair of hairy arms wrapped themselves round his neck, and he felt the pressure of a wose on his back. He gagged at the smell. It had worked its way round him while he was fighting its fellows, and sprang. Desperately, he tried to throw it off.

Another wose, a smaller one, leapt at his ankle. He stamped down on its fingers, but it ignored the pain and wrapped its arm round his legs. He struggled in its grip, and the grip of the first wose, who seemed to be trying to throttle him. A sword was useless at such close quarters.

A large wose flung itself at the struggle, and Theodric went over. Iron-strong paws grabbed him, and held him to the ground. Two more wrapped round his head, grasping his long blond hair and forcing his face up. Through the roaring in his ears he caught a bark of command, and he glimpsed the old wose approaching slowly, holding a great club aloft. It was studded with animal teeth.

The old wose stood over him, and raised the club up high. Theodric took a strangled breath, and consigned himself to Woden.

The wose raised the club even higher.

This was it, Theodric thought. He'd survived one attack from these creatures, but not even his luck would save him from this. He tried to grin. All the old heroes had died laughing, but that was impossible in his semi-asphyxiated condition. The best he could do was to enter Valhalla smiling.

The wose brought its club whistling down.

PRETTY CRUCIFIXION by Obsidian Mercurio Tesla

Hang me high, a cross of your own design,
Twisted limbs of broken bone
Baked to perfection beneath your flaming acid sun
I am nothing more than hollow carrion bait,
A pale ghost of a younger 'me'.

Your neglect speared right through my side,
My hands pierced by your sharp thorns of
Apathy, each syllable and phrase
Cuts through me like a rail-road spike,
Wounded flesh bleached milk white.

I have grown so accustomed to the bleeding,
I cannot feel the burn of your tainted touch
Or smell the stench of your Golgotha.

My sweet, sweet Judas
How many pieces of silver
Will it cost to cut me free?

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Thirty Eight ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MOB'S ARRIVAL AT SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S.—THE ATTEMPT TO GAIN ADMISSION.

The soldiery had been sent for from their principal station near the churchyard, and had advanced with some degree of reluctance to quell what they considered as nothing better nor worse than a drunken brawl at a public-house, which they really considered they ought not to be called to interfere with.

When, however, the party reached the spot, and heard what a confusion there was, and saw in what numbers the rioters were assembling, it became evident to them that the case was of a more serious complexion than they had at first imagined, and consequently they felt that their professional dignity was not so much compromised with their interference with the lawless proceedings.

Some of the constabulary of the town were there, and to them the soldiers promised they would hand what prisoners they took, at the same time that they made a distinct condition that they were not to be troubled with their custody, nor in any way further annoyed in the business beyond taking care that they did not absolutely escape, after being once secured.

This was all that the civil authorities of the town required, and, in fact, they hoped that, after making prisoners of a few of the ringleaders of the riotous proceedings, the rest would disperse, and prevent the necessity of capturing them.

Be it known, however, that both military and civil authorities were completely ignorant of the dreadful outrage against all common decency, which had been committed within the public-house.

The door was well guarded, and the question now was how the rioters were to be made to come down stairs, and be captured; and this was likely to remain a question, so long as no means were adopted to make them descend. So that, after a time, it was agreed that a couple of troopers should march up stairs with a constable, to enable him to secure any one who seemed a principal in the riot.

But this only had the effect of driving those who were in the second-floor, and saw the approach of the two soldiers, whom they thought were backed by the whole of their comrades, up a narrow staircase, to a third-floor, rather consisting of lofts than of actual rooms; but still, for the time, it was a refuge; and owing to the extreme narrowness of the approach to it, which consisted of nearly a perpendicular staircase, with any degree of tact or method, it might have been admirably defended.

In the hurry and scramble, all the lights were left behind; and when the two soldiers and constables entered the room where the corpse had lain, they became, for the first time, aware of what a horrible purpose had been carried out by the infuriated mob.

The sight was one of perfect horror, and hardened to scenes which might strike other people as being somewhat of the terrific as these soldiers might be supposed to be by their very profession, they actually sickened at the sight which the mutilated corpse presented, and turned aside with horror.

These feelings soon gave way to anger and animosity against the crowd who could be guilty of such an atrocious outrage; and, for the first time, a strong and interested vengeance against the mob pervaded the breasts of those who were brought to act against it.

One of the soldiers ran down stairs to the door, and reported the scene which was to be seen above. A determination was instantly come to, to capture as many as possible of those who had been concerned in so diabolical an outrage, and leaving a guard of five men at the door, the remainder of the party ascended the staircase, determined upon storming the last refuge of the rioters, and dragging them to justice.

The report, however, of these proceedings that were taking place at the inn, spread quickly over the whole town; and soon as large a mob of the disorderly and the idle as the place could at all afford was assembled outside the inn.

This mob appeared, for a time, inertly to watch the proceedings. It seemed rather a hazardous thing to interfere with the soldiers, whose carbines look formidable and troublesome weapons.

With true mob courage, therefore, they left the minority of their comrades, who were within the house, to their fate; and after a whispered conference from one to the other, they suddenly turned in a body, and began to make for the outskirts of the town.

They then separated, as if by common consent, and straggled out into the open country by twos and threes, consolidating again into a mass when they had got some distance off, and clear of any exertions that could be made by the soldiery to stay them.

The cry then rose of "Down with Sir Francis Varney—slay him—burn his house—death to all vampyres!" and, at a rapid pace, they proceeded in the direction of his mansion.

We will leave this mob, however, for the present, and turn our attention to those who are at the inn, and are certainly in a position of some jeopardy. Their numbers were not great, and they were unarmed; certainly, their best chance would have been to have surrendered at discretion; but that was a measure which, if the sober ones had felt inclined to, those who were infuriated and half maddened with drink would not have acceded to on any account.

A furious resistance was, therefore, fairly to be expected; and what means the soldiery were likely to use for the purpose of storming this last retreat was a matter of rather anxious conjecture.

In the case of a regular enemy, there would not, perhaps, have been much difficulty; but here the capture of certain persons, and not their destruction, was the object; and how that was to be accomplished by fair means, certainly was a question which nobody felt very competent to solve.

Determination, however, will do wonders; and although the rioters numbered over forty, notwithstanding all their desertions, and not above seventeen or eighteen soldiers marched into the inn, we shall perceive that they succeeded in accomplishing their object without any manoeuvring at all.

The space in which the rioters were confined was low, narrow, and inconvenient, as well as dark, for the lights on the staircase cast up that height but very insufficient rays.

Weapons of defence they found but very few, and yet there were some which, to do them but common credit, they used as effectually as possible.

These attics, or lofts, were used as lumber-rooms, and had been so for years, so that there was a collection of old boxes, broken pieces of furniture, and other matters, which will, in defiance of everything and everybody, collect in a house.

These were formidable means of defence, if not of offence, down a very narrow staircase, had they been used with judgment.

Some of the rioters, who were only just drunk enough to be fool-hardy, collected a few of these articles at the top of the staircase, and swore they would smash anybody who should attempt to come up to them, a threat easier uttered than executed.

And besides, after all, if their position had been ever so impregnable, they must come down eventually, or be starved out.

But the soldiers were not at liberty to adopt so slow a process of overcoming their enemy, and up the second-floor staircase they went, with a determination of making short work of the business.

They paused a moment, by word of command, on the landing, and then, after this slight pause, the word was given to advance.

Now when men will advance, in spite of anything and everything, it is no easy matter to stop them, and he who was foremost among the military would as soon thought of hesitating to ascend the narrow staircase before him, when ordered so to do, as paying the national debt. On he went, and down came a great chest, which, falling against his feet, knocked him down as he attempted to scramble over it.

"Fire," said the officer; and it appeared that he had made some arrangements as to how the order was to be obeyed, for the second man fired his carbine, and then scrambled over his prostrate comrade; after which he stooped, and the third fired his carbine likewise, and then hurried forward in the same manner.

At the first sound of the fire arms the rioters were taken completely by surprise; they had not had the least notion of affairs getting to such a length. The smell of the powder, the loud report, and the sensation of positive danger that accompanied these phenomena, alarmed them most terrifically; so that, in point of fact, with the exception of the empty

chest that was thrown down in the way of the first soldier, no further idea of defence seemed in any way to find a place in the hearts of the besieged.

They scrambled one over the other in their eagerness to get as far as possible from immediate danger, which, of course, they conceived existed in the most imminent degree the nearest to the door.

Such was the state of terror into which they were thrown, that each one at the moment believed himself shot, and the soldiers had overcome all the real difficulties in getting possession of what might thus be called the citadel of the inn, before those men who had been so valorous a short time since recovered from the tremendous fright into which they had been thrown.

We need hardly say that the carbines were loaded, but with blank cartridges, for there was neither a disposition nor a necessity for taking the lives of these misguided people.

If was the suddenness and the steadiness of the attack that had done all the mischief to their cause; and now, ere they recovered from the surprise of having their position so completely taken by storm, they were handed down stairs, one by one, from soldier to soldier, and into the custody of the civil authorities.

In order to secure the safe keeping of large a body of prisoners, the constables, who were in a great minority, placed handcuffs upon some of the most capable of resistance; so what with those who were thus secured, and those who were terrified into submission, there was not a man of all the lot who had taken refuge in the attics of the public-house but was a prisoner.

At the sound of fire-arms, the women who were outside the inn had, of course, raised a most prodigious clamour.

They believed directly that every bullet must have done some most serious mischief to the townspeople, and it was only upon one of the soldiers, a non-commissioned officer, who was below, assuring them of the innoxious nature of the proceeding which restored anything like equanimity.

"Silence!" he cried: "what are you howling about? Do you fancy that we've nothing better to do than to shoot a parcel of fellows that are not worth the bullets that would be lodged in their confounded carcasses?"

"But we heard the gun," said a woman.

"Of course you did; it's the powder that makes the noise, not the bullet. You'll see them all brought out safe wind and limb."

This assurance satisfied the women to a certain extent, and such had been their fear that they should have had to look upon the spectacle of death, or of grievous wounds, that they were comparatively quite satisfied when they saw husbands, fathers, and brothers, only in the custody of the town officers.

And very sheepish some of the fellows looked, when they were handed down and handcuffed, and the more especially when they had been routed only by a few blank cartridges—that sixpenny worth of powder had defeated them.

They were marched off to the town gaol, guarded by the military, who now probably fancied that their night's work was over, and that the most turbulent and troublesome spirits in the town had been secured.

Such, however, was not the case, for no sooner had comparative order been restored, than common observation pointed to a dull red glare in the southern sky.

In a few more minutes there came in stragglers from the open country, shouting "Fire! fire!" with all their might.

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon by Ray Cummings

XXXIII

“Wake up. Gregg! They're coming!”

I forced myself to consciousness. “Coming—”

I leaped from my bunk, followed Snap with a rush into the corridor.

We had returned safely to the Grantline camp. Anita and I found ourselves exhausted from lack of sleep, our arduous climb of Archimedes and that tense time on the brigand ship. On the flight back, Snap had explained how the landing of the ship on Archimedes was observed through the Grantline telescope. They had read with amazement my signals to the brigands. Snap had rushed to completion the first of our flying platforms. Then he had seen Miko's signals from the crater base, seen the lights and the fight to capture Anita and me, and had come to rescue us.

Back at the camp we were given food, and Grantline forced me to try to sleep.

“They'll be on us in a few hours, Gregg. Miko will have joined them by now. He'll lead them to us. You must rest, for we need everyone at his best.”

And surprisingly, in the midst of the camp's turmoil of last minute activities, I slept soundly until Snap called me, telling me the ship was coming.

The corridor echoed with the tramp of Grantline's busy crew. But there was no confusion; a grim calmness had settled on everyone.

Anita and Venza rushed up to join us. “It's in sight!”

There was no need of going to the instrument room. From the windows fronting the brink of the cliff the brigand ship was plainly visible. It came sailing from Archimedes, a dark shape

blurring the stars. All its lights were extinguished save a single white search beam in the bow peak, slanting diagonally down.

The beam presently caught our group of buildings; its glare shone in the windows as it clung for a moment. I could envisage the triumphant curiosity of Potan and his men up there, gazing along the beam.

We had dimmed the lights to conserve our power, and to enable the Erentz motors to run at full capacity. Our buildings would have to withstand the brigands' rays which soon would be upon us.

Outside on our dim, Earthlit cliff, the tiny lights showed where our few guards were lurking. As I stood at the window watching the incoming ship, Grantline's voice sounded:

“Call in those men! Ring the call-lights, Franck!”

The siren buzzed over the camp's interior; the warning call-lights on the roof brought in the outer guards. They came running to the admission ports, which had been repaired after Miko disabled them.

The guards came in. We dimmed our lights further. The treasure sheds were black against the cliff behind us. No need for guards there—we reasoned the brigands would not attempt to move it until our buildings were captured. But, if they should try it, we were prepared to defend it.

In the dim light we crouched. A silence was upon us save for the clanging in the workshop down the corridor. Most of us wore our Erentz suits, with helmets ready, though I am sure there was not a man of us but who prayed he might not have to go out. At many of the windows—our weakest points to withstand the rays—insulated fabric sheets were hung like curtains.

The brigand ship slowly advanced. It was soon over the opposite rim of our little crater. Its searchbeam swung about the rim and down the valley.

My thoughts ran like a turgid stream as I stood tensely watching.

Four hours ago I had sent that flash signal to Earth. If it was received, a patrol ship could come to our rescue and arrive here in another eight hours—or perhaps even less.

Ah, that “if!” If the signal was received! If the patrol ship were immediately available. If it started at once....

Eight hours at the very least. I tried to assure myself that we could hold out that long.

The brigand ship crossed the opposite crater rim. It dropped lower. It seemed poised over the crater valley, almost at our own level and less than two miles from us. Its searchbeam vanished. For a moment it hung, a sleek, cylindrical silver shape, gleaming in the Earthlight.

Snap looked at me and murmured, “It's descending.”

It slowly settled, cautiously picked its landing place amid the crags and pits of the tumbled, scarred valley floor. It came to rest, a vague, menacing silver shape lurking in the lower shadows, close at the foot of the inner opposite crater wall.

A few moments of tense waiting passed. Soon tiny lights were moving down there, some out on the rocks near the ship, others up under its deck dome.

A stab of searchlight shot across the valley, swung along our ledge and clung with its glaring ten foot circle to the front of our main building. Then a ray flashed.

The assault had begun!