



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

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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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the Archive.

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk.

We will also review published and self-published novels, in both print and digital editions. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Night of the Living Dead" by [George A Romero](#). Cover design by [C Priest Brumley](#).

Editorial by [Gavin Chappell](#)

The Garden of Fear by [Robert E Howard](#) - *Once I was Hunwulf, the Wanderer...* SWORD AND SORCERY

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Ayame's Love - Part Nine by Thomas C Hewitt - *The placid one stood watching the river...* EPIC POEM

Warrior and Valkyrie by [Gavin Chappell](#) - *Helgi meets nine Valkyries riding...* MYTHOLOGY

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Run To The Hills by [Gavin Chappell](#) - *Behind them in the night blazed the great cities of their realm, and the barbarians fed the flames with the corpses of priests and children...* SWORD AND SORCERY

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: [After London - Part Seven](#) by [Richard Jefferies](#) -

***'The Irish landed at Blacklands the day before yesterday, and burnt Robert's place...'* SCIENCE FICTION**

EDITORIAL

Happy April Fool's Day!

Just one week away from our anniversary edition (and the Hettford Witch Hunt Easter Special!) This week we see the second Robert E Howard story of James Allison, who remembers another incarnation in prehistoric, sub-Hyborian times. Todd Nelsen returns with a dark tale of survival in the face of unthinking menace. Ayame's Love continues with the real story behind the far-famed village of legend that has drawn Ranzo and Anton.

I have included another retelling of Norse mythology, the tale of the first incarnation of Helgi, who was destined to sit at Odin's right hand. Rob Bliss gives us a fresh set of perspectives on a notorious assassination in American Birthright. C Priest Brumley has contributed a grisly story of vengeance taken too far, in The Red Recliner. And, after the success of The House of Skulls, I've contributed another sword and sorcery tale, this featuring Walwain the Pict.

In Varney the Vampyre, there is a warning, a new plan, and an insulting message from the vampyre himself. And in After London, our hero experiences difficulty getting out of bed. But don't we all, sometimes?

Next week, Schlock's first anniversary: still taking submissions!

-Gavin Chappell

THE GARDEN OF FEAR by Robert E Howard

Once I was Hunwulf, the Wanderer. I cannot explain my knowledge of this fact by any occult or esoteric means, nor shall I try. A man remembers his past life; I remember my past lives. Just as a normal individual recalls the shapes that were him in childhood, boyhood and youth, so I recall the shapes that have been James Allison in forgotten ages. Why this memory is mine I cannot say, any more than I can explain the myriad other phenomena of nature which daily confront me and every other mortal. But as I lie waiting for death to free me from my long disease, I see with a clear, sure sight the grand panorama of lives that trail out behind me. I see the men who have been me, and I see the beasts that have been me.

For my memory does not end at the coming of Man. How could it, when the beast so shades into Man that there is no clearly divided line to mark the boundaries of bestiality? At this instant I see a dim twilight vista, among the gigantic trees of a primordial forest that never knew the tread of a leather-shod foot. I see a vast, shaggy, shambling bulk that lumbers clumsily yet swiftly, sometimes upright, sometimes on all fours. He delves under rotten logs for grubs and insects, and his small ears twitch

continually. He lifts his head and bares yellow fangs. He is primordial, bestial, anthropoid; yet I recognize his kinship with the entity now called James Allison. Kinship? Say rather oneness. I am he; he is I. My flesh is soft and white and hairless; his is dark and tough and shaggy. Yet we were one, and already in his feeble, shadowed brain are beginning to stir and tingle the man-thoughts and the man dreams, crude, chaotic, fleeting, yet the basis for all the high and lofty visions men have dreamed in all the following ages.

Nor does my knowledge cease there. It goes back, back, down immemorial vistas I dare not follow, to abysses too dark and awful for the human mind to plumb. Yet even there I am aware of my identity, my individuality. I tell you the individual is never lost, neither in the black pit from which we once crawled, blind, squalling and noisome, or in that eventual Nirvana in which we shall one day sink--which I have glimpsed afar off, shining as a blue twilight lake among the mountains of the stars.

But enough. I would tell you of Hunwulf. Oh, it was long, long ago! How long ago I dare not say. Why should I seek for paltry human comparisons to describe a realm indescribably, incomprehensibly distant? Since that age the earth had altered her contours not once but a dozen times, and whole cycles I of mankind have completed their destinies.

I was Hunwulf, a son of the golden-haired Aesir, who, from the icy plains of shadowy Asgard, sent its blue-eyed tribes around the world in century-long drifts to leave their trails in strange places. On one of those southward drifts I was born, for I never saw the homeland of my people, where the bulk of the Nordheimer still dwelt in their horse-hide tents among the snows.

I grew to manhood on that long wandering, to the fierce, sinewy, untamed manhood of the Aesir, who knew no gods but Ymir of the frost-rimmed beard, and whose axes are stained with the blood of many nations. My thews were like woven steel cords. My yellow hair fell in a lion-like mane to my mighty shoulders. My loins were girt with leopard skin. With either hand I could wield my heavy flint-headed axe. Year by year my tribe drifted southward, sometimes swinging in long arcs to east or west, sometimes lingering for months or years in fertile valleys or plains where the grass-eaters swarmed, but always forging slowly and inevitably southward. Sometimes our way led through vast and breathless solitudes that had never known a human cry; sometimes strange tribes disputed our course, and our trail passed over bloodstained ashes of butchered villages. And amidst this wandering, hunting and slaughtering, I came to full manhood and the love of Gudrun.

What shall I say of Gudrun? How describe color to the blind? I can say that her skin was whiter than milk, that her hair was living gold with the flame of the sun caught in it, that the supple beauty of her body would shame the dream that shaped the Grecian goddesses. But I cannot make you realize the fire and wonder that was Gudrun. You have no basis for comparison; you know womanhood only by the women of your epoch, who, beside her are like candles beside the glow of the full moon. Not for a millennium of millenniums have women like Gudrun walked the earth. Cleopatra, Thais, Helen of Troy, they were but pallid shadows of her beauty, frail mimicries of the blossom that blooms to full glory only in the primordial.

For Gudrun I forsook my tribe and my people, and went into the wilderness, an exile and an outcast, with blood on my hands. She was of my race, but not of my tribe: a waif whom we found as a child wandering in a dark forest, lost from some wandering tribe of our blood. She grew up in the tribe, and when she came to the full ripeness of her glorious young womanhood, she was given to Heimdul the Strong, the mightiest hunter of the tribe.

But the dream of Gudrun was madness in my soul, a flame that burned eternally, and for her I slew Heimdul, crushing his skull with my flint-headed axe ere he could bear her to his horse-hide tent. And then follows our long flight from the vengeance of the tribe. Willingly she went with me, for she loved me with the love of the Aesir women, which is a devouring flame that destroys weakness. Oh, it was a savage age, when life was grim and bloodstained, and the weak died quickly. There was nothing mild or gentle about us, our passions were those of the tempest, the surge and impact of battle, the challenge of the lion. Our loves were as terrible as our hates.

And so I carried Gudrun from the tribe, and the killers were hot on our trail. For a night and a day they pressed us hard, until we swam a rising river, a roaring, foaming torrent that even the men of the Aesir dared not attempt. But in the madness of our love and recklessness we buffeted our way across, beaten and torn by the frenzy of the flood, and reached the farther bank alive.

Then for many days we traversed upland forests haunted by tigers and leopards, until we came to a great barrier of mountains, blue ramparts climbing awesomely to the sky. Slope piled upon slope.

In those mountains we were assailed by freezing winds and hunger, and by giant condors which swept down upon us with a thunder of gigantic wings. In grim battles in the passes I shot away all my arrows and splintered my flintheaded spear, but at last we crossed the bleak backbone of the range and descending the southern slopes, came upon a village of mud huts among the cliffs inhabited by a peaceful, brown-skinned people who spoke a strange tongue and had strange customs. But they greeted us with the sign of peace, and brought us into their village, where they set meat and barley-bread and fermented milk before us, and squatted in a ring about us while we ate, and a woman slapped softly on a bowl-shaped tom-tom to do us honor.

We had reached their village at dusk, and night fell while we feasted. On all sides rose the cliffs and peaks shouldering massively against the stars. The little cluster of mud huts and the tiny fires were drowned and lost in the immensity of the night. Gudrun felt the loneliness, the crowding desolation of that darkness, and she pressed close to me, her shoulder against my breast. But my axe was close at my hand, and I had never known the sensation of fear.

The little brown people squatted before us, men and women, and tried to talk to us with motions of their slender hands. Dwelling always in one place, in comparative security, they lacked both the strength and the uncompromising ferocity of the nomadic Aesir. Their hands fluttered with friendly gestures in the firelight.

I made them understand that we had come from the north, had crossed the backbone of the great mountain range, and that on the morrow it was our intention to descend into the green tablelands which we had glimpsed southward of the peaks. When they understood my meaning they set up a great cry shaking their heads violently, and beating madly on the drum. They were all so eager to impart something to me, and all waving their hands at once, that they bewildered rather than enlightened me. Eventually they did make me understand that they did not wish me to descend the mountains. Some menace lay to the south of the village, but whether of man or beast, I could not learn.

It was while they were all gesticulating and my whole attention was centered on their gestures, that the blow fell. The first intimation was a sudden thunder of wings in my ears; a dark shape rushed out of the night, and a great pinion dealt me a buffet over the head as I turned. I was knocked sprawling, and in that instant I heard Gudrun scream as she was torn from my side. Bounding up, quivering with a furious eagerness to rend and slay, I saw the dark shape vanish again into the darkness, a white, screaming, writhing figure trailing from its talons.

Roaring my grief and fury I caught up my axe and charged into the dark--then halted short, wild, desperate, knowing not which way to turn.

The little brown people had scattered, screaming, knocking sparks from their fires as they rushed over them in their haste to gain their huts, but now they crept out fearfully, whimpering like wounded dogs. They gathered around me and plucked at me with timid hands and chattered in their tongue while I cursed in sick impotency, knowing they wished to tell me something which I could not understand.

At last I suffered them to lead me back to the fire, and there the oldest man of the tribe brought forth a strip of cured hide, a clay pot of pigments, and a stick. On the hide he painted a crude picture of a winged thing carrying a white woman--oh, it was very crude, but I made out his meaning. Then all pointed southward and cried out loudly in their own tongue; and I knew that the menace they had warned me against was the thing that had carried off Gudrun. Until then I supposed that it had been one of the great mountain condors which had carried her away, but the picture the old man drew, in black paint, resembled a winging man more than anything else.

Then, slowly and laboriously, he began to trace something I finally recognized as a map--oh, yes, even in those dim days we had our primitive maps, though no modern man would be able to comprehend them so greatly different was our symbolism.

It took a long time; it was midnight before the old man had finished and I understood his tracings. But at last the matter was made clear. If I followed the course traced on the map, down the long narrow valley where stood the village, across a plateau, down a series of rugged slopes and along another valley, I would come to the place where lurked the being which had stolen my woman. At that spot the old man drew what looked like a mis-shapen hut, with many strange markings all about it in red pigments. Pointing to these, and again to me, he shook his head, with those loud cries that seemed to indicate peril among these people.

Then they tried to persuade me not to go, but afire with eagerness I took the piece of hide and pouch of food they thrust into my hands (they were indeed a strange people for that age), grasped my axe and set off in the moonless darkness. But my eyes were keener than a modern mind can comprehend, and my sense of direction was as a wolf's. Once the map was fixed in my mind, I could have thrown it away and come unerring to the place I sought but I folded it and thrust it into my girdle.

I traveled at my best speed through the starlight, taking no heed of any beasts that might be seeking their prey--cave bear or saber-toothed tiger. At times I heard gravel slide under stealthy padded paws; I glimpsed fierce yellow eyes burning in the darkness, and caught sight of shadowy, skulking forms. But I plunged on recklessly, in too desperate a mood to give the path to any beast however fearsome.

I traversed the valley, climbed a ridge and came out on a broad plateau, gashed with ravines and strewn with boulders. I crossed this and in the darkness before dawn commenced my climb down the treacherous slopes. They seemed endless, falling away in a long steep incline until their feet were lost in darkness. But I went down recklessly, not pausing to unsling the rawhide rope I carried about my shoulders, trusting to my luck and skill to bring me down without a broken neck.

And just as dawn was touching the peaks with a white glow, I dropped into a broad valley, walled by stupendous cliffs. At that point it was wide from east to west, but the cliffs converged toward the lower end, giving the valley the appearance of a great fan, narrowing swiftly toward the south.

The floor was level, traversed by a winding stream. Trees grew thinly; there was no underbrush, but a carpet of tall grass, which at that time of year were somewhat dry. Along the stream where the green lush grew, wandered mammoths, hairy mountains of flesh and muscle.

I gave them a wide berth, giants too mighty for me to cope with, confident in their power, and afraid of only one thing on earth. They bent forward their great ears and lifted their trunks menacingly when I approached too near, but they did not attack me. I ran swiftly among the trees, and the sun was not yet above the eastern ramparts which its rising edged with golden flame, when I came to the point where the cliffs converged. My night-long climb had not affected my iron muscles. I felt no weariness; my fury burned unabated. What lay beyond the cliffs I could not know; I ventured no conjecture. I had room in my brain only for red wrath and killing-lust.

The cliffs did not form a solid wall. That is, the extremities of the converging palisades did not meet, leaving a notch or gap a few hundred feet wide, and emerged into a second valley, or rather into a continuance of the same valley which broadened out again beyond the pass.

The cliffs slanted away swiftly to east and west, to form a giant rampart that marched clear around the valley in the shape of a vast oval. It formed a blue rim all around the valley without a break except for a glimpse of the clear sky that seemed to mark another notch at the southern end. The inner valley was shaped much like a great bottle, with two necks.

The neck by which I entered was crowded with trees, which grew densely for several hundred yards, when they gave way abruptly to a field of crimson flowers. And a few hundred yards beyond the edges of the trees, I saw a strange structure.

I must speak of what I saw not alone as Hunwulf, but as James Allison as well. For Hunwulf only vaguely comprehended the things he saw, and, as Hunwulf, he could not describe them at all. I, as Hunwulf, knew nothing of architecture. The only man-built dwelling I had ever seen had been the horse-hide tents of my people, and the thatched mud huts of the barley people--and other people equally primitive.

So as Hunwulf I could only say that I looked upon a great hut the construction of which was beyond my comprehension. But I, James Allison, know that it was a tower, some seventy feet in height, of a curious green stone, highly polished, and of a substance that created the illusion of semi-translucency. It was cylindrical, and, as near as I could see, without doors or windows. The main body of the building was perhaps sixty feet in height, and from its center rose a smaller tower that completed its full stature. This tower, being much inferior in girth to the main body of the structure, and thus surrounded by a sort of gallery, with a crenellated parapet, and was furnished with both doors, curiously arched, and windows, thickly barred as I could see, even from where I stood.

That was all. No evidence of human occupancy. No sign of life in all the valley. But it was evident that this castle was what the old man of the mountain village had been trying to draw, and I was certain that in it I would find Gudrun--if she still lived.

Beyond the tower I saw the glimmer of a blue lake into which the stream, following the curve of the western wall, eventually flowed. Lurking amid the trees I glared at the tower and at the flowers surrounding it on all sides, growing thick along the walls and extending for hundreds of yards in all directions. There were trees at the other end of the valley, near the lake; but no trees grew among the flowers.

They were not like any plants I had ever seen. They grew close together, almost touching each other. They were some four feet in height, with only one blossom on each stalk, a blossom larger than a man's head, with broad, fleshy petals drawn close together. These petals were a livid crimson, the hue of an open wound. The stalks were thick as a man's wrist, colorless, almost transparent. The poisonously green leaves were shaped like spearheads, drooping on long snaky stems. Their whole aspect was repellent, and I wondered what their denseness concealed.

For all my wild-born instincts were roused in me. I felt lurking peril, just as I had often sensed the ambushed lion before my external senses recognized him. I scanned the dense blossoms closely, wondering if some great serpent lay coiled among them. My nostrils expanded as I quested for a scent, but the wind was blowing away from me. But there was something decidedly unnatural about that vast garden. Though the north wind swept over it, not a blossom stirred, not a leaf rustled; they hung motionless, sullen, like birds of prey with drooping heads, and I had a strange feeling that they were watching me like living things.

It was like a landscape in a dream: on either hand the blue cliffs lifting against the cloud-fleeced sky; in the distance the dreaming lake; and that fantastic green tower rising in the midst of that livid crimson field.

And there was something else: in spite of the wind that was blowing away from me, I caught a scent, a charnel-house reek of death and decay and corruption that rose from the blossoms.

Then suddenly I crouched closer in my covert. There was life and movement on the castle. A figure emerged from the tower, and coming to the parapet, leaned upon it and looked out across the valley. It was a man, but such a man as I had never dreamed of, even in nightmares.

He was tall, powerful, black with the hue of polished ebony; but the feature which made a human nightmare of him was the batlike wings which folded on his shoulders. I knew they were wings: the fact was obvious and indisputable.

I, James Allison, have pondered much on that phenomenon which I witnessed through the eyes of Hunwulf. Was that winged man merely a freak, an isolated example of distorted nature, dwelling in solitude and immemorial desolation? Or was he a survival of a forgotten race, which had risen, reigned and vanished before the coming of man as we know him? The little brown people of the hills might have told me, but we had no speech in common. Yet I am inclined to the latter theory. Winged men are not uncommon in mythology; they are met with in the folklore of many nations and many races. As far back as man may go in myth, chronicle and legend, he finds tales of harpies and winged gods, angels and demons. Legends are distorted shadows of pre-existent realities, I believe that once a race of winged black men ruled a pre-Adamite world, and that I, Hunwulf, met the last survivor of that race in the valley of the red blossoms.

These thoughts I think as James Allison, with my modern knowledge which is as imponderable as my modern ignorance.

I, Hunwulf, indulged in no such speculations. Modern skepticism was not a part of my nature, nor did I seek to rationalize what seemed not to coincide with a natural universe. I acknowledged no gods but Ymir and his daughters, but I did not doubt the existence--as demons--of other deities, worshipped by other races. Supernatural beings of all sorts fitted into my conception of life and the universe. I no more doubted the existence of dragons, ghosts, fiends and devils than I doubted the existence of lions and buffaloes and elephants. I accepted this freak of nature as a supernatural demon and did not worry about its origin or source. Nor was I thrown into a panic of superstitious fear. I was a son of Asgard, who feared neither man nor devil, and I had more faith in the crushing power of my flint axe than in the spells of priests or the incantations of sorcerers.

But I did not immediately rush into the open and charge the tower. The wariness of the wild was mine, and I saw no way to climb the castle. The winged man needed no doors on the side, because he evidently entered at the top, and the slick surface of the walls seemed to defy the most skillful climber. Presently a way of getting upon the

tower occurred to me, but I hesitated, waiting to see if any other winged people appeared, though I had an unexplainable feeling that he was the only one of his kind in the valley--possibly in the world. While I crouched among the trees and watched, I saw him lift his elbows from the parapet and stretch lithely, like a great cat. Then he strode across the circular gallery and entered the tower. A muffled cry rang out on the air which caused me to stiffen, though even so I realized that it was not the cry of a woman. Presently the black master of the castle emerged, dragging a smaller figure with him--a figure which writhed and struggled and cried out piteously. I saw that it was a small brown man, much like those of the mountain village. Captured, I did not doubt, as Gudrun had been captured.

He was like a child in the hands of his huge foe. The black man spread broad wings and rose over the parapet, carrying his captive as a condor might carry a sparrow. He soared out over the field of blossoms, while I crouched in my leafy retreat, glaring in amazement.

The winged man, hovering in mid-air, voiced a strange weird cry; and it was answered in horrible fashion. A shudder of awful life passed over the crimson field beneath him. The great red blossoms trembled, opened, spreading their fleshy petals like the mouths of serpents. Their stalks seemed to elongate, stretching upward eagerly. Their broad leaves lifted and vibrated with a curious lethal whirring, like the singing of a rattlesnake. A faint but flesh-crawling hissing sounded over all the valley. The blossoms gasped, straining upward. And with a fiendish laugh, the winged man dropped his writhing captive.

With a scream of a lost soul the brown man hurtled downward, crashing among the flowers. And with a rustling hiss, they were on him. Their thick flexible stalks arched like the necks of serpents, their petals closed on his flesh. A hundred blossoms clung to him like the tentacles of an octopus, smothering and crushing him down. His shrieks of agony came muffled; he was completely hidden by the hissing, threshing flowers. Those beyond reach swayed and writhed furiously as if seeking to tear up their roots in their eagerness to join their brothers. All over the field the great red blossoms leaned and strained toward the spot where the grisly battle went on. The shrieks sank lower and lower and lower, and ceased. A dread silence reigned over the valley. The black man flapped his way leisurely back to the tower, and vanished within it.

Then presently the blossoms detached themselves one by one from their victim who lay very white and still. Aye, his whiteness was more than that of death; he was like a wax image, a staring effigy from which every drop of blood had been sucked. And a startling transmutation was evident in the flowers directly about him. Their stalks no longer colorless; they were swollen and dark red, like transparent bamboos filled to the bursting with fresh blood.

Drawn by an insatiable curiosity, I stole from the trees and glided to the very edge of the red field. The blossoms hissed and bent toward me, spreading their petals like the hood of a roused cobra. Selecting one farthest from its brothers, I severed the stalk with a stroke of my axe, and the thing tumbled to the ground, writhing like a beheaded serpent.

When its struggles ceased I bent over it in wonder. The stalk was not hollow as I had supposed--that is, hollow like a dry bamboo. It was traversed by a network of thread-like veins, some empty and some exuding a colorless sap. The stems which held the leaves to the stalk were remarkably tenacious and pliant, and the leaves themselves were edged with curved spines, like sharp hooks.

Once those spines were sunk in the flesh, the victim would be forced to tear up the whole plant by the roots if he escaped.

The petals were each as broad as my hand, and as thick as a prickly pear, and on the inner side covered with innumerable tiny mouths, not larger than the head of a pin. In the center, where the pistil should be, there was a barbed spike, of a substance like thorn, and narrow channels between the four serrated edges.

From my investigations of this horrible travesty of vegetation, I looked up suddenly, just in time to see the winged man appear again on the parapet. He did not seem particularly surprised to see me. He shouted in his unknown tongue and made a mocking gesture, while I stood statue-like, gripping my axe. Presently he turned and entered the tower as he had done before; and as before, he emerged with a captive. My fury and hate were almost submerged by the flood of joy that Gudrun was alive.

In spite of her supple strength, which was that of a she-panther, the black man handled Gudrun as easily as he had handled the brown man. Lifting her struggling white body high above his head, he displayed her to me and yelled tauntingly. Her golden hair streamed over her white shoulders as she fought vainly, crying to me in the terrible extremity of her fright and horror. Not lightly was a woman of the Aesir reduced to cringing terror. I measured the depths of her captor's diabolism by her frenzied cries.

But I stood motionless. If it would have saved her, I would have plunged into that crimson morass of hell, to be hooked and pierced and sucked white by those fiendish flowers. But that would help her none. My death would merely leave her without a defender. So I stood silent while she writhed and whimpered, and the black man's laughter sent red waves of madness surging across my brain. Once he made as if to cast her down among the flowers, and my iron control almost snapped and sent me plunging into that red sea of hell. But it was only a gesture. Presently he dragged her back to the tower and tossed her inside. Then he turned back to the parapet, rested his elbows upon it, and fell to watching me. Apparently he was playing with us as a cat plays with a mouse before he destroys it.

But while he watched, I turned my back and strode into the forest. I, Hunwulf, was not a thinker, as modern men understand the term. I lived in an age where emotions were translated by the smash of a flint axe rather than by emanations of the intellect. Yet I was not the senseless animal the black man evidently supposed me to be. I had a human brain, whetted by the eternal struggle for existence and supremacy.

I knew I could not cross that red strip that banded the castle, alive. Before I could take a half dozen steps a score of barbed spikes would be thrust into my flesh, their avid

mouths sucking the flood from my veins to feed their demoniac lust. Even my tigerish strength would not avail to hew a path through them.

The winged man did not follow. Looking back, I saw him still lounging in the same position. When I, as James Allison, dream again the dreams of Hunwulf, that, image is etched in my mind, that gargoyle figure with elbows propped on the parapet, like a medieval devil brooding on the battlements of hell.

I passed through the straits of the valley and came into the vale beyond where the trees thinned and the mammoths lumbered along the stream. Beyond the herd I stopped and drawing a pair of flints into my pouch, stooped and struck a spark in the dry grass. Running swiftly from chosen place to place, I set a dozen fires, in a great semi-circle. The north wind caught them, whipped them into eager life, drove them before it. In a few moments a rampart of flame was sweeping down the valley.

The mammoths ceased their feeding, lifted their great ears and bellowed alarm. In all the world they feared only fire. They began to retreat southward, the cows herding the calves before them, bulls trumpeting like the blast of Judgement Day. Roaring like a storm the fire rushed on, and the mammoths broke and stampeded, a crushing hurricane of flesh, a thundering earthquake of hurtling bone and muscle. Trees splintered and went down before them, the ground shook under their headlong tread. Behind them came the racing fire and on the heels of the fire came I, so closely that the smouldering earth burnt the moose-hide sandals off my feet.

Through the narrow neck they thundered, levelling the dense thickets like a giant scythe. Trees were torn up by the roots; it was as if a tornado had ripped through the pass.

With a deafening thunder of pounding feet and trumpeting, they stormed across the sea of red blossoms. Those devilish plants might have even pulled down and destroyed a single mammoth; but under the impact of the whole herd, they were no more than common flowers. The maddened titans crashed through and over them, battering them to shreds, hammering, stamping them into the earth which grew soggy with their juice.

I trembled for an instant, fearing the brutes would not turn aside for the castle, and dubious of even it being able to withstand that battering ram concussion. Evidently the winged man shared my fears, for he shot up from the tower and raced off through the sky toward the lake. But one of the bulls butted head-on into the wall, was shunted off the smooth curving surface, caromed into the one next to him, and the herd split and roared by the tower on either hand, so closely their hairy sides rasped against it. They thundered on through the red field toward the distant lake.

The fire, reaching the edge of the trees, was checked; the smashed sappy fragments of the red flowers would not burn. Trees, fallen or standing, smoked and burst into flame, and burning branches showered around me as I ran through the trees and out into the gigantic swath the charging herd had cut through the livid field.

As I ran I shouted to Gudrun and she answered me. Her voice was muffled and

accompanied by a hammering on something. The winged man had locked her in a tower.

As I came under the castle wall, treading on remnants of red petals and snaky stalks, I unwound my rawhide rope, swung it, and sent its loop shooting upward to catch on one of the merlons of the crenellated parapet. Then I went up it, hand over hand, gripping the rope between my toes, bruising my knuckles and elbows against the sheer wall as I swung about.

I was within five feet of the parapet when I was galvanized by the beat of wings about my head. The black man shot out of the air and landed on the gallery. I got a good look at him as he leaned over the parapet. His features were straight and regular; there was no suggestion of the negroid about him. His eyes were slanted slits, and his teeth gleamed in a savage grin of hate and triumph. Long, long he had ruled the valley of the red blossoms, levelling tribute of human lives from the miserable tribes of the hills, for writhing victims to feed the carnivorous half-bestial flowers which were his subjects and protectors. And now I was in his power, my fierceness, and craft gone for naught. A stroke of the crooked dagger in his hand and I would go hurtling to my death. Somewhere Gudrun, seeing my peril, was screaming like a wild thing, and then a door crashed with a splintering of wood.

The black man, intent upon his gloating, laid the keen edge of his dagger on the rawhide strand--then a strong white arm locked about his neck from behind, and he was jerked violently backward. Over his shoulder I saw the beautiful face of Gudrun, her hair standing on end, her eyes dilated with terror and fury.

With a roar he turned in her grasp, tore loose her clinging arms and hurled her against the tower with such force that she lay half stunned. Then he turned again to me, but in that instant I had swarmed up and over the parapet, and leaped upon the gallery, unslinging my axe.

For an instant he hesitated, his wings half-lifted, his hand poising on his dagger, as if uncertain whether to fight or take to the air. He was a giant in stature, with muscles standing out in corded ridges all over him, but he hesitated, as uncertain as a man when confronted by a wild beast.

I did not hesitate. With a deep-throated roar I sprang, swinging my axe with all my giant strength. With a strangled cry he threw up his arms; but down between them the axe plunged and blasted his head to red ruin.

I wheeled toward Gudrun; and struggling to her knees, she threw her white arms about me in a desperate clasp of love and terror, staring awedly to where lay the winged lord of the valley, the crimson pulp that had been his head drowned in a puddle of blood and brains.

I had often wished that it were possible to draw these various lives of mine together in one body, combining the experiences of Hunwulf with the knowledge of James Allison. Could that be so, Hunwulf would have gone through the ebony door which Gudrun in her desperate strength had shattered, into that weird chamber he glimpsed

through the ruined panels, with fantastic furnishing, and shelves heaped with rolls of parchment. He would have unrolled those scrolls and pored over their characters until he deciphered them, and read, perhaps, the chronicles of that weird race whose last survivor he had just slain. Surely the tale was stranger than an opium dream, and marvelous as the story of lost Atlantis.

But Hunwulf had no such curiosity. To him the tower, the ebony furnished chamber and the rolls of parchment were meaningless, inexplicable emanations of sorcery, whose significance lay only in their diabolism. Though the solution of mystery lay under his fingers, he was as far removed from it as James Allison, millenniums yet unborn.

To me, Hunwulf, the castle was but a monstrous trap, concerning which I had but one emotion, and that a desire to escape from it as quickly as possible.

With Gudrun clinging to me I slid to the ground, then with a dextrous flip I freed my rope and wound it; and after that we went hand and hand along the path made by the mammoths, now vanishing in the distance, toward the blue lake at the southern end of the valley and the notch in the cliffs beyond it.

THE END

THE SCHOOLYARD by Todd Nelsen

“God isn’t real. Don’t believe the hype. It’s all bullshit. If you doubt it, take a good look at the world around you. Who could still believe after all this misery?”

He raised his gun.

“Survival, on the other hand,” he continued, “now that is real. It’s a sure thing. You don’t find it hiding in the clouds or in a book. It doesn’t have to. You find it where you expect to, where you left it, out in the open. That’s right,” he said, taking aim. “It’s why people locked their doors at night so many years ago. Told their kids not to talk to strangers. Stuck a crowbar beneath the driver’s seat. Deep down, they knew the truth.”

His first two shots hit their mark, as intended, leaving rumped heaps on the ground. Instant kills. The third, however, missed, grazing his target. From my vantage point, and the way it jolted, it looked like a shoulder hit to me. So he trailed it with the barrel of his rifle as it lumbered toward us across the open schoolyard. For a brief moment, my stomach went tight, fearing he’d take too long to fire or he’d miss. But moments later, it, too, was a rumped heap, his shot having gone through the bridge of its nose and splattering its brains out the back of its head.

“Bull’s-eye,” he said.

They had been stupid to approach us in daylight. They were normally nocturnal and seemed to abhor sunlight. I found their behavior this year unsettling. But who could

blame them? It was the hunger driving them on, an appetite that had nothing to do with caution or intelligence. They knew we were here, so they came. We were food to them. It was that simple.

“What will they eat when we’re gone, I wonder?” I asked, breaking my silence. The idea had been bugging me for a few weeks now, and I figured it was about time I expressed it.

Another came up over the hill. He fired a fifth shot, dropping it like the other three.

Four out of five today. Not bad. He appeared satisfied with himself.

“Vegetarians,” he said. He cocked an eye to me and smiled. “They’ll become vegetarians like your crazy half-sister or those Hindus. Or they’ll eat each other.”

The thought made him chuckle, but somehow I doubted he truly believed this.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“I think when their food supply is gone,” he said, “they won’t know the difference. They’ll just keep coming, like they always have. Ever seen one starve to death? I haven’t. Hell, on a long enough timeline, after you and I are dead and gone, they’ll still be out there, walking that yard.”

I looked to the yard and openly shuddered. One question followed another: with nobody around, who would pull the trigger?

“Is it me? Or does it feel like there’s been more of them lately?” he asked.

He lowered his gun. The thought seemed to trouble him.

“Come on,” he said finally. “We’re done here. Let’s get back inside where it’s safe.”

I shrugged. He was probably right. The sun would be down soon. It was unsafe to be out in the dark.

AYAME’S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

9.

The placid one stood watching the river.
Underneath his feet the ground was sun caked,
submissive green flexed over iron firm
and deep-set eyes sat over a soft face.
Flowing close like the driest bushes burn,
water bounced over the rocks in its way
while through its gentle whispers it inferred
that it would cover every peak someday.

The white noise that droned from water and rock
was a still warm and welcome aid to thought.
Arrival at the village had been with
disappointed words from his comrades' lips:
one sick for love, the other for money,
both spoke with anger and both spoke with greed.

The river itself had surprised them all;
that is to say it made them feel foolish
because out of sight, though not a far walk,
they found that the water's rage diminished
to a stream whose pace was a lazy crawl,
a contrast to the rough rapid spillage,
like the sound of a constant violent brawl
of the water nearest to the village.

Still the noise that the water made was less
angry than that of the old man's son's friends
who since arriving in the peaceful place
had found that they had little to say
and then spoke only insults and complaints
in a constant barrage of vocal pains.

He was literally placed between them both;
the three wooden shacks they had been given
seemed to stand unnecessarily close.
Their walls were thick enough to keep heat in
but not thick enough to keep out the noise
and too often he heard them arguing
or the loud bangs and sighs of the annoyed,
both of whom lay uneasy in their beds.

They were competing from inside those rooms.
Both men were trying to be the one who
kept the other awake longest with sound
that whilst being clumsy and overloud
could be construed as struggling for comfort
if the other voiced a complaining thought.

Ranzo was apparently quite surprised
that the place was just a normal village
and there wasn't a row of girls in line
all wishing that they'd be the one he picked.

That surprise was taken to greater heights
by the face of the man that he'd travelled with,
when Ranzo confessed that the whole long time
that he and Anton had walked on their trip

Ranzo had been relying on his dream
to pay a man whose first love was trading
for his time, lost business and his fatigue.

Anton was forced to remain in that place
until he found means to make Ranzo pay.

The village itself was as Ranzo found
simply a group of occupied houses
and it was in vain they had all nearly drowned
for all the adults there already kissed
those to whom by intention they were bound.

They were greeted by a man called Arliss
whose voice was soft and whose features were sound.
He assured them it was the place of myth.

The village was not marked by revelry
but by mundane daily activity.
Old couples, men and women worked for food,
at night disappearing to private rooms.
Faint mirth spilled under doors in to the streets
conspiring to make Ranzo feel lonely.

The old man's son had heard all about it
through the loquacious whines from Ranzo's mouth
that Anton met with his own bitter spit
as the old man's son had to hear them out.
Two weeks passed and he tired of listening.

There were questions he had himself about
why the village had inspired such grand myths
that for all three travellers had grown to doubts.

He had asked Arliss questions once before
and was directed to the river's shore
where Arliss assured him the answers slept
with the still of the noise and the movement
of the fast flowing currents and what's more
the way fast water does not move at all.

The old man's son had stood now for three days,
watching the river run around the rocks
although no enlightenment had he gained,
just welcome rest from Ranzo and Anton.

As he watched the water flow, his thoughts strained.
Whilst his thoughts strained, his eyes turned to the sun
and filled with its brightness began to ache.

He needed to know the explanation.
turning to the village he was intent
to justify the effort he had spent.
Walking straight to Arliss' house with feet
beating the village paths determinedly
and the mud he pounded soon gave way to
a doorway that led to warm wooden rooms.

Arliss was a kindly old man who smiled
in a manner that seemed to pre-empt words
before they uttered in words they were wise.
He spoke in a calm tone softer than hurt
his wire eyes as heavy as they were bright.

The old man's son bowed his head as in prayer
and muttered the question that was his mind:
what answer could be gleaned from the river?

Arliss took a deep breath, then he began.

“In days once I was a much younger man
and in the days my wife was still alive
for some months had been bearing our first child,
the two of us had a lot to wish for
and a deal of poverty to ignore
but we did at least have a house and food
and I had constant work to fill my days
as long as there was rain to leak through roofs
and roofs that could not stand up to the rain.

“But sick of struggling my heart too soon grew
and too slow to anger and quick to pain.
No-one could pay for the work I would do
for everyone's problems were all the same:
the crops had all been failing in our town,
soil was turned barren underneath the plough,
people were quick to abandon their homes
and misery grew where plants should have grown.
We were of the last few that still remained
hoping that life would return to the place.

“The event that altered our fortune there
was the same that created this village
as the final things for which we had cared
were dying or were soon to diminish.

“My wife Laura's family had fast grown scarce.
As farming failed their living perished.
Bidding goodbye to the land and Laura

they moved on to found farms in lands more fit.
Laura stayed to be with me and I stayed
for as long as my father there remained.

“My father’s breath had grown short and fractured,
perhaps from the sawdust he had scattered
while he was building houses in the town
of which he was too proud to leave the grounds.

“He was ever a stronger man than I.
Even in his sickness he still had strength
that seemed too abundant ever to die
and yet this story depends on his death
and so did my wife and I at the time
for women need food when they are pregnant
and though food was becoming harder to find
it is wrong to say that his death was thanked
for seldom has there lived a better man.

“I wept hard until my eyes were as though
they were bleeding lumps of heat reddened coal.
Remembering his kindness I could not
shake feelings of tragedy from my thoughts.

“My father crafted his trade out of love
and what little amount gained from it
bought him only the name of generous.
Often it was that the houses he fixed
he fixed only for the owners’ comfort
and for those that had no homes his hands built
strong wooden shacks until they could afford
a sturdy and warm house in which to live
and to me he was more than a father
but a friend and mentor and constant harbour.

“So strange does it seem that his death would prove
in so many ways to do me much good
but his dying to me at all is strange
so perhaps his life is more to be blamed.

“I had known for a while that we must move
to a place that could more provide for us
but after my father’s death my will proved
to be weaker than necessity’s push
as my grief took precedence over food.

“I lay in bed weeping and sighing much.
Laura held me with sympathy and love
and I was pulled from sorrow by a touch.

It was the stern kick of a tiny foot
that altered my mindset and woke me up
for the kick felt as though it had been done
out of sympathy by my unborn son.

“It was then that I realised that all
emotion is of the same energy
and that the energy can be controlled
focused so that it fits a person’s needs.

“The next day we left to find a new home
and we came on this spot within a week.
All that then stood of this house was its stone
but its placing was good near wood and streams.
I covered these walls with fresh wooden beams.

“We lived there alone for a year or more
until two like us sought help at our door.

“They were a little older than we were
and a good deal thinner about the face.
Deryn was pregnant much like Laura
had been when we first came to this place
and all our problems were mutually shared.

“My boy was a few months old and he wailed
enough that he could grey a young man’s hair
but not Mark nor Deryn ever complained
and in exchange for shelter gave him care,
respite to us that we later returned.

“They often asked how I kept my patience
when I hadn’t slept for rocking my son
and he would not rest from screaming aloud
whether the sun had come up or gone down.

“As months went on and my son grew more calm
I had more time to gather thoughts to words
and explained how emotions can be changed
away from pure instinct and made to work
like rain can be saved to water a farm
or fire used to heat and not to burn
so can depression be turned to a spark
that ignites into overwhelming care.

“The principle is focused energy.
Emotions released never disappear
though their effect will with exposure dull
as will that of poison or alcohol;

the form of energy can be changed
but ignoring them can preserve the pain.

“By nights we would sit by the fire and talk
about the energy of emotions
that never dissipates but changes forms.
In the day we worked to change our wants;
we built a house for Deryn and Mark
and the food we gathered was abundant.
From knowing that rage as wild as a storm
can be dispersed or focused but not spent.

“Though I am afraid it’s hard to maintain,
sometimes even I am too tired to strain
with my feelings and give way to my hurts.
The passing of my wife was hard to bear;
it takes some effort to see past her death -
a misery to me that seldom rests.

“I breathe and only think about breathing
and I am cooled by the soothing effect
that feeling the rhythm of breathing brings.
The calm rhythm allows me to direct
my energy to a neutral feeling.
Happiness and sorrow are too intense
and I am too old to bother with such things
except for the times I want to feel them.

“Reality is changed by perception,
something we saw when more people had come
and the thought that I had was passed to each
that settled in our community.
Travellers who rested with us lightly said
that they never heard any arguments.

“And now it seems a myth has grown from that ,
but we have only ever been people
that control our feelings and how we act.
Many that come here find our village dull,
peaceful, pragmatic and lacking romance
and your two friends perhaps are that way pulled
but they were not guided here by chance
rather by thoughts that were set like metal.

“Look to the river. It has only one
course yet it wanders wherever it wants,
round corners, up hill and over the stones,
widening the earth with its gentle flow;
even when it reaches still lakes it moves

but with size too great for the eyes of fools.”

Arliss looked kindly at the old man’s son and he gracefully offered him some tea.
“Take some time to think how it is you want your moments of most contentment to feel.”

The old man’s son accepted tea and from that moment for days he mulled the ideas Arliss had shared and they helped spare him on through the awkwardness of the coming weeks.

For comfort was needed for him the most as he lacked in anger or threats or boasts, taking stillness instead to be his stream to help guide him towards some kind of peace.

But Anton and Ranzo had their own means for keeping each other in misery.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

WARRIOR AND VALKYRIE by Gavin Chappell

1. Hjorvard

There was a king named Hjorvard who had four wives. His first wife was named Alfhild and their son was Hedin. The second was called Saereid and they had a son named Humlung. The third wife was named Sinrjod, and their son was Hymling. Now King Hjorvard vowed to have for his fourth wife the fairest woman in the world.

Hjorvard had an earl named Idmund whose son was called Atli. One day Atli was standing in a wood when he heard a bird speak, saying. ‘I have heard your men saying that Hjorvard’s wives are the fairest of women. Have you seen Sigrlin, daughter of Svafnir, king of Svavaland? She is deemed fair in her own land, though Hjorvard’s wives are also said to be beautiful.’

Atli asked the bird what else it had to say.

It said, ‘I will speak more if the prince makes an offering, and I can have what I desire from the king’s house.’

Atli asked it not to choose Hjorvard, or any of his sons or wives. The bird demanded a temple and sacrifices in return for which the king would receive Sigrlin.

Atli told Hjorvard of Sigrlin, and the king sent him to woo the princess on his behalf. Atli spent the winter with King Svafnir. Sigrlin’s foster-father was an earl named Franmar, and he had a daughter named Alof. The earl told him the maiden’s hand was

denied, and Atli returned home. He told the king that Sigrlin had been denied him and the king decided he would go himself next time.

He set out with his men, but when they crossed the mountains into Svavaland they found the land aflame and thick with dust clouds from the hoofs of many horses. The king rode down from the mountains and camped beside a stream. Atli kept watch that night.

He went to the stream, where he found a house. A huge bird sat on top of the house to guard it, but it was sleeping. Atli threw his spear at the bird and slew it, and it fell to the earth in the form of Earl Franmar, Sigrlin's foster-father. Atli went into the house and inside he found Franmar's daughter Alof and Sigrlin herself, and he brought them outside. He learnt that a king named Hrodmar was invading the land; he had killed King Svafnir and was plundering the countryside. Earl Franmar had turned himself into an eagle to guard the women from the invaders. Atli took Alof and King Hjordvard took Sigrlin.

2. Helgi

Hjordvard and Sigrlin had a son, who was a big, silent man. No name stuck to him. One day he was sitting on a hill when he saw nine Valkyries ride past. The fairest one of them spoke to him. She called him Helgi and said it would be long before he had gold or lands. Helgi asked, 'What gift comes with my name?' for it was a custom in those days when namegiving to also give a gift.

She told him, 'Forty-six swords lie on the island of Sigarsholm, one of which is mightiest of them all, and it will bring you fame and courage, and death to your foes.' The Valkyrie's name was Svava, and she was the daughter of King Eylimi.

Helgi went to his father. He criticised him for letting King Hrodmar burn and loot his mother's land, but reminded him that the king still had the gold he had taken from the kingdom. Hjordvard said he would give his son a following if he intended to go and avenge his mother's father. Helgi went out with his retinue, including Atli, and they journeyed to Sigarsholm where Helgi took the sword Svava had described. Then they journeyed to Hrodmar's kingdom and they slew him.

Later he slew the giant Hati, whom he met sitting on a mountain. Helgi and Atli had anchored their fleet in Hati's fjord. During the first half of the night, Atli kept watch. Then Hati's daughter Hrimgerd asked the name of the king of the Vikings in the fjord. Atli told her his name was Helgi and that witches could not harm him. She asked him his name, and he gave it and told her how much he hated witches. He asked her for her name and the name of her father. She told him she was called Hrimgerd and Hati had been her father.

Atli threatened her but Hrimgerd insulted him, and called him a gelding. Atli said he would kill her, and she suggested they duel on the shore. Atli refused to leave the ships until the warriors awoke.

Hrimgerd shouted to Helgi, 'Awake and pay wergild for my father's death by letting

me share a bed with you.’

Helgi awoke and he turned down this offer. ‘You will find a better mate in a troll.’

Hrimgerd told him that Valkyries watched over Helgi’s fleet. Helgi said, ‘If I am to pay wergild for your father’s death in the way you propose, tell me whether one or many Valkyries guard the fleet.’

Hrimgerd told him, ‘Twenty-seven Valkyries guarded the fleet, but one maiden rode in front of the others.’

The sun rose as they were talking, and Hrimgerd was turned to stone by its rays, as Atli had hoped would happen when he began speaking.

Now Helgi went to King Eylimi and asked for Svava’s hand in marriage. Eylimi agreed and the couple exchanged marriage vows. Svava remained at her father’s hall while Helgi went to the wars.

3. Hedin

Meanwhile Helgi’s brother Hedin had remained at home. One Yule Eve he was riding home when he met a troll-woman riding a wolf with snakes for reins. She asked Hedin to go with her but he refused, and she said he would pay for that when he was drinking in the hall.

That night when the sacred boar was brought out for the warriors to swear oaths upon, Hedin swore at once to have Svava, Helgi’s wife. He regretted this so much that he took to wild paths to reach Helgi, who was at Frekastein.

The son of King Hrodmar, Alf, challenged Helgi to single combat at Sigarsvellir, seeking vengeance for his father’s killing. When Helgi saw Hedin, he asked his brother what had brought him here. Hedin told the truth, but Helgi told him not to blame himself. He told Hedin what faced him, and said that he thought that the troll-woman who Hedin had met was probably his fetch and that her appearance meant he was doomed to die.

Now Helgi went to fight Alf, and in the battle that followed, he was mortally wounded. He sent one of his men, Sigar, to find Svava and ask her to come to his die. Sigar rode to Svava and told her what had happened. Svava hurried to join him, and found him close to death. His last request was that she should marry his brother Hedin when he was gone. Svava reminded him that when they first met she had promised never after his death to accept the embrace of an untried warrior.

Helgi asked her to kiss him, saying, ‘You will not see me again until I have avenged the valiant son of Hjorvard.’

Helgi was later reborn as the hero Helgi Hunding’s bane, and Svava became his lover, Sigrun. But that is another saga.

AMERICAN BIRTHRIGHT by Rob Bliss

You are alone now, happily lost, hitchhiking on a two-lane paved road surrounded by farmer's fields in a state thousands of miles from your home. A small knapsack on your back with fewer than the bare essentials, your jeans worn thin, spattered with small holes. Your red plaid shirt stained by old sweat. Your hair has grown long after having been shaved off by the army and its now-ended war.

You killed many people and were legally justified in doing so. But coming home, all justification seemed thin; in a land of peace, all war actions become crimes again. People walking down the street make you nervous. You want to kill them before they kill you. Post office boxes and garbage cans and baby carriages all harbour bombs. Human beings are just another form of walking meat; your job had been to stop their walk, to lay them out, raze them with bullets, to ensure they were not a threat. The nightmares of screaming and blood and flesh torn apart by wailing fire power refused to end.

So you went for a long walk. To purposely get lost, away from populated centres, to try to renew your sight for the species you belong to – this homo sapiens sapiens beast – as benevolent again, as an animal that has the ability to be at peace with others of its kind.

A small zippered pocket in your knapsack contains a handful of cigarette stubs which you've picked up along your journey. You take one out and smoke it. Three draws of smoke and the tobacco is in your lungs, buzzing inside your head. A bright sun burns the asphalt, brings sweat into your eyes. You inhale heat along with the smoke. The road ahead shimmers with liquid mirages where it dips. Pools of phantom water make your tongue stick to the roof of your dry mouth. Saliva as thick as glue webs the corners of your cracked lips. Oxygen is a thick burning syrup that you pull into your shallow chest.

Another mirage appears on the road ahead. A car with a figure walking beside it. The car's wheels roll and the figure's legs walk on water. Burning air is a distorting lens, so you stare for a while to see if there really is movement, if the figure is approaching you as you approach him. There are too many lenses for sight to move through – the eye's lens, the air's shimmer – for you to be sure that what you see is no mirage. Air is a prism. Will what you see disappear as you near?

You stand and wait for the mirage to come to you. It does. The long black car staying with the figure's walking pace. You cannot see a driver, so you decide that even though the entire image has not vanished as it approaches, there still must be some falsity to it. Or to your perception of it. The heat must be burning your brain, throwing black spots of perception against what you are seeing, making your mind fill in the blanks of impossibility.

The spectre stops as it reaches you. Each on either side of the quiet road. A man in a black suit stands beside the stilled car, one hand palm flat on the black metal wheel well. Cool enough to the touch, you suppose. There is no driver sitting in the black

leather interior. A convertible with three bench seats for six people; a glass partition between the driver's bench seat and the passengers. It is a 1961 Lincoln Continental, custom built. A beautiful machine.

The man wears a black hat with a wide brim. Looks like the type of hat worn by Amish men, you observe. An immaculate black suit and tie, red shirt, covers his gaunt frame. His face is a collection of bones covered in thin white skin. Protruding cheek bones and a jutting chin, sunken cheeks, lines like claw gouges rake his forehead. Hair shaved up to the hat line, the shape of his skull an egg of bone. His eyes are hidden by small circular black sunglasses. To yourself, you find an adequate description for the colour of his thin lips: ash grey.

You tell yourself in the mirage heat of your distorted thinking: this man is made of ash. And ash cannot burn. It is the product of fire and, therefore, impervious to flames. The sun cannot break him with its heat. The car's black metal is probably as hot as a forge, but his long-boned fingers and ash dry palm feel no burn.

You're still not convinced that he is real. But you've learned, have been trained, to deal with that which is real, that which is false, and that which is neither and both simultaneously. (An old man, his back bent as he hobbles across your path, pulls an AK-47 from under his robes and aims it at you. Too quickly for your mind to process if what you are seeing is real or fake, but your training has taught your limbs to react for you. Your arms and hands shoot the old man mirage, tear phantom holes through him from groin to clavicle, but force real blood to haemorrhage from his falling corpse. And you walk on... a small terrestrial god, able to push away all forms of reality into the realm of ghosts. Where the only harm they can do to you is done through the medium of nightmares. But you learned to not fear them anymore because, so far, you always wake up.)

You and the man stare at each other, he into your black eyelash squint, you into the dimmed reflection of yourself in his round lenses.

How do you begin a conversation with a mirage? Just begin...worry about decorum later.

You glance down the road ahead of the car, return your gaze to the black lenses.

"Long road ahead," you say, feeling your lips unpeel from each other.

"For us both," the man says.

You scan the length of the car. The man has not taken his hand from the hood. "Out of gas?"

He shakes his head slowly. "Just felt like walking."

You nod, understanding the need to walk. You feel comfort and camaraderie in the presence of another traveller. A strange wanderer. Lost and alone and happy to be where you are finally happy after so many years of feeling fear and paranoia or, more

often, feeling nothing at all. Feeling numb to your experiences, you assumed, was not good for you, but it was necessary given the circumstances. You did what you had to do to survive your world. Then that world dropped away.

“Beautiful car.”

The man glances at where his hand is on the metal. Both of your faces reflected in the black sheen.

“She’ll take you anywhere you need to go,” he says. You feel his eyes smiling behind the glasses. “Care to take her for a spin?”

You look into his eye’s reflection, glance at his ash mouth for signs of deception or truth. Is it a trap, or is he merely a traveller like you who knows your needs?

He sees you thinking, so he allays your fears. “I’m a very trusting man.” He pats the metal. “She’s a very trusting car. Goes where she wants and takes you with her.”

You smile. “A magic car?”

He smiles, black stains frame his long yellow horse teeth. “Let’s just say, she knows where you need to go. She’ll bring you back safely. Trust the car and I’ll trust you.” He steps back, opens the door for you, ushers you in with his long, thin arm.

You feel as though you’re being given the chance of a lifetime. (Whatever a lifetime is, what it should be, how it never lives up to your expectations, how it sends you to hell but expects you to stay a saint.) Perhaps this man’s offer could change all of it. Hell or Heaven...two sides of a single coin.

You step to the car, unsling your knapsack, drop it into the back seat, let your body slip into the driver’s seat, let your fingers curl around the cool rubber steering wheel. He closes the door, smiles down at you.

“See you soon, friend. I’ll be here for you.”

You peer up at him. The rim of his hat like a black halo shading his face. You grit your teeth, inhale the burning air. A warm breeze dries the sweat on your forehead.

“I’ll return,” you confide. “You can trust me.”

His lips smile as he steps away from the car, stands on the yellow dividing line. “I know I can.” Two fingers clamp on his hat brim, he nods.

Without touching the pedals, the wheel spins, throwing off your grip, the car squeals spinning tires and speeds down the road, taking you back the way you came.

It knows where you need to go.

#

Your eye aims down the sights of a 6.5 Carcano rifle, Model 91/38, aimed at a city street six stories below the seven-story building where you have nested. The street winds passed your window. The car that brought you here will be coming, but you will need the time of the street's lazy curve to align your shot. And it's not good sniper skill to shoot the target when it's directly below your window. Lead it a bit, to deflect witness observation away from the gunshot source. They'll piece it together, of course, especially after you stash the rifle between the mountain of cardboard boxes filled with history books at your back. But not until after you've left your nest, escaped the building, the crowd lining the street panicking, their minds trying to process what may or may not have just happened in front of their eyes.

You are a man in your twenties, thin build, oval face with a small chin. You will receive a wound on your forehead above your right eye, but later, after you change your clothes.

The rifle in your hands was made in Italy in the city of Terni, cost \$19.95 mail order. You stare an eye through a 4X18 Ordance Optics telescopic sight. Also on your person is a snub-nosed Smith & Wesson "Victory" model .38 special revolver. You may or may not need to use it – the future will tell – but it is the rifle that will achieve your victory.

Crowds cheer and applaud as the car comes into view. A second car behind it with flanking motorcycles. Six people sit in your car, but only one, the man in the back seat beside the woman, is your intended target. Of course, bullets do not discriminate, so they will punch through your target into the man sitting in front of your man. More victory for the precise marksman.

Aiming at the back of the man's head, a moving target, you curl your finger around the trigger and squeeze. The first 6.5mm brass cartridge ejects and clatters on the floor after sending the slug through the man's upper back, exiting through the knot of his tie. His arms fold high across his chest as though he's reacting to heartburn.

Between the first and second shots there elapses a high-performance time of 1.66 seconds. The third shot is slower at 7.49 seconds. You're not sure if the third bullet was yours. There will be much speculation about this time lapse, incongruous with the time between bullets one and two. Perhaps you needed a little more time to readjust your sights, to raise the barrel from the man's back to his head.

A section the size of a small bowl blows off the front of the man's head, hinged by hair and skin. The woman no longer needs to worry – as she did with the tie knot bullet, trying to ask the man if everything was all right, though he was unable to answer with blood seeping into his trachea – now, with his head burst out in a spray of blood, and her hand useless to put it back, she retreats. Starts to crawl across the back of the car, a man trying to climb up, reaching to grab her hand. But the car speeds up, so the reaching man falls away and the woman slips down into the back seat to curl and huddle below the line of the car's bulletproof body, the dead man slumped forward on his side.

Between the third and fourth, and final, shots there elapses 0.44 seconds. Shots one and two are tightly grouped, as are shots three and four. Thus, the almost seven and a half seconds between the two groupings is cause for suspicion.

But you do not care. On the floor at your feet rest three 6.5X52mm brass cartridges. Three, not four. You stash the rifle and retreat. All eyes are distracted away from your exit.

The seven-story building, and its sixth floor window where you shot from, will become historical monuments, impervious to demolition, in perpetuity, because of you. You have just become history. An infamous idol, an actor's challenge in re-enactment, a t-shirt.

And that is your true victory.

#

You are an older man, in your 60s, bald, an oval, meaty face, thin lips. You wear black-rimmed glasses, though you may remove these when you look through the viewfinder of your home movie camera.

Though you don't yet know it, the camera will become your greatest asset. You will make three copies of today's footage, sending two of them to the federal authorities. The camera itself will be kept in pristine condition in a museum. It will be declared a piece of history, as will the film you shoot with it, which will bear your name.

The camera is a Model 414 PD Bell & Howell Zoomatic Director Series camera powered by a spring-wound mechanism. It shoots eighteen frames per second. You will shoot 486 frames, or 26.6 seconds, of Kodachrome II 8mm safety film. The car will appear in 343 of the frames you shoot. You shoot in colour, but the footage will be aired in black and white until broadcast technology catches up to your hand-held machine, and the full colour of blood will finally be seen.

You stand on the most western of two concrete pedestals overlooking the motor route. The view is unimpeded by the crowd, so the footage is clean. You skilfully track the car, keeping the man and the woman in the lens. The camera does not shake to blur the view, and you do not falter your step on the pedestal and drop the camera as it catches the scene.

Without you, your country and the world will not see the framed, second by second historical event as it folds and unfolds into itself. It will repeat like a commodity of assembly line mass production. Without your knowledge, or intent, you give birth to a new style of film making. A war is approaching and battlefield cameras will record death as it actually happens. This is new and unheard of in any historical era.

Broadcasts after you won't merely report that "a man was shot", but it will show the shooting, the path of the bullets, the mess it makes of flesh and bone. The war will be lost in part because of you and your amateur film-making technique. (But it is a war that needs to be lost, history will determine.) The amateur style becomes the choice of

the professional. People will mistrust the skilled technician, assuming censoring manipulation. Only blood and gore will appease the desensitized and desensitizing public.

In a few decades, your style will dominate all forms of media. Something is only real if speeding, slightly blurred, film catches and contains a man's head blowing apart.

You become a different type of sniper, but one equally famous as the last man you were; both of your selves solemnized in this brief moment.

History is merely brief moments stretched through time by perpetual repetition.

#

You are an unknown man hidden behind a wall, beneath a covering shade of trees, your gun – most likely a sniper rifle – aimed at the street. You will see the man in the car from the front. You will not see the man with the movie camera, he will not see you – your versions of firearms are not compatible.

If you fire your shots, they will not be fully known. Only speculation on puffs of smoke and unreliable witnesses will give rise to your existence.

You don't even know yourself, who you are, what you look like, where you come from, whom you may be working for, what is the source of your orders.

Unable to define yourself, history can only do so much with, and for, you.

You will only become history as a shadow. But without shadows, history cannot move forward in the minds of the benevolent people.

Unnamed people have always sped the toppling of Camelots.

#

You are the woman. More intelligent than the man you sit beside, but an intelligent woman is not an asset in your time and place. So you adhere to a persona of smiling shyness and reserve. You write the man's speeches since your knowledge of literary techniques and political verbiage is extensive. Greek orators would be proud; so you eventually go to Greece for your next husband. You don't speak, you write, and after today, you will never speak again.

You sit and smile and wave and feel happy on this warm, cloudless day. You are beautiful. You are iconic, which is more dangerous than beauty.

You wear a double-breasted strawberry pink and navy trim collared Chanel wool suit with matching pink wool hat. White gloves protect your hands. Only after a blood stain slashes your pristine suit will it become a monument. But not one displayed in any museum. The blood will not be washed off, ever. The suit itself will be stored in an undisclosed location, temperature-controlled, sunless. It becomes a totem of horror,

not to be sold or displayed for worship. Your intelligence tells you that both sorrow and blood-lust can become religions. Often, both are necessary for worship. Which means the clothing you wore on that day is ripe for the creation of a cult.

You are no blood goddess, though some will make you one. You are not stupid enough to create a religion around your holy garments. But you cannot sway all the minds of the masses. You know silence is the only choice. Let the world and its horrific history pass; you have been grafted onto it and cannot fight who you became that day.

You only want to crawl away from the headless man slumped beside you. The fine red mist, still in the air, smells of pomegranate and iron. You don't even think to scream. Real people don't scream when faced with horror. Their animal instinct is smarter than that. Adrenaline surges to fuel their retreat, across a moving vehicle, or worse, back down onto the bloody leather to sit beside death.

The flight instinct repelled, you wait in shocked stone-face until time takes the horror away.

You are become death.

#

You are, finally, the man. Smiling and waving as you're huddled low in the roofless car. Unflanked by suited men with their palms on the car's body. A bright, beautiful day to be exposed to your adoring public.

You are immaculate in your Brooks Brothers grey suit, size 34 black belt, blue and white striped shirt, size ten-and-a-half black moccasin shoes, and blue silk tie by Christian Dior called the "Monsieur". In your pocket, a white linen handkerchief and a tortoiseshell comb. Your wrist carries a gold Cartier watch.

You are contained in your details and the events that you affect and which affect you. (As are all other players in this theatre.) A decision you made sat the world at a stand-still, holding you and your enemy nations in a stand-off. You won. But powerful losers don't like winners. If conventional war is not an option, guerrilla tactics become necessary. (The coming war will prove this: a lesser guerrilla power will defeat a greater conventional war machine. Much to the shock of the military elders.) A well-aimed bullet can sometimes devastate a triumphant nation better than a storm of poorly-fallen bombs.

Humiliation calls up the sniper from his entrenched anonymity.

Your arms rise to your chest, feeling the exit at the knot of the tie. Head bows to see what you're feeling for, a gap suddenly punched through you. Shock sends rivers of ice water through your veins. Your eyes blur. Passing scenery slows down. The man sitting in front of you turns to see the source of the bullet that has pierced him as well. Wondering, for a fraction of a second, if you are the assassin of yourself, taking him with you. But he sees your head bowed and blood streaming down your blue and

white striped shirt. You are now robed in the tri-colours of your nation. A martyred patriot to inspire patriots to their own martyrdom.

Because you are both the man and yourself, you can not only feel but also witness the explosion of your skullcap. It feels like nothing: there are no nerves webbing the brain – it is the only organ in the human body that cannot sense itself. This is an evolutionary, or godly, mercy. The skin and muscle and bone of the head are wired to feel pain, but again, there is a mercy.

The bullet travels faster than both the speed of your car and your brain's ability to process pain as pain. The steel projectile enters the back of your skull and exits towing a mass of cranium above your right eye. If electricity rushes along the brain's synapses at the speed of light, then, theoretically, you would feel pain before the bullet exits. But if you do, it would be a short-term sensation. After the pain registers, it will be erased when the processing centre of the grey matter explodes against the back of the man in front of you. (He is also shot dead, a footnote, the unnameable, to usher his king into the afterlife – a great patriotic servant.) [Was he killed?]

The woman tried to help you, a motherly, wifely instinct, until she realizes all domestic inclination and indoctrination by her mother and her mother's mother burns quickly away, replaced by her animal flight.

But you can't see her. She is lost. You are slumped to the floor, staring at your moccasin shoes until your internal sight gives way to the blackness of your vision.

#

The car slows to the man standing at the side of the road, his hat brim shading his reflective eyes. The car steers itself. You sit with your hands in your lap and let yourself be driven to the man as black as a shadow, as white as ash.

He smiles with his black and yellow teeth. Hand on the chrome handle, he opens the door for you, waits for you to get your bearings, to muster the energy to slide out of the seat, to stand again.

“Enjoy the ride?” he asks.

You nod. Look down the length of the car. Its interior and exterior are clean, immaculate. No physical residue of your memories taints its shined surface. Had you even been in the car? Seconds tick by like millennia and your memory fades, cleaned away by accelerated time.

The man steps close enough for you to see yourself in his black lenses.

“Check your pocket.”

A hand slides into the tight denim pocket against your hip. Withdraw your hand to feel and see a silver coin in your palm. A profile image of the man who died, whom you once were, for a brief time, is stamped on the metal.

The man holds out his hand. “We must all pay for our journeys.”

He takes the coin from you, drops it into a small breast pocket in his suit jacket. Smiles. Slips his lenses low to peer over and look at you with unshaded eyes.

Those are coins that are his eyes, you observe.

Shades his eyes again, and slips behind the wheel of the car, clicks closed the door. Reaches into the back seat and hands you your knapsack.

“There are many more journeys to take, my friend,” he says. “Keep walking this road ... it has a lot of history. Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

Two fingers to the brim of his hat is his salute to you. Hands loose on the steering wheel, he drives slowly away. Picks up speed but keeps to the limit as he grows small in the distance.

You sling the knapsack onto your back, hands in your empty pockets, and walk down the road in a direction you’ve never travelled before.

THE RED RECLINER by C. Priest Brumley

The knocking on my front door was the signal I had been waiting on.

The recliner groaned as my weighty bulk settled in, springs and timber frame creaking and popping in protest as always. It was my sanctuary, my home-in-my-home. It knew the contours of my body better than any woman ever could. The texture of the corduroy upholstery was a kind of magic to my sense of touch, oftentimes rendering my hand numb when I would stroke the arm while reading or deep in contemplation. It was, simply put, perfect.

I remember how we were united quite vividly; it was mid-October, and the leaves on the magnolia trees were as green as they ever would be. We were all gathered to our local place of worship, the New South Holy Baptist Church, for its annual charity-drive auction. Everyone brought something, and you were only allowed to buy one thing in return. Now, if you brought more than one item, don’t fret; whatever wasn’t sold after everyone finished went to the St. Vincent store to help them out. In case you happened to be wondering, I brought a bottle of LSU Merlot someone had gotten me for Christmas that I never opened. Never was much of a wine man, and I knew a few fellows in the congregation who would jump at that bottle in a damn heartbeat.

We all had a chance before things started to check over the items for auction, and that’s where I saw it. It was calling out to me from the sidelines of the auction block, almost audibly, and as I felt the deep red corduroy slide under my hand as smooth as ruffled silk during inspection, I knew beyond the proverbial shadow of a doubt it was to be mine. It was a LayzeeDad, just like my father (may God rest his poor soul) had before he died. Exact same model, too, complete with the hand-carved lever for

raising the feet and over-stuffed headrest.

Just the sight of it brought back a cavalcade of buried memories, from sitting on my Dad's lap when I was a child, all the way up to my older brother punching me in the face after my father died and walking out with the damned thing before I could get up and stop him. Memories like that stay with you a lifetime.

There was no doubt in my mind: I needed that recliner.

Trouble was, it seemed someone else wanted it, too.

The old widow Violet had stopped in the line and was eyeing the piece, same as I. She was well known throughout our congregation, her generosity being second only to Pastor Miles in scope, and her food was certainly a gift from the Lord himself. She was all of five feet tall, her dark skin so smooth from well care that she resembled a woman half her age, easy. And her temper was a thing to behold, or so I've heard tell. The look she gave my recliner was telling in its intensity: she wanted it just as bad as I did.

Great. Competition. Just peachy.

The auction started at half-past three, when Pastor Miles huffed and puffed his way up the stairs to stand by the microphone. The items on the block started to go, one by one, with the good Pastor acting the auctioneer. His speech was slurring as he called out the bids in the traditional fashion, tongue tripping over itself multiple times per item in an effort to maintain the speed and ferocity required of his job. A sheen of sweat even broke out on his brow around the tenth item up, and he went on with an even fiercer determination to hold on to the hellish speed.

By the time the recliner came up most of the crowd had left, their one item limit having been filled with assorted pies baked by grandmotherly patrons and wooden trinkets carved by the local handyman who doubled as an usher on Sundays. As they drove away to plan their day, I stood waiting for that magnificent piece, sun baking my chocolate skin to a nice, deep shade of burned-all-to-hell, sweat emanating from every pore on my body and then some. And still she stood there, white cotton dress ruffling in the breeze of her paddlefan, head kept cool by the wide-brimmed hat perched on her head, that singleminded determination on display for the world to see.

Pastor Miles had Rufus, the handyman/usher, haul the scarlet idol on to the raised platform they had built behind the church proper. And thus, it began.

"Next up, a used recliner donated by our dear patron, Ms. Carol Parker." He waved to an older lady towards the back of the crowd wearing a purple pants suit and a matching hat, who waved back with a smile. "The bidding starts at fifty dollars. Anyone- Ms. Violet has fifty, do I hear fifty-fi- Mr. Andy has fifty-five, do I see six- Ms. Violet has sixty, do I see sev- Mr. Andy has sev- Ms. Violet has sev-...

* * * * *

The battle raged for five glorious minutes, the endless tug-of-war between old Ms. Violet and myself driving the final buying price to an astounding two-hundred and fifty-five dollars, at which point Ms. Violet, on her pensioner's budget, was forced to bow out. I stood triumphant, arms raised in the V of victory and taking deep breaths as though I had just completed a triathlon in the same time span.

"Yes! Praise the name, baby!"

I walked up to the podium after my flagrant display and drew out my wallet. The required money was in front of the ever-growing battery of business cards, store rewards cards, and assorted receipts that make up the contents of a man's wallet. My hand was shaking with excitement as I handed the three one-hundred dollar bills to Pastor Miles, with the result of having the grace of a mountain goat.

"Son, I can't give ya anythang back. You know y'all were supposed to bring exact change."

I thought to myself for a few moments, then came to a quick conclusion. "Sir, keep the rest. Put the overage towards getting those new hymnals you've been wanting since Tommy and Lori's wedding last month, sir."

"Weh-hell, that's mighty nice of ya, Andy!" He clapped my shoulder with his left hand and shook my right with his. "I know the Lord appreciates this, and I certainly know I do, too! Thank ya, son!"

"More than welcome, Pastor Miles! Now, how are we gonna get this thing in my truck, you think? You know how my back gets, and I've been standin' out here a while, sir."

"Well, son, normally I would say it's up to you, but you've just been so damn nice that I think we might persuade Ruf- Hey, Rufus! Thank you can come on over here for a second?"

"Yussir?" Rufus had the loping grace of a man long in the bone and short in the pantry, and his gait merely reinforced what you would think at first sight. "Whatchoo got, sir?"

Pastor Miles clapped my shoulder once more. "Now this generous man just donated an extra forty-five plus his item's fee. Do ya thank you could help him get that monstrosity of a chair packed away nice-like in his truck?"

Rufus broke his face into a wide grin, looking all the more like a late-in-life version of Jimmie Walker. "Naw, that ain't a problem, sir. I can do it by myself, even. Which truck yours, Mistah Andy?"

"The grey Silverado with the black trim on it, man! Thank you so much!"

Rufus tipped his hand in the air as he would the brim of a hat, then turned and lifted the recliner with a practiced ease. I turned back to Pastor Miles, intending to talk to

him about volunteering for Sunday school duties during the summer.

“Mistah Andy! You gotta come here, man!” The terror in his voice cut me to my core. I broke out in a flat run, breath ragged and broken from the exertion. The run only took a minute, but I was so out of shape it felt like ten miles, easy. I skid to a halt next to Rufus, who was staring, dumbfounded, at my wheels.

They were slashed. All four of them. And scraped along the driver’s side of the truck bed was a single word:

“MINE.”

* * * * *

The police report was a formality, in my mind. I knew, without having a shred of evidence, who was responsible. The trouble was, convincing those around me of the truth.

“Andy, I told ya a million times now, Miss Violet was not responsible! And I don’t wanna hear a word otherwise, son. It was just some damn kids tryin’ to play a damn prank!” Pastor Miles’s face grew redder with every bygone second.

“Father, I’m telling you! She wanted that armchair just as much if not more than I did! And we all know her temper! She did this, I swear to it!”

Pastor Miles shook his hung head, disbelief etched in every pore. The policeman and Rufus had both left minutes before, leaving the both of us here to wait on my rental truck to arrive. The moment they left, I picked up the same argument I’d given the policeman about Miss Violet’s guilt, to the same response. I’ve been having the same argument for hours now.

“Andy, son, I want you to hear me, and listen well. She’s a good woman, and a little old lady to boot. Why on this earth would she do somethin’ like this over a damn recliner? It just don’t make sense. As soon as you get home, I want you to get some sleep, son. When you wake up, you’ll look back on this and realize just how foolish this sounds, okay?”

“Are you trying to tell me, or convince me, sir?”

Pastor Miles’s face grew as red as I’ve ever seen it. “You damn fool,” he hissed, his eyes flashing with unbridled anger of the sort clergy should not show. Before I could retort, though, he spun and walked away, leaving me alone in the church’s parking lot. His crunching footfalls faded away as he reached the church and closed the doors behind him with a thud.

New sounds emerged a moment later as the rental truck pulled in, the steady crackling of gravel under tires filling my entire attention span. It pulled next to me, door half-open to let out the driver: an obnoxious young man named Deshawn (as his name tag stated) that had his pants by his ankles and those blasted “dreadlocks” all the kids

nowadays seem to sport. He tossed me the keys underhand with a grin, and I caught them with the practiced ease of my minor-league days.

“Here you go, sir.” I was amazed that he called me anything other than “shawty” or “dawg” or whatever inane nickname the kids came up with these days.

“Thank you, son. Say, do you mind giving me a hand with something real quick before your ride gets here?”

“Yeah man, whatcha got?”

I pointed at the recliner still sitting on the raised platform, glowing in the illumination of the church’s exterior lights. “Think you can give me a hand getting it in this bed?”

His grin broke wide, revealing gleaming silver covering his front teeth. “That ain’t a problem, man,” was all he said before he jogged over to the platform, lifted the recliner off the edge with ease, and made his way to the truck. I pulled down the tailgate in time for him to slide it on, and together we pushed it to the front near the cabin.

“Thank you, son. Damn thing’s caused me nothing but a world of trouble...” I wiped the sweat from the summer night off my brow.

“Don’t mind my askin’, why’s it so much trouble?” The kid’s concern looked genuine, despite the age difference. I decided to humor him.

“Well, to put it mildly, I bought this thing from the auction, right? And there was this woman, name of Miss Violet, wanted it bad, too. After I won it, we go to load it in my truck here, and all my damn tires are slashed flat and someone keyed my car up! Now are we thinking it’s a coincidence?”

“Wait, man. Violet Thomas? Little old lady, ‘bout five foot tall?”

The shocked look on my face must have been priceless, judging by his grinning reaction. “I take it you know her?”

“Know her? Sheee, man, that’s my great auntie! She used to bring me out to mass here all the time, man. You been here a while, you prolly seen me here before!” A flash of memory brought me the face of a younger man, without the dreads or the decorations, sitting with Miss Violet in one of the front rows on a few occasions. “How you think I knew where it was, man? Ain’t used no GPS or nothin’, just straight mem’ry, sir.”

My jaw dropped at the revelation of information. He knew Violet... Maybe he could let slip something to prove her guilt...?

“So, knowing her like you do, you think she did it or what?”

Deshawn looked thoughtful for a moment, then, to my tremendous relief, nodded.

“Wouldn’t be the first time, y’dig? She cut the valves off my tires right before prom my senior year ‘cus she thought I stole ‘em. Stuff like that, ya feel me?”

The relief that washed over me was a godsend. I had evidence of Violet’s destructiveness, straight from the mouth of her kin. Nothing could stop me from getting my revenge now.

The question was, what type of revenge was I going to deliver?

Then, my eyes lit up. I knew what I was going to do. And as the thought churned away, a grin escaped. Payback’s a bitch.

* * * * *

It was the middle of the night by the time I reached Violet’s house on Avenue G. Her place was small, a shotgun duplex that would have fit in all too well with its surroundings under normal conditions. The pale pink and white paint adorning the house gave her away, as did her cleanliness; a neatly trimmed yard, diorama of the nativity, and well-tended azalea bushes were there in place of the usual unkempt grass, glass bottles, and rusting children’s toys that every other place on the block seemed to be collecting.

It screamed Violet from top to bottom.

I pulled up to her house at the curb and cut the lights. I didn’t know if Deshawn would have warned her or not about my inquiry, but I didn’t want to take the risk of getting caught. The creaking of the car door was unavoidable for the most part, but I managed to catch it before the bottom could scrape the curb and cause a cacophony. As I walked away from the car, I pushed the exacto-knife deep in the front pocket of the black hoodie adorning my torso.

The front lawn was only a few yards deep, but it felt like eternity as I stole across, my senses heightened by the imminent lawbreaking. Each step sounded a cannonball, each glimmer a barrage of police lights as I made my way to her porch, treading light in the event of loose boards. What should have taken a few seconds was taking minutes in comparison, and upon the realization I hastened to complete the task before more time could pass.

The exacto-knife gleamed under the light from the streetlamp as I pulled it across the wood of the front door, the metal gliding effortlessly through the cheap thin-ply veneer. Thirty-four strokes would be enough. I counted aloud under my breath as each was completed, watching the thin strips of wood fall after each with a sense of vindictive pride.

Two minutes later, the task was done. I stood back for a second and let the righteousness of my actions boil my blood. The word “MINE” was carved in her front door next to the knob, letters gouged wide in a bold print sure to be unmissable.

My imagination shifted into overdrive as I stood there. I imagined her seeing the

message as she went to lock her front door behind her when she left in the morning, smooth brown hands turning white with fear and shock, trembling from the personal intrusion, scared to leave her house, calling me to apologize and offering to pay for the damage, bawling as I turned her offers down, my laughter ringing in the air around me...

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Violet’s voice pierced my thoughts, drawing me out of the imagined scenario and depositing me in the now. Blinking at the sudden burst of light coming through the doorway, I managed to make out a vague image of Violet in a silken nightgown staring me down with the authority of generations. I started to panic at once, palms greased from sweat and adrenaline as my fight-or-flight was gearing itself for an epic struggle.

Vocally, I chose not to respond. In retrospect, it was the wrong decision.

“Andy Gibson, I asked you a damned question! What the hell are you doing, showing up on my porch in the dead o’ night, laughing your head off like a maniac? I should call the police on you, teach you a damn lesson you ain’t ever gon’ forget! You gon’ answer me, you...”

Her words faded as I tuned her out. Instead, ‘...teach you a damn lesson...’ reverberated endlessly around my head, ricocheting off the walls of my skull, incinerating my inhibitions as the incensed anger grew, the indignation at her feeling of injustice, and isn’t it just peachy-freaking-keen that she can be self-righteous about something like this and I’m expected to be fine with the abuse and just take it and why don’t I fight back and WOW everything’s red why is everything red hey look I’m throwing a punch!

The action of the swing brought me back to myself, and seeing the prone form of the old lady crumpled on the ground brought a renewed bout of nervousness. Her whimpering, an utterly pathetic sound, was too low to attract attention. The fight-or-flight, still coiled in my muscles like a rattlesnake poised, forced its way through the fog of my conscious mind, forcing me to make a decision about my current predicament: do I leave her here, where she can call the police when she wakes up (if someone hasn’t already) and risk going to jail, or do I take her with me, wait for her to wake, and explain myself in a calm and rational manner?

I hefted Miss Violet’s body with a degree of difficulty and walked to the rented truck waiting at the curb.

* * * * *

Night-time in my neighborhood was a godsend to me. The streets were immaculate and quiet, a luxury afforded from my days playing minor-league baseball until the injury. My house was the fourth down the street on the right, a modest one-story compared to the others around it. The design differentiated, too, in that while everyone else had their stucco and bleached brick exterior, we were the only ones on the street boasting old-style red brick and barn-white trim. It was my dream house.

I pulled up the driveway at a slow pace, still not sure on the rental truck's braking capabilities (which had flip-flopped between slow, grinding skids to drop-of-a-dime halting regularly). The garage door opener clicked loud as I pressed the button to open, eliciting a slight stir from the back seat, but nothing more. A tennis ball hanging from the ceiling in the garage tapped the windshield as I came to a final halt and set the truck in Park. I opened the door as quiet as I could and closed it the same.

Can't wake her up yet. Nothing's ready. Need to work quick if I'm to do this proper.

All preparations went fast, simple as they were. The dining room got cleared out first, with all the shades drawn and everything except the dinner table and two chairs removed to the living room. I grabbed the roll of duct tape from the utility drawer in the kitchen and set it by one of the chairs, the tall backed one with the arms that I liked; a place of honor. The last touch was trying to find something to hold her head up before she woke. I tried to find something that would do, like a milk crate, but in the end settled on my spare car jack from the garage for its adjustability. Everything was in place. Time for Violet.

My footfalls sounded magnified in the large garage, another luxury of my choosing. I opened the back door of the truck with the same temerity I had handled the front, door pulling away to reveal the scrubbed pink soles of Miss Violet's feet. I could see up her nightgown with her feet splayed as they were, but it didn't excite me any. I was too nervous for any of that, having taken care to get everything ready just right and now hoping to Jesus and every last apostle she accepts my apology.

It took a few minutes of maneuvering, but I managed to extract her from the back seat without waking her. She was a small woman, both in girth and height, but the strain of her slight weight on my back was agonizing torture and I almost dropped her as soon as I got her in my arms. I kept her up, somehow, and carried her through the garage's internal doorway to the house, made a left, and got her to the chair already pulled out and waiting.

Depositing Miss Violet, slowly, feet first, then torso in the seat, sitting her as upright as I could without her doing it properly herself. Bending down with the duct tape, taping each leg to its corresponding chair leg for stability, taping each arm to its corresponding armrest to hold her up. I wanted to tape her torso to the chair back, too, but I was afraid she'd be angry at me for getting that white sticky residue that duct tape leaves behind on her silken nightgown, so I left that part out. Finally, leaning her head forward, placing it on the wide top of the car jack, taping around the head and affixing it to the jack's wide top. Cranking the jack a few notches, straightening out her head, giving the true appearance of sitting upright and leaning in to hear anything I had to say.

I flicked the light switch off and prepared for the worst.

She came to as slow as anything, eyes blinking away the unconsciousness from the blow. I watched her from across the table, sitting down, my hands twisting in front of me from my nerves. She tried to yawn and stretch, I could tell from how she was moving. Instead, the duct tape holding her down did its job well, preventing her from

moving her arms more than an inch or two. She tried again and again, struggling to get free, trying to move her head, arms, feet, anything, all to no avail. After a few minutes of waiting and watching with bated breath, I saw her tears.

And they were glorious.

They were slow and fat, thick tears forming a set of miniature rivers pouring down Violet's face on to the table, emphasizing her now choked screams. Her chin was squashed against the wide top of the jack, mouth held shut from the force of the duct tape surrounding her head. She screamed through clenched teeth in my direction, the one she was facing. I don't think she saw me, though. Room was pretty dark, after all.

"Who the hell are you? Why are you doing this?" More sobbing came then, puddles forming on the table around the base of the jack. "Why are you doing this?" Gasping for breath now between her sobs. I felt powerful, my control over Miss Violet a drug that I couldn't stop taking no matter how bad it was for me.

Enough. Time to apologize, Andy. She's suffered enough for her sins, I think.

"Even- well, actually, Mornin', Miss Violet."

"Who the hell are you? I can't see anythang it's so dark in here!" Her voice rose in pitch. "Let me go, you sick bastard!"

"Not until you hear what I have to say."

"Hear what you have to say?" I detected the incredulity in her voice. My blood started to boil. Why doesn't she want to listen to me? I gave her my favorite chair, didn't I? I propped her up so she wouldn't fall to the ground, right? Why am I being yelled at? I've been nothin' but helpful, damn it!

I rose from my chair and took the three short steps to the wall behind me, clicking the switch and drowning the room in bright light. Her eyes flew open when she saw me standing there.

"Andy, what the hell do you thank you're doin'? Why am I all tied up like this? Let me go! You're hurting me!"

"No, Miss Violet. Please, stop struggling." My voice broke at the end, heartache seeping from my every pore. "I just wanted to explain myself for earl-"

"Andy Gibson you let me go this instant or I swear to God himself when I get out of this mess I will do more than just cut your damn ti-"

"So you did do that?" The triumph was overwhelming.

"Of course I did! I even told Pastor Miles I was gonna! Carol put that chair in the auction for ME, dumbass! That way, I could donate to the church and get my favorite chair of hers! But oh no, you just HAD to have the damn thang, didn'tcha? Just HAD

to take away an old woman's comfort? You damn idiot!"

The last straw gave way. So Pastor Miles knew, did he? Everyone else knew, too, then? My blood pressure rose as my anger increased, righteous indignation coursing along my veins, and why am I standing I don't remember getting up from my seat?

Breathe, Andy. You're here to apologize to her. She's already been punished enough, hasn't she?

No. Nowhere near enough. She needs to suffer.

"See, I was gonna apologize for hittin' ya earlier, Miss Violet." I started pacing on my side of the table, my legs restless from inaction. I felt the coiled serpent in my muscles once more, this time waiting to spring forward and hurt Violet. It was a new sensation; I've never intentionally wanted to hurt anyone, but here I was, waiting for my chance to do just that. "I was gonna apologize for blaming you for the tires and everythang." More pacing, more anticipation. "I was even gonna apologize and offer you the damn chair." Almost time now. "And then you go and tell me something like that. To tell you the truth, Miss Violet, you the damn idiot."

"Wha- what are you gonna do?" Her voice dropped to a near squeak as I advanced on her. "Andy? Answer me!"

I walked past Violet to the open door behind her, the door that led to the garage. I knew it would come to this. Violet was too much of a loose cannon, as they say. She didn't understand. No one ever does. I try to be nice. I'm a good man. I repeat that as a mantra in my head as I headed for the toolbox towards the back of the garage, with Miss Violet's cries echoing around me in the cavernous space: I'm a good man! I'm a good man!

I found what I was looking for easy, having set the jack's pump handle on top of the toolbox when I grabbed the jack earlier. I hefted it, feeling the return of the power I felt earlier. I liked it. Walking back to the dining room was an exercise in control. I wanted to run, to attack, to brutalize. I forced myself to walk, taking my time, step by step by step.

Her sobs had returned in the wake of her terror. The puddles on the table had formed one large puddle in its stead, rippling around the base of the red and black jack holding Miss Violet's head up. I waited in the doorway behind her, watching her slight form shake from fear and crying. It would be too easy, punishing her. I wanted to enjoy the moment.

The car keys in my pocket jingled when I shifted my weight to my other foot. Oops.

"Andy? Where are you? Let me go!"

Can't hold out any longer. I walked to her left side, smiling all the while, and found the nub where the handle was supposed to go. Inserting, twisting, handle locked in place.

“Miss Violet, it’s time to go. Are you ready?”

“N-no! A-Andy, what are you--?”

I pumped the handle once. The jack went up a single notch, stretching Miss Violet’s neck upwards, eliciting a fresh bout of sobs and muffled pleas. I pumped it once more, watching the skin on Miss Violet’s neck grow lighter as it stretched out.

Again. Stretch.

Again. Stretching. Miss Violet’s screams growing hoarse as her neck elongated.

Again. Skin forcefully ripping as the pumping continues, muscle and sinew exposed to the air, blood running downwards from the wound in a multitude of directions. Her nightgown absorbed the first few trails, collar soaking up quick with the non-stop streams.

Again. Muscles tearing away from their anchors. Sinew detaching and tearing. Screaming has stopped.

Again. I can see the bone through the torn and detached muscle now. I refuse to look at Miss Violet’s face.

Again, and again, and again I pumped the handle, fear and remorse and panic coursing through me, erration in my actions, I need to stop but I can’t, I just want to be done with it, the handle goes up and down and Miss Violet’s head just keeps going up up UP while her body stays there, no more sound coming from her but the sloshing sound of muscle being ripped and blood filling the hole her spine is vacating as it sticks out of her neck, detached nerves hanging from the sides of the spine and swaying with the upward motion.

Stop. Just Stop, Andy. STOP.

I walked away from the handle, hands out in a defensive position, awareness of what I’ve just done hitting my conscience. I just killed Miss Violet. The thought hit me like a ton of bricks, sucking the wind from my lungs, forcing me to sit down and catch my breath.

I need to do something. She needs to be taken care of. I can’t just leave her here like this. What to--? The cell phone was in my hand and dialing the number before I consciously knew what I was doing.

“Nine-One-One, Please state your emergency.”

“Yes ma’am. Umm, I need an ambulance to Eleven-Oh-Four Jefferson Street. I have a dead body here. Please treat her with respect.”

“Sir, can I get you--” Her voice cut out as I folded my old cell phone closed. I got up

from the chair in the dining room across from Miss Violet's mangled corpse, shook my head slowly, and walked to the recliner set up in the living room.

The recliner groaned as my weighty bulk settled in, springs and timber frame creaking and popping in protest as always. It was my sanctuary, my home-in-my-home. It knew the contours of my body better than any woman ever could. The texture of the corduroy upholstery was a kind of magic to my sense of touch, oftentimes rendering my hand numb when I would stroke the arm while reading or deep in contemplation. It was, simply put, perfect.

The knocking on the door ten minutes later was the signal I had been waiting for. I grabbed my Grandpa's old hip-shooter sitting on the floor by the recliner, put it in my mouth, and smiled.

BANG.

-Fin.

RUN TO THE HILLS by Gavin Chappell

'We will defend our island, whatever the cost may be...'

Winston Churchill.

Prologue: A Divided Land

Horses' hoofs drummed upon the darkened earth as riders fled desperately across the land. Fear sat in their hearts and on their faces; behind lay death and destruction, sacked cities and slaughtered peoples, as starving, mad-eyed barbarians laid waste the fair realm the riders had once ruled.

Bonded by fear, they rode through the night, intent at last on one course of action - now that it was too late; too, too late. Corruption, treachery, power-lust; they left it all behind them as they abandoned their defenceless people, and for one last time, looked to their own salvation.

Behind them in the night blazed the great cities of their realm, and the barbarians fed the flames with the corpses of priests and children. Blood ran in the gutters and stained the great rivers red; the flickering flames that licked the roofs of churches and fortresses were mirrored darkly in the crimson flood; the darkness of the countryside was brightened only by the blaze of destruction as the foreigners ran wild across the farmlands, surrounding guttering continents of beleaguered cities with archipelagos of fire.

Ahead lay only the wild western hills, favoured resort of all exiles; beyond them were the shallow seas and tangled isles where other barbarians dwelt, ready to exploit the chaos unleashed by the incompetence of those men who galloped towards the peaks. Only in the mountains could the riders hope to escape the flood of flame that was drowning their land: their recklessness had weakened dams that once held back a barbarian tide that now gushed across their island, a tributary of a greater fire that had

set an entire empire ablaze.

At their head rode one man, a tall, thin figure who sat his horse like a scarecrow, though once he had been the proud ruler of a free nation; a man whose face was old with untold sins where once it had blazed with youthful fervour; the face of an idealist turned tyrant who had committed atrocities in his attempts to hold together both his country and his soul, until honour and idealism fled him just as now he fled his own folk. Now the only light in his tired eyes was the beady glare of a hunted animal; his only desire one to run and hide, to escape the monster he had unleashed upon his unsuspecting people...

Their souls clenched against the torment deep within, the exiles rode for the hills.

1: Walwain and Ambrosius

‘There’s a barbarian at the gate,’ said the porter casually, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb.

Count Ambrosius stared at the slovenly figure with annoyance and glanced around the primitive wooden hall. His warriors gaped down from their benches at the porter with ill-concealed curiosity.

‘What kind of barbarian?’ he demanded. ‘You must be more specific in your reports.’

The porter scowled, and spat on the hard-packed mud floor. ‘A Pict, by his accent and his tattoos,’ he said. ‘He says he’s related to you.’

‘Related? To me?’ Ambrosius frowned. ‘He knows that I am here? This is serious.’

‘Sir,’ said one of his men respectfully. ‘The whole of Britannia knows you fled to the mountains when Vortigern had your father murdered. Anyone who wanted to find you would not need to waste much time looking.’

‘Certainly, Caius,’ Ambrosius conceded, though the implications cut him to the quick. ‘I had hoped our constant movement about the mountains would make us harder to find.’ He looked back at the porter. ‘You say he claims to be related to me?’

The porter nodded. ‘Your nephew.’ He shrugged noncommittally. ‘He wants to join your warband.’

Ambrosius looked startled.

‘My sister’s son?’ he demanded. A sudden smile warmed his craggy face.

‘Sir?’ Caius leaned forward. ‘I wasn’t aware you had a sister.’

Ambrosius frowned at him reprovingly. This irrepressible Briton needed to be properly disciplined, but the Britons took it amiss whenever discipline was administered. Since they were all of noble blood, they claimed, equal to his, they were

exempt from such treatment; equal to him, they said, whose family had worn the purple when these barbarians had been bandits!

‘This man may be who he says he is,’ he said. ‘Not long before Vortigern had my father murdered, my sister married the ruler of a tribe of Romanised Picts. This visitor may indeed be her son.’ He clicked his fingers. ‘Bring him in, but under restraint. And tell him to leave his weapons at the gate.’ The porter nodded, and shambled out of the hall.

Ambrosius settled back in his fur-spread high seat, and glanced at the semi-barbaric figures that surrounded him. Few were truly Roman; most had joined him in his exile after finding themselves on the wrong side of Vortigern. He curled his lip.

The proud tyrant Vortigern had conceived his idea of independence from Rome in collusion with Pelagian heretics; he’d led a revolution against Ambrosius’ father to achieve it. Rumour said that now he’d taken to employing Saxon auxiliaries in order to hold back raiding Picts; tactics the Romans had used since the empire’s beginnings. But his people had risen in revolt when he went as far as to marry the daughter of the barbarian leader, and they had replaced him with his own son...

Raised voices from without broke into Ambrosius’ train of thought, and the porter re-entered hastily with a gaudy, blue-tattooed figure close behind him, brandishing a drawn sword. Ambrosius leapt to his feet.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he demanded angrily.

‘I couldn’t help it, I...’ the porter cried.

‘Silence!’ bellowed the Pict in heated tones. He turned towards the warriors on the benches in the hall. ‘Who is leader here?’

‘I am,’ replied Ambrosius proudly.

The Pict’s manner changed. He bowed gracefully, and sheathed his sword.

‘I apologise, but this churl insisted I leave my weapons outside.’ He nodded to the Count. ‘I have searched for you across the mountains for a day and a half. You are my uncle,’ he added tentatively. ‘Count Ambrosius? I am Walwain of Walweitha.’

‘I am the Count,’ Ambrosius replied. ‘Though I have no recollection of a Pict as one of my relatives.’ He studied the figure before him.

He had seen Picts before; his father had had a Pictish bodyguard and one of them had indeed married his sister. But Ambrosius mistrusted them; the bodyguard had assassinated his father after all, admittedly at Vortigern’s urging.

Still, this Pict seemed different. Though his face was as heavily tattooed, his build as small and wiry, his hair as red as any Pict, a touch of the Roman lurked in that proud jaw and hook-like nose. And though the Count had to search deep beneath the

barbarous veneer, there was something of a family resemblance.

‘Suppose I accept you for whom you claim to be,’ he said cautiously. ‘Why should I trust you not to betray my position to Vortigern?’

‘Don’t trust him,’ broke in Caius, his wild British blood belying his sober Roman name. ‘He’s a heathen Pict, probably a spy! For Vortigern or for his own people, but we can’t trust him. Remember it was the Picts who killed your father!’

‘Be silent. Remember too, Vortigern instigated the murder,’ Ambrosius countered. ‘Vortigern is the real enemy, never forget that. It is his power that we must break before we take on the barbarians...’

He broke off. The Pict was laughing.

‘You’ve no need to fear Vortigern anymore,’ Walwain said. ‘The tyrant has been toppled.’

‘Again?’ demanded Ambrosius. ‘By whom? His sons?’

Walwain shook his head. ‘His allies,’ he replied. ‘Hengest returned from exile with a larger army than before. Vortigern found it impossible to keep them all fed - the Britons hate them for their idolatry, and refused to supply them. Hengest, the crafty old Saxon, called for a peace conference with the government, supposedly to discuss their grievances, but then he had his men assassinate them.’

‘Vortigern escaped the massacre, but now he’s fled to these mountains while Hengest ravages Britannia. The Saxons have already captured Londinium, and the last I heard they were heading for Eboracum[1], laying waste to the lands along the coast.’ Walwain’s tattooed face hardened. ‘Now is the time for the Britons to unite against their foes, not to fight amongst themselves.’

‘Vortigern must die, whatever happens,’ Ambrosius replied. ‘He cannot be allowed to continue his reign of terror.’

Walwain grinned suddenly. ‘I know you have a personal stake in all this,’ he replied. ‘My own interest in the matter is equally personal. Vortigern had my father killed as well as yours. We Picts have hated and distrusted him ever since. But if you want to rule Britannia, you must see beyond the personal, if you’ll accept my unbiased advice. Your nation would be a great one if you could forget these petty squabbles and feuds. They will be Britannia’s destruction unless you unite now; forget your differences until the real enemy is crushed.’

Caius leaned forward and cried out: ‘That’s what my foster-brother always said!’

Ambrosius turned to him.

‘Artorius?’ he replied coldly. A hush fell over the feasting board at the forbidden name, but the Count’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. ‘My nephew’s idea to concentrate

on holding Britannia against the barbarians, rather than returning to the empire? But we disagreed on that. That's why he went to his friends in Gododdin.'

'That is what we need,' Walwain urged passionately. He frowned. 'What you need, I should say,' he corrected himself. Unconsciously, he'd identified himself with these southerners. 'The empire in the west is falling to the barbarians. If Britannia is to survive, it must stand strong and undivided.'

Caius laughed. 'You see, sir?' he demanded. 'Even the barbarians themselves say so, even this pagan...'

'I'm a Christian,' Walwain snarled angrily.

Caius paid him no attention. 'Even this Pict agrees with Artorius. We must ensure that Vortigern never returns to the throne. But we must turn our eyes to the real problem; defending Britannia from outside attack.'

'The Saxons are rampaging in the east,' Ambrosius said thoughtfully. 'And Vortigern's people can do nothing to fend them off.... But we are too weak to fight Hengest...'

'Call Artorius back to the fold,' Caius urged. 'Now you admit that he was right, he will forget his pride and return to us with his warband. Then we will be strong enough.'

Ambrosius nodded, pleased with this advice. Caius was thinking with rather more cunning than usual: he tended to call for immediate action, and leave the planning to others.

He turned to Walwain. 'If you wish to prove yourself in our eyes...' he said slowly.

'Which I do,' Walwain nodded. 'I want to join you, my uncle.'

'Good,' said Ambrosius coolly. 'Then you can take the message to Artorius in the North. Now, Caius. The other matter. We need to discredit Vortigern in the eyes of his followers. What do you suggest?'

Walwain interrupted again. 'I know that they are building a fortress on a southern spur of Mount Eryri.'

'Aye,' said Caius. 'I knew.'

Walwain looked surprised. 'How? They began only the other day! News must spread fast in these mountains.'

Caius looked a little shamefaced, and glanced at his leader.

'Meno saw it all in a vision,' he said. 'That's how I knew this would happen. And he knows how we can destroy Vortigern; insure that the tyrant never returns to the

throne, but wanders the land "hated by all until he dies an ignoble death."

'Meno?' Ambrosius looked troubled, as Caius ushered a white-robed form into the torchlight.

Walwain's eyes widened as he recognised the bearded, bent-backed figure of a Druid.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK...

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE by Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LIX.

THE WARNING.—THE NEW PLAN OF OPERATION.—THE INSULTING MESSAGE FROM VARNEY.

So much of the night had been consumed in these operations, that by the time they were over, and the three personages who lay upon the floor of what might be called the haunted chamber of Bannerworth Hall, even had they now been disposed to seek repose, would have had a short time to do so before the daylight would have streamed in upon them, and roused them to the bustle of waking existence.

It may be well believed what a vast amount of surprise came over the three persons in that chamber at the last little circumstance that had occurred in connection with the night's proceedings.

There was nothing which had preceded that, that did not resemble a genuine attack upon the premises; but about that last mysterious appearance, with its curious light, there was quite enough to bother the admiral and Jack Pringle to a considerable effect, whatever might be the effect upon Mr. Chillingworth, whose profession better enabled him to comprehend, chemically, what would produce effects that, no doubt, astonished them amazingly.

What with his intoxication and the violent exercise he had taken, Jack was again thoroughly prostrate; while the admiral could not have looked more astonished had the evil one himself appeared in propria persona and given him notice to quit the premises.

He was, however, the first to speak, and the words he spoke were addressed to Jack, to whom he said,—

"Jack, you lubber, what do you think of all that?"

Jack, however, was too far gone even to say "Ay, ay, sir;" and Mr. Chillingworth, slowly getting himself up to his feet, approached the admiral.

"It's hard to say so much, Admiral Bell," he said, "but it strikes me that whatever object this Sir Francis Varney, or Varney, the vampyre, has in coming into Bannerworth Hall, it is, at all events, of sufficient importance to induce him to go any

length, and not to let even a life to stand in the way of its accomplishment."

"Well, it seems so," said the admiral; "for I'll be hanged if I can make head or tail of the fellow."

"If we value our personal safety, we shall hesitate to continue a perilous adventure which I think can end only in defeat, if not in death."

"But we don't value our personal safety," said the admiral. "We've got into the adventure, and I don't see why we shouldn't carry it out. It may be growing a little serious; but what of that? For the sake of that young girl, Flora Bannerworth, as well as for the sake of my nephew, Charles Holland, I will see the end of this affair, let it be what it may; but mind you, Mr. Chillingworth, if one man chooses to go upon a desperate service, that's no reason why he should ask another to do so."

"I understand you," said Mr. Chillingworth; "but, having commenced the adventure with you, I am not the man to desert you in it. We have committed a great mistake."

"A mistake! how?"

"Why, we ought to have watched outside the house, instead of within it. There can be no doubt that if we had lain in wait in the garden, we should have been in a better position to have accomplished our object."

"Well, I don't know, doctor, but it seems to me that if Jack Pringle hadn't made such a fool of himself, we should have managed very well: and I don't know now how he came to behave in the manner he did."

"Nor I," said Mr. Chillingworth. "But, at all events, so far as the result goes, it is quite clear that any further watching, in this house, for the appearance of Sir Francis Varney, will now be in vain. He has nothing to do now but to keep quiet until we are tired out—a fact, concerning which he can easily obtain information—and then he immediately, without trouble, walks into the premises, to his own satisfaction."

"But what the deuce can he want upon the premises?"

"That question, admiral, induces me to think that we have made another mistake. We ought not to have attempted to surprise Sir Francis Varney in coming into Bannerworth Hall, but to catch him as he came out."

"Well, there's something in that," said the admiral. "This is a pretty night's business, to be sure. However, it can't be helped, it's done, and there's an end on't. And now, as the morning is near at hand, I certainly must confess I should like to get some breakfast, although I don't like that we should all leave the house together"

"Why," said Mr. Chillingworth, "as we have now no secret to keep with regard to our being here, because the principal person we wished to keep it from is aware of it, I think we cannot do better than send at once for Henry Bannerworth, tell him of the

non-success of the effort we have made in his behalf, and admit him at once into our consultation of what is next to be done."

"Agreed, agreed, I think that, without troubling him, we might have captured this Varney; but that's over now, and, as soon as Jack Pringle chooses to wake up again, I'll send him to the Bannerworths with a message."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Jack, suddenly; "all's right."

"Why, you vagabond," said the admiral, "I do believe you've been shamming!"

"Shamming what?"

"Being drunk, to be sure."

"Lor! couldn't do it," said Jack; "I'll just tell you how it was. I wakened up and found myself shut in somewhere; and, as I couldn't get out of the door, I thought I'd try the window, and there I did get out. Well, perhaps I wasn't quite the thing, but I sees two people in the garden a looking up at this ere room; and, to be sure, I thought it was you and the doctor. Well, it warn't no business of mine to interfere, so I seed one of you climb up the balcony, as I thought, and then, after which, come down head over heels with such a run, that I thought you must have broken your neck. Well, after that you fired a couple of shots in, and then, after that, I made sure it was you, admiral."

"And what made you make sure of that?"

"Why, because you scuttled away like an empty tar-barrel in full tide."

"Confound you, you scoundrel!"

"Well, then, confound you, if it comes to that. I thought I was doing you good sarvice, and that the enemy was here, when all the while it turned out as you was and the enemy wasn't, and the enemy was outside and you wasn't."

"But who threw such a confounded lot of things into the room?"

"Why, I did, of course; I had but one pistol, and, when I fired that off, I was forced to make up a broadside with what I could."

"Was there ever such a stupid!" said the admiral; "doctor, doctor, you talked of us making two mistakes; but you forgot a third and worse one still, and that was the bringing such a lubberly son of a sea-cook into the place as this fellow."

"You're another," said Jack; "and you knows it."

"Well, well," said Mr. Chillingworth, "it's no use continuing it, admiral; Jack, in his way, did, I dare say, what he considered for the best."

"I wish he'd do, then, what he considers for the worst, next time."

"Perhaps I may," said Jack, "and then you will be served out above a bit. What 'ud become of you, I wonder, if it wasn't for me? I'm as good as a mother to you, you knows that, you old babby."

"Come, come, admiral," said Mr. Chillingworth: "come down to the garden-gate; it is now just upon daybreak, and the probability is that we shall not be long there before we see some of the country people, who will get us anything we require in the shape of refreshment; and as for Jack, he seems quite sufficiently recovered now to go to the Bannerworths'."

"Oh! I can go," said Jack; "as for that, the only thing as puts me out of the way is the want of something to drink. My constitution won't stand what they call temperance living, or nothing with the chill off."

"Go at once," said the admiral, "and tel! Mr. Henry Bannerworth that we are here; but do not tell him before his sister or his mother. If you meet anybody on the road, send them here with a cargo of victuals. It strikes me that a good, comfortable breakfast wouldn't be at all amiss, doctor."

"How rapidly the day dawns," remarked Mr. Chillingworth, as he walked into the balcony from whence Varney, the vampire, had attempted to make good his entrance to the Hall.

Just as he spoke, and before Jack Pringle could get half way over to the garden gate, there came a tremendous ring at the bell which was suspended over it.

A view of that gate could not be commanded from the window of the haunted apartment, so that they could not see who it was that demanded admission.

As Jack Pringle was going down at any rate, they saw no necessity for personal interference; and he proved that there was not, by presently returning with a note which he said had been thrown over the gate by a lad, who then scampered off with all the speed he could make.

The note, exteriorly, was well got up, and had all the appearance of great care having been bestowed upon its folding and sealing.

It was duly addressed to "Admiral Bell, Bannerworth Hall," and the word "immediate" was written at one corner.

The admiral, after looking at it for some time with very great wonder, came at last to the conclusion that probably to open it would be the shortest way of arriving at a knowledge of who had sent it, and he accordingly did so.

The note was as follows:—

"My dear sir,—Feeling assured that you cannot be surrounded with those means and appliances for comfort in the Hall, in its now deserted condition, which you have a

right to expect, and so eminently deserve, I flatter myself that I shall receive an answer in the affirmative, when I request the favour of your company to breakfast, as well as that of your learned friend. Mr. Chillingworth.

"In consequence of a little accident which occurred last evening to my own residence, I am, ad interim, until the county build it up for me again, staying at a house called Walmesley Lodge, where I shall expect you with all the impatience of one soliciting an honour, and hoping that it will be conferred upon him.

"I trust that any little difference of opinion on other subjects will not interfere to prevent the harmony of our morning's meal together.

"Believe me to be, my dear sir, with the greatest possible consideration, your very obedient, humble servant,

"FRANCIS VARNEY."

The admiral gasped again, and looked at Mr. Chillingworth, and then at the note, and then at Mr. Chillingworth again, as if he was perfectly bewildered.

"That's about the coolest piece of business," said Mr. Chillingworth, "that ever I heard of."

"Hang me," said the admiral, "if I sha'n't like the fellow at last. It is cool, and I like it because it is cool. Where's my hat? where's my stick!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Accept his invitation, to be sure, and breakfast with him; and, my learned friend, as he calls you, I hope you'll come likewise. I'll take the fellow at his word. By fair means, or by foul, I'll know what he wants here; and why he persecutes this family, for whom I have an attachment; and what hand he has in the disappearance of my nephew, Charles Holland; for, as sure as there's a Heaven above us, he's at the bottom of that affair. Where is this Walmesley Lodge?"

"Just in the neighbourhood; but—"

"Come on, then; come on."

"But, really, admiral, you don't mean to say you'll breakfast with—with—"

"A vampyre? Yes, I would, and will, and mean to do so. Here, Jack, you needn't go to Mr. Bannerworth's yet. Come, my learned friend, let's take Time by the forelock."

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

AFTER LONDON, or, Wild England by Richard Jefferies

CHAPTER II: THE HOUSE OF AQUILA

Presently there came the sound of a creaking axle, which grew louder and louder as the waggon drew nearer, till it approached a shriek. The sleeper moved uneasily, but recognising the noise even in his dreams, did not wake. The horrible sounds stopped; there was the sound of voices, as if two persons, one without and one within the wall, were hailing each other; a gate swung open, and the waggon came past under the very window of the bedroom. Even habit could not enable Felix to entirely withstand so piercing a noise when almost in his ears. He sat up a minute, and glanced at the square of light on the wall to guess the time by its position.

In another minute or two the squeaking of the axle ceased, as the waggon reached the storehouses, and he immediately returned to the pillow. Without, and just beneath the window, there ran a road or way, which in part divided the enclosure into two portions; the dwelling-house and its offices being on one side, the granaries and storehouses on the other. But a few yards to the left of his room, a strong gate in the enclosing wall gave entrance to this roadway. It was called the Maple Gate, because a small maple tree grew near outside. The wall, which surrounded the whole place at a distance of eight or ten yards from the buildings, was of brick, and about nine feet high, with a ditch without.

It was partly embattled, and partly loopholed, and a banquette of earth rammed hard ran all round inside, so that the defenders might discharge darts or arrows through the embrasures, and step down out of sight to prepare a fresh supply. At each corner there was a large platform, where a considerable number of men could stand and command the approaches; there were, however, no bastions or flanking towers. On the roof of the dwelling-house a similar platform had been prepared, protected by a parapet; from which height the entire enclosure could be overlooked.

Another platform, though at a less height, was on the roof of the retainers' lodgings, so placed as especially to command the second gate. Entering by the Maple Gate, the dwelling-house was on the right hand, and the granaries and general storehouses on the left, the latter built on three sides of a square. Farther on, on the same side, were the stables, and near them the forge and workshops. Beyond these, again, were the lodgings of the retainers and labourers, near which, in the corner, was the South Gate, from which the South Road led to the cattle-pens and farms, and out to the south.

Upon the right hand, after the dwelling-house, and connected with it, came the steward's stores, where the iron tools and similar valuable articles of metal were kept. Then, after a covered passage-way, the kitchen and general hall, under one roof with the house. The house fronted in the opposite direction to the roadway; there was a narrow green lawn between it and the enceinte, or wall, and before the general hall and kitchens a gravelled court. This was parted from the lawn by palings, so that the house folk enjoyed privacy, and yet were close to their servitors. The place was called the Old House, for it dated back to the time of the ancients, and the Aquilas were proud of the simple designation of their fortified residence.

Felix's window was almost exactly opposite the entrance to the storehouse or granary yard, so that the waggon, after passing it, had to go but a little distance, and then,

turning to the left, was drawn up before the doors of the warehouse. This waggon was low, built for the carriage of goods only, of hewn plank scarcely smooth, and the wheels were solid; cut, in fact, from the butt of an elm tree. Unless continually greased the squeaking of such wheels is terrible, and the carters frequently forgot their grease-horns.

Much of the work of the farm, such as the carting of hay and corn in harvest-time, was done upon sleds; the waggons (there were but few of them) being reserved for longer journeys on the rough roads. This waggon, laden with wool, some of the season's clip, had come in four or five miles from an out-lying cot, or sheep-pen, at the foot of the hills. In the buildings round the granary yard there were stored not only the corn and flour required for the retainers (who might at any moment become a besieged garrison), but the most valuable products of the estate, the wool, hides, and tanned leather from the tan-pits, besides a great quantity of bacon and salt beef; indeed, every possible article that could be needed.

These buildings were put together with wooden pins, on account of the scarcity of iron, and were all (dwelling-houses included) roofed with red tile. Lesser houses, cottages, and sheds at a distance were thatched, but in an enclosure tiles were necessary, lest, in case of an attack, fire should be thrown.

Half an hour later, at six o'clock, the watchman blew his horn as loudly as possible for some two or three minutes, the hollow sound echoing through the place. He took the time by the sundial on the wall, it being a summer morning; in winter he was guided by the position of the stars, and often, when sun or stars were obscured, went by guess. The house horn was blown thrice a day; at six in the morning, as a signal that the day had begun, at noon as a signal for dinner, at six in the afternoon as a signal that the day (except in harvest-time) was over. The watchmen went their round about the enclosure all night long, relieved every three hours, armed with spears, and attended by mastiffs. By day one sufficed, and his station was then usually (though not always) on the highest part of the roof.

The horn re-awoke Felix; it was the note by which he had been accustomed to rise for years. He threw open the oaken shutters, and the sunlight and the fresh breeze of the May morning came freely into the room. There was now the buzz of voices without, men unloading the wool, men at the workshops and in the granaries, and others waiting at the door of the steward's store for the tools, which he handed out to them. Iron being so scarce, tools were a temptation, and were carefully locked up each night, and given out again in the morning.

Felix went to the ivory cross and kissed it in affectionate recollection of Aurora, and then looked towards the open window, in the pride and joy of youth turning to the East, the morning, and the light. Before he had half dressed there came a knock and then an impatient kick at the door. He unbarred it, and his brother Oliver entered. Oliver had been for his swim in the river. He excelled in swimming, as, indeed, in every manly exercise, being as active and energetic as Felix was outwardly languid.

His room was only across the landing, his door just opposite. It also was strewn with implements and weapons. But there was a far greater number of tools; he was an

expert and artistic workman, and his table and his seat, unlike the rude blocks in Felix's room, were tastefully carved. His seat, too, had a back, and he had even a couch of his own construction. By his bedhead hung his sword, his most valued and most valuable possession. It was one which had escaped the dispersion of the ancients; it had been ancient even in their days, and of far better work than they themselves produced.

Broad, long, straight, and well-balanced, it appeared capable of cutting through helmet and mail, when wielded by Oliver's sturdy arm. Such a sword could not have been purchased for money; money, indeed, had often been offered for it in vain; persuasion, and even covert threats from those higher in authority who coveted it, were alike wasted. The sword had been in the family for generations, and when the Baron grew too old, or rather when he turned away from active life, the second son claimed it as the fittest to use it. The claim was tacitly allowed; at all events, he had it, and meant to keep it.

In a corner stood his lance, long and sharp, for use on horse-back, and by it his saddle and accoutrements. The helmet and the shirt of mail, the iron greaves and spurs, the short iron mace to bang at the saddle-bow, spoke of the knight, the man of horses and war.

Oliver's whole delight was in exercise and sport. The boldest rider, the best swimmer, the best at leaping, at hurling the dart or the heavy hammer, ever ready for tilt or tournament, his whole life was spent with horse, sword, and lance. A year younger than Felix, he was at least ten years physically older. He measured several inches more round the chest; his massive shoulders and immense arms, brown and hairy, his powerful limbs, tower-like neck, and somewhat square jaw were the natural concomitants of enormous physical strength.

All the blood and bone and thew and sinew of the house seemed to have fallen to his share; all the fiery, restless spirit and defiant temper; all the utter recklessness and warrior's instinct. He stood every inch a man, with dark, curling, short-cut hair, brown cheek and Roman chin, trimmed moustache, brown eye, shaded by long eyelashes and well-marked brows; every inch a natural king of men. That very physical preponderance and animal beauty was perhaps his bane, for his comrades were so many, and his love adventures so innumerable, that they left him no time for serious ambition.

Between the brothers there was the strangest mixture of affection and repulsion. The elder smiled at the excitement and energy of the younger; the younger openly despised the studious habits and solitary life of the elder. In time of real trouble and difficulty they would have been drawn together; as it was, there was little communion; the one went his way, and the other his. There was perhaps rather an inclination to detract from each other's achievements than to praise them, a species of jealousy or envy without personal dislike, if that can be understood. They were good friends, and yet kept apart.

Oliver made friends of all, and thwacked and banged his enemies into respectful silence. Felix made friends of none, and was equally despised by nominal friends and

actual enemies. Oliver was open and jovial; Felix reserved and contemptuous, or sarcastic in manner. His slender frame, too tall for his width, was against him; he could neither lift the weights nor undergo the muscular strain readily borne by Oliver. It was easy to see that Felix, although nominally the eldest, had not yet reached his full development. A light complexion, fair hair and eyes, were also against him; where Oliver made conquests, Felix was unregarded. He laughed, but perhaps his secret pride was hurt.

There was but one thing Felix could do in the way of exercise and sport. He could shoot with the bow in a manner till then entirely unapproached. His arrows fell unerringly in the centre of the target, the swift deer and the hare were struck down with ease, and even the wood-pigeon in full flight. Nothing was safe from those terrible arrows. For this, and this only, his fame had gone forth; and even this was made a source of bitterness to him.

The nobles thought no arms worthy of men of descent but the sword and lance; missile weapons, as the dart and arrow, were the arms of retainers. His degradation was completed when, at a tournament, where he had mingled with the crowd, the Prince sent for him to shoot at the butt, and display his skill among the soldiery, instead of with the knights in the tilting ring. Felix shot, indeed, but shut his eyes that the arrow might go wide, and was jeered at as a failure even in that ignoble competition. Only by an iron self-control did he refrain that day from planting one of the despised shafts in the Prince's eye.

But when Oliver joked him about his failure, Felix asked him to hang up his breastplate at two hundred yards. He did so, and in an instant a shaft was sent through it. After that Oliver held his peace, and in his heart began to think that the bow was a dangerous weapon.

"So you are late again this morning," said Oliver, leaning against the recess of the window, and placing his arms on it. The sunshine fell on his curly dark hair, still wet from the river. "Studying last night, I suppose?" turning over the parchment. "Why didn't you ride into town with me?"

"The water must have been cold this morning?" said Felix, ignoring the question.

"Yes; there was a slight frost, or something like it, very early, and a mist on the surface; but it was splendid in the pool. Why don't you get up and come? You used to."

"I can swim," said Felix laconically, implying that, having learnt the art, it no more tempted him. "You were late last night. I heard you put Night in."

"We came home in style; it was rather dusky, but Night galloped the Green Miles."

"Mind she doesn't put her hoof in a rabbit's hole, some night."

"Not that. She can see like a cat. I believe we got over the twelve miles in less than an hour. Sharp work, considering the hills. You don't inquire for the news."

"What's the news to me?"

"Well, there was a quarrel at the palace yesterday afternoon. The Prince told Louis he was a double-faced traitor, and Louis told the Prince he was a suspicious fool. It nearly came to blows, and Louis is banished."

"For the fiftieth time."

"This time it is more serious."

"Don't believe it. He will be sent for again this morning; cannot you see why?"

"No."

"If the Prince is really suspicious, he will never send his brother into the country, where he might be resorted to by discontented people. He will keep him close at hand."

"I wish the quarrelling would cease; it spoils half the fun; one's obliged to creep about the court and speak in whispers, and you can't tell whom you are talking to; they may turn on you if you say too much. There is no dancing either. I hate this moody state. I wish they would either dance or fight."

"Fight! who?"

"Anybody. There's some more news, but you don't care."

"No. I do not."

"Why don't you go and live in the woods all by yourself?" said Oliver, in some heat.

Felix laughed.

"Tell me your news. I am listening."

"The Irish landed at Blacklands the day before yesterday, and burnt Robert's place; they tried Letburn, but the people there had been warned, and were ready. And there's an envoy from Sypolis arrived; some think the Assembly has broken up; they were all at daggers drawn. So much for the Holy League."

"So much for the Holy League," repeated Felix.

"What are you going to do to-day?" asked Oliver, after awhile.

"I am going down to my canoe," said Felix.

"I will go with you; the trout are rising. Have you got any hooks?"

"There's some in the box there, I think; take the tools out."

Oliver searched among the tools in the open box, all rusty and covered with dust, while Felix finished dressing, put away his parchment, and knotted the thong round his chest. He found some hooks at the bottom, and after breakfast they walked out together, Oliver carrying his rod, and a boar-spear, and Felix a boar-spear also, in addition to a small flag basket with some chisels and gouges.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[1] Roman York.