

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

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THIS WEEK'S FEATURED STORY:

Kristy Elliott's
THE DRAIN

Also Featuring,

**ON THE SUBJECT
OF FUNERALS, Pt. 2**

By C. Priest Brumley

SUPER DUPER, Pt. 20

By James Rhodes

Vol. 1 Iss. 25
1 October 2011



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

Issue 1, Volume 25

2 October 2011

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

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, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk.

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This Edition

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

This week's cover illustration is "Kommendes Ereignis" by Michael Böhme.
Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

The Drain by Kristy Elliott - *What's lurking in YOUR drain...?* HORROR

On The Subject Of Funerals Part 2 by [C. Priest Brumley](#) - *Thomas awakens to terror...* HORROR

Kane's Hollow, West Virginia by Benjamin Welton - *An account of the terrible legacy of the Bowyer family...* HORROR

State of Emergency - Part Seven by David Christopher - *The aftermath of the shooting...* SCIENCE FICTION

Super Duper by James Rhodes – *continues next week...* SCIENCE FICTION

Babbage Must Die - Part Nineteen by Gavin Chappell - *Brian faces mutiny and worse ...* SCIENCE FICTION

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 19) by Ray Cummings - *The sunset caught the Lunar mountains, flung slanting shadows over the Lunar plains. All the disc was plainly visible. The mellow Earthlight glowed serene and pale to illumine the Lunar night...* SPACE OPERA

At The Centre of the Earth - Part One by Gavin Chappell - *Eloise reaches the city of Agartha...* Last in the Going Underground series. URBAN FANTASY

THE DRAIN by Kristy Elliott

The water rained down on me from the white shower head. I turned in the cramped space doing my best not to slip. I watched the soap bubbles turn in an odd dance a few seconds before sliding down the drain. I tilted my head to the left and wonder what was down there. I stared at the drain for a few more seconds and then decided to crouch down and take a look. The water hit the back of my head and traveled down my face as I stared into the black depths of the drain.

I heard something, so I tilted my head again to get a better focus on the sound. I definitely heard something. It was a scratching, kind of like hard plastic on metal. I felt my heart beat speed up and I swallowed hard. I knew I shouldn't but my fingers weren't listening to my brain screaming. I stuck one finger at the edge of the drain; it was poised there, waiting. I took a deep breath, knowing I couldn't stop the curiosity now. I slid my finger barely inside the drain. I swallowed hard again, waiting for something, but not knowing quite what it was.

My heart was racing, thumping in my chest. It felt like there was a lump in my throat, threatening to forbid air from passing. My finger went deeper into the drain. The scratching

was getting closer. Something brushed against my finger. I yanked my finger back to me and examined it. It was unmarked. I let out the breath I was holding.

I was suddenly aware of the water hitting my back, it was getting colder. How long had I been here? I stood, swallowing hard one last time. My eyes were still focused on the drain and the scratching that was coming from deep inside. I finished my shower and stepped from the tub. I heard a strange gurgling sound and forced myself not to look back at the drain.

I finished drying off and dressing. I looked back toward the drain one last time before leaving the bathroom. I must have just been imagining things. I shuffled out of the bedroom, which was connected to the bathroom, and into the living room. I pulled my robe around me tighter. I felt a draft, but not on the outside. No matter how tight I pulled my robe around me, I could still feel the breath of cold air. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and my skin tightened as little bumps rose to the surface. I shivered and pulled my feet under me.

I sighed and found myself wishing I wasn't alone today. This was a bad time for Tammy to have to go to her doctor's appointment by herself. I didn't usually get scared, but for some reason I was nervous to be alone. I looked up at the clock and let relief escape my lips in a silent breath. Just another hour, that's all I had. Just an hour and she would be home. I didn't know why I was waiting for her to come home, she was more scared of drains than I was.

I reached for the remote; it fell off the table into that small space between the end table and sofa. The space was just big enough for my arm if I willed it to be small enough. I looked down into the space and, somehow, heard the scratching down there that I heard in the drain. How could this be? My heart raced and I found myself swallowing again. How could I be hearing the noise from the drain? There wasn't any metal down there. My eyes were wide as I slowly slid my arm down beside the couch. My fingers barely brushed the remote's solid surface. I shifted my weight and leaned forward rather than to the side. I swallowed again, trying to calm my heartbeat. I was afraid my heart would beat right out of my chest if I didn't. I squeezed my eyes shut and stretched for the last inch that I needed. My fingers closed around the remote and I pulled it up. I pushed the red button and an ear splitting scream came from the television speakers. I jumped and then laughed at myself. My laugh quivered and I realized that I was trembling inside. I got sucked into the movie on TV, it was Evil Dead. I forgot that one of the channels was running an Evil Dead marathon today. I was subconsciously aware of the faint scratching sound that came from above me.

Subconscious turned into conscious about halfway through the movie. I heard the scratching right above me. It was as if whatever was in the drain was following me through the house. It was coming from the air duct. I looked up at the duct that was right above me. I tried to focus on the movie again, but, I couldn't help but to become obsessed with the thought of the thing, crashing down on me. Eventually the scratching became too distracting and it seemed to get louder drowning out the movie.

Not being able to stand it any longer, I stood on the couch to try to get closer to the scratching. I stretched as far as I could and my finger tips barely brushed the ceiling. As soon as my fingers brushed the surface of the ceiling, the scratching stopped. Everything was still. A bit too still. I tried to get closer to the ceiling. I stood on the arm of the arm of the couch to give me those few inches. That gave me just what I needed. I was able to lay my palm on the ceiling. I tilted my head, listening. I heard some faint scratching and then something fell. I

jumped and a squeak passed my lips. I slipped off the arm of the couch. Luckily I fell on the couch and not to the floor.

I laid there on the cushions, listening. All was quiet again. I started to get up and heard another thud. This one was louder. My heart raced, thumping against the wall of my chest. My eyes were wide, staring up at the ceiling. I was expecting something to crash through and pin me to the couch, tearing me apart with its claws. I laid there paralyzed.

When I was finally able to move, I rolled to the floor. A cold sweat had broken out on my brow and I was panting. My chest hurt. There was a slight wheeze coming from my lungs. I sat on the floor with my back against the couch trying to convince myself to calm down.

“Honey. I'm home,” Tammy said as she came through the doorway.

A scream exploded from me. Darkness closed around me and I passed out. When I opened my eyes, Tammy was standing over me, a damp towel pressed to my forehead. She was looking at me with wide eyes. She looked as scared as I felt.

“Denise? Are you ok?”

I slowly sat up and nodded. I told her I was ok and then proceeded to tell her about the scratching. Her eyes were wide and I could tell she had heard the scratching too. Her face got pale. She looked as pale as I felt.

“Probably just mice,” she said after a long pause. “We should get some traps.”

“I don't think it's mice, Tammy.”

“What do you think it is, Denise? What else could it be?” She was impatient.

“I don't know, Tammy. If they are mice, they are some big damn mice. We may need to just move out and let them have the house,” I was trying to lighten the mood, but a bit perturbed at her attitude all of a sudden.

“Rats then. We will pick up some traps tomorrow. Ok? We'll get it taken care of and everything will be fine.”

All I could do was sigh. I didn't think it was mice or rats, squirrels, opossums, raccoons or anything else along those lines. There was something up there and I had a strange feeling it was stalking us. I didn't want to say anything to Tammy though. She would just say I was being paranoid or delusional or both. She didn't believe or understand my feelings. When I got a gut feeling like this it was usually right. And something didn't sit right with this.

The night plodded along and soon it was time for bed. I watched the clock and listened to Tammy breathe. I stared at the ceiling, trying not to move. Tammy was sleeping so soundly. She had work in the morning. I had the day off. A three day weekend. I would have been excited if that damn scratching wasn't so damn loud.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I threw the covers off of me and shot out of bed. I think I may have hit Tammy with the covers, because I heard a hushed moan come from her. I flipped on

the bathroom light and stared at the drain. The scratching was louder than I remember it. It was playing with me. Mocking me. It could have been because it was 3 o'clock in the morning. It didn't matter what it was. It was keeping me awake.

I decided to get the drain cleaner. I knew we had some under the sink. I opened the cupboard and there it was. Right in front. I reached for it. Good. Almost half a bottle left. I opened the container and tipped it upside down over the drain.

“Scratch this, you s.o.b.”

Not long after the bottle was empty, a foul, greenish smoke rose from the drain. It smelled like a cross between rotten eggs and scorched flesh. It made me gag and I have a strong stomach. Luckily I was able to keep my stomach from emptying itself. That is, until the drain started bubbling. At first the froth was white, then it turned pink and thick.

Luckily I was in the bathroom and right beside the toilet because my stomach decided to empty. I tried not to look at the drain again, but I no longer had control over my body. It was on autopilot. When I looked at the drain, a small eyeball had risen to the top of the thick, pink sludge.

There it was. Stuck in the goop bubbling up from the drain. It just hovered there. Staring at me. Mocking me. I couldn't pull my eyes away from it. The stench came around for a second time and hit my nose again. My stomach flipped again. A bubble popped in the ooze, shifting the eyeball. Not enough though. It was still watching me. There was intent there. I knew there was. Somewhere inside me, I knew that eyeball was plotting against me.

I forced my eyes to blink. I need to break the eye's gaze. I heard myself scream when a hand clamped on my shoulder. It was Tammy. She jumped when I screamed. I thought she was asleep.

“You ok?” Her face winkled and she pinched her nose. “What is that smell?”

I pointed to the tub. I couldn't hold my stomach anymore. Thank goodness I was still in the bathroom.

Tammy looked in the tub.

“You got it! What did you do? That's so gross.” She mumbled the last part.

Did she seriously expect me to answer her right now? As soon as I was able to pull my head out of the toilet, I told her about dumping the drain cleaner down the drain. At least I didn't hear the scratching anymore. I found myself wondering if the thing had any friends down there.

My day off was a relaxing one. It was quiet too. No scratching. Tammy went to work and I set about cleaning the house. It needed it. I hadn't had a day off in a week and a half. It was ok though. I loved my job. It was Good Friday and the gym was closed, so we all got a three day weekend.

The cleaning went pretty smooth. That is, until I came to the bathroom. The sludge had dried for the most part and the eye was encased in the hardening gunk. I pulled on gloves. Luckily the smell had dissipated for the most part. As I was cleaning I realized there was coarse hair mixed in with the hardening remains. This made me gag. I decided that I couldn't think about what I was cleaning. I stopped for lunch once my stomach had settled from cleaning the tub.

Tammy and I were going to dinner and a movie. It was our first date in a few months and we needed the time together. Not that we were having problems, just that our jobs kept us so busy we didn't have much time together. The new movie based on a Stephen King novel was out and we both loved him.

I had just finished getting ready when Tammy came home. It didn't take me long to get ready for anything. Make sure the clothes are appropriate and nice, just enough make up to take the old off. It was the hair that took the longest. Many times it would argue with me and I would have to spend more time coaxing it.

Tammy and I left about twenty minutes after she got home. We stopped for a nice healthy meal at a local restaurant and then off to catch the nine-o'clock show. It wasn't terribly busy and, for the most part, we had our choice of seats at the theater. We got there ten minutes before nine. I like getting to movies early. I love the coming attractions.

We got home at about midnight. I was ready for bed. The first thing I noticed when we walked in the house was the quiet. There wasn't any scratching. It wasn't until I let my breath out that I realized I was holding it. Tammy and I got ready for bed and slipped in at the same time. I fell asleep smiling and holding Tammy in my arms.

My eyes flew open and looked at the clock. 4:50am. Something wasn't right. I could feel it. I heard the scratching again. I turned over in bed and realized that Tammy wasn't there. She did that sometimes. She couldn't sleep, so she would get up and watch TV in the living room, that way she wouldn't wake me up. I laid there. Perfectly still. Listening. I didn't hear the TV. Somewhere inside, I knew I wouldn't.

I threw the covers off of me. My naked feet hit the cold floor and made me tense up. I stood up and went into the hallway. I called out for Tammy and paused. I was listening. I went to the stairs, called out, and paused again. I did this all the way into the living room. I was answered each time with silence. On some level, I knew I would be.

I looked for Tammy for a good thirty minutes. She wasn't in the house anywhere. I even looked outside. Her car was still there. All of her belongings were untouched. I knew, just as I knew I wouldn't find her in the house, that she didn't leave voluntarily.

As I walked around the house, I heard the scratching again. It seemed to follow me room to room. It also seemed to be getting louder. I covered my ears and ran upstairs. I began throwing clothes in a bag. I stopped. I couldn't leave. I didn't have the money to leave. I felt my insanity beginning to slip away from me. It felt like a splinter slipping out of the skin.

By noon I was pacing the house, doing anything to drown out the scratching. I had turned the radio up full blast about two hours ago. I realized I was talking to myself. Rambling really. It seemed to work somewhat. Then the scratching began to get louder. And it seemed to follow me through the house. There was another sound underneath it. A mournful wail. I didn't

know if it was because my insanity slipping away from me or what, but I thought I could hear my name in the wails.

I hadn't eaten and my stomach was growling. It was also cramping, but I couldn't bring myself to stop long enough to fix something to eat. The movement was giving me something to focus on.

By one, I had started sobbing. I felt the loneliness closing in on me. It was being carried by the scratching. The scratching and the wailing. I couldn't hear myself think. My skin itched. All of it. Arms. Legs. Front. Back. Eyelids. Even the insides of my ears. Unconsciously I scratched every place I could reach.

By three there were spots all over me where I had scratched myself raw. That was when I realized what was making me itch. It was my sanity leaking out of every pore of my body. My sanity leaving me was making me itch. The scratching throughout the house was getting louder.

By five I was weak with hunger. I was still pacing. I hadn't stopped moving since before noon. Over five hours. I hadn't sat down or eaten. I had picked raw spots all over my body and hadn't been to the bathroom. I couldn't bring myself anywhere near a drain. I knew if I did, something would escape and take me. Take me somewhere below the house. I think I may have pissed myself, but couldn't be sure.

I had started pulling out patches of my hair and the rambling continued. It actually got worse. I was making perfect sense to myself, but I am sure that would have been a different story if someone were here listening to me. If a madman rambles in the woods and there's no one around to hear him, does he make sense?

By seven-thirty I had stopped long enough to get something to eat. Microwave popcorn. It was quick and I could keep moving while making it. I was now positive that if I stopped moving, something terrible would happen. I wasn't quite sure what, but it wouldn't be pretty. And it would happen deep under the house. In a drain.

Somewhere deep inside of me, on a cellular level, I was becoming aware of the source of the scratching beginning to emerge. It was crawling out of the bowels of Hell, or wherever they were lurking. They weren't just in the drains anymore. They were in the air ducts. In the walls. Watching. Waiting.

There was a whisper in the shadows of my brain. It was telling me to go to the kitchen sink. I obeyed. I stood there. At the sink. Staring into the drain. Then I saw it. The clawed fingers. They looked more like dried twigs than fingers. I didn't want to see what they were attached to, but I couldn't look away. I was frozen there. Caught in a trance.

I saw an eye glinting up from the drain. Whatever it was, it was trying to pull itself up into the sink. I had to force myself to move. The second clawed twig gripped the opening of the drain. That was all I needed. My hand reached out and flipped the light switch on. My eyes were wide and I felt my heart trying to burst through my chest. A scream caught in my throat. The blades in the drain growled to life. They grabbed the thing and its screams were drowned out by the chewing of the blades as they ate the thing alive.

The blades caught and there was a strained hum. The creature still had one clawed hand gripping the outer edge of the drain and it worked on pulling itself up. The disposal finally cut through and thick pink pus exploded from the sink, splattering my face.

I gagged and brought one, shaky hand up to my face, wiping the entrails. I wasn't sure, but just before I flipped the light switch I could have sworn I heard the thing speak. Whisper. It sounded like 'Help me.' I shook off the thought and blew it off to my rapidly fleeing sanity. It couldn't have said anything. Could it? Rats can't speak. Can they?

I stood there for a long minute. Staring into the drain. Listening. I didn't hear anything. No scratching. No whispering. I didn't want to celebrate just yet though. I was sure I was going to hear the scratching again. Just like I did before when I poured the drain cleaner in the tub.

I was alone. Tammy had disappeared and the scratching had fallen silent. I set about pacing the floor again. I was alone with my thoughts. As scattered as they were. I felt my sanity hanging on by a thread. A glass thread.

Before long, I curled myself in the corner, pulling my knees to my chest. Movement caught my eye. They were drawn to the dark corners of the house. Something was jumping between the shadows. Playing an evil version of the kid's game "shark." I heard a chanting whisper splashed with clicking sounds. Not the clicking of nails on hardwood floors. It was the clicking of a tongue on the roof of the mouth. I couldn't see them, but I could sense them. They were getting closer to my corner. I pulled my knees in tighter.

Within seconds, my eyes got heavy. They clouded over and all I could see were shapes. I saw hunched figures about the size of rats coming toward me. Their muzzles were short and ears were tall and skinny. Their eyes were set close together and the nose was a little more than small holes in the middle of their faces.

They were alternating between walking on all fours and walking upright. I couldn't tell if they had tails. One of them laid a dry, three clawed hand on my ankle. It was cold. The cold of death. That was all I saw. My eyes closed with a heavy thud.

I opened my eyes as fast as I could. My eyelids felt like they weighed fifty pounds each. I blinked at the shapes around me. I couldn't see any details. It looked like I was seeing the world through grey scale infrared glasses. The only light was about three feet above me. A perfect circle. I reached out my hands. The walls were warm, but felt metal. Damp. I suddenly realized I was in a drain pipe. My only thought was to escape.

I heard muffled voices above me. I began to move toward them. I was thinking, perhaps they could help me. I would plead my case. Whatever that was. I moved steadily toward the voices and all I heard was the scratching.

ON THE SUBJECT OF FUNERALS by C. Priest Brumley

Part 2: Waking Up...

The sound of Jim's worried voice hit my ears before consciousness fully returned.

"Thomas? Baby, are you okay? Please wake up...." It sounded like he was extremely worried. My eyes opened a fraction to see Jim knelt down besides my prone body, tears rolling down his cheeks and worry evident on his face. I opened my mouth in an effort to reassure him that I was okay, but all I managed was a drawn out grunt. That seemed to be enough for Jim.

"Thomas, oh my fuckin' god! I was so worried..." He trailed off. "What happened? Are you okay?" he added hurriedly. I groaned again in response. That seemed to be my thing lately.

Jim went to pick me up in his arms, but a new voice entered, stage right, and said, "Don't move him yet, I want to check him out first and make sure he's okay to get up."

I rolled my head to the source of the new voice, and saw one of the younger pallbearers that I didn't want to know kneel down next to me and promptly pull a penlight from inside his jacket. Apparently there *was* a doctor in the house. I closed my eyes and chuckled at my own joke, then slowly made the effort to open my eyes fully and investigate the world around me.

There was a circle of people surrounding Jim, the doctor and I, most with worried faces. Those that weren't seemed amused by the situation, and although I felt my anger flare a bit, I took it in stride externally. Never let them see you sweat, as the old expression went. I looked around and saw Lilly, Vincent, Mrs. Carol, the other pallbearers, the minister, and a few others looking down... at...

I double-took, and indeed there she was, in all her glory, wearing the purple dress she wore to Vincent's wedding two years ago and looking like hell. Her eyes were sunken in from their normal position, and she was definitely more pale than I had ever seen her in life. But still, she was there, with a look on her face that I couldn't quite pinpoint. I pointed a finger at her and began to stammer, but Jim cut me off before I could scream or manage anything coherent.

"What are you pointing at?" he asked in a fairly hushed voice, following the line of my finger until he saw what I was pointing to.

The moment I saw Mrs. Carol reflected in his brown eyes, I saw something that will haunt me until the end of my days: Jim, the man that's not scared of a single thing in this world, my rock in a sea of turmoil, went as white as a ghost. He too started staring and stammering at Mrs. Carol, finally managing to mutter the word, "How?" several times in succession.

The pair of us making what was evidently a scene had started to cause a bit of an uproar in the crowd around us. Those nearest us, the doctor included, looked around wildly, trying to identify the source of the problem. Lilly was the first after Jim and me to catch on. Her face scanned the crowd like everyone else, shock and concern plastered across her thin face, until she spotted her mother.

Her face lit up as soon as she comprehended what she saw. Lilly then squealed loudly, tears pouring down her alabaster cheeks, and ran to her mother in a manner reminiscent of a small child who had lost their parent (which, I reflected, she *had*). She threw her arms around Mrs. Carol haphazardly and hugged her rather tightly as one might have expected.

Mrs. Carol seemed to not notice Lilly at all at first, still facing me with that disconcerting look that almost seemed like... Was that hunger? Or anger? Or longing? I shook my head violently, inducing a wave of dizziness and nausea as I did so.

The dizziness went away after a moment, but the nausea didn't. I hurriedly threw my head to the side just in time to vomit on the ground between me and Vincent, whom I jumped back out of reflex and bumped into the woman behind him. The woman, in turn, hit Vincent around the head with her suitcase of a purse and cursed vehemently at him in mangled Spanglish, prompting a brief apology from him and a withering look at me.

The nausea passed after another moment, but the fear and paranoia of another wave stuck with me. I held my head to the side while enduring the acrid stench of my own sick, letting the aftershock wave roll over me before I attempted to sit upright and figure out what in the hell was going on. My head spun from the fumes, and I felt another lurch come up from stomach as the smell fully hit me. Mercifully it didn't come.

Jim had partly diverted his attention from Mrs. Carol to me, crouching over me in a halfway defensive position while rubbing my neck slowly to help ward off another bout of vomiting. He was still staring at the recently deceased with a wary face; like me, he obviously didn't trust what he saw in the situation. Something wasn't right, and he wanted to make sure I was safe and taken care of before anything else. My protector.

I looked up and realized that Mrs. Carol had finally noticed Lilly, and had embraced her back. She was even crying as she buried her face into the curve of Lilly's neck. Upon later contemplation, I even think it was morbidly artful the way both of their tears mingled with the outpouring of blood coming from the area where Mrs. Carol's face met Lilly's flesh.

Lilly gasped and tried to pull away. Mrs. Carol wouldn't let her.

Lilly's struggles were causing her more pain, as Mrs. Carol still had her teeth embedded deep in Lilly's neck. She was chewing and gnawing like an old man who had only recently remembered how to eat and was determined to be sated. Lilly audibly cried out, sobbing at first, then screaming at the top of her lungs. A piercing sound.

Most people nearby whom had formed around me and Jim had by now excitedly turned to Lilly and her mother, expecting to see a tearful reunion. Instead, they stood transfixed by the grotesquery before them, not sure of what was going on, most being too cautious to approach or intervene.

"HELP ME!!!" Lilly cried out at the top of her lungs, but the sound was wet, as though being forced through a glass of milk. "PLEASE SOMEBODY HELP ME GOD DAMMIT!!!"

Vincent was the first to step in, running around Jim and I and trying to forcibly separate the two before being thrown backward single-handedly (!) by Mrs. Carol. Lilly's screams had at this point fully devolved into gurgles as more and more of her neck and throat were devoured. Jim hurriedly stood up, grabbing me by my shoulders and forcing me to my feet.

"We have to get out of here," he said in a low, urgent voice that only I could hear. "Can you walk, baby?"

"Yeah, I think so," I replied, still not taking my eyes off the slaughter, and took one tentative step in the direction of Jim's truck. Thankfully I found my weight supported me, and took another, all the while being supported by Jim and his farmer's strength.

We made our way to the truck slowly, winding around the onlookers in our path with the pretense of needing to get me to the hospital. It didn't take long, and as soon as we climbed

inside the cabin, I pulled out my phone and dialed the three numbers we all know by heart while Jim lit two cigarettes and handed me one.

"911, please state your emergency," came the bored voice on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, my name's Thomas Black and I'm at the Requiem Gardens Cemetery in Metairie, and I'd like to report what I *think* is a murder!" I blurted out rather quickly.

"Hold on, sir, you *think* it's a murder?" came the operator in a voice that suggested she couldn't care less if World War Three had broken out here today, just so long as she got her paycheck.

"Uh..." I trailed, "Yeah. I know this is going to sound weird but please follow me. My ex-mother-in-law, whom we had just had a funeral for, got out of her coffin and is eating my ex-wife's neck while everyone is standing around and staring.... That's murder, right?" I added almost childishly. On second thought, yeah, I really didn't think this out.

I pulled a drag on the cigarette Jim had handed me while I sat through a thoroughly stunned silence on the other end of the phone. Eventually I heard the telltale clicking of a keyboard being worked furiously, followed by the sound of multiple people in the background snickering.

At this point, my temper started to flare a bit, and I added, "You do believe me right?" in a serious tone.

More snickering. And finally, my anger broke.

"Listen here, you stupid fucking bitch," I started, causing Jim to look my way with a mixture of awe and solemnity, "I just witnessed my ex-wife have her neck turned into fucking kibble by a dead fucking woman and all you're gonna do is call your stupid-ass dumb-fucking coworkers and laugh at me like I'm some crazy fucking transient making a god damn crank call?!"

"Whoa, baby," Jim said out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes still scanning the graveyard in front of him in case the carnage spilled our way.

The laughter at the other end of the phone stopped almost as soon as the last syllable left my mouth. Apparently I had been put on speakerphone without my knowledge or previous consent. Before I could press that advantage, though, a new voice entered my phone.

"Sir, I don't like that tone you're taking with my operator, and I would appreciate it if you'd apologize to her right now or hang up the phone and take your damned fib elsewhere," came a deep voice that I presumed to be the supervisor. I opted for the latter choice.

"What are we gonna do, Jim?" I asked after roughly shoving the phone in my pocket, "Do you want to stay here and try to stop her or do you wanna bail and try and find an actual policeman to..."

BANG.

"What the fuck?" I half-screamed. Jim cautiously craned his head around to see the bed of the truck, where the sound had emanated from. Almost instantly, he shot back around, put the keys in the ignition, and tried like hell to crank the engine up with the celerity of the gods.

"What was that?" I asked, afraid to turn around.

"....."

"Baby...?"

"Vincent's head."

KANE'S HOLLOW, WEST VIRGINIA by Benjamin Welton

For the village dead to the moon outspread

Never shone in the sunset's gleam,

But grew out of the deep that dead years keep

Where the rivers of madness stream

Down the gulfs to a pit of dream.

-H.P. Lovecraft, "Hallowe'en in a Suburb" (1926).

Kane's Hollow sits at the outer edge of Pleasants County, with a waterfront adjacent to the Ohio River. In terms of general geography, Kane's Hollow is considered part of the Parkersburg-Marietta-Vienna metropolis, if "metropolis" is even the correct term to describe an area with a smaller population than one street block in New York City. While Kane's Hollow and its population (18,561 as of the 2000 Census) may never be described as urbane, they nevertheless possess the certain picturesque quality that attracts so many tourists each year to this part of Appalachia. For instance, Kane's Hollow can boast of scenic mountain vistas along the local mountain ridges known locally as "The Tracks," as well as extensive riverfront attractions ranging from a yearly regatta to numerous swimming "holes." If natural beauty does not pique your interest, then the city's modest downtown area, with its quaint mom and pop shops, specialty stores (especially those dealing in the Halloween market), and dining establishments will certainly meet your needs.

For all you interested in more high-brow affairs, Kane's Hollow just happens to be the home of Straub College. Founded in 1872 by Edward Straub, a local businessman, philanthropist, and a Democratic politician of some renown, Straub College is an internationally recognized academic institution which year after year produces several young scholars who eventually go on to attend such universities as Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Princeton as graduate students. Likewise, instructors at Straub are known nationally and for the most part widely published. Why, even just last year, Dr. Kate Abraham won international acclaim for her book *Searching the Ruins: The Last Remnants of King Solomon's Israel* (Oxford, 2009), becoming the only work on archaeology in recent memory to top the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

Kane's Hollow isn't just for those interested in ancient history, either. The city itself is rich in late Victorian history, with many small mansions being present, especially in the neighborhood known as Oak Grove. The residents of Oak Grove are mostly the descendants

of the oilmen and coal barons who flooded the Ohio Valley after the Civil War. As such, Oak Grove is the domain of the elite of Kane's Hollow. Their collective wealth can be seen in the ways in which they dress their children in well-kept Oxford shirts and slacks with perfectly pressed neckties. Their wealth is also evident in St. Tristan's Episcopal Church, a lavish neo-Gothic affair which forms the centerpiece of the neighborhood. It is not uncommon to still see this church in use on Sunday mornings, often with a line stretching the short walk from Parkersburg Avenue to Belknap Street. It is no wonder that most Oak Grove residents prefer to list their address as Oak Grove rather than Kane's Hollow; for the city has touches of stygian darkness.

The rougher sections of Kane's Hollow begin around Morrison Park, a once pristine playground that has become a known meeting place for drug dealers, dog fighters, and sexual perverts. Traveling south from Morrison Park, we come to an even grittier area known simply as "The Jungle." This area, which encompasses all the territory between Elm Street and Cassville, the next town over, faces the Ohio River with a lowly assortment of dive bars, bordellos, and gambling establishments. "The Jungle" was once home to the immigrant populations that came over to work in the area's coal mines and glass factories, but those hard-working Slavic, Italian, Irish, and even African American faces are no longer seen. "The Jungle" is now home to only the most wretched individuals of diverse backgrounds, united only in their love of vice and their hatred of labor. Common in "The Jungle" are knife scars, STDs, criminal records, and concealed firearms. Visitors from outside can only expect to be met with furtive glances, burly fists about the face, or a sundry assortment of other unpleasant things. Needless to say, the Pleasants County Sheriff's Department, which handles all the law enforcement duties in Kane's Hollow, never runs out of things to do on Friday and Saturday nights. Only the most brave or daring Straub student can be found drinking down in "The Jungle."

Unfortunately, "The Jungle" is not an anomaly insofar as the popular history of Kane's Hollow is concerned. Besides the more mundane tales of gunfights, lynch mobs, and family vendettas, the history and, more precisely, the folklore of the city is awash in blood and tales of the weird and unexplained. For some reason or another, ever since the Confederate bushwhacker "Crazy" Cincinnatus Kane made this area his headquarters late in 1864, thus founding Kane's Hollow, the city has acted as a beacon for the violent and the depraved. Kane's Hollow is the home of such notorious figures as Ignatius Long, the bank robber responsible for gunning down Sheriff Edgar T. Trimble in 1889, Ms. Luella Gordon, the legendary blackmailer who was finally apprehended in Columbus in 1901, and most infamously, Gerhardt Kunkle, the serial killer responsible for the death of eight women between 1919-1923. For more specific information regarding the uglier sides of Kane's Hollow's history, see Dr. Allen Swecker's *The Mark of Kane* (Berkeley, 1999).

According to the historical records as well as the research collected by anthropologists and folklorists, the origin of Kane's Hollow's haunted legacy (which is why, I'm sure, you are reading this article in the first place) began in the mid eighteenth century. The first white family to settle in the region was the Bowyer family, formally of the Rhode Island Colony. Many terrible stories have been whispered about the Bowyers, and even today, especially in the more remote stretches of Pleasants County, rustic storytellers still visibly tremble at the mere mention of the family's West Virginia patriarch, Augustus Morgan Bowyer. While mostly these stories can be laughed off as small examples of superstitious hogwash, what is factually known about the Bowyers does much to explain the abundance of sordid tales about them. Here I will cede the floor to Dr. Swecker.

The origins of the Bowyer family can be traced back to the eleventh century, when the line was founded in England by Henri Boyer, formally of Normandy. As told in the *Doomsday Chronicle*, Henri was a minor noble who was bequeathed lands in Cornwall as thanks for his heroic deeds at the Battle of Hastings. But, as Dr. Bruce Henniker has shown, ‘Henri was widely disliked by his fellow Normans, and, as such, he was given lands in a part of England considered uninhabitable and barbarous (185).’ The source of this disdain apparently had roots in the fact that Henri was both a recent settler in Normandy (somewhere around 1060) and an even more recent convert to Christianity. For the other Norman nobles in England, Henri reeked too much of their previous Scandinavian and pagan past (85-86).

Henri’s time in Cornwall is not well documented, although it is widely rumored by Cornish philologists and folklorists that Henri was the real life inspiration for the dreaded Blunderbore legend.[1][1] One version of the Blunderbore legend describes the fearsome giant as a soulless being who captured children on moonless nights for the purpose of sacrificing them to unnameable gods. As it stands today, the Blunderbore is used by Cornish parents as a sort of bogey-man, warning children about the potential threat posed by strangers.

This parcel of Cornish folklore aside, Henri and his heirs are simply non-existent in the historical records. Whether this was deliberate or not cannot be fully stated at this time. But while the Bowyers of Cornwall seem like a pack of ghosts, the Bowyers who came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1690 were all too real. Once again, I grant Dr. Swecker the floor:

The Massachusetts Bay Colony seemed like an odd choice for the Bowyers, especially considering the widespread rumors of their devout heathenism. Likewise, the Bowyers hailed from Cornwall, a part of England considered beastly and far too Celtic for tastes of the Puritans of southeastern England. Against these odds, the Bowyers managed to flourish in the colony. Indeed the only written account of Jericho Bowyer, the family patriarch, spoke favorably of his business acumen and his lovely wife Abigail. But this same account also hinted at the darker aspects of Jericho’s character, such as his ‘dark eyes which bespeak of devilry and malice.[2][2]’ Jericho, according to the author, was also a giant whose repulsive height was only increased by his corpulent body. His hands were supposedly the size of boulders, with ‘tangled, animal hair covering all extremities of skin.[3][3]’ With such images in mind, many fellow colonists regarded Jericho as a sort of human Grendel or werewolf. These beliefs would only increase with the madness of 1692 (101-102).

During the Salem Witch Trials, one accuser, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Peabody, came forward to claim that she had been magically seduced by Jericho Bowyer. Ms. Peabody stated that Jericho came to her as a nude black man with a lower half resembling that of a goat. Jericho then proceeded to take Ms. Peabody to a clearing in the woods wherein a great pyre had been built. Ms. Peabody’s testimony then claimed that a noticeably aroused Jericho attempted to rape Ms. Peabody, but was thwarted by defensive struggles from Ms. Peabody.

At some point, Ms. Peabody claimed that Jericho unsheathed a blade of “non-European origin” (13) with the intention of murder. Once again, Ms. Peabody successfully defended herself and managed to avoid further molestation before absconding into the night. Her testimony ends with her claim that she could hear Jericho “braying like a hound with great anger” (14).

Ms. Peabody's testimony is out of keeping with the others of the Salem Witchcraft Trials. For one, instead of some lonely and already ostracized spinster being accused of practicing Satanic magic, it was a man of some standing in the business circle of the colony. Secondly, Ms. Peabody never once spoke of being in a dream-like stupor nor did she claim her ordeal ended upon waking. Ms. Peabody clearly stated that her ordeal occurred while she was of her senses and her scars apparently bore this out.[4][4] These scars also highlight a third aberration within Ms. Peabody's testimony and that is the fact that the evidence of grotesque cuts and bruises on her body, especially around the areas of her upper thighs and stomach. The fourth and most undeniably shocking difference in Ms. Peabody's testimony as opposed to all the others was that no action was taken whatsoever to publicly persecute or punish Jericho Bowyer. Jericho and his family were simply too frightening for the authorities. Their fears ranged from the mundane (Jericho's collection of firearms) to the outré (Jericho's supposed ability to transform into any forest creature, such as a wolf or a snake). For these reasons and others, the Bowyers were left untouched, and yet they still decided to relocate to the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations sometime in the eighteenth century.

In Rhode Island, the Bowyers again seemed to have slipped from the historical records. No known mentions of the Bowyers or their property exists in any written accounts, and furthermore, the knowledge that the Bowyers eventually settled in western Virginia comes from a Union officer's journal account dated 1863. What happened during the years spent in Rhode Island are not known, although literature scholar and H.P. Lovecraft expert Dr. Antonio Mendoza of the University of Buenos Aires claims that the Bowyers served as the model for the "Wizard" Whateleys in "The Dunwich Horror" (1928). Although Dr. Mendoza's theory is supported by a paucity of sources and his assertions seem to be based more on conjecture than anything else, his claim has been generally accepted by many.

The first mention of the Bowyers in West Virginia comes from one of the first first-hand accounts of the new state. As part of a mission to assess the Union Army's recruiting potential among West Virginians, Captain Ezekiel Payne of the 9th Indiana Infantry set out to describe West Virginia, its terrain and its people. While Captain Payne's account mostly describes West Virginia as a beautiful state with gentle, rolling hills and lush vegetation, but with extremely low recruiting potential (except in the northern panhandle region and Morgantown), his account of meeting one Increase Bowyer stands out.

For Captain Payne, who regarded his mission and the state as a backwater of the war, Increase Bowyer and his mansion (which once stood on an island five miles ashore from Kane's Point) served as a cause célèbre. Finally, as Captain Payne wrote, there existed a cultured white man in the wilderness of West Virginia. Captain Payne's writing is all aglow with descriptions of Increase Bowyer's prodigious book collection and his seemingly endless supply of fine whiskey.

But, as with all the known accounts of the Bowyers, Captain Payne detected subtle hints of the abnormal within the Bowyer household. The house itself, a gigantic colonial affair with pale blue siding, black shutters, and white, Doric columns, both excited and repulsed Captain Payne. While at once he regarded the exterior of the Bowyer home as an exquisite relic of a better time, Captain Payne also abhorred Increase's prominent display of Indian scalps in the main foyer. Increase's wife also disgusted Captain Payne for reasons which I'll let him explain:

While Increase is of unquestionable Anglo-Saxon lineage, with his chestnut hair and great height, his wife, Isadora, is from the lowliest stock of Mexican. Increase claims to have met

Isadora while he was serving in the Mexican War in Veracruz. Isadora, or so Increase claims, was a highly respected *bruja* along the Veracruz waterfront. I haven't the slightest idea exactly what the word *bruja* means, but I believe Increase when he says that it denotes a sort of spiritual healer. A *bruja* or not, I must confess there is something about Mrs. Bowyer which upsets me. Her appearance suggests the worst sort of miscegenation, and her persistent silence only heightens the mystery that surrounds her. She cannot be but five feet two inches, with a petite frame that borders on the childlike. Her hair, which is worn long and kinky, is of the deepest, darkest black I've ever seen. But without question, Mrs. Bowyer's most distinctive feature is her eyes. They are as luminous and shifty as a feline's and they also contain a feline's sense of malevolence. I cannot help but be disgusted by this woman. What a gentleman such as Increase can see in such a creature is beyond my powers to see (July 20, 1863).

Oddly enough, later on in his journal entry for July 27, 1863, Captain Payne answers his own question. He tells of Increase's nightly jaunts into the wilderness surrounding the island, which, as Captain Payne guesses, had something to do with Increase's professed interest in the occult. Also, in his July 27th journal entry, Captain Payne, who was clearly sexually interested in the exotic Isadora, describes the haunting sounds of male and female voices (supposedly the Bowyers) that nightly assaulted the ears of his men asleep on the Bowyer property. To Captain Payne's ears, these wailings reminded him of "the stories of Negro 'hoodoo' ceremonies that are so prevalent in the Mississippi Delta region." Even though Captain Payne goes on to spend a great deal of time and energy on describing these nightly noises, he only claims to have made out one distinct word—"Shub-Niggurath."

After spending two weeks on the Bowyer property, Payne and his men moved deeper into the interior to continue their study of the new state. But before we leave Captain Payne, there is one interesting side note involving two soldiers under Payne's command. Before committing suicide in his Ohio home in 1876, James Fenton, a former Private with the 9th Indiana, put to paper a gruesome account of his experiences on Bowyer Island. What follows now is Private Fenton's full suicide note.

On the night of 26 July 1863, I and Private Alexander King McBride left our squad's temporary camp located on the front yard of the Bowyer mansion around 2100 in order to locate more fire wood. After an hour of traveling deep into the island's forest, Private McBride claimed to see some sort of fire burning in the distance. After being alerted to this fact, I too began to discern the distant firelight, which I believe to be coming from the other extremity of the island (which is approximately eight miles long). At this point, our curiosities were excited and we agreed upon a closer investigation.

As we got closer and closer to the firelight, strange noises began to gain in strength and frequency. These noises were similar to the sounds of religious festivals, and indeed, at first I thought Private McBride and I were closing in on a revival meeting of some sort. But as we got nearer, I discerned the sounds of drums and flutes of the most archaic kind. The rhythm of the music was strange and unlike anything I had ever heard before. Unfortunately, Private McBride and I decided to pursue our interests to the end instead of turning around and away from that ungodly sight.

When McBride and I reached the boundary of the clearing wherein the fire was located, we espied two figures immediately. One of the figures was Mrs. Bowyer. Mrs. Bowyer was entirely nude, and yet her entire body was covered in ghostly gray paint. The other figure along with Mrs. Bowyer was the most horrid thing imaginable. This beast, which has haunted

my sleep ever since, was a bipedal animal which looked similar to a wolf. Its height was well above seven feet and its coat was dark brown with striking streaks of silver. The face of this beast was beyond ferocious, and its hideousness was downright demonic. This hellhound was astride Mrs. Bowyer in the act of copulation of the most revolting sort. Unbelievably, Mrs. Bowyer seemed in ecstasy rather than in fear.

This act filled McBride and I with such filthiness that even now I cannot successfully wash away. But even this accursed image cannot compare to the other thing. While McBride and I were transfixed on the scene around the fire, we both began to hear the sound of renewed drumming and chanting. These noxious sounds were emanating from the other end of the clearing, and both McBride and I saw figures dancing in the inky blackness beyond the fire. These figures appeared to be an assortment of men and beasts engaged in Dionysian revelry.

Seemingly one figure was in charge of all this madness—a priest of sorts. His voice (which reminded both McBride and I of Mr. Bowyer's) thundered from some unknown location. His chants of unfamiliar words and phrases were often repeated by the thriving horde beyond the clearing, while the beast and Mrs. Bowyer continued their infernal activity in oblivious bliss.

The whole scene seemed to grow in power with each thriving minute, and the aura of blasphemous pulsation reminded me of the Bosch canvass my father kept in his second floor study. At some point, I retched. McBride seemed to have turned to stone; for, his eyes showed a lusterless shine and his facial expression was immobile. I did everything I could to arouse McBride out of his trance, but it was all to no avail. Fear caused me to contemplate abandoning McBride to the devils, but my military training was strong enough to suppress this thought.

Since I knew a moment longer in those woods meant certain death for the both of us, I physically dragged McBride away back to the Bowyer mansion and our camp. We must have taken forever because I can recall with exactitude was the seemingly endless parade of oak trees, moss-covered stones, and wet forest floor. When McBride and I returned to camp it was near daylight. We both made a solemn vow to never speak of what we saw that night, and, until now, I have kept my promise. McBride was killed at Kennesaw Mountain with our secret still held tightly to his lips.

And now since I have revealed here the worst moment of my miserable life, I can no longer continue. I must follow McBride into Hell. Goodbye and goddamn you, Increase Bowyer.

- Private James Samuel Fenton, 9th Indiana Volunteer Infantry. Marietta, Ohio.

Since James Fenton's story was first published in an 1892 book of Appalachian folklore (with substantial editing), paranormal, spiritualist, folklore, and Civil War investigators and enthusiasts have examined the case backwards and forwards. Fenton's tale and the resulting popular interest in it had much to do with the economic boom that occurred in Kane's Hollow in the early 1900s. When coal and natural gas deposits were discovered in Kane's Hollow around 1895, outside business interests began to flood the small town. Business in turn attracted labor which helped the population of Kane's Hollow to triple between 1900 and 1920.

For many years Kane's Hollow was known for its thriving economy rather than its ghoulish first family. But underneath all of this veneer of prosperity there was dark talk. Many miners, especially those immigrant miners who originally came from the legend-haunted countries of southern and Eastern Europe, told tales of ghostly sounds and

experiences down in the mines. Many miners told of odd knockings behind the walls and even the faint sounds of drums echoing from below. One miner in 1921 even went so far as to investigate the odd noises with just his pick and head lamp. This miner, who has never been identified, apparently vanished without a trace into the deep recesses of mineshaft #22.

Many in Kane's Hollow today still claim that this is the real reason why the miners went on strike in 1921. The terrified miners simply did not want to work in what they believed were cursed mines. Unfortunately, the strike turned into a three day battle between the striking miners and agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency who had been hired by the Blaine-Davis Consolidated Trust Company, the mine operators. The battle would claim five Baldwin-Felts operatives and twelve miners, and it ended when the miners were forced back into the mines, many at gunpoint. Miners still continued to complain about strange occurrences in the mines up until the last one was closed in 1970, and even then many still shun the abandoned mines as haunted.

Similar to the mines, the Bowyer mansion (which is nothing more than burned out foundation) stands empty today. The reason for this is another strange story in the annals of the history of Kane's Hollow. The last occupant of the mansion, the playboy Willis Bowyer, was killed along with his wife and child and twenty others in a blaze caused by Trenton Mohr, a local reputed to be insane. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, the Bowyer mansion was the focal point of Kane's Hollow's upper crust social scene. Even through the crash of 1929 and its Depression and wartime rationing, Willis Bowyer continued lavishly to entertain his guests with parties that often extended into the morning hours. While mostly these parties were composed of traditional entertainments such as drinking, recreational drug use, and casual sex, there were rumors that less acceptable, more devious acts were performed at these gatherings.

The older gossipers that met daily in front of Sally Trickett's grocery store on Canterbury Avenue often suggested tales of opium circles, cock fights, and, to their sensibilities the most shocking thing of all, orgies. These suggestions were the most widespread mainly because Ed Carswell saw to it that everyone in town knew about them. But there were also other, less well-known rumors about the weekly gatherings on Bowyer Island.

Dr. Lewis Kleiner, a professor of literature at West Virginia University, often spoke to close associates about his belief that the guests on Bowyer Island actually made up a witch's coven. His belief was based not only on his reading of the legends about Kane's Hollow and the Bowyer family; it was also based on his personal observations of the Bowyer parties. Apparently Dr. Kleiner would hide in the forest outside the Bowyer mansion on the nights of the festivities and watch and take notes on what he observed and heard. When Dr. Kleiner tried to publish his findings and his thesis concerning the "Bowyer Witch Circle," he not only lost his tenure, he also was politely expelled from academic life. Dr. Kleiner's reputation was further damaged when his former friend and associate Dr. Robert Niedzinski wrote in an editorial that Kleiner was nothing more than a voyeur who hoped to catch the notoriously beautiful Mrs. Bowyer (nee Dzija) in the buff.

Amazingly, only one outsider ever entered the Bowyer mansion. Sheriff Dell Trimble, the only a deputy, was called out to the Bowyer mansion on Halloween night, 1942. Deputy Trimble begrudgingly took the call, even though he was scheduled to leave for basic training the very next morning. The caller, Marjorie Applewhite, claimed to hear screaming coming from the mansion. She said it sounded like a young woman being "skinned alive.[5][5]" When Deputy Trimble arrived, he was confronted by many hideous monsters, everything

from werewolves to vampires to red-cloaked demons. These were of course the revelers in costume.

One thing Deputy Trimble could not find though was any sign of a crime. After a perfunctory examination of the premises, Deputy Trimble left after first apologizing to the Bowyers for disturbing their party. Although Deputy Trimble today still maintains that all the legends about the Bowyer family and their mansion are false and are of the most ignorant sort, he also claims that that night was one of the most uncomfortable of his life. "I felt completely disarmed by the whole situation," Sheriff Trimble told Dr. Swecker years later, "Everywhere I looked in that house eyes hidden by masks followed me. It was creepy as all get out. And worst of all, for some reason I know they were hiding something from me, like maybe that screaming girl was actually locked away somewhere in there. I'll tell you something, I was glad to ship off to basic and the war the next day" (303).

Maybe it was all the rumors about the devil-worshipping Bowyers or maybe it was all about a twisted sense of revenge for his son's death at Leyte Gulf, but the one sure fact is that on December 12, 1945, Trenton Mohr set the Bowyer mansion on fire. Inside were at least thirty people, including Willis, his wife, and daughter. Because the flames took so quickly and because Trenton Mohr's rifle shots kept people inside, no one survived. Trenton Mohr turned himself in that very night and he was soon found guilty of first degree murder. From the time that he turned himself in to his death from liver cancer in 1988, Trenton Mohr never spoke about the mansion or what he did and why he did it.

Kane's Hollow residents who were perplexed by the mystery of Trenton Mohr's rampage were also mystified by the fact that none of the remains could be properly identified. This fact not only failed to answer the question about who really attended the Bowyer gatherings (a source of continued conjecture and accusation), but it also inadvertently gave rise to the myth that at least one of the Bowyers escaped, even though three headstones are present in the Bowyer family burial ground on the island.

The continued mystery surrounding the Bowyers and their island also influenced another black chapter in the city's history. Mark Bonura was an undergraduate student at Straub College when he began researching the Bowyers. Previously, Bonura was an accomplished young academic who was also known for his popularity on campus. He was noticeably handsome, with dark olive skin and curly black hair. It was not uncommon to see Bonura in the arms of an attractive young woman on Friday nights in Mack Skivington's bar on Holland Street. But Bonura began to change significantly when he started delving into the Bowyers and their abnormal past. He quit many campus associations and completely stopped his social life. His grades likewise began to suffer, and his instructors complained that he no longer attended their classes. Bonura also moved out of his apartment on Dye Road and took up residence on Bowyer Island. His new home was a worn camping tent.

About the same time Mark Bonura began to slip into eccentricity, young co-eds began to disappear from the Straub campus. The first body to be recovered was that of eighteen year-old Mary Elizabeth Braddock of New Egypt, New Jersey. Mary Elizabeth's body washed up in "The Jungle" and was found at 3 a.m. by Jeffrey Hoffman, an unemployed day laborer. Mary Elizabeth had been essentially dissected like a frog in a high school biology class. Not only was her corpse missing its spleen and intestines, but her left breast had also been severed.

The discovery of Mary Elizabeth's body was followed by the discovery of Eloise Hickman (19, Fairmont, WV), Laci Vojtasko (21, New Castle, PA), Alexandra Rollins (20, Kane's Hollow, WV), Joyce Hornak (18, Kane's Hollow, WV), and Suxing Yan (24, Beijing, China). All five bodies were mutilated in the same manner as Mary Elizabeth Braddock, although Suxing Yan had also been decapitated. These victims were all also found washed ashore, which led Pleasants County Sheriff investigators to believe that the killer was using one of the numerous islands in and around Kane's Hollow. Initial investigations led to dead ends and even nightly sweeps into "The Jungle" turned up no leads.

The big break in the case finally came when Dr. Jennifer Garcia contacted Sheriff Trimble's office about the strange messages she had been receiving for the past four months. Dr. Garcia, a theology professor at Straub, had once taught Mark Bonura and believed that the obscene written messages were coming from him. These messages were covered in odd hieroglyphics and words of unknown origin. Interestingly enough, one word that kept recurring was "Shub-Niggurath." But the most solid piece of evidence that came from these messages was the reoccurring sentence "since they killed Saint Willis & burned his temple, evil is unfocused. It is now in the shit streams & blood of Kane's children[6][6]." This sentence convinced investigators to search Bowyer Island in the hope of capturing Mark Bonura, their primary suspect.

On April 30, 2000, Walpurgis Nacht, sheriff deputies and detectives landed on Bowyer Island and found themselves in a shootout with Bonura and his .32 caliber Browning M1910 pistol. After only two minutes, Bonura was dead and all the sheriff's men were unharmed. A search turned up several hunting knives, rope, electrical tape, and a video recorder documenting Bonura's crimes. In a bizarre twist, this recorder and its video footage were stolen from the Sheriff's Department in 2002. Its current whereabouts are unknown.

With the death of the serial killer Mark Bonura, life in Kane's Hollow seemed to return to normal. Although fights and occasional deaths in "The Jungle" were not uncommon, the bad reputation of Kane's Hollow seemed to wane. As it stands today, Kane's Hollow is mostly a forgotten city that usually only attracts "legend trippers" or their more serious counterparts, folklorists. It is only a little more violent than other post-industrial cities along the Ohio River, but unlike most, it has a flourishing collegiate life.

But local residents still talk about a devastating waiting—a waiting for the return to the dark days of the Bowyers. No one past the age of fifty in Kane's Hollow seriously believes the city's stygian past is really behind them. To them the evil brought by the Bowyers is merely dormant now, although any mere spark of life could reawaken it. Hopefully for the residents of Kane's Hollow, West Virginia that spark will never come.

Postscript: A week after this article was posted on the blog *Real Legends* on August 21, 2010, a new resident began building on Bowyer Island. Dr. Chase Lockard of West Virginia University is planning on finishing construction of his three-story house in the spring of 2011. Soon after receiving this news, the author of this article committed suicide in her Pittsburgh home.

Chapter Seven: Crackdown

A few minutes later, though it seemed like eternity, he was scrambling down the fire escape at the side of the building.

Etched into his mind was the image of the home secretary jerking back in her seat as the bullet tore into her. Will kept thinking of how Daisy had likened it to the Kennedy assassination. The car had screeched to a halt, the escort of bikers had halted, security men had rushed towards the car. Even now, sirens were blaring in the distance, and growing nearer.

Was Verlaine dead? He was a crack shot, for what that was worth, but it had been a difficult one. Even Lee Harvey Oswald had been shooting into an open convertible. And yet he had definitely hit her. Again he saw Verlaine jerk back as the shot hit her.

He had flung down the sniper rifle and run for it.

What if she was dead? It would send a message to the authorities, certainly. It was certainly revenge for the Professor. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Surely the human race was past that kind of justice these days. Had they descended into the Old Testament politics of bloodfeud?

How would the government react? Would they back down? Would they admit they were wrong? Unlikely. No government had ever admitted that. Would this break them, bring them down? It was more likely to tip them over the edge. Was Will to be responsible for the beginning of a reign of terror?

‘Will!’ Daisy cried as he leapt down from the fire escape into the filthy alley below. She stood beside the car, her eyes wide. ‘Quickly! This way!’

Will sprinted towards the car. The rotor blades of helicopters thrummed overhead. He had certainly stirred them up, he thought, as he leapt into the back. Rex was gunning the engine, and before Will could even fully close the door.

‘Where are we going?’ he gasped. Rex was intent on the deserted back street through which they were driving. ‘The police are on their way.’

‘Of course they are,’ Daisy snapped as Rex screeched round a corner, narrowly missing a parked delivery van. ‘We need to get out of here before they put up roadblocks.’

Will felt himself sweating freely. He forced himself to sit back, take deep breaths, and put on his seatbelt. Even if the police didn’t get them for what he’d done, they’d be bound to take an interest in Rex’s reckless driving.

Rex pulled up in a heavily parked up side street, switched off the engine, and flung open the door.

‘Where are we going?’ Will asked again as they all got out. Daisy pointed towards a building down the street. Rex led them at a run to the entrance to a set of flats.

Their footsteps echoed in the cold, bare lobby as they hurried up a flight of steps. Rex produced a key and opened the door to the second flat. It led to another door and beyond that

was a lounge. Rex flung himself down on the sofa and flicked on the TV while Daisy went through to the kitchenette and put the cafetiere on.

Diffidently, Will sat down on an armchair, as far from Rex as he could manage. Rex had brought up a twenty four hour news channel.

He leapt up in terror as he heard a heavy banging on the front door.

‘That’ll be Higgy and Wiggy,’ said Daisy, coming through from the kitchenette. ‘No, Will,’ she added, as he went to answer the door. ‘Rex! Get up off the sofa and answer the door. You sit down, Will, and have a coffee.’

‘I think I’d prefer a tea,’ he said. ‘Strong, lots of sugar.’

She studied him in concern for a moment, then nodded, and went back to the kitchenette. Will had time to catch the newscaster saying:

‘Reports coming in of an assassination attempt in the centre of London a quarter of an hour ago...’ when Rex returned, followed by his friends. Higgy came up to Will and punched him enthusiastically on the arm.

‘Man oh man! You did it!’ he said.

‘The bitch Verlaine is dead!’ Rex declared.

Wiggy flung himself down on the sofa and waved them into silence. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said, watching the TV intently.

‘...rushed to hospital by ambulance crews where she is said to be in a stable but critical condition...’

‘She’s not dead,’ he rumbled. ‘Not yet.’

Crestfallen, Rex sat down beside him. He glowered at the newscaster as if it was her fault.

‘... statement from the prime minister urging the public not to panic. News just in: the security services have received a message from a group calling itself the National Libertarian Front who are claiming responsibility for the shooting...’

Will sat up suddenly. He stared at Rex, then at Higgy and Wiggy. Daisy came into the lounge and handed him a mug of tea. He put it down on the coffee table.

‘What was that?’ he demanded. ‘Who is the National Libertarian Front?’

Higgy giggled. ‘They’re a front, man,’ he said.

‘Shut up, Higgy,’ Rex snapped. He turned to Will. ‘That’s the name of our organisation, Will.’

‘It’s got a name, now, has it?’ Will replied. He picked up his tea and sipped it thoughtfully. ‘Sounds like a terrorist operation.’

‘Oh, really, Will,’ said Daisy impatiently. ‘Don’t be swayed by establishment rhetoric! Terrorist! Who is it who rules by terror? Who uses the tactics we’ve seen to crush dissent? You saw how they reacted to the riots! They’re the terrorists, not us!’

Will found his breathing becoming shallower, and again cold sweat pooled on his skin. ‘You mean we *are* terrorists,’ he said slowly.

‘How could you be so naïve?’ she replied. ‘You know full well that we’re opposed to the government. You wanted to help.’

‘I have helped,’ he said thickly. ‘I’ve done more for your cause than any of you.’

‘Of course you’ll be suitably rewarded,’ Rex broke in impatiently. ‘What’s the matter? You agreed to do this. Now you’re getting hot under the collar about semantics.’

Will was about to reply, when he found his attention seized by the TV again. The head of the London Metropolitan Police was visible, clearly at a press conference, looking down from a podium as flash bulbs illuminated him like sheet lightning.

‘A state of emergency has been declared and a curfew will be imposed in the capital between 1800 hours and 0700 hours the following morning...’ he was saying. *‘We must crack down on these insurgents whose actions threaten democracy itself.’*

Will turned to Daisy and Rex.

‘That’s the result?’ he demanded. ‘No home secretary, and they’re declaring a state of emergency? You told me what I did would send them a message. Well, it looks like they’re sending one straight back – up yours!’

Daisy made a disgusted sound. Rex looked unimpressed.

‘Things will be fractious for a while,’ he said, ‘but now the government knows how the people feel.’

‘How the people feel?’ Will demanded. ‘What has this got to do with the people? Did they vote for us to shoot the home secretary?’

‘It was you who shot her,’ Daisy pointed out resentfully. ‘You agreed to do this.’

‘And what a fool I was,’ Will muttered. He slumped down to watch the news.

At six o’clock that evening the streets filled with police vans and mounted police. Sirens wailed out across the city. Will watched from the window as patrols of police passed by, sometimes accompanied by soldiers in jeeps. The rain hissed down, filling the road up with puddles that sprayed rainwater across the pavements whenever a police van or army jeep passed by. The orange light of the street lamps welled up through the murk.

Then – distant noise of chanting from somewhere out of sight. Despite the intermittent rain, Will saw fires blaze in the night. Official voices, distorted by bullhorns, blared out.

Running feet, screeching tyres, the clatter of flung halfbricks. A scuffle, a skirmish. Suddenly, the street below was filled with rioters, flinging brickbats and Molotov cocktails. A car was ablaze. Riots vans screeched round the corner. It was all happening right below him, but it seemed as distant and unreal as if it was on TV. He found that Daisy and the others had joined him.

‘London’s getting too hot for us,’ Daisy murmured, as she watched the scene of disturbance in horror.

They retreated inside.

‘This is sending them a message,’ Rex insisted, speaking rapidly. ‘We won’t put up with their corruption any more. They can’t kill our people without facing the music themselves. That bitch Verlaine knows it now.’

‘She’s in hospital, for god’s sake,’ Will said bitterly. ‘I don’t think she knows anything right now.’

Wiggy sank his head in his hands.

‘It’s like a police state out there,’ he said. ‘The Pigs are running the country!’

Will started in terror as gunfire broke out from the street outside. Wide-eyed, he gazed towards the window. All that he could see from this angle was the flickering of fires in the street below, and another kind of light – muzzle flashes that came in time with the roar of gunfire. ‘My god...’ he muttered. ‘They’re firing on the protestors again.’ Where was all this going to end?

‘So what’s the plan now, Rex?’ Daisy demanded.

Rex was pacing back and forth.

‘We’ve got to get out of the city,’ he said. ‘I think this phase will continue for days. There will be roadblocks. People will be trying to get out. The police will crack down. We need another way out.’

‘Why should we be any different?’ Will wanted to know.

Daisy turned to him. ‘We’ve got things to do, important things. The professor chose you to tell about his manifesto. We need to get you somewhere where we can make people see that there’s another way.’

Will looked uncertainly at her.

‘I think I can get us out of the city,’ Rex said. ‘I’ll have to get in touch with my contacts.’ He produced his mobile phone, punched in a number, and stalked out into the kitchen, talking on it.

Will returned to the window to stare out at scenes of confusion from which only distance and a sheet of glass separated him. It seemed to him that he was constantly cut off from the action, seeing it through windows or on TV screens. Ironically, when he had been in a TV studio, it had seemed unreal. And when he had really been mid-stage in the centre of the action, it had seemed like nothing more than a hunting expedition.

Daisy joined him at the window.

‘It doesn’t seem real, somehow,’ she said. Clearly, she was thinking along similar lines. ‘Out there’s the drama of the rioters and riot police, and here we are, cut off.’

‘And it wouldn’t have happened if it hadn’t been for me,’ Will said miserably.

Daisy shook her head firmly. ‘Nonsense. You’ve played your part. But it’s for the people as a whole to play out the whole scene.’

Will turned to her. ‘Do you think that’s all this is? A play? This is real! For what that’s worth.’ The protestors were running down the street, pursued by mounted riot police. Will winced as he saw a figure fall to the ground to be trampled under a horse’s hoofs.

Rex reappeared from the kitchen, doing his usual impression of a force of nature.

‘Right, it’s all organised,’ he said. ‘We’re going to have to cross London, get to an area where the chopper can land. I know where we going though. Just a case of getting there.’

Will shot a look out at the street. Fires were burning where shops had once stood; the pavement and road surface was littered with broken glass, rubble, fallen bodies.

‘Can’t they come here?’ he demanded.

Daisy nodded. ‘What’s the problem with coming here?’

‘I’m not keen on making my way through all that,’ Wiggy added, coming to join them.

‘There’s nowhere a chopper can land round here,’ Rex said. ‘We’ve got to go to London Heliport in Battersea and meet with them. It’s several miles from here, south of the river. But once we’re aboard, we’re free.’

‘Unless some trigger-happy army type shoots us down,’ Will muttered.

Rex got out a street map and showed them their current location, then after smoothing the map out pointed to a spot down by the river. ‘This is where we’re making for,’ he said. ‘We’ll have to go right through Aldwych and on through Westminster before crossing the river at Battersea Bridge. I shouldn’t think the riots will have touched Westminster... Too well guarded.’

‘And what about when we get out of London?’ Will asked. ‘Won’t there be an investigation into the shooting?’

‘I don’t think you need to be afraid of an investigation,’ Rex said confidently. ‘People are going to be too busy dealing with the current situation to start poking their noses into what we’ve been up to. We’ll go back to Oxford and weather this storm. The country will be all the better at the end of it.’

Will went and sat back down on the couch. He fixed his eye on Rex, still standing at the window, arm possessively round Daisy’s shoulders, his face garishly illuminated by the fires from the street. He jabbed at the TV remote to see what the news had to say.

Rex seemed far too confident. Despite his assurances, Will wasn’t willing to adopt his complacent attitude. He didn’t think getting out of London would be easy; he didn’t think that

life after the riots would be easy, either. He could see no reason why there would be no investigation into the killing of Verlaine. And they had hardly been careful! Security cameras could well have picked him up, either before or after the shooting, and if they had his face on one of their databases, well, it was just a case of tracking him down.

Would he spend the rest of his life as a man on the run? Should he just surrender himself to justice right now, and hope they'd be lenient? Prison couldn't be so bad... Oh, but then the thought of his parents, and how disappointed they would be, and Geoff – how he'd sneer, and say this was what he'd always expected.

Why had he got into this mess? Because of Quigley, and the manifesto. The manifesto! Quigley had concealed it in his hotel room. It was out of reach. But he'd asked Will to get it to his publishers. The Professor had seemed convinced that its publication would be the solution to all the country's problems.

He jabbed at the remote again, and realised that the TV was on – but showing no picture. He switched to another channel. Still nothing. The TV was on – but it wasn't receiving. Something up with the aerial? Or with the transmitter...

He gave up, got to his feet and turned off the faulty set. 'So, when are we going?' he asked.

'We'll start out first thing in the morning,' Daisy said. 'As soon as the curfew is over.'

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Nineteen

'Oh,' said Brian, embarrassed. 'Ada. What are *you* doing here?'

Ada shrugged. 'I'm on a one way ticket to Australia,' she told him. 'What are you doing? Are you a pirate now, Brian? I thought you'd joined the Navy! You look ridiculous with that cat on your shoulder.'

Brian felt utterly humiliated. Playing pirates with his new nineteenth century friends had been great fun but he hadn't expected anyone from his own century to see him. Now he was feeling a bit of a fool. He tickled the cat, who purred affectionately.

Then Ada's face broke open in a smile.

'But it's so good to see you!' she exclaimed, rushing up to him and enveloping him in a big hug. Then she reached up and stroked the cat, too.

Brian grinned back, dimly aware that everyone else was staring at them. It was so good to be back with Ada. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed her.

'So how did you come to be on a convict ship?' he asked.

'It's a long story,' she said. 'Maybe you could take me aboard your own ship, and we could talk about it there.'

'Yeah, right, okay!' Brian said. He brandished his cutlass at the other convicts. 'Here's your chance. Take over this ship and become pirates yourselves. I'd take you aboard the *Black Flag*, but we've not got the room. McGee! Divide the supplies with these gentlemen and bring our share aboard. Then we're sailing for England!'

Ada made her farewells to the convicts, who took the crew prisoner and began to busy themselves about the deck. Brian led his pirates back aboard the *Black Flag*, and they set sail. As Brian led Ada to the wardroom, Boone stopped him.

‘I don’t think the crew are happy about going to England,’ he said.

‘I told you, Boone, you take me there – and Ada, of course,’ Brian said, ‘and then the ship’s yours, and the crew, to do with as you please. Can’t say fairer than that, can I?’

Boone went over to talk with McGee. They glanced over at Brian and Ada, then went down into the hold.

Brian and Ada sat by the stern windows in the wardroom, sipping wine pinched from the master’s personal rations and watching the sun set over the sea, touching the wake of their homeward bound ship with red and gold. Ada was telling Brian about her adventures. Puss was curled up in the corner, twitching her tail occasionally.

‘You met Lord Byron!’ Brian marvelled. He shook his head. ‘I’m disappointed with Will Yates, though. Just goes to show, you can’t trust a computer to do anything except fuck you over. Yeah, it’s a shame the Luddites weren’t much help when it came to dealing with Babbage. Then we could just go back to the cellar and wait for Percy to open up the wormhole.’

Ada pursed her lips. ‘We’ve still got to deal with Babbage. But at least we have this ship. Thanks to you, Brian.’ She gave him an admiring look, and he flushed, unaccustomed to such praise.

‘Thanks, Ada,’ he said. She hadn’t been half as complimentary the time he’d seen her. ‘I suppose this jaunt has been the making of me. I’m not the idle dole-scrounger I used to be...’

‘We need to land as close to Cambridge as we can,’ Ada said thoughtfully.

‘Isn’t Cambridge on the coast, then?’ Brian asked.

Ada sighed. ‘No, Brian,’ she said patiently. ‘You’re obviously better at piracy than geography. We want to come ashore in East Anglia or thereabouts, in some quiet little cove.’

‘Like smugglers,’ Brian said. ‘We might have trouble getting up the Channel if the Navy is about, though. And there’s the French as well, of course. And... did you know we’re at war with *America* as well? I mean England is.’ He shook his head. ‘Never heard the like of it.’

‘Of course we’re at war with America,’ Ada said. Her natural sense of superiority seemed to be returning. ‘You’ve never heard of the War of 1812?’

‘Is that like the 1812 Overture?’ he asked, proud to be able to display the extent of his cultural education. But Ada shook her head.

‘That’s about Napoleon in Russia. No, you see, in 1812 America declared war on Britain because, among other things, the British had been press-ganging American citizens...’

‘Alright Ada, I know *all* about that!’ Brian told her. ‘I’ll introduce you to some of the Americans who was pressed, if you want. You don’t need to give me a history lecture. I’ve lived through it, girlie.’

Ada snorted. ‘Anyway, the important thing is getting to Cambridge, and dealing with Babbage.’

Brian slipped a pistol from his sash and examined it. ‘I think I’ll take care of that,’ he said quietly. ‘I’m not the man you used to know. I can use these things pretty good.’

Suddenly the wardroom door burst open. Framed in it was the dishevelled figure of Lieutenant Piper, a pistol in his hand, McGee and – Brian was saddened to see – Boone at his back, and behind them a mutinous mob of sailors. Keane was among them. Brian had been hoping he hadn’t survived the previous fight. But he was still here to plague him... Piper levelled his pistol at Brian. Ada shrieked. With the speed of a gunslinger, Brian whipped up his own pistol and pulled the trigger.

It clicked impotently. Shit. Brian hadn’t reloaded it. Too late now.

‘Wells,’ Piper snapped. ‘Your crew has tired of your command. You’re under arrest. I’m confining you to the hold.’

Brian sighed. 'I really should have made you walk the plank,' he murmured. He saw that the American captain was in the crowd, at Boone's side. 'I understand why McGee might have wanted Piper running things again,' he added. 'But you, Boone! Mutiny!'

Boone looked shamefaced. 'I never wanted to be a pirate, Wellsy,' he said. 'I don't want to hang.'

'Which is exactly what you'll do when we reach port,' Piper told Brian. 'You and your rebel whore!' He gestured to the men. 'Take them below and put them in irons!'

'You know, I used to think he was a decent guy,' Brian told Ada conversationally as they were hustled out of the wardroom and taken below decks.

The crewmen chained them up in a gloomy part of the hold and left them with only the rats for company. Brian preferred cats. And these chains were heavy.

'Well, Brian,' said Ada acerbically. 'Looks like that's the end of your career as a pirate captain.'

'Mutinous dogs!' Brian swore. 'Lily-livered landlubbers, every man jack of 'em!'

'That's enough of the Long John Silver routine,' Ada told him sternly. 'God, I wish I was back on that convict ship now. I was quite looking forward to it. Seven years in Australia. If I hadn't died of scurvy on the way.'

'Seven years hard labour!' Brian muttered.

'Not for women,' Ada told him. 'Domestic service, that's all. A cushy option, comparatively. But now I'm going to swing. Thanks to you! I escaped the gallows in Nottingham, only for this.'

Brian was silent. It was hardly his fault his men had mutinied. Well, okay, it wasn't anyone else's fault, but at least he'd saved Ada from transportation. Briefly, they'd had a chance of completing their mission and going home to the twenty first century. But not now. Now, as Ada so delicately put it, they were going to swing.

He tested his fetters. They clanked dully as he tried to lift them. Really, they were heavy. No getting out of them. A thought struck him.

'I wonder which port we're heading for,' he said.

Ada stirred. 'What's that?' she said gruffly.

'Where are they taking us?' he asked. 'Thing is, half the crew is American, and the other half is British. That was why I thought becoming pirates was a good idea, because otherwise they'd be at each other's throats and there wouldn't be a big enough crew to sail the ship. Now they're back to square one, Americans and British on the same ship. And we're at war, you know.'

'Yes, Brian,' Ada said patiently. 'You mentioned.'

'So where are they going to take us?' Brian went on. 'Baltimore? That's a long way, other side of the Atlantic. Or Britain? Piper probably wants to go to Plymouth or Portsmouth or somewhere like that. Who's going to get their own way?'

'I see what you mean,' said Ada thoughtfully. 'Whichever port they wind up in, half the crew will become prisoners of war. Unless they go to a French port, when they all will. Or will the French favour the Americans? Yes, it's a conundrum.'

Brian was glad that she appreciated the dilemma. Glad she'd stopped blaming him, too. He wondered how Puss was getting on.

He yawned, and lay down on the hard boards.

'Well, I'm getting some kip,' he said. 'If that's possible in these things. I'll be interested to see how things turn out.'

Ada said nothing. Brian curled up and tried to sleep. The gentle rocking of the ship lulled him and soon, despite the heavy manacles and the hard deck, he was asleep.

‘Brian, wake up!’

Brian woke suddenly from a nightmare where he’d been forced to walk the plank and was trying to swim back home with a cat on his head. It was almost pitch black in the hold, but he could dimly make out Ada’s shape. He heard shouts and bellows from above; the sound of fighting, clashing cutlasses and the bang of flintlocks.

‘What is it?’ he demanded. ‘Have we been attacked by more pirates?’

‘I don’t know,’ came Ada’s voice. ‘I think there’s been another mutiny.’

‘Another one!’

Brian heard footsteps pounding down a nearby companionway. Suddenly the hold was illuminated by the wildly swinging light of a lantern held high in a sailor’s hand. Several other crewmen were behind him. Brian recognised the man with the lantern as Boone.

‘Come to gloat?’ he demanded. ‘What’s happening up there?’

A scream rang out from above, followed by a splash.

Boone handed the lantern to another sailor, and crouched down to free the two prisoners from their chains. ‘They shot the captain!’ he said. ‘Your friend Piper shot him. They quarrelled about who was in charge. The captain wanted to turn for home. Piper wouldn’t give him assurances of free passage after reaching Portsmouth. Now the whole crew is up in arms, fighting each other.’

‘Where are we?’ Ada demanded, as Boone removed her fetters. ‘Portsmouth?’

‘That’s where we were heading, miss,’ he said. ‘We’re somewhere in the English Channel. But the ship’s drifting while they fight it out. There’s no one at the helm. We could collide with another ship, or be boarded by the French.’

Brian stretched. ‘So what do you want with us?’ he said, his tone hostile.

‘We need leadership,’ Boone pleaded. ‘The leadership you can give us, Wellsy. End the mutiny and take the helm.’

Despite himself, Brian preened. ‘Well, there’ll be conditions,’ he said.

‘Anything you like, Wellsy,’ Boone replied. ‘Just get up there and bring some order to this ship before things get worse.’

‘Anything?’ Brian asked, rising.

‘Anything,’ Boone repeated.

‘Good,’ said Brian, and head-butted him in the face.

‘*Brian!*’ Ada complained.

Boone held his face and staggered. The other sailors rushed forward, their faces set with anger. Boone ushered them back.

‘No!’ he said. He looked at Brian and dabbed at his bleeding nose. ‘Guess I deserved that, Wellsy. I just wanted to go home, that’s why I joined the last mutiny. I didn’t want to hang for piracy, either. But now let’s get on deck and take over!’

‘Okay,’ said Brian. Someone slipped a cutlass in his hand, and he led Boone, Ada and the sailors at a run.

They burst out onto the deck to find it a scene of confusion. One group of sailors was up on the quarterdeck, fighting off others who were trying to storm their position. Cutlasses clashed and pistols boomed. Brian saw Piper fighting two American sailors on the steps to the poop. He pointed at the lieutenant.

‘That one’s mine!’ he roared and charged forward.

Brian elbowed his way through the struggling men and raced up the steps. Piper saw him coming, and the lieutenant’s face fell.

‘Come here, you bastard!’ Brian shouted. Piper came at him with his sword and Brian parried the attack with a clumsy swipe of his cutlass, then followed it up with a punch, using the cutlass hilt as a knuckleduster again, that laid Piper flat on the deck. He had no time to play Errol Flynn. Standing over the man, he shouted to the rest of the embattled sailors.

‘That’s enough, me hearties! Piper’s out of the action. Time to accept me as your captain again!’ Boone raced up to join him, dismay on his face. ‘What’s up with you, then?’ Brian demanded. Boone whirled round and pointed.

‘Look!’ he yelled, and his voice carried across the entire deck. Everyone turned to see what he was pointing at.

Brian saw the dark looming form of a cliff racing towards them in the darkness. But before they hit it, he heard a terrible rending sound from below and the entire deck leapt up into the air. Brian found himself catapulted forwards. He soared through the air at incredible speed before hitting wet sand with a thud that knocked the breath from him. Then he knew no more.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PREPARATIONS FOR LEAVING BANNERWORTH HALL, AND THE MYSTERIOUS CONDUCT OF THE ADMIRAL AND MR. CHILLINGWORTH.

It seemed now, that, by the concurrence of all parties, Bannerworth Hall was to be abandoned; and, notwithstanding Henry was loath—as he had, indeed, from the first shown himself—to leave the ancient abode of his race, yet, as not only Flora, but the admiral and his friend Mr. Chillingworth seemed to be of opinion that it would be a prudent course to adopt, he felt that it would not become him to oppose the measure.

He, however, now made his consent to depend wholly upon the full and free acquiescence of every member of the family.

"If," he said, "there be any among us who will say to me 'Continue to keep open the house in which we have passed so many happy hours, and let the ancient home of our race still afford a shelter to us,' I shall feel myself bound to do so; but if both my mother and my brother agree to a departure from it, and that its hearth shall be left cold and desolate, be it so. I will not stand in the way of any unanimous wish or arrangement."

"We may consider that, then, as settled," said the admiral, "for I have spoken to your brother, and he is of our opinion. Therefore, my boy, we may all be off as soon as we can conveniently get under weigh."

"But my mother?"

"Oh, there, I don't know. You must speak to her yourself. I never, if I can help it, interfere with the women folks."

"If she consent, then I am willing."

"Will you ask her?"

"I will not ask her to leave, because I know, then, what answer she would at once give; but she shall hear the proposition, and I will leave her to decide upon it, unbiased in her judgment by any stated opinion of mine upon the matter."

"Good. That'll do; and the proper way to put it, too. There's no mistake about that, I can tell you."

Henry, although he went through the ceremony of consulting his mother, had no sort of doubt before he did so that she was sufficiently aware of the feelings and wishes of Flora to be prepared to yield a ready assent to the proposition of leaving the Hall.

Moreover, Mr. Marchdale had, from the first, been an advocate of such a course of proceeding, and Henry well knew how strong an influence he had over Mrs. Bannerworth's mind, in consequence of the respect in which she held him as an old and valued friend.

He was, therefore, prepared for what his mother said, which was,—

"My dear Henry, you know that the wishes of my children, since they have been grown up and capable of coming to a judgment for themselves, have ever been laws to me. If you, among you all, agree to leave this place, do so."

"But will you leave it freely, mother?"

"Most freely I go with you all; what is it that has made this house and all its appurtenances pleasant in my eyes, but the presence in it of those who are so dear to me? If you all leave it, you take with you the only charms it ever possessed; so it becomes in itself as nothing. I am quite ready to accompany you all anywhere, so that we do but keep together."

"Then, mother, we may consider that as settled."

"As you please."

"It's scarcely as I please. I must confess that I would fain have clung with a kind of superstitious reverence to this ancient abiding-place of my race, but it may not be so. Those, perchance, who are more practically able to come to correct conclusions, in consequence of their feelings not being sufficiently interested to lead them astray, have decided otherwise; and, therefore, I am content to leave."

"Do not grieve at it, Henry. There has hung a cloud of misfortune over us all since the garden of this house became the scene of an event which we can none of us remember but with terror and shuddering."

"Two generations of our family must live and die before the remembrance of that circumstance can be obliterated. But we will think of it no more."

There can no doubt but that the dreadful circumstance to which both Mrs. Bannerworth and Henry alluded, was the suicide of the father of the family in the gardens which before has been hinted at in the course of this narration, as being a circumstance which had created a great sensation at the time, and cast a great gloom for many months over the family.

The reader will, doubtless, too, recollect that, at his last moments, this unhappy individual was said to have uttered some incoherent words about some hidden money, and that the rapid hand of death alone seemed to prevent him from being explicit upon that subject, and left it merely a matter of conjecture.

As years had rolled on, this affair, even as a subject of speculation, had ceased to occupy the minds of any of the Bannerworth family, and several of their friends, among whom was Mr. Marchdale, were decidedly of opinion that the apparently pointed and mysterious words uttered, were but the disordered wanderings of an intellect already hovering on the confines of eternity.

Indeed, far from any money, of any amount, being a disturbance to the last moments of the dissolute man, whose vices and extravagances had brought his family, to such ruin, it was pretty generally believed that he had committed suicide simply from a conviction

of the impossibility of raising any more supplies of cash, to enable him to carry on the career which he had pursued for so long.

But to resume.

Henry at once communicated to the admiral what his mother had said, and then the whole question regarding the removal being settled in the affirmative, nothing remained to be done but to set about it as quickly as possible.

The Bannerworths lived sufficiently distant from the town to be out of earshot of the disturbances which were then taking place; and so completely isolated were they from all sort of society, that they had no notion of the popular disturbance which Varney the vampyre had given rise to.

It was not until the following morning that Mr. Chillingworth, who had been home in the meantime, brought word of what had taken place, and that great commotion was still in the town, and that the civil authorities, finding themselves by far too weak to contend against the popular will, had sent for assistance to a garrison town, some twenty miles distant.

It was a great grief to the Bannerworth family to hear these tidings, not that they were in any way, except as victims, accessory to creating the disturbance about the vampyre, but it seemed to promise a kind of notoriety which they might well shrink from, and which they were just the people to view with dislike.

View the matter how we like, however, it is not to be considered as at all probable that the Bannerworth family would remain long in ignorance of what a great sensation they had created unwittingly in the neighbourhood.

The very reasons which had induced their servants to leave their establishment, and prefer throwing themselves completely out of place, rather than remain in so ill-omened a house, were sure to be bruited abroad far and wide.

And that, perhaps, when they came to consider of it, would suffice to form another good and substantial reason for leaving the Hall, and seeking a refuge in obscurity from the extremely troublesome sort of popularity incidental to their peculiar situation.

Mr. Chillingworth felt uncommonly chary of telling them all that had taken place; although he was well aware that the proceedings of the riotous mob had not terminated with the little disappointment at the old ruin, to which they had so effectually chased Varney the vampyre, but to lose him so singularly when he got there.

No doubt he possessed the admiral with the uproar that was going on in the town, for the latter did hint a little of it to Henry Bannerworth.

"Hilloa!" he said to Henry, as he saw him walking in the garden; "it strikes me if you and your ship's crew continue in these latitudes, you'll get as notorious as the Flying Dutchman in the southern ocean."

"How do you mean?" said Henry.

"Why, it's a sure going proverb to say, that a nod's as good as a wink; but, the fact is, it's getting rather too well known to be pleasant, that a vampyre has struck up rather a close acquaintance with your family. I understand there's a precious row in the town."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; bother the particulars, for I don't know them; but, hark ye, by to-morrow I'll have found a place for you to go to, so pack up the sticks, get all your stores ready to clear out, and make yourself scarce from this place."

"I understand you," said Henry; "We have become the subject of popular rumour; I've only to beg of you, admiral, that you'll say nothing of this to Flora; she has already suffered enough, Heaven knows; do not let her have the additional infliction of thinking that her name is made familiar in every pothouse in the town."

"Leave me alone for that," said the admiral. "Do you think I'm an ass?"

"Ay, ay," said Jack Pringle, who came in at that moment, and thought the question was addressed to him.

"Who spoke to you, you bad-looking horse-marine?"

"Me a horse-marine! didn't you ask a plain question of a fellow, and get a plain answer?"

"Why, you son of a bad looking gun, what do you mean by that? I tell you what it is, Jack; I've let you come sneaking too often on the quarter-deck, and now you come poking your fun at your officers, you rascal!"

"I poking fun!" said Jack; "couldn't think of such a thing. I should just as soon think of you making a joke as me."

"Now, I tell you what it is, I shall just strike you off the ship's books, and you shall just go and cruise by yourself; I've done with you."

"Go and tell that to the marines, if you like," said Jack. "I ain't done with you yet, for a jolly long watch. Why, what do you suppose would become of you, you great babby, without me? Ain't I always a conveying you from place to place, and steering you through all sorts of difficulties?"

"D---n your impudence!"

"Well, then, d---n yours."

"Shiver my timbers!"

"Ay, you may do what you like with your own timbers."

"And you won't leave me?"

"Sartingly not."

"Come here, then?"

Jack might have expected a gratuity, for he advanced with alacrity.

"There," said the admiral, as he laid his stick across his shoulders; "that's your last month's wages; don't spend it all at once."

"Well, I'm d——d!" said Jack; "who'd have thought of that?—he's a turning rumgumtious, and no mistake. Howsomdever, I must turn it over in my mind, and be even with him, somehow—I owes him one for that. I say, admiral."

"What now, you lubber?"

"Nothing; turn that over in your mind;" and away Jack walked, not quite satisfied, but feeling, at least, that he had made a demonstration of attack.

As for the admiral, he considered that the thump he had given Jack with the stick, and it was no gentle one, was a decided balancing of accounts up to that period, and as he remained likewise master of the field, he was upon the whole very well satisfied.

These last few words which had been spoken to Henry by Admiral Bell, more than any others, induced him to hasten his departure from Bannerworth Hall; he had walked away when the altercation between Jack Pringle and the admiral began, for he had seen sufficient of those wordy conflicts between those originals to be quite satisfied that neither of them meant what he said of a discouraging character towards the other, and that far from there being any unfriendly feeling contingent upon those little affairs, they were only a species of friendly sparring, which both parties enjoyed extremely.

He went direct to Flora, and he said to her,—

"Since we are all agreed upon the necessity, or, at all events, upon the expediency of a departure from the Hall, I think, sister, the sooner we carry out that determination the better and the pleasanter for us all it will be. Do you think you could remove so hastily as to-morrow?"

"To-morrow! That is soon indeed."

"I grant you that it is so; but Admiral Bell assures me that he will have everything in readiness, and a place provided for us to go to by then."

"Would it be possible to remove from a house like this so very quickly?"

"Yes, sister. If you look around you, you will see that a great portion of the comforts you enjoy in this mansion belong to it as a part of its very structure, and are not removable at pleasure; what we really have to take away is very little. The urgent want of money during our father's lifetime induced him, as you may recollect even, at various times to part with much that was ornamental, as well as useful, which was in the Hall. You will recollect that we seldom returned from those little continental tours which to us were so delightful, without finding some old familiar objects gone, which, upon inquiry, we found had been turned into money, to meet some more than usually pressing demand."

"That is true, brother; I recollect well."

"So that, upon the whole, sister, there is little to remove."

"Well, well, be it so. I will prepare our mother for this sudden step. Believe me, my heart goes with it; and as a force of vengeful circumstances have induced us to remove from this home, which was once so full of pleasant recollections, it is certainly better, as you say, that the act should be at once consummated, than left hanging in terror over our minds."

"Then I'll consider that as settled," said Henry.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XIX

"Try again. By the infernal, Snap Dean, if you do anything to balk us, you die!"

Miko scanned the apparatus with keen eyes. How much technical knowledge of signaling instruments did this brigand leader have? I was tense and cold with apprehension as I sat in a corner of the radio room, watching Snap. Could Miko be fooled? Snap, I knew, was trying to fool him.

The Moon spread close beneath us. My log-chart, computed up to thirty minutes past, showed us barely some thirty thousand miles over the Moon's surface. A silver quadrant. The sunset caught the Lunar mountains, flung slanting shadows over the Lunar plains. All the disc was plainly visible. The mellow Earthlight glowed serene and pale to illumine the Lunar night.

The Planetara was bathed in silver. A brilliant silver glare swept the forward deck, clean white and splashed with black shadows. We had partly circled the Moon so as now to approach it from the Earthward side.

Miko for a time had been at my side in the turret. I had not seen Coniston or Hahn of recent hours. I had slept, awakened refreshed, and had a meal. Coniston and Hahn remained below, one or other of them always with the crew to execute my sired orders. Then Coniston came to take my place in the turret, and I went with Miko to the radio room.

"You are skillful, Haljan." A measure of grim approval was in his voice. "You evidently have no wish to try and fool me in this navigation."

I had not, indeed. It is delicate work at best, coping with the intricacies of celestial mechanics upon a semicircular trajectory with retarding velocity, and with a makeshift crew we could easily have come upon real difficulty.

We hung at last, hull down, facing the Earthward hemisphere of the Lunar disc. The giant ball of the Earth lay behind and above us—the Sun over our stern quarter. With forward velocity almost checked, we poised, and Snap began his signals to the unsuspecting Grantline.

My work momentarily was over. I sat watching the radio room. Moa was here, close beside me. I felt always her watchful gaze, so that even the play of my emotions needed reining.

Miko worked with Snap. Anita too was here. To Miko and Moa it was the somber, taciturn George Prince, shrouded always in his black mourning cloak, disinclined to talk; sitting alone, brooding and sullen. This is how they thought of Anita.

Miko repeated: "By the infernal, if you try to fool me, Snap Dean!"

The small metal room, with its grid floor and low arched ceiling, glared with moonlight through its window. The moving figures of Snap and Miko were aped by the grotesque, misshapen shadows of them on the walls. Miko gigantic—a great menacing ogre. Snap small and alert—a trim, pale figure in his tight-fitting white trousers, broad-flowing belt, and white shirt open at the throat. His face was pale and drawn from lack of sleep and the torture to which Miko had subjected him earlier on the voyage. But he grinned at the brigand's words, and pushed his straggling hair closer under the red eyeshade.

The room over long periods was deadly silent, with Miko and Snap bending watchfully at the crowded banks of instruments. A silence in which my own pounding heart seemed to echo. I did not dare look at Anita, nor she at me. Snap was trying to signal Earth, not the Moon! His main grids were set in the reverse. The infra-red waves, flung from the bow window, were of a frequency which Snap and I believed that Grantline could not pick up. And over against the wall, close beside me and seemingly ignored by Snap, there was a tiny ultra-violet sender. Its faint hum and the quivering of its mirrors had so far passed unnoticed.

Would some Earth station pick it up? I prayed so. There was a thumbnail mirror here which would bring an answer.

Would some Earth telescope be able to see us? I doubted it. The pinpoint of the Planetara's infinitesimal bulk would be beyond vision.

Long silences, broken only by the faint hiss and murmur of Snap's instruments.

"Shall I try the graphs, Miko?"

"Yes."

I helped him with the spectro. At every level the plates showed us nothing save the scarred and pitted Moon surface. We worked for an hour. There was nothing. Bleak cold night on the Moon here beneath us. A touch of fading sunlight upon the Apennines. Up near the South Pole, Tycho with its radiating open rills stood like a grim dark maw.

Miko bent over a plate. "Something here? Is there?"

An abnormality upon the frowning ragged cliffs of Tycho? We thought so. But then it seemed not.

Another hour. No signal came from Earth. If Snap's calls were getting through we had no evidence of it. Abruptly Miko strode at me from across the room. I went cold and tense; Moa shifted, alert to my every movement. But Miko was not interested in me. A sweep of his clenched fist knocked the ultra-violet sender and its coils and mirrors in a tinkling crash to the grid at my feet.

"We don't need that, whatever it is!" He rubbed his knuckles where the violet waves had tinged them, and turned grimly back to Snap.

"Where are your ray mirrors? If the treasure lies exposed—"

This Martian's knowledge was far greater than we believed. He grinned sardonically at Anita. "If our treasure is here on this hemisphere, Prince, we should pick up its rays. Don't you think so? Or is Grantline too cautious to leave it exposed?"

Anita spoke in a careful, throaty drawl. "The rays came through enough when we passed here on the way out."

"You should know," grinned Miko. "An expert eavesdropper, Prince, I will say that for you.... Come, Dean, try something else. By God, if Grantline does not signal us, I will be likely to blame you—my patience is shortening. Shall we go closer, Haljan?"

"I don't think it would help," I said.

He nodded. "Perhaps not. Are we checked?"

"Yes." We were poised very nearly motionless. "If you wish an advance, I can ring it. But we need a surface destination now."

"True, Haljan." He stood thinking. "Would a zed-ray penetrate those crater cliffs? Tycho, for instance, at this angle?"

"It might," Snap agreed. "You think he may be on the northern inner Tycho?"

"He may be anywhere," said Miko shortly.

"If you think that," Snap persisted, "suppose we swing the Planetara over the South Pole. Tycho, viewed from there—"

"And take another quarter day of time?" Miko sneered. "Flash on your zed-ray; help him hook it up, Haljan."

I moved to the lens box of the spectroheliograph. It seemed that Snap was very strangely reluctant. Was it because he knew that the Grantline camp lay concealed on the north inner wall of Tycho's giant ring? I thought so. But Snap flashed a queer look at Anita. She did not see it, but I did. And I could not understand it.

My accursed, witless incapacity! If only I had taken warning!

"Here," commanded Miko. "A score of 'graphs with the zed-ray. I tell you I will comb this surface if we have to stay here until our ship comes from Ferrok-Shahn to join us!"

The Martian brigands were coming. Miko's signals had been answered. In ten days the other brigand ship, adequately manned and armed, would be here.

Snap helped me connect the zed-ray. He did not dare even to whisper to me, with Moa hovering always so close. And for all Miko's sardonic smiling, we knew that he would tolerate nothing from us now. He was fully armed and so was Moa.

I recall that several times Snap endeavored to touch me significantly. Oh, if only I had taken warning!

We finished our connecting. The dull gray point of zed-ray gleamed through the prisms to mingle with the moonlight entering the main lens. I stood with the shutter trip.

"The same interval, Snap?"

"Yes."

Beside me, I was aware of a faint reflection of the zed-ray—a gray cathedral shaft crossing the room and falling upon the opposite wall. An unreality there, as the zed-ray faintly strove to penetrate the metal room side.

I said, "Shall I make the exposure?"

Snap nodded. But that 'graph was never made. An exclamation from Moa made us all turn. The gamma mirrors were quivering! Grantline had picked our signals! With what was undoubtedly an intensified receiving equipment which Snap had not thought Grantline able to use, he had caught our faint zed-rays, which Snap was sending only to deceive Miko. And Grantline had recognized the Planetara, and had released his occulting screens surrounding the ore.

And upon their heels came Grantline's message. Not in the secret system he had arranged with Snap, but unsuspectingly in open code. I could read the swinging mirror, and so could Miko.

And Miko decoded it triumphantly aloud:

"Surprised but pleased your return. Approach Mid-Northern Hemisphere region of Archimedes, forty thousand off nearest Apennine range."

The message broke off. But even its importance was overshadowed. Miko stood in the center of the radio room, triumphantly reading the little indicator. Its beam swung on the scale, which chanced to be almost directly over Anita's head. I saw Miko's expression change.... A look of surprise, amazement, came over him.

"Why—"

He gasped. He stood staring. Almost stupidly staring, for an instant. And as I regarded him with fascinated horror, there came upon his heavy gray face a look of dawning comprehension. And I heard Snap's startled intake of breath. He moved to the spectro, where the zed-ray connections were still humming.

But, with a leap, Miko flung him away. "Off with you! Moa, watch him! Haljan, don't move!"

Again Miko stood staring. I saw now that he was staring at Anita!

"Why, George Prince! How strange you look!"

Anita did not move. She was stricken with horror; she shrank back against the wall, huddled in her cloak. Miko's sardonic voice came again:

"How strange you look, Prince!" He took a step forward. He was grim and calm. Horribly calm. Deliberate. Gloating like a great gray monster in human form toying with a fascinated, imprisoned bird.

"Move just a little, Prince. Let the zed-ray light fall more fully."

Anita's head was bare. That pale, Hamlet-like face. Dear God, the zed-ray light lay gray and penetrating upon it!

Miko took another step. Peering. Grinning. "How amazing, George Prince! Why, I can hardly believe it!"

Moa was armed with an electronic cylinder now. For all her amazement—what turgid emotions sweeping her I can only guess—she never took her eyes from Snap and me.

"Back! Don't move either of you!" she hissed at us.

Then Miko leaped at Anita like a giant gray leopard pouncing.

"Away with that cloak, Prince!"

I stood cold and numbed. And realization came at last. The faint zed-light had fallen by chance upon Anita's face. Penetrating the flesh; exposed, faintly glowing, the bone line of her jaw. Unmasked the art of Glutz.

Miko seized her wrists, drew her forward, beyond the shaft of zed-light, into the brilliant light of the Moon. And ripped her cloak from her. The gentle curves of her woman's figure were so unmistakable!

And as Miko gazed at them, all his calm triumph swept away.

"Why, Anita!"

I heard Moa mutter, "So that is it?" A venomous flashing look—a shaft from me to Anita and back again. "So that is it?"

"Why, Anita!"

Miko's great arms gathered her up as though she were a child. "So I have you back! From the dead, delivered back to me!"

"Gregg!" Snap's warning, and his grip on my shoulders brought me a measure of sanity. I had tensed to spring. I stood quivering, and Moa thrust her weapon against my face. The grids were swaying again with a message from Grantline. But it was ignored.

In the glare of moonlight by the forward window, Miko held Anita, his great hands pawing her with triumphant possessive caresses.

"So, little Anita, you are given back to me!"

AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH by Gavin Chappell

1

‘Eloise? Eloise, look, I found this dog,’ called Nick, marching back over the headland. He looked proudly down at the mongrel gambolling at his feet. ‘I’m going to call him Timmy,’ he added.

Eloise looked up from where she was sitting on the cold grey beach, staring out at the sea as it rolled away into the misty distance. In the mists above, the interior sun remained overhead, at an eternal, never-changing noon. She glanced over at Nick, then turned to Hamish, lying sprawled next to her. Beyond him, in the water, floated the wreck of a submersible. In it, they had been cast upon the cold shores of this mysterious, apparently uninhabited continent, deep in the bowels of the planet.

‘Nick’s found a dog!’ she exclaimed. ‘Did you hear that, Hamish? A dog?’

The skinhead sat up and glared in the direction of the approaching crustie. ‘Where the fuck did ye find that?’ he barked.

Nick looked defensive.

‘He was wandering around on his own, up there,’ he said. ‘Up in them funny looking trees.’

‘They’re cycads,’ said Eloise helpfully.

‘Well, aren’t we all, some days,’ Nick replied. ‘Look, I’m calling him Timmy, anyway. You got a problem with that?’

Eloise frowned. 'But where did he come from?' she murmured, puzzled. She looked out to sea again.

Only the three of them had survived the nightmare descent into the maelstrom. Eloise had cracked her head against a bulkhead as their vessel swirled down through the roaring waters and remembered little more before she had recovered to find herself lying on this cold, grey shore, with Hamish looming over her, shaking her awake. In the waters nearby bobbed the wreck of the submersible.

There had been no sign of Kohl; or of Menyw, Siân, or Osborne, but some time later Nick had turned up out of the forest beyond the beach. Apparently, he'd been cast ashore some miles away and had been wandering through the trees ever since, convinced that he was alone at the centre of the earth.

For some days now they had been resting on the shore of the dark and silent ocean - at least, Eloise assumed they were days. There was no way of telling. The sun that hung in the misty sky - at the very centre of the earth - never rose or set, or even moved. There was no moon and thus no tides in the subterranean sea. As far as they were aware - although their explorations had not yet taken them far - there was nothing living anywhere, except for the trees that fringed the beach. Eloise recognised them as cycads, the kind of trees that had flourished in the sands of Mesozoic Earth. But they were deep within the planet now, within its hollow core - alone?

But where had this dog come from?

'Och, this is gey great,' said Hamish in disgust. 'Four go mad at the centre of the earth; Hamish, Eloise, Nick and Timmy the Dog.'

'I'm going to put him on a piece of string,' said Nick, running a hand through his tatty dreadlocks. 'I used to have a dog called Timmy, back when we were with the travellers. When we went off to Wales, I left him with Dave - you remember? Guy with the mandolin?' He glanced at Timmy again, who was sitting on his haunches, panting. Eloise was disturbed by the dog's skinniness. His ribs were visible. 'You know, this dog looks just like him, too.'

'What, like Dave?' Hamish grunted, confused.

'No, like my old dog,' Nick replied, fashioning a leash from a piece of cord he'd produced from one of his coat pockets. 'There, boy!' He slipped it round Timmy's neck.

'This is all very fine and wonderful,' snapped Eloise, 'but it's getting us nowhere. Where's Menyw? He knew what we were supposed to do.'

'Where's Kohl?' added Hamish.

Nick looked doleful. 'I reckon they're somewhere at the bottom of that,' he said, indicating the silent ocean. He felt in his pockets. 'And the scran's running low,' he added. He produced something and held it out to the dog. 'Still got this Kendal mintcake.'

'Don't gie it to the dog!' said Hamish angrily. 'We're gonna need it! Cannie the fuckin' thing go catch some rabbits?'

'Hamish!' snapped Eloise, a strict vegetarian.

Nick looked up at them.

‘That’s a good point,’ he said. ‘There must be something else out there except Timmy, for him to live on. I reckon we go hunting.’

‘Aye!’ said Hamish, with sudden enthusiasm. He produced his spear, the mystic weapon he had clung to even during the terrifying descent through the waters under the earth. ‘Let’s go spike some rabbits!’

Eloise looked angry. ‘Why do you always have to be so macho?’ she complained.

Hamish shrugged. ‘Gonna fuckin’ starve otherwise, aren’t we?’ he pointed out. ‘Unless you can eat cycad fruit.’

Eloise pursed her lips. She assumed the dinosaurs had lived on them - the herbivorous ones, at least. But were they fit for human consumption? Hamish was right. They would starve if they didn’t find themselves some food.

‘Alright,’ she said bravely. ‘But don’t take the Spear of Lugus! That’s a mystical artefact, not a pig-sticker. Timmy will do the hunting for us, won’t you?’ She patted the dog on his head and he fawned. She got up, dusting the sand off her long black skirt. Grudgingly, Hamish left the Spear with the meagre pile of their belongings next to the little fire of cycad wood. ‘Come along,’ Eloise added. ‘I’ve always wanted to be a hunter-gatherer. Well, a gatherer, anyway.’

They headed up the beach and entered the forest.

The cycad trees loomed above them as they picked their way through the vegetation, casting long, black, unmoving shadows across their path. No grass or undergrowth grew in the sandy soil that crunched beneath their feet, no animals or birds were visible or audible. Eloise found herself half-hoping they would find none. It was a silly, selfish, self-defeating hope; they would die without food, Timmy especially. It would be better for her to hope the terrain would change for something more productive.

The path began to climb and the sandy soil around them grew rocky, while the cycads began to thin. Eloise glimpsed high basalt cliffs where the trees ended. She was about to point them out to her companions when Timmy started casting around, snuffling at the ground.

‘He’s picking up a scent!’ Nick exclaimed, slipping him off the leash. ‘Good boy! Go, Timmy, go!’

They followed the dog cautiously as he quested through the thinning forest. Entering a clearing, they found him sniffing at a churned up area of sand. Nick hurried forwards and stared at the ground. Eloise and Hamish joined him.

‘What is it, Nick?’ asked Eloise. Nick pointed silently at the ground and Eloise followed his finger.

Footprints crossed the sand, heading towards the trees. In the middle of the clearing was a confusion of marks, as if people had stood there for some time.

Nick looked at them. ‘Maybe this place isn’t uninhabited,’ he said quietly.

The three of them exchanged glances. Who could have left footprints here? Eloise tried to imagine the people who might live on an island in the centre of the earth. She shuddered. Unpleasant half-memories of Edgar Rice Burroughs novels flitted through her mind.

‘How long do you think it is since they were here?’ she asked. ‘Whoever they were?’

Nick shrugged. As he did so, Hamish slipped off into the trees. ‘How should I know? I’m not some Indian tracker.’

‘It was your idea to go hunting,’ Eloise snapped. ‘I thought you knew about this kind of thing.’

Nick shrugged. ‘I thought you were the country girl. I’m just a townie, aren’t I?’

‘Oh, for goodness sake!’ Eloise exclaimed, folding her arms. ‘We’re lost in the centre of the earth and not one of us knows the first thing...’

Hamish came running back into the clearing.

‘Stop whinging, bachle!’ he barked. ‘Come and look at this!’ He led them through the trees.

‘What is it?’ asked Eloise. ‘Have you found the people who made those marks?’

They came out of the trees abruptly. Basalt cliffs loomed over them, stretching away on either side. A narrow pass wound up from the sandy forest floor. Hamish halted at the head of the pass, outlined against the skyline. He glanced back at them.

‘Look!’ he said, indicating the view beyond him. Eloise, Nick and Timmy the Dog struggled up to join him.

‘What are you being so dramatic about?’ Eloise asked. ‘What...’

She halted, as she saw what lay beyond the rise. She opened her mouth, but said nothing.

Beyond the line of cliffs, the land sloped steeply downwards in a deep bowl of basalt rock. Across the horizon beyond marched a line of distant mountains that Eloise guessed must be every bit as high as the Alps. Between the two lay an eerie landscape of rock, shrouded with mist, especially the wide lake that lay about half a mile away. But what caught their gaze was reflected by the waters on the far side.

On the shores of the lake stood a high-towered city.

It was built from the same basalt that surrounded them on all sides and Eloise found it difficult to work out where the City ended and the surrounding landscape began. The City itself looked as if it was the work of nature, like one of those wind-carved rocks that jut from the sands of the Arizona desert. It possessed a monumental architecture that reminded Eloise in part of the megalithic monuments of Salisbury Plain and Carnac, in part of the ancient cities of South and Central America; Tenochtitlan, Cuzco, Teotihuacan. It spoke of an ancient and primal civilisation, a culture rich in art and skill built to a moral code at odds with the ethical structures within which Eloise existed.

It was an alien city.

‘Do you think they’ll have anything to eat?’ Nick asked. ‘I’m starving.’ Timmy barked, then whimpered.

Hamish turned to Eloise. ‘What do you think, eh?’ he asked. ‘Should we try there?’

Eloise darted him a wide-eyed glance.

‘In that place?’ she asked incredulously. ‘That city of evil?’

Nick looked uncertain. ‘Evil?’ he asked. ‘I just want a bite to eat, like.’

Eloise stared fearfully at the distant city. It was silent, like everything else in this place and she could detect no sign of movement among the strangely constructed towers. She shivered.

‘Maybe it’s a dead city,’ she said.

They were silent.

‘Are we going to stand here all day?’ said Nick finally. ‘Someone make up their mind. My dog’s getting bored.’ Timmy had been fidgeting at the leash since they reached the head of the pass.

‘Oh, I don’t know!’ said Eloise. ‘Why does everyone always leave it up to me? I can’t decide.’ She looked at Hamish. He shrugged.

Eloise sighed and turned back to Nick. ‘You make a decision for once!’

Nick looked hurt.

‘Well...’ he said tentatively. ‘I reckon we go to the City.’

He hoped this was not a decision he would come to regret.

So began their journey across the desert of twisted rock and thick, sulphurous mist, across slag, clinker and pumice. The going was far from easy and paths through the rocks were infrequent and unreliable. Often they had to scramble across flat, open areas of rock where the mist hung even thicker and their progress was impeded by wide areas of vitrified rock.

At three points during the monotonous journey, they heard noises - strange, unearthly cries that echoed through the swirling mist, causing them to halt and crouch close to the rock, while futilely scanning their surroundings. But at all other times, the journey was conducted in a deathly hush, broken only by the clink and clatter of their boots on the basalt beneath them.

The City had vanished in the mist not long after they set out across the dead valley and the horizon on all sides was distant and obscured. Occasionally, they stumbled across rock pools that stank, as Nick said, like week-old eggs. It was from these that the mist rose, growing ever thicker the closer they came to the lake.

In fact, it was so thick that only the increase in stench warned them of the lake’s close proximity. They stepped out of the mist and found themselves on the shore. The smell of sulphur brought tears to Eloise’s eyes as she peered through the mist towards the City.

‘Like a fuckin’ Pink Floyd concert,’ said Nick, coughing and wheezing.

‘Ah don’t like the smell of this,’ Hamish said to himself. ‘Eloise, do we have to get so close to this lake?’

Eloise looked back and shrugged.

‘We’ve got to get across it, haven’t we?’ She indicated the high cliffs that rose on either side, dimly visible through the choking clouds. ‘It doesn’t look like there’s a way round it. We’ll have to swim.’

Nick and Hamish exchanged glances. Hamish coughed.

‘Much as Ah’d love to see you get yer kit off, Eloise...’ he began.

‘I’m not swimming across that!’ Nick exclaimed. He looked down at Timmy. Timmy glanced up and whined.

‘Not even the dog’s willing to paddle it,’ said Hamish.

‘Well,’ said Eloise. ‘Does anyone have a better idea?’

Hamish harrumphed.

‘Mebbe not,’ he admitted. He squared his shoulders. ‘Och, well, if we gotta, we gotta,’ he said resignedly. ‘Oota the way, Eloise. Lemme go first.’

He made his way to the rocks and pebbles that formed the shore.

‘Careful!’ said Eloise, suddenly. ‘We don’t know what could be lurking in there!’

Hamish halted and gave her a red-eyed glare. ‘This was yer idea. Ah’m only obeying orders.’ Huffily, he stepped into the water.

With an undignified yelp, he leapt out again and stumbled back, falling over. Timmy the Dog rushed up to him and ran rings around him, barking at his steaming boots.

‘Fuck me!’ Nick exclaimed. Eloise moved forward, incredulous. Hamish sat up and rolled up the leg of his jeans. Although his boots - whose manufacturer had been trumpeted their ability to withstand industrial chemicals - had resisted the lake’s acerbity, acid had splashed up his leg, leaving a splatter of vicious blisters.

‘Ow!’ he said angrily. ‘That fuckin’ hurt!’

Wide-eyed, Nick stared out across the acid lake.

‘Alright, we’re not swimming across it,’ said Eloise after fussing over the Scot. ‘Are you going to survive, Hamish? Well, come on!’

They followed her down the sterile shore.

A causeway loomed out of the mist. After passing through the rocks and boulders from the direction of the cliffs, it cut straight across the lake, some way to the right of the pass through which the three teenagers had entered the valley. The causeway led directly towards the City, which was now visible again through the mist. Feeling exposed, but seeing no other solution to their predicament, the three teenagers walked down the causeway.

They reached the far side of the acid lake and tentatively approached the high walls of the City that rose forty feet above the misty waters.

Directly ahead of them was a gateway that Eloise found reminiscent of the Lion Gate of Mycenae. Beyond it, they could see the beginnings of some kind of courtyard. The megalithic walls stood much as they must have done on the day of their erection. But the massive city was as silent as Babylon or Mohenjo-Daro, as if its builders and inhabitants were long since dead. The gate was wide enough for two Bronze Age chariots to pass abreast and any competent imitator of HP Lovecraft would have described the walls themselves as ‘cyclopean.’

But the City was silent.

Dead.

‘Och, let’s eat the dog,’ said Hamish.

‘You can fuck off,’ Nick replied in wounded tones, kneeling down to pat the scabby mongrel.

‘It’s not as if there’s much meat on him anyway,’ said Hamish gloomily.

‘Probably more than we’re likely to find in this place,’ Eloise murmured. ‘I don’t know who built this place, but it seems to have been long-since abandoned.’

‘Who would have built a city in the centre of the earth, anyway?’ asked Nick. ‘Have you ever heard of anything like it?’

Eloise put her hands in her pockets. ‘Maybe this is Agartha...’

‘What is this Agartha place, anyway?’ Hamish said. They started walking towards the gate. ‘Kohl mentioned it, when we were in the submersible. But Ah couldna make head nor tail of his ramblings.’

They passed under the gateway, to find a wide plaza stretching out before them, silent, deserted. Vast buildings surrounded them and wide streets led in all directions. Looming over the City was a massive pyramidal tower. Unconsciously, Eloise found herself moving in that direction.

‘I don’t know exactly,’ she murmured, ‘but there was a man in my grannie’s coven who went on about stuff like this. I didn’t like him though, he was a creep.’ She remembered the time he’d tried to get her on her own, after the meeting in the woods near the reservoir...

They had left the plaza now and were heading down what looked like some kind of ceremonial way that led directly towards the pyramid. Realising that Hamish and Nick were hanging on her every word, she went on. ‘But I remember him saying something about Tibet and the Nazis and the inevitable supremacy of the Nordic race and the cities of Shamballah and Agartha - which some say are in Central Asia, while others reckon they’re to be found at the centre of the earth. I never believed in the Hollow Earth theory - not until we went down Y Pwll Ddu mine, anyway. But maybe this is Agartha...’

‘Didn’t Kohl say the Cauldron of Rebirth is in Agartha?’ said Nick suddenly. Eloise turned and looked at him. She was about to reply, when there was a shout from behind them.

‘*Hande höch!*’

They turned to see a squadron of SS soldiers covering them with sub-machine guns.

