

Schlock! webzine

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Schlock! Publishing

This Edition

[Super Duper: Part Four](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - In which we meet The Don and his mother and Smith sets out to save the world. *Also featuring interactive adventure game "[Smith Makes a Cup of Tea](#)."*

[Wolf Moon: Part Two](#) by [Gavin Roach](#) and [Gavin Chappell](#) - Horror in the forests of Germania!

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

[Babbage Must Die - Part One](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - automation and computerisation has made humanity redundant: there is only one way to save the world...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 1\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *I saw a bare gray arm come from the cloak, flung up to maintain its balance. Or perhaps my pencil ray had seared his arm. The gray-skinned arm of a Martian.*

[The Summer Country - Part One](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways come to regret messing about in boats. *Fifth in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Saga of the Ere-Dwellers: Part Five](#) - supernatural soap opera from Iceland, translated by [William Morris](#) and Eirikr Magnússon.

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Prologue](#) - by Rex Mundy - a lustful king brings his kingdom to the edge of peril.

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Herbert West: Reanimator - Part Four](#) by [HP Lovecraft](#) - Herbert West continues his quest to successfully reanimate the dead!

Super Duper

Chapter Four

“I need some help.”

The Don smiled wistfully. He was wearing his favourite smoking jacket over an Austin Reid suit that he bought at Barnado’s for a tenner and he looked every bit as smug and superior as he felt. He gave his only friend the most derisive glare that he could muster.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve finally come around to admitting it.”

The Don didn’t smile at his own jokes. That was for other people to do; it was enough for him to know that they were funny. And he did know in the deepest part of his chest that not a single sentence that left his mouth had not been honed to perfection by the years of wasted degrees, masters degrees and that PhD he got on scholarship. Years of avoiding debtors had made his tongue very sharp indeed. At least, he thought so and that was all that truly mattered.

“Well, young Smith; in what exact manner is it that I can come to your aid?” The Don enquired. “I know it must be some dire happening for you have actually taken the trouble of walking the half mile to my house instead of taking your usual conveyance.”

Smith took a deep breath; he wasn’t feeling especially comfortable with some of the emotions that he had been experiencing since Corrine walked out on him. It was nice to see that The Don was his old self.

“Well, Don,” he started, “the trouble is this. I don’t know if you had noticed but there seems to have been a tremendous shift in the political status quo in this country.”

“Acutely observed and delicately placed.”

“Under the new and, not entirely lamentable, collapse of Great British culture, a few minor concerns spring to mind.”

Smith knew from experience that hyperbole was the quickest route to securing The Don’s interest in anything.

“One of which is of course, how do you kill a cow and strip it of its meat for sustenance? Another being whether or not the current period of political status will give over to an even more robust form of totalitarianism capitalism than we have previously witnessed.”

“Both excellent concerns.”

“But moreover, and most concerning of all is, how is the power still on if, as popular belief would have it, that nobody can be bothered going to work anymore?”

“I think I see what you’re driving at. Do come in and we’ll discuss it over some Earl Grey.”

The Don’s house was as immaculate as a house could possibly be without professional help. The main reason for this was that The Don, at the age of thirty-six, still lived with his mother, who was badly in need of some professional help herself. She liked to clean, and she liked things to be clean. Furthermore, since she was retired, she didn’t see why she couldn’t just clean all the time. As the two of them entered the living room, they could hear her cleaning the kitchen.

“How’s your mum doing?” Smith asked with as much tact as he could muster.

“Well, this contagious lethargy doesn’t seem to have touched either one of us. She has been her usual self and I have been composing an epic poem about a talking

bear.”

“Excellent. How far along are you with it?”

“Not as far along as I hoped, I had to break in to the Co-Op to get some milk and other essentials and it took me a good while to crack the locks on the shutters... Not the sort of thing you ever expect to have to know about. Anyway, we’ve enough food and UHT milk to last out the month so it should be plain sailing from now on.”

At The Don’s invitation, Smith made himself comfortable on the couch whilst his friend went to turn on the kettle.

“Mother will be in with tea momentarily.”

The Don sat himself to the left of Smith in a large and excessively padded armchair. His chunky frame spilled over the edges of it with extraordinary dignity.

“Now, could you expand upon our earlier conversation?”

Smith stared around the immaculate living room. Over the gas fireplace hung a portrait of a sad clown tying bright red and oversized shoes. Underneath the clown on the mantelpiece were pictures of The Don at every one of his graduation ceremonies. It was a catalogue that spanned two decades. On the right hand side of that was a cabinet topped with a few pictures of The Don’s older brother but filled with trophies and polished medals that The Don had won in his various sporting capacities as a martial artist, a power lifter and crown green bowler. The trophies were there, Smith knew, for the benefit of his mother who was very proud of all her son’s accomplishments, not caring one iota that those accomplishments had never led to anything. She would have been disappointed if they had, because then she would have had no one left at all.

“What I was thinking,” Smith said as seriously as he could, “was that if there is still power, that means the power stations must still be running.”

“That’s a reasonable assumption.”

“But I’m thinking that they probably are being run by automated computer cycles as opposed to closely monitored manual applications.”

“Quite possibly.”

“Now, in the case of the New Brighton wind farms and the hydro-electric plant in North Wales that’s all fine. If the system goes down, the power goes off and everything’s as smooth as stout. However, in the case of our decommissioned nuclear facilities there is a very good prospect of meltdown. Which, I’m sure you’ll agree, wouldn’t bode well for either your sainted mother or my acrimoniously despised ex-girlfriend Corrine.”

“You and Corrine broke up? Why?”

“She has better people to watch decay than myself.”

“OK, so what about the power plants?”

“Well, I was thinking the nearest one I know of is Sellafield and as I understand it, it’s pretty bloody big. Anyway, if you’re not too busy today we could drive up to Cumbria to try to see if there’s some obvious safety shutdown procedure we can follow. It shouldn’t take us more than a few hours. Plus, the roads are bound to be empty, what with everyone dying in bed and all.”

The Don closed his eyes reflectively and only opened them again when his mother put a tray of tea, milk, cups, saucers and biscuits on the coffee table. For a woman of sixty-five The Don’s mother still looked as lithe and alert as any woman twenty years her junior. Her dress sense was as immaculate as her living room.

“Not with your young lady today? Thought you’d come over and see me hey?”

There was a playful smile on her lips.

“You know I can barely keep myself away from you at the best of times.”

The Don leant forward and as he did, he dropped his usual facade and his local drawl became more even more pronounced than it was when he was speaking elegantly.

“Thanks for the tea, mum. Listen, you wouldn’t mind if I borrowed the car this afternoon would you? Smith and I have to try and save the few important things left in the world.”

“As long as you both come back in one piece,” she said. “And I’m talking about you and the car, not this reprobate - he can look after himself.”

Smith smiled. That was perhaps the most flattering thing anyone had said about him since he learned to wipe his own bottom.

And with that it was agreed on. Smith remained on the couch whilst The Don made a few preparations for the journey.

“I’m going to take a sword just in case it’s turned in to Mad Max out there. Is there anything you want?”

Smith had been hoping that The Don would ask him that; The Don had quite an armoury from his time as a martial artist and though the swords were blunt, they would be a good deterrent against any rogue elements.

“Do you have any of those twirly things, nun chucks?”

“I do, but you don’t know how to use them. How about some knuckle dusters?”

“That’ll be fine, should we take some food?”

“I’ve got all kinds of munchies from the Co-Op earlier, but we shouldn’t need too much.”

“Quality! Do you need a hand packing?”

The Don had already assumed that Smith would be too lazy to offer help and had packed the car on his own. Smith was, of course, well aware of both of these facts.

“Did you pack any Monster Munch?”

“There are cashews and raisins.”

“Whatever you say, but if we pass a service station we might want to stop for some, and condoms, just in case - I’m a free man now, you know.”

The Don shook his head but smiled with amusement and vicarious pride. Despite being handsome and well dressed, it had been ten years since he had last had any use for a prophylactic himself. His weary claim was that he understood women too well to want to be with one.

With the car packed up and Nicol Williamson’s definitive reading of *The Hobbit* on the stereo, the two friends waved goodbye to The Don’s mother, headed out of the street and down on to the Old Chester Road. After a quick right at Bebington Station where they ignored the red traffic light (with far more glee than was necessary) they went up towards the Clatterbridge roundabout. All the roads were desolate and they felt confident that they’d be on the motorway and up in Cumbria in no time at all.

The M53 from Clatterbridge was as open as either of them could have hoped for. Just for the hell of it they took the car up to a hundred and twenty and only dropped back down to ninety when the very framework of the vehicle began to shudder intensely. However, as they merged on to the M56 and got closer to Chester they noticed a gradual change. The roads were still free of any other travelling cars. Then, intermittently at first but with quickly decreasing scarcity, they began to notice

other abandoned cars. No cars were parked at the side of the road but rather they were all scattered as if their drivers had simply let them drift to a stop, not even bothering to put the handbrake on.

For the most part it was easy to weave through them but it did take the speed down to a steady fifty as they got within five miles of the junction to the M6. The matter had been some cause for remark between the two of them but as The Don put it:

“Given that society as we know it has collapsed, this is a fairly mild happenstance.”

Smith, who was more able to give the matter attention than The Don, but who simply chose not to, listened with interest to what his friend was saying; only so that he could go back to listening with interest to Nicol Williamson narrate *The Hobbit* instead. He had his eyes half closed and was thinking about how cool it would be to be Gandalf or better yet Radagast, because then you got all the powers and never actually had to do anything with them.

“I wish Tolkien had written more about Radagast the Brown,” he mournfully declared.

The Don, however, was unable to run with the thought because at that exact moment he hit a point in the road that was almost entirely inaccessible. Three cars blocked off the three central lanes of the motorway and being in the centre lane he was also blocked in on either side. Aroused from his slumber by the sudden deceleration, Smith glanced around to see what had caused it.

“Fucking Jesus!”

He spat the words aloud in horror. The Don looked over at him.

“What? What is it?”

“There’s a fella in this car.”

Smith pointed to the car next to them. The Don carefully terminated the reverse manoeuvre he beginning and applied his handbrake. He looked past Smith for confirmation and then slipped off his seat belt.

“I think he’s dead, you know.”

“So?”

“Well, do you really want to get out just for some dead guy?”

“Better to try and help someone that doesn’t need help than to not try and help someone that does.”

“Very eloquent, but has it occurred to you that neither of us has contracted this illness because we’re both such hopeless shut-ins?”

“You just don’t want to stand up.”

Smith shrugged.

“Well, if he’s dead anyway...”

The man wasn’t dead, although, slumped back in his car seat he was gaunt and dehydrated and as close to death as a living thing can be. His open eyes were so equally divided between bloodshot and jaundice that they could have easily been mistaken for orange. The locked car doors did not give into the frantic handle pulling and, as the two of them banged on his window in an effort to get him to unlock the door, the man simply blinked at them.

The Don walked calmly back to his own car and came back wearing the knuckledusters he had chosen as the self-defence item that Smith was least likely to hurt himself with. Walking to the left side of the car, away from the driver, he drew back his hand and sinking all of his weight in to the motion, punched cleanly through the car window, cascading the dying man with shards of flying glass, which made him

instantly feel guilty.

Reaching through the shards of a window that probably cost more than Smith's yearly teabag expenditure, The Don pressed the unlock button and all of the car's doors clicked healthily. Smith instantly pulled open the driver's side door and almost as instantly pulled away, his nose buried into his elbow in revulsion.

The acrid smell of a combination of faeces and urine was overwhelming and even The Don struggled to get especially close to it.

"What are we going to do with him?" A mixed look of confusion, panic and concern filled The Don's face as he spoke.

"Well, I'm not giving him a sponge bath if that's what you're suggesting."

"We should get him in the car, get him to a hospital."

"If any of them are open."

"We have to try, he's dying."

Smith took a deep breath.

"Look around man, they all are."

Sure enough as The Don looked from car to car, he saw and he could not believe that he had not seen it before. Every one of the abandoned vehicles contained at least one person.

"They're all dying anyway; we have to save what's left of the living."

The Don was no longer listening. The magnitude of the situation had gripped him, and in turn, he gripped his eyes as if he wanted to rip them out rather than look upon the misery before him. He let out a deep howl feral howl and breathing heavily, he set to work. He pulled the man out of his car and slung him over his shoulder.

"There's no point," Smith pleaded.

The Don would not be deterred. First one, then two and three until finally four of the wretches were piled on top of each other in the back of his car. He fit two more in the boot and another two in the seat that Smith was travelling in.

"You stay here."

There was no point arguing with The Don, he was all animal concern. So Smith watched him back the car awkwardly up the motorway until there was enough space to turn around, propping up the body next to him with his shoulder as the sufferer flopped with every movement of the car. The Don drove away.

Click here to play the interactive adventure game, [Smith Makes a Cup of Tea](#).

Wolf Moon

Chapter Eight

‘Who is it, Cicatrix?’ A big man, almost as tall as Titus, and wide across the shoulders, came up behind the scarred man. He studied the four recruits. ‘Rookies, eh? Replacing Marius, and Paulus, and...’

Cicatrix howled. ‘Don’t say their names!’ he cried, and lumbered back into the room.

‘Come in, rookies,’ said the big man, eying them cynically. ‘I’m Vibius.’ He held his hand out and Titus tried to shake it. ‘No,’ Vibius sighed. ‘We clasp wrists. You’re not a civilian now.’ Titus clasped Vibius’ wrist, and Aulus, Mustela and Servius copied him. Vibius ushered them into the cell.

A fresh-faced man about thirty looked up from a piece of armour he was burnishing. An older man was lounging on a chair, with an uncompleted game of draughts before him. Cicatrix was crouched before a small, crude shrine in one corner, muttering to himself.

‘Greetings,’ said the fresh-faced man, putting the armour to one side and rising. He clasped their hands. Titus noticed a small mark in his forehead, a brand in the shape of a bird. ‘I’m Lucianus,’ he added. ‘You’ve already met Cicatrix and Vibius.’ He indicated the older man, whose eyes were severely bloodshot, and Titus noticed that he and the other legionaries also had the same mark. ‘This is Laurentius. And you are?’

Titus introduced himself. ‘This is my brother Aulus,’ he said. ‘And this is Mustela and Servius.’

‘We’re all brothers here,’ Vibius said. ‘Brothers in arms. The only kind of brothers that matter. If you survive the training, you’ll be brothers too, comrades. Warriors of Mithr...’

Cicatrix looked up warningly from his shrine. Vibius shrugged. ‘But you’ve got that to wait for.’

Lucianus turned to Vibius. ‘Stop trying to wind up Cicatrix and make yourself useful. Show these lads around the place. Have you banked your money with the standard bearer? Had your medical? No? Vibius, see that they get everything done. This evening, we’re all going down a tavern that we legionaries frequent. Oh, a word of warning – never trust a Caledonian.’

With this enigmatic pronouncement, he let Vibius lead them away. For the rest of that afternoon the legionary took them round the fort, introducing them to such delights as the latrines, the headquarters (again), the stables (where they saw more blue-faced Britons lounging about), the legate’s house, the tribunes’ houses (not that they were allowed entry), the workshops, the hospital (but no sign of Zeno or Ajax), and finally the baths, a little piece of Roman civilisation out here in the wilds, where they unwound in the hot waters. Later, they reencountered Zeno, on a similar mission after a busy afternoon in a distant part of the hospital.

‘Looks like we all made it in the end,’ he commented cheerfully.

‘We’re going down to a legionaries’ bar tonight,’ Aulus said. ‘Any chance of you coming with us?’

Zeno shook his head. ‘They won’t let non-Romans in a legionaries’ bar, Aulus, unless they’re auxiliaries,’ he said. ‘Maybe we could find somewhere else to go.’

Vibius frowned. ‘I can’t let you do that,’ he told the recruits brusquely. ‘You’re going to the legionaries’ bar because Lucianus said so. It’s a privilege, and I won’t

have you turning your snotty noses up at it, got that?’

Zeno made a face behind the legionary’s back, and left soon after.

That evening, after their first introduction to legionary’s porridge, they joined their comrades down at a bar in town called “The Pride of the Empire”.

‘What was that?’ Aulus was muttering as they came in. ‘It was like that bear stuff they drink, but less liquid.’

‘Beer,’ Titus corrected him.

‘Didn’t get you pissed, either,’ Mustela replied.

‘If our father knew we were eating that rubbish...’ Aulus continued.

‘He must be a great man, to own an eatery in Rome,’ Servius said dreamily. He’d heard more about the two lads’ background.

‘Was,’ Aulus replied shortly.

‘Alright, enough out of you,’ Vibius said. ‘You’re privileged enough to be allowed into the legionaries’ bar. Now shut up, and don’t expect us to buy your drinks.’ He raised his hand in salute across the bustling room to Lucianus, Laurentius and Cicatrix, who were sitting beside the bar. Near them was a red-haired, tattooed auxiliary who Titus thought he recognised from somewhere. They joined their comrades, and listened to their conversation, which revolved chiefly around wine, women and warfare.

Titus realised it was the two spiral tattoos reaching to the auxiliary’s cheeks that were familiar. Suddenly, the man looked up, and his blazing blue eyes met Titus’. Titus looked away quickly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the auxiliary rise, and lurch over to them.

‘Rookies, are ya?’ he asked in a barbarous accent. ‘Welcome to the First Legion! The least I can do is offer to buy ye all a pint!’

‘Oh, that’s very kind of you,’ Mustela said with a smile, ‘but...’

‘No, I insist!’ the auxiliary said. ‘Barman, pints all round for my new friends.’ He clapped them on their backs. ‘So, how’s army life finding ye?’

‘Well enough,’ said Titus, a little stiffly. ‘We’ve only just arrived.’

‘Just arrived?’ the auxiliary asked. ‘Then ye won’t have heard of me, will ye? Dubigalos the Caledonian, that’s me.’

‘Pints,’ the barman announced, appearing with a tray of beakers. Dubigalos grinned at the man, and made a great pantomime of searching for his money-pouch.

‘Och, by Epona’s teats!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’ve left ma money in ma other tunic. One of you fine lads will have ta pay.’ Titus saw the barman give Dubigalos a knowing look, which the Caledonian ignored. Servius looked at everyone else, then pulled out his money pouch. Aulus winced, and darted Titus a look.

‘Very generous of ye, young lad,’ Dubigalos said heartily. ‘Here’s to the First Legion – and our legate Marius Maximus!’

‘Marius Maximus!’ they chorused. Titus understood that this was the name of the senator currently in charge of the legion. He watched Dubigalos’ Adam’s apple bob up and down as he knocked back the pint. The Caledonian slammed it down on the table and looked blearily around at his reluctant companions. ‘Och, no,’ he chided. ‘When we toast the big chief, we don’t sip – we quaff!’

‘How do you do that?’ Servius asked. Dubigalos’ eyes lit up.

‘I’d show ye,’ he said, ‘but I’d need more beer first.’

Titus gazed thoughtfully at the dark surface of his beer. He had a feeling Dubigalos had done this before. Laughing unwillingly, Mustela bought the next round.

‘Drink up, drink up!’ Dubigalos urged them. ‘Och, so ye’ve decided to join the

legion. Well, it's a man's life, they say. But drink up. I canna believe Rome conquered anywhere with lads who drank as slowly as ye.'

'You're an auxiliary, right?' Mustela asked.

'Aye,' Dubigalos said proudly. 'Argentorix's Troop, scout and lancer, second class, that's me. Backbone of the army, us auxiliaries. Rome would be nowhere without us.'

'How d'you work that one out?' Aulus demanded.

'One city conquering the whole world?' Dubigalos asked. 'It would never have happened if ye hadn't had a bit of help – and that's where we come in. We do the real work before you Romans stroll along with your wee swords and your bendy javelins and act as if you've done it all yourselves. That's how you conquered the world – ha! Listen to me! Conquered the world. That's what ye like to think. Ye never conquered the Parthians, right? Ye never conquered the Germans – or we wouldn't be here. And you'll never conquer the Caledonians, mark my words. The Caledonians are more than a match for you southerners any day. Drink up! Who's buying the next round?'

'So what's so great about the Caledonians that makes them unconquerable?' Aulus asked, after digging deep to buy their third round. 'From what I've heard there's nothing north of Hadrian's Wall worth fighting for.'

'Aye, that's why we fight so well,' Dubigalos bragged. 'We have nothing but our freedom! And we won't let the Romans take it from us. We live in tents, naked and unshod, amidst the majestic sweep of the wild mountains and moorlands, living on our flock, fruit and wild game – content with that and nothing more. All Caledonians are equal, except slaves, of course, and women we possess in common – some of them very common, especially ma mother. The boldest men we make our rulers, aye! With the wind in your hair, the tang of the heather in your nostrils, eating the simplest of food, it's a fine life for a man. Not like the corruption ye meet in the Empire.'

'If it's so great,' Aulus asked, 'why did you come and join the Roman Army?'

'Because I got sick and tired of standing bollock-naked up to ma chin in swamps and eating bark and roots!' Dubigalos exploded. 'Och, ye can keep barbarism. I'll stick with civilisation. Especially when someone else is buying the next round. Your turn, big man,' he told Titus.

Titus went to the bar, thinking on the auxiliary's words. Dubigalos had turned his back on the wilds, but his words had stirred something deep inside Titus. He wanted to plunge into the forests, wanted to live like a barbarian, a cleaner, simpler life than Roman life. He wanted... He didn't know what he wanted.

He staggered back to his friends to see Lucianus and the others had joined them, and Dubigalos was trying to convince Cicatrix to buy the next round.

Titus had no recollection of getting back to the barracks. He awoke to find someone shaking his arm. Morning sunlight streamed in through the open door and his head felt like it was about to split open. He looked up. It was Vibius.

'Get up!' he barked. 'It's not all fun and games in the legions, you know. Training begins today for you rookies. But I suggest you all have a shave and look lively before Centurion Decimus sees you looking like this!'

Titus groaned, rolled over, and started trying to waken Aulus.

Chapter Nine

'What d'you think you're doing, you gruesome little specimen!'

Decimus' bellow echoed round the parade ground. Servius, the subject of his wrath, cowered before the centurion. Titus watched the scene uneasily from further

down the rank of trainee legionaries.

‘I, er, I...’ Servius stuttered.

‘You’re a disgrace!’ the centurion bellowed. ‘Keep in time! How much simpler can it be? Left foot’ – he pointed to his own, and then at Servius’ – ‘right foot’ – he repeated this with the other foot – ‘then left foot again. A drunken Hibernian could get it right, but not you, oh no! The barbarians will be down on us in seconds if you’re left to guard the frontier.’

He stamped away to one side of the parade ground, clutching his vine staff under his armoured arm. Settling his plumed helmet more comfortably on his head, he bellowed:

‘We’ll start again, if that’s alright with young master Servius! This time I want to see you marching! I want to see you marching across this parade ground like legionaries, not the Emperor’s favourite concubines out for a stroll! Am I making myself clear?’ He pointed straight at Servius with his staff, and brandished it. ‘And if that maggot marches out of time again, I’ll take great pleasure in breaking my vine staff across his back! And then I’ll call for another! Now march!’

The men staggered round and began to march across the dusty parade ground. Titus kept an eye on Servius. Decimus seemed to be trying to break him, constantly humiliating him in front of the others, treating him as the weakest link. As Titus marched in step with Aulus and the others, he thought how he would deal with someone like Servius, if he was in Decimus’ position.

‘Halt!’ Decimus shouted. The recruits stumbled to a stop.

‘I said halt!’ Decimus bellowed, charging into them and lashing about with his vine staff. ‘When I said halt I want you to halt immediately, not stagger round until you feel like pausing. Now, who wants to tell me what went wrong there?’

Titus frowned. He hadn’t noticed anything going wrong. He glanced briefly at Aulus who nodded significantly at Servius. Decimus’ hawk-like eyes caught the movement.

‘Well spotted, that man!’ he roared. ‘Our lord and master Servius thought he was strolling through the woods of Arcadia! Am I correct, Lord Servius?’

‘No, I... I...’ Servius stammered.

‘Are you telling me I’m wrong?’ Decimus bellowed.

‘No, I...’

‘So you’re telling me I’m right?’

‘Yes, I...’

‘So you did think you were strolling through the woods of Arcadia?’

‘I, er...’

‘Get that armour off and bend over!’

Titus watched in anger as Decimus beat Servius with his vine staff manically, while the recruit stood bewildered and weeping. He took a step forward, brows contracting in rage. Aulus shot out a hand to grab his arm. Titus looked angrily at Aulus. Aulus shook his head.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Aulus hissed.

Servius’ flesh was criss-crossed with red welts. True to his word, Decimus broke his staff across Servius’ back before he halted, panting. Servius collapsed to the dust. Titus looked worriedly at his unmoving body.

‘Alright you bunch of dairy-maids! Attention! Cohort... Wait for it! *Dis-miss!*’

He nodded to Titus and Aulus as they began to march past Servius’ bloody form. ‘You two – take that away. *If* he’s still alive, drag him down to the hospital – and don’t be too gentle about it!’ He turned on his heel and marched away.

'I'm alright,' Servius groaned feebly, as they lifted him up. Titus relaxed slightly. They helped him stagger from the parade ground.

'Why did you just stand there and let him beat you?' Aulus demanded in a whisper, glaring over his shoulder at Decimus, who stood on the other side of the parade ground, laughing and joking with a group of legionaries.

Servius shrugged weakly.

In a white-tiled room in the hospital, Ajax inspected the welts solemnly, and applied vinegar to the worst, despite Servius' howls of pain. The physician tutted.

'You're in the legions now, lad,' he reminded him. 'Time to show something of that renowned Roman fortitude. Zeno!'

'Yes, master?' Zeno hurried forward, with a quick nod to Titus and Aulus.

'Fetch me the unguent from the top shelf, will you?' Zeno went to a row of shelves on the far wall, each of which was packed with jars, bowls, pouches and containers. Titus glanced round the room, regarding the floor mosaic of Aesculapius the Healer curiously.

Zeno handed Ajax a jar, from which the physician produced a vile-smelling paste.

'Can't you call on the gods to help?' Titus asked, as Ajax began to smear this on Servius' welts. Absently, the physician shook his head.

'No need for that nonsense with so simple a case,' he muttered. 'If faith healing is called for, I'll use it. But if your friend here gets some rest and doesn't irritate the abrasions, he should be as healthy as Herakles in a few days. Now, a word of advice young Servius. Don't get on the wrong side of the centurion.'

'I think I already have,' said Servius mournfully.

Bidding farewell to Ajax and Zeno, the three recruits made their leisurely way back to their barracks block. As they reached the door, Vibius appeared, glaring at them.

'Oh, so there you are at last!' he exclaimed. 'Decided to join us, have you? You'll be glad to know Centurion Decimus has put the whole squad on street cleaning fatigues thanks to dimwit here.' He indicated Servius.

Titus frowned. This was unfair. What was Decimus trying to do to them? Now the rest of the squad would start to hate Servius. This wasn't the first time, either. All through the training Decimus had been making an example of them like this. Even Mustela seemed to be growing impatient with Servius.

Lucianus appeared, leading the rest of the squad. 'Come on, men,' he said. 'We start with our street.' He took them to a cupboard and produced brooms and hoes. 'You four' - he indicated Titus, Aulus, Servius and Mustela - 'can do the weeding. Vibius, Cicatrix, Laurentius and myself, we're sweeping up.'

As they came out into the open air, Titus saw a group of men heading towards them. His heart sank, as he recognised them as squad 0406. They shared the barracks block with 0405, and rivalry had existed between the two groups since long before the new recruits appeared on the scene.

'I hear you're on fatigues!' Their sneering leader was a swarthy man named Priscus. 'Not again, Lucianus! I thought you'd learnt to keep your scum in line.'

Lucianus smiled coldly at Priscus. 'Move along now, Priscus,' he said. 'We're cleaning this street.'

'It *is* full of scum,' Priscus agreed, and his fellow-legionaries guffawed. 'Get mopping, ladies. We don't want this kind of filth staining our gutters.' He glowered at Servius, who snapped him a quick salute. The other legionaries laughed again.

'What d'you think you're doing?' Priscus bellowed, in a fair imitation of Decimus' parade ground bellow. 'You don't salute a fellow-legionary! We're all comrades here. Now jump to it!'

‘Yessir,’ Servius replied. He turned to start hoeing the weeds growing up among the gravel, when Priscus barged into him, walking towards the door of the barracks. Servius fell flat.

Titus took a step forward. Aulus grabbed his arm. Titus shook him off.

‘Not this time, brother,’ he rumbled. He advanced on Priscus. But before he could reach the legionary, he heard a howl of anger, and turned to see Laurentius bearing down on Priscus, his mouth split wide in anger, his bloodshot eyes like those of a ravening wolf, his fist raised.

Priscus and Laurentius fell to the gravel, struggling and punching each other. Priscus’ comrades surged forward. Titus saw Lucianus’ mouth opening and closing as he bellowed at his men, but it was too late. The rest of the squad sprang to Laurentius’ defence, and the gravel spattered in all directions as a fight broke out.

Titus found himself against a tall, skinny legionary who seized him by the waist, then got him in a neck-lock. Bent over, Titus heaved against the man’s grip was surprised to find it was like an iron chain. The man’s bony fist pounded into Titus’ face. Titus grabbed the man by his knees, then heaved himself into a standing position, dragging the legionary up at right angles. The man flailed in Titus’ grip before he flung the man to the gravel with a grunt.

Aulus dashed forward, about to kick the man in the ribs. A bellow from the end of the street gave him pause for thought. He looked up, and Titus followed his gaze to see Decimus and a group of other centurions charging towards them.

‘Break it up, break it up!’ Decimus shouted as he and the other centurions lashed out on either side with their vine staffs. ‘That’s enough! You’re all on a charge! I’ve got your numbers.’ He halted in front of Servius. ‘You again!’ he hissed.

‘I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t...’ Servius warbled. Decimus smashed him to the ground with a blow.

Panting, the centurion looked around. ‘The lot of you!’ he shouted. ‘I’m going to skin you alive before I’ve finished with you. Legionary Lucianus!’

Lucianus sprang to attention. ‘Sir!’

Decimus prowled towards him. ‘What was your part in this?’

Lucianus looked straight ahead. ‘Sir, we were just sparring, sir!’

Decimus circled him. ‘Sparring?’ he hissed. ‘With Legionary Priscus and his merry men? Not for the first time, either. Did I give you permission to spar?’

‘Sir, no, sir!’ Lucianus replied.

‘You’re on a charge!’ Decimus bellowed. Titus stared at him in disgust as the older man waddled and turned a shade of purple. ‘You’re on fatigues!’

‘Sir, we are already on fatigues, sir!’ Lucianus yapped.

Decimus circled him again, bringing his face so close to Lucianus’ it looked to Titus as if they were about to kiss.

‘You’re on latrine fatigues now!’ he bellowed, spattering Lucianus’ face with spittle. ‘Legionary Priscus!’ he bawled, still facing Lucianus.

‘Sir!’

‘Road cleaning fatigues! Move!’

Priscus and the other legionaries took the brooms and hoes from the unresisting hands of Titus and his squad. Decimus spun round on his heel. ‘I want to see no more of it!’ he shouted. ‘I’ll bring you insubordinate rabble to line if I have to decimate you!’

He marched off, followed by the other centurions, who gave him approving looks. Aulus swaggered forward, imitating him. Servius laughed. Titus knocked his brother to the ground with a blow.

In the ensuing silence, Aulus got to his feet, clutching his ear.
'Ow!' he complained. 'What did you do that for?'
'Come on, men,' Lucianus said wearily. 'Off to the latrines it is.' They walked away, leaving Priscus and his comrades sweeping the gravel.

Titus trudged up the road, weighed down by his pack. The sun baked down on his armoured form. Lucianus had said that when winter came, the temperature would fall dramatically. But right now the heat was almost unbearable.

Trudging figures filled the road ahead and behind, each one in full armour and carrying a heavy pack. Nearby, Aulus marched grimly on, lost for words after the last ten miles. Mustela seemed almost unaffected, but Servius was staggering as he walked.

'Why's that man limping?'

Titus' head snapped up. He saw Decimus bearing down on their section of the column. The centurion was pointing at Servius. The recruit looked up guiltily.

'Stone in my boot, sir,' he yapped.

'Century... halt!' Decimus bellowed.

With sighs of gratitude, the men came to a stop. Decimus bore down upon Servius.

'Get that boot off!' he barked.

Servius dropped his kit in the dust with a clang, and tried to pull off the boot while still standing to attention on one leg. Decimus grabbed the boot and yanked it off.

Servius' foot was a mass of blisters.

'You repellent little man!' Decimus bellowed. 'Take the other boot off!' Sitting in the dust, Servius did so. 'Now get marching again! Twenty miles.' Servius began to limp after the others in his bare feet.

The staccato crack of wooden training sword filled the air as the mid-morning sun beat down upon the recruits. They were breathing heavily through the heat, sweat stinging their eyes as they cut and thrust at one another.

An occasional flat thump could be heard as a wooden sword struck home, followed by the curses of the man who had been hit. Decimus stood at the edge of the square, surveying the scene before him. His cold grey eyes settled upon the figure of Servius scrambling through the dust after his sword.

'Come on, Servius!' Mustela panted, a note of exasperation creeping into his voice. 'How many times do I have to show you? You need to relax your grip on the sword. You're holding it too tightly.'

'It's just that my feet still hurt and I can't see properly with all the dust in the air,' Servius complained.

'Stop whining!' Mustela snapped. The two figures started to circle each other once more.

Servius let fly with a wild swing that Mustela easily parried. He moved forwards quickly and caught Servius with a short thrust to the ribs. Servius collapsed onto one knee, gasping in pain. As he went down, fighting for air, his wicker training shield crashed onto Mustela's instep.

'Jupiter's balls!' Mustela shouted as a sharp pain lanced through his foot.

‘Oh! I’m sorry, are you hurt?’ Servius gasped, taking a step towards Mustela.

‘I’m fine! Put up your fucking guard!’ Mustela spat. He advanced upon Servius.

‘Really, Mustela, I didn’t mean it, I’m sorr...’ Servius just managed to raise his shield in time to block a vicious stab by Mustela. The blow sent Servius staggering back a step or two, jarring his shoulder.

Servius tried to speak to his friend again, but Mustela rained blow after blow down on his shield. Each strike caused the smaller man to fall back. They came rapidly, smashing into Servius’ shield and numbing his arm. With each blow, Mustela snarled, and spittle flecked his chin. Servius heard a rending sound and saw that the top of his shield was almost detached. The next strike tore the top third of it away, exposing his head and shoulders. Panic was etched into his face. Servius felt his shield arm, now totally numb, drop limply to his side as he stumbled backwards. Guarding himself as best he could with the small wooden sword, he saw the remnants of his shield fall to the ground.

Another blow from Mustela smashed the sword from his grip. Down he went, whimpering, falling flat on the dusty ground. Servius heard a roar, and squinting upwards thought he saw the face of a demon. Mustela straddled him, his wooden sword raised above his head.

Suddenly confusion filled Mustela’s face. He looked around as if lost. Then he stepped back from Servius and leant upon his shield, gasping for breath.

Decimus, who had been watching the struggled with a brutal expression, turned away in disgust.

The enemy blocked the way ahead of them.

Titus looked behind him at the three squads of recruits, each holding a wicker shield in one hand and a wooden training sword in the other. He turned back to see the long line of armoured men that curved away on either side. His squads were between the horns of a crescent. ‘We’re not going to make it,’ Aulus murmured at his side. Titus said nothing.

The situation was a classic one; in this way Rome had met its greatest defeat at Cannae, when faced by the Carthaginians under Hannibal. Their previous rush had seemed to force the enemy back – too quickly, too easily. But Decimus had made Mustela their leader, and nothing seemed to perturb him.

‘Charge!’ he yelled, and led them at a run towards the centre of the line. Titus groaned, but ran with the others.

Their enemies, recruits like themselves, closed in, swinging their wooden sword about them as they surrounded Titus’ comrades. Mustela went down in the first rush, having taken a thrust to his chest he was obliged to scramble away to wait at the edge of the field with the others who had fallen. Titus found himself in close combat with a wide-eyed man from the other side. He looked about him as he parried a blow with his practice sword, and saw that his side had been split into a series of duels and skirmishes. They would never win through.

He smashed the man’s shield with a blow of his sword, knocked back a thrust, and jabbed the man in the chest. The man lowered his sword, shrugged, and said:

‘You’ve lost, anyway,’ before he walked away through the struggling figures.

They had lost their leader, they had lost hope. They were about to lose the fight. Titus looked around and saw that Aulus had also left the field. He hurried towards the largest group of his comrades, who were struggling against the enemies who

surrounded them.

‘To me!’ he shouted ‘To me!’ he saw Servius was still on his feet, jammed between two larger men. He grinned at Titus like a puppy.

‘Force your way out!’ Titus cried. ‘Concentrate your attack on one section! Come on, come on, get it together.’

Slowly, inexorably, coughing in the dust, the recruits began to push their way through the press. Men fell on either side. Titus saw Servius set upon by three or four of the other side. Losses were inevitable, he reminded himself.

Finally, they were out in the clear. Ahead of them, Titus saw the wooden staff jutting from the ground that represented the enemy’s standard.

‘Come on!’ he bellowed, leading his few surviving comrades towards the staff. A man from the other side tried to interpose himself at the last minute. Titus bashed him to one side with his shield. Flinging his sword and shield away, Titus grabbed the enemy standard and flourished it above his head.

A piercing whistle broke through the noise. Titus turned to see Decimus striding through the crowding, striking out casually on either side with his vine staff.

‘Very clever,’ he bellowed, waving his hand at the standard. ‘In a real battle you’d have lost the moment they surrounded you!’ Titus met the centurion’s eyes, angry to be belittled. He was surprised to see Decimus look back with something he would have thought to be fear in a lesser man.

His comrades cheered.

The parade ground was silent except for the distant souging of the wind. Rank upon rank of legionaries looked on as Titus and his fellow recruits stood before the rostrum where Marius Maximus, legate of the First Legion, was concluding a speech.

‘... and so we welcome you all as legionaries. Now repeat after me: “I swear by the Capitoline Triad...”’

‘I swear by the Capitoline Triad...’

‘To obey the orders of my commanders...’

‘To obey the orders of my commanders...’

‘To faithfully guard the Emperor Commodus...’

‘To faithfully guard the Emperor Commodus...’

‘And to protect the standard of the First Legion with my life.’”

‘And to protect the standard of the First legion with my life.’

They bowed towards the eagle standard held by the standard bearer, a man who wore a bearskin over his helmet.

Titus beamed proudly at the tall, thin legate as he gazed hawkishly over the gathered recruits. Marius Maximus saluted them.

‘Recruits, we will be meeting our new governor, Lucius Septimius Severus. For the moment you are free to go to the civil settlement. However, it is imperative that you return to your barracks before sunset. Recruits.... Dismiss!’

Titus and his comrades saluted, turned smartly to the right, and marched across the parade ground under the eyes of the gathered cohorts. As they reached the edge, they encountered Centurion Decimus with a group of other centurions. He gave them a world weary look.

‘You’ve made it this far,’ he barked, ‘but don’t go getting any ideas. Call yourselves legionaries? I won’t call you legionaries until you’ve faced the enemy – and survived! Chances are I’ll never call you legionaries. Now get moving. If you’re

not back by sunset, I'll have you all flogged!

Too high-spirited to be downcast by Decimus, Titus, Aulus and their friends rushed chattering away.

Accompanied by Servius and Mustela, Titus and Aulus wandered down the main street of the civil settlement, looking from one tavern to another. Being a settlement attached to a military camp, there was an abundance of drinking places.

'Well, which one?' Aulus asked. 'The whores in "The Pride of the Empire" must be missing me. Let's go there!'

'You've spent enough already,' Titus laughed. Over the last few months his brother had developed quite an appetite for camp followers. 'That Gaulish redhead, what's her name?'

'Who, Brannouenna?' Aulus asked.

'Yes. Surely she'll be retiring rich after the amount you've spent on her over the last few months!'

'A man needs to relax from time to time,' Aulus said defensively.

'Judging by the amount of time you spend with Brannouenna,' Mustela said, 'I'm surprised you can still stand. What with all that relaxing.'

Aulus made a playful lunge at Mustela. 'How dare you! That's the woman I love!'

'Oh yes. And what about Flavia and Nitocris?' Mustela asked, with an arched eyebrow.

'Don't forget Constantina,' Servius added.

'Oh! I love them all,' Aulus sighed. 'Every one of them.'

Titus halted. 'Ah! The "Bull and Scorpion". Let's go in here.'

They'd first come here with Dubigalos. It was a shame he couldn't accompany them, Titus thought, but currently he was languishing in the fort gaol for offences including nakedness, drunkenness and insulting behaviour to a superior officer.

They stepped out of the bright light of the street into the gloom of the tavern. Inside it was dark and comfortable. A small group of musicians played in one corner. Frescoes lined the walls and dancing girls weaved their way between the tightly packed tables. The four comrades made their way towards the bar.

Most of the customers were legionaries, auxiliaries, or otherwise associated with the legion. Much like Bos the owner, an ex-legionary who had sold the farm he'd been given on leaving and opened this tavern with the proceeds. A thick-set man with a broad forehead in which was set a curious brand, he stood behind his counter watching his clientele as Titus and his comrades entered the tavern. Behind him, imperfectly illuminated by the flickering lamplight, was a fresco showing a handsome man in a Phrygian cap wrestling with a bull. A scorpion was leaping at the creature's groin.

Bos welcomed them with an expansive gesture. 'Welcome to the legion at last, lads,' he said. 'Drinks are on the house.'

'On the house?' Aulus asked. 'What, all night?' Bos smiled.

'You'll be wanting to get back to your barracks before sunset,' he said. 'But you've got plenty of drinking time before you.'

They sat at a table and Servius went to collect the drinks Bos had poured for them. Titus drank his fermented grain and gazed around the crowded tavern. He had hated beer when he first came here; now, though, this barbarian beverage was rather beginning to grow on him.

'Well, here's to the First!' Mustela said, breaking the companionable silence.

'The First!' they chorused, and drank their beer. A series of other toasts followed, and soon their beakers were empty.

‘Mustela, get us another round,’ Aulus ordered.

Mustela smiled a little thinly, and went to the bar. Servius looked anxiously at Aulus.

‘You shouldn’t be so brusque with him!’ he hissed.

‘Why’s that?’ Aulus asked lazily. Servius looked troubled. He peered over at Mustela, now collecting the tray of drinks, and shook his head.

‘Mustela scares me,’ he muttered, half to himself.

Drink followed drink and Titus’ memories of the rest of the afternoon were hazy. He remembered Bos coming over to them, while they were all deep in an argument about the relative merits of the Blues and the Greens in the Circus Maximus back home.

‘Almost sunset,’ Bos said. ‘Time young legionaries were back in bed.’

They staggered outside into the twilight, still arguing, and wandered towards the fort. As they reached the gate Titus heard a fanfare behind them, and turned to see a troop of auxiliaries followed by a cohort of legionaries. A group of men were riding at their head. One of the men, to whom everyone else was looking deferentially while gesturing at the town around them, had doffed his helmet. Titus caught a glimpse of a smallish man with a keen expression and a forked beard, before Mustela dragged them all to the edge of the street.

‘Who’s that?’ Titus asked as the newcomers passed and entered the fort.

‘That must be our new governor,’ Mustela replied. ‘Lucius Septimius Severus.’

They returned to their barracks shortly after, and soon crawled onto their bunks. Titus drifted into a sluggish sleep, wondering vaguely what the visit from the new governor would mean for them.

He awoke abruptly many hours later to find someone shaking him by the arm. The barracks room was in darkness, lit only by a small taper held by one of several dark figures that loomed over him.

‘Titus? Get up!’ It was Lucianus’ voice. ‘Come on, get on your feet.’

‘What is it?’ Titus hissed. ‘What’s going on?’ Had the barbarians attacked the fort? All was quiet and still. ‘Where’s Aulus?’

‘I’m here, Titus,’ said one of the other dark figures. ‘They woke me up just before.’

‘Where are we going?’ Titus demanded.

‘They didn’t say.’ Titus recognised Mustela’s voice. He got off the bunk and struggled into his tunic and boots.

‘What’s going on?’ he demanded of Lucianus. The legionary’s face was grim in the taper light.

‘Can’t say,’ he muttered. ‘Put these on, all of you.’ He thrust something into Titus’ hands. It looked like a hood. Titus pulled it on only to discover that it covered his eyes.

‘I can’t see,’ he objected.

‘We’ll guide you,’ Vibius snapped. Someone pushed Titus roughly. ‘Now get moving.’

The hood stank of stale vomit, and it covered Titus’ eyes. Hands grasped him by the arms and he was urged forward. He stumbled blindly out into the cold night, hearing his feet crunch on gravel. On either side and from behind and ahead, he heard stealthy movement and blundering footsteps. The journey seemed endless.

After a while, the gravel gave way to mud and grass. Still Vibius and the others urged Titus and his comrades onwards. They seemed to be going down a grassy slope... And then the voices began to echo and the cold grew intense as if they had

gone underground. They came to a halt. Silence fell.

In the distance, Titus could hear a drip of water, a crackle of fire and chanting. A pungent, heady aroma drifted through the rough weave of the stinking hood. Where were they?

Someone tore the hood from his face. Blinking in the ruddy light of torches, Titus looked around to find himself standing in a cold, gloomy underground chamber. Starlight filtered in from behind him, but ahead, seemingly down a long tunnel, yellow light was visible.

Dark figures surrounded Titus, each clad in a cowl. Dimly, he could hear Aulus' complaining voice. A robed, hooded figure beckoned to them, and Titus was bundled forward by the hooded figures. Presumably Aulus and the others were somewhere else in the group.

The robed figure led them down a stone stairway towards the torchlight ahead. They came out into a high-vaulted cave, its walls illuminated by many flickering candles. Hooded figures lined the walls. Directly ahead, a flight of steps led down to another level. Beyond this, a grille lay in the floor. Titus heard a lowing sound, and turning his head to one side, he saw a bull standing amidst a group of men in priest's robes.

The legionaries urged Titus and his three comrades forward. Each was taken across the grille towards an altar on the far side of the cave. Two men in gorgeous purple robes stood beside the altar. Titus could see a statue of a young man wearing a Phrygian cap standing behind the altar. He was wrestling a bull to the ground.

The hooded figures chanted in some arcane tongue as the four recruits stood before the altar. The first purple-robed man stepped forward, bearing a chalice. He put it to Titus' lips.

'Blood of Mithras,' the high priest whispered. Titus sipped, and tasted fine wine, spiced and strangely tangy. The high priest moved to each of the others, while his companion followed behind. He handed Titus a small, flat, unleavened piece of bread.

'Body of Mithras,' he said in a hoarse voice, and moved onto Aulus.

When all four had been given the bread and wine, one of the hooded legionaries who had brought them stepped forward. He beckoned to them. Titus followed him. His mind felt muzzy from the incense and the wine, his head was pounding. His body was drenched in sweat, and the coppery scent of blood was in his nostrils. A warm, golden haze seemed to creep in on the edge of his vision. Unresisting, he and the others followed the hooded man down the steps into a pit, lit only by light from the grille above. Here the man took their cloaks and tunics from them, and they stood with their torsos bare.

The metal grille shuddered and creaked above them. Titus looked up to see the priests leading the bull onto the lattice. He saw one of the men produce a knife, and approach the beast. The next thing Titus knew, a rain of hot, sticky blood was pouring down through the grille and into the pit.

It gushed down onto the four men in a fountain as the bull lurched to its knees, then toppled with a crash onto the metal grille. Still the blood bathed the unmoving men. They were drenched in gore now, and it mingled with their sweat to run in rivulets down their bare skin. The pounding in Titus' head grew louder.

He seemed to glimpse a world beyond the darkness of the torchlit cave and the shower of blood. Superimposed on the gloom was a sea of trees, tossing and trembling in an unfelt breeze, extending on all sides. Figures moved among the trees, dark figures that turned to gaze towards Titus: a one-eyed man, his neck scarred with rope burns; a handsome warrior with a single hand; a red-bearded man bearing a

warhammer... The pounding in Titus' head grew beyond bearing.

The silence beyond the cave seemed to weigh down on Titus like an unbearable burden. He stared out from the darkness and chill of the Temple of Mithras, the blood and sweat cooled and sticky on his skin. The raven brand in the centre of his forehead was now no more than a dull, throbbing ache. His mind was still filled with images from the night in the cave, but now he stared out at a brilliant new dawn, noting the colours of the grass and the trees and the great blue vault of the heavens. He felt more at peace than he could remember being since early childhood.

So now he was an initiate into the cult of Mithras. But he knew that the god was not for him. His visions had not been of a god of the east. He turned slightly as Aulus came to join him.

'The colours...' Aulus murmured dazedly, staring out at the dawn lit world.

Titus looked away, gazed towards the forest. Gazed towards the north.

Chapter Ten

'Get moving, you pansies!'

Decimus glowered at the marching legionaries. Evening was falling and still they were trudging across the rolling, grassy plains of Iazyges country. The horizon was empty, the iron-grey sky rose over them like the vaulted roof of a massive temple. A thin crescent moon hung over the eastern hills.

'We make camp as soon as we can,' Tribune Plautianus had told him. Eight cohorts of the First Legion had been despatched to police the turbulent Sarmatian prairies following the recent raids, but Decimus despaired of his own command. They were soft, for all his attempts to put some backbone into them – half were raw recruits.

He turned and marched on in disgust.

'What's his problem?' Aulus muttered out of the side of his mouth.

'He knows he's got to rely on faggots like you,' Vibius hissed, marching alongside him. Titus gave his comrade a glare, which Vibius ignored. He was looking mockingly at Servius, who was blundering alongside Mustela.

'Know what the Sarmatians do to their prisoners?' he asked the recruit.

'No,' Servius said bravely. 'What?'

'Skin 'em alive,' Vibius growled. 'They flay you and make saddles out of your hide.'

Titus frowned. Servius was pale.

'How do you know?' Aulus asked. 'Do you know anyone they flayed?'

Vibius glared at him angrily. 'Are you doubting my word?' he blustered.

'Everyone knows it!'

Cicatrix nodded, and reached for his charms. Titus was about to speak when he heard pounding of hooves and the jingling of harness. A troop of auxiliaries was riding down the line.

'Well, look who it isn't!' Aulus exclaimed as one of the auxiliaries reined beside them. The rest rode on as he pulled off his helmet to reveal the tattooed face of Dubigalos.

'Hail, citizens!' he said with a laugh. 'And how are the new boys takin' to war? Must be hard on the feet, all that marching.' His horse reared back, and he sawed at

the reins.

‘Any news, trooper?’ Lucianus asked.

Dubigalos gave him a short glance.

‘Sarmatians supposed to be on their way,’ he said, looking towards the hills. ‘Don’t think we’ll meet them this evening...’ He broke off abruptly and cocked his head.

‘Is that thunder?’ Aulus asked as a drumming noise broke out from the north. Looking that way Titus saw a dust cloud on the darkening horizon.

‘Och, I’d better be off!’ Dubigalos said hurriedly. Titus saw a group of horsemen crest the northern rise. Dubigalos spurred his own horse and rode to join the main auxiliary troop.

Titus felt his pulse race as the distant riders began to ride along the horizon parallel with the marching legion. The nomad horsemen were deathly quiet. They trotted just out of range of the Parthian auxiliary archers’ bows, lances raised high, scale mail glittering in the last rays of the setting sun, taunting the invaders with their presence.

Some of the men stirred within the ranks as they marched.

‘Settle down!’ Decimus bellowed. ‘You’ll get a closer look soon enough!’ The men continued marching, unable to take their eyes off these silent newcomers.

‘Why don’t they attack?’ Servius asked nervously.

‘They’re deciding which one of us will be best for saddle leather,’ Vibius said, leering at Servius.

‘Quiet, Vibius,’ Lucianus said. ‘They’re getting a look at us. Just want to know what they’re dealing with.’

Servius looked down. All of a sudden his sword seemed small and ineffectual compared with the Sarmatians’ towering lances. Even with the months of training, he didn’t think it would be any good against these barbarians.

He looked at the faces of his companions. Mustela was his usual calm self, staring ahead, apparently oblivious of the Sarmatians as they rode along the darkening skyline. Cicatrix was muttering a prayer to some god or other. Lucianus was readjusting the straps on his armour.

Servius stared at his feet and tried not to think about the inevitable. A shout broke out from the rear of the column, followed by a series of screams. Servius almost tripped over his javelin as he turned to look. ‘Where are they?’ he said, gazing at the forest of spears that blocked out the light behind him.

Panic gripped him. He felt an overriding desire to run.

‘The rear! The rear! They’re attacking the rear of the column!’ someone shouted. Momentary confusion reigned as the legionaries’ stride faltered, and they ground to a halt.

‘About turn!’ Decimus bellowed, and Titus heard the same orders being shouted down the column. With a clatter of armour, the legionaries began to turn. Auxiliaries rode past towards the rear of the column. In the distance, Titus heard cries, the thunder of hooves, shouted challenges and the sound of metal meeting flesh. By the time he had turned round, Titus could see a group of Sarmatians riding away from the baggage train, about two hundred yards away. The Caledonian auxiliaries were pursuing them, but Titus could see several bodies lying on the grass, their heads gone, their mounts standing still or riding round in confusion. Others were severely wounded. Titus noticed Servius staring in horror at the carnage.

The Sarmatian attackers vanished over the ridge, and the auxiliaries trailed back to the column. Titus noticed that the first group of Sarmatians had departed from the

skyline.

‘What do we do now?’ Aulus asked. ‘Go after them?’

‘We wait for orders, lad,’ Lucianus murmured. Orders were soon forthcoming. As a group of men were sent to assess the damage to the baggage train and load up the bodies of the dead auxiliaries, Decimus and the other centurions barked at their men:

‘Get moving immediately! We strike camp as soon as we find a good position.’

The column lumbered to life again. They marched on across the darkening plain, reaching an area of hills as the sun set. In the deepening gloom, they went about the business of entrenching an area to establish a marching camp; digging a deep ditch and using the earth to establish an earthwork, while other men who had been transporting the necessary materials built a palisade on the earthwork. Meanwhile, Ajax and the medical staff had already pitched their tent and were attending to wounded auxiliaries from the previous attack.

Titus and his comrades had to pitch their tents in the growing dark. Vibius grumbled loudly as the squad struggled to complete the task.

‘I don’t know what they think they’re doing,’ he muttered. ‘Anyone knows you don’t make camp in the middle of the night. We should have stopped hours ago.’

Centurion Decimus loomed up out of the darkness.

‘Quiet!’ he bellowed. ‘You may not have noticed, Legionary Vibius, but we have been dealing with an enemy attack which delayed us. They’re still out there.’

Servius’ face, a pale oval in the gloom, turned even paler. ‘That’s right,’ Decimus added, noticing the legionary’s reaction. ‘So we need men on watch. Vibius, Servius – up to the palisade. The rest of you – get a move on! I want you all tucked up in bed in half an hour, or I’ll want to know why, ladies!’

Servius stood beside the main gate, clutching his spear. Vibius stood beside him. The wind was bitter as it swept across the grasslands, and Servius was shivering, despite the camp fires that burned nearby. But it was not just the cold. Out there in the darkness, distant voices were audible, and the drumming of hooves as the Sarmatians rode their ponies round and round the camp.

‘How long do you think they’ll be circling?’ he asked Vibius.

‘As long as it takes,’ the legionary replied. ‘They want us to break and run.’

Servius shivered. ‘We’re not going to do that,’ he said, his words half statement, half-question.

‘No, Servius,’ Vibius replied. ‘We’re Romans. We’ll defend our positions until every single one of us has been flayed by them. Or beheaded.’

Still the Sarmatians circled in the surrounding darkness.

Servius shook his head. ‘They won’t get all of us,’ he said.

Vibius laughed. ‘They’ll get you, though,’ he replied.

The Sarmatians’ war-whoops grew louder and the grass thundered as a contingent of riders burst into the dim light of the camp fires.

Servius heard a shout from the towers adjacent to their position. He saw the auxiliary archers, loosing arrows at the attacking horsemen. One Sarmatian toppled back from his horse. Another nomad produced three black, ball-like objects from his saddle, and flung them towards the gate.

Suddenly the Sarmatians were riding away again, vanishing beyond the light of the camp fires in a hail of arrows. The things the Sarmatian had thrown at the gate had landed near Servius’ feet.

‘What are they?’ Vibius asked, with an uncharacteristic note of unease creeping into his voice. Servius took a step forward, and investigated, his heart pounding, his cold skin wet with sweat.

He prodded one with his foot, and leapt back as if stung as it rolled over to face him, and glassy eyes stared at the night sky. Vibius turned to frown at him, and took a second look at the grisly objects.

‘Heads,’ Servius stammered. ‘They’re severed heads.’ He broke and ran.

Servius ran through the camp, not knowing where he was going. In the distance behind him, Vibius was shouting. Servius knew that he was behaving like a coward, but what else could he do? He had never wanted to join up, he’d been forced to – he’d been conscripted. He wasn’t the right material for a soldier. He would have been happiest back home, working as a pastry chef.

Men looked up from their tent awnings as he blundered past, muttering to himself. What was he to do? Where was he to go? Decimus would have him flogged for this. None of his comrades would understand, not even Titus. Even Mustela seemed impatient with him. No one understood.

‘Get him!’ Decimus bellowed somewhere behind Servius. ‘Get the deserter!’

Servius ran faster. He turned a corner. He saw the big hospital tent ahead of him. Maybe he’d find help here! He rushed towards it.

The sounds of pursuit from behind died away, to be replaced almost immediately by whooping Sarmatian war-cries and the ring of metal on metal. As Servius rushed under the tent flap, the camp exploded in an uproar.

‘Help me!’ Servius sobbed. ‘Help me, sir, please help me!’

Ajax turned from a bed where a wounded auxiliary lay sweating in a fever-soaked nightmare. He regarded the dishevelled legionary facing him with uncertainty.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked.

‘Servius!’ Zeno exclaimed from nearby. ‘What’s up?’

‘You’re not wounded,’ Ajax probed. ‘Do you have a message?’ he paused, listening to the noise outside. ‘Battle! Have the Sarmatians attacked at last?’

‘I think so...’ Servius said brokenly. ‘I don’t know. They came at us. They threw these heads at us.’

‘And attacked?’ Ajax asked. ‘The Legate should double the guard. These men in here are in no fit state to fight. Was that your message? Or did you have something else?’

‘Hide me!’ Servius demanded. ‘I ran away! I was scared. I think there’s something wrong with me. I can’t be a legionary! Centurion Decimus is after me.’ He broke down in tears.

Ajax frowned. ‘I can’t hide you here, Legionary Servius,’ he said apologetically, guiltily. ‘I’ll have to hand you over to your centurion.’ This provoked a fresh bout of sobbing.

‘I can’t stay in the army!’ Servius bawled. ‘Get them to let me go! Tell them I’m ill... I think I am. Ill in my mind. Whenever I have to fight, it’s like I have a fever...’

Zeno looked at Ajax, who shook his head. Zeno pursed his lips.

‘Why don’t you stab yourself in the foot?’ he asked. ‘Cripple yourself. Then they’ll have to discharge you...’

‘Zeno!’ Ajax barked. ‘Zeno, boy, go outside and see what’s happening. I think the battle’s dying down.’

Titus stood at the gate with his comrades, staring out into the darkness, where the Sarmatians had retreated. Some of them had been mounted archers, and legionaries lay scattered in the gateway, filled with arrows. The auxiliary archers had shot down a few of the attackers, too, but not many. Decimus was shouting at Vibius.

‘... know he ran off, where did he run off to?’ the centurion bellowed.

‘A man was seen running for the hospital tent,’ Tribune Plautianus announced, striding up to join them. Decimus saluted the tribune.

‘The hospital tent?’ he asked. ‘That sounds likely. Come on, men, we’ve got words to have with friend Servius.’ He marched them through the camp.

‘Did Servius just break and run?’ Mustela asked Vibius, as they marched. Titus looked sidelong at the legionary.

‘He’s a coward,’ Vibius sneered.

‘He might have made a good legionary, if you’d given him a chance,’ Titus muttered.

They reached the hospital tent and Decimus pushed inside, followed by the squad. In the gloom inside they found Servius standing with his sword drawn but pointing downwards, while Ajax and Zeno looked on. As Decimus halted, Servius looked up hopelessly.

‘Too late to fall on your sword, Legionary Servius,’ Decimus barked. ‘Drop that!’

Servius obeyed, and stood unresisting as Decimus seized him. He flung him over to Vibius and Lucianus.

‘Get him shackled,’ he ordered. ‘We’ll deal with him in the morning. Physician, you’ll have your work cut out in a minute.’ He turned to the others. ‘Get back to your tents!’

Tribune Plautianus surveyed the weary legionaries of his cohort as the sun rose over the hills beyond the camp. At his side, Decimus and the other centurions were glowering at the men. Servius stood before them, with fetters on his arms and legs, gripped strongly by Vibius and Lucianus.

‘As you know, we sustained a number of casualties due to enemy attack last night,’ Plautianus began. ‘The Sarmatians gained entry to the camp and cut down a number of men before we fought them off. What you may not know is that the Sarmatians would not have got in if it had not been for the cowardice of one of your number. Legionary Servius, who was on guard with his comrade Vibius, saw fit to desert his post when the enemy arrived.’

The legionaries muttered angrily. In the group, Titus turned to look grimly at Aulus. Servius stared shamefacedly at his feet.

‘It is my sad duty to pass sentence on this deserter,’ Plautianus continued. ‘His act has led to the deaths of your comrades – and might have resulted in the deaths of us all!’

He turned, and beckoned to the centurions. They went into a huddle, and spoke in low tones.

‘What do you think will happen to Servius?’ Aulus asked quietly. Cicatrix looked at him, and shook his head.

‘Only one punishment for desertion I know of.’

Titus was about to ask the scarred veteran what he meant, when Plautianus turned to face them again.

‘It has been decided that we will punish this infraction in accordance with

tradition,' he said. He indicated a pile of hefty wooden sticks lying on the grass before him. 'The men of Servius's squad must beat him to death.'

Lucianus turned to look at Plautianus, who ignored him. Servius struggled violently. Vibius grabbed him and pinioned him by the neck. Decimus stamped over.

'Everyone from Servius's squad, come to the front at the double!'

Titus and Aulus exchanged glances. Were they hearing right?

Mustela pushed past them. 'Come on,' he said calmly. Cicatrix and Laurentius hustled them forward.

Titus felt his stomach churn as he stepped out into the open, surrounded by his grim-faced mates. Vibius and Lucianus watched as they came up. Servius was still struggling in Vibius' iron grip.

Laurentius saluted the tribune. 'Reporting for duty,' he snapped.

Plautianus surveyed the squad, his eyes alight with cynicism. He caught sight of Titus, glaring at him and trembling with anger.

'This man deserted his post,' he said languidly. 'He endangered you all. He brought shame on your squad.'

Decimus stepped forward. 'Legionary Lucianus, Legionary Vibius,' he barked. 'Unshackle the prisoner.'

Lucianus removed Servius' leg-irons; Vibius removed his arm-chains. Servius bolted and tried to run, but Vibius seized him by the tunic-neck and dragged him savagely backwards.

'Strip him!' Decimus bellowed.

Vibius heaved Servius' tunic over his head. Servius' white legs thrashed about on the grass until Lucianus seized them and held him fast. Once they had stripped him, the two legionaries held him down. Plautianus watched, breathing heavily, licking his lips.

Decimus turned to the other men of the squad. 'Take a stick!'

Laurentius came forward and picked up a stick. Cicatrix took the next one. Mustela came forward calmly and picked up the rest, handing one to Aulus, who took it doubtfully, and stood there staring at it as if unsure as to what he should do with it. The other he gave to Titus.

Titus stared at the heavy stick he held. It was rough and jagged with splinters, about two feet long. He looked down at Servius, who was crouched before Vibius and Lucianus, whose faces were grim. He looked up and saw Plautianus, staring in excitement at Servius' naked form. He turned, and regarded Decimus.

Decimus had seen his indecision.

'Beat him!' he bellowed. Titus flung the stick to the grass.

Silence fell over the assembled men. Decimus stamped over to Titus, having to crane his neck to look him in the face.

'Pick that stick up now!' he roared.

Silently, trembling with anger, Titus shook his head.

'Titus!' Aulus hissed.

'Do as you're told!' Decimus bellowed, 'or you'll be joining him!'

Lucianus came to Titus' side. 'Come on, lad,' he said in a kindly voice. 'We have to make an example of Servius. He deserted his post. Don't antagonize the centurion. No point two of us going.'

Titus stared glassily at Lucianus. He turned to look at Servius, who had raised his tear-streaked face to look at him. Quietly, Servius shook his head.

Titus grunted, and picked up the stick.

Aulus struck the first blow. The crack of the wood against Servius' hunched

shoulders echoed across the grassy space, almost drowning out his muffled cries. Next Laurentius brought his stick down with more gusto. Lucianus and Vibius picked up sticks and joined the others. The blows rained down, but the legionaries were half-hearted at first. Mustela began to sob under his breath. Titus looked at him in concern. Mustela had known Servius longer than any of them.

‘Bastard,’ Mustela sobbed. ‘Bastard!’ Suddenly he was bringing his stick down again and again, leaving blood-red bruises across Servius’ back. Titus and the others stepped back in surprise as Mustela began to batter Servius to a pulp.

Titus looked on in horror as Servius struggled to remain crouched under the battering blows. His feet skidded apart and he fell to the churned-up grass as Mustela beat at him again and again. Titus heard the snap and pop of bones breaking. Servius’ back was a red-raw mess. Suddenly Mustela halted. Titus stared at Servius. A bubbling sob rattled from the man’s throat and he twitched helplessly. He was still alive, Titus realised. Alive but in terrible pain. Surely they weren’t going to leave him to die of his wounds? That was inhuman.

Without realising what he was doing, Titus lumbered forward, placed his knee on Servius’ back, seized his head by the hair and yanked it back. The wet snap as his neck broke was audible across the grassy space. Slowly, Titus rose to his feet.

He knew he would be punished for what he had done. Decimus would never forgive him for putting Servius out of his misery. They had been supposed to make an example of the deserter, not show him mercy. The men were silent. Titus looked around, shamefaced, as his long shadow fell across Servius’ mangled corpse.

He frowned. No one was looking at him, not even Decimus. They were all looking behind him, eastwards towards the sun.

He turned.

Lining the horizon half a mile away, with the rising sun at their backs, their lances raised high above them, were countless horsemen. The Sarmatian horde had returned in force.

Chapter Eleven

Titus studied the horde as the horsemen dominated the skyline. In the centre were countless lancers, clad in glittering mail. On either side, smaller horses bore numerous archers. Dragon banners whipped and swirled in the wind as a figure rode the length of the line, smaller than its fellows. Even as far away as the camp, it was clear that the rider was exhorting its comrades.

‘Is that a woman?’ Aulus murmured suddenly at Titus’ side.

The two wings of horse archers swept down the slope towards the hill containing the camp. Orders were barked as Decimus and the other centurions prepared their men for the coming struggle. Titus and his comrades abandoned Servius’ corpse as they rushed to rejoin the ranks.

The horse archers drew closer, and their thin wailing war-cries grew louder, stronger as they rode round the palisade. With a gobbling, whistling sound, flights of arrows poured into the camp, striking down running men who collapsed screaming into the mud.

‘Raise shields!’ Decimus bellowed, and the order was taken up by the other centurions as the legionaries desperately lifted their shields to protect themselves from the deadly downpour. Titus heard arrows batter down onto the shields all around him, and staggered, almost fell as one plunged into his own shield. Nearby, he heard a

scream, and craned his neck to see that a man from Priscus' squad fell with an arrow jutting from his throat. As the men moved to close up ranks, Titus realised the arrow had come through the man's shield, through his neck and out through his throat.

'Shields down!' Decimus bellowed. In a clatter of confusion the men lowered their shields. This was nothing like a drill, Titus thought, it was chaos. Arrows still showered down on the far side of the camp. The horse archers were circling.

He saw the legate and his tribunes had appeared from the command tent. The legate took one look at the scene, then began issuing orders.

The legionaries formed up in eight ranks outside the gates, with Dubigalos and the auxiliary horse flanking them and the Parthian archers at their back. Titus and Aulus were in the first rank. Despite his many comrades, Titus felt dangerously exposed, out here on the naked step as the wind howled and bit at their bodies. He heard the snorting of the cavalry mounts, and an answering whinny from the Sarmatian horses now advancing across the valley. Where were the horse archers?

Titus saw them thundering round the corner of the camp, and marvelled as they rode past, loosing arrows from their short, heavy bows as they passed. He watched one Sarmatian as he drew closer and closer: he notched his arrow, drew back the string and released it, then whipped another arrow from his quiver before the first had plunged into the throat of a charging auxiliary lancer. Titus saw the auxiliary cavalry were now riding forward to take on the horse archers.

The Sarmatian he had been watching shot past, surrounded by his fellows, so close to the first rank of legionaries that Titus caught a whiff of his unwashed body. Arrow after arrow leapt from his bow as the auxiliary cavalry plunged after the horse archers: forward, sideways, sideways again, then back behind him! The Sarmatian twisted in his saddle, keeping up a withering fire as he guided his horse with his knees.

Titus looked to Decimus for orders. Were they to stand motionless for the whole fight?

'What's going on?' Aulus hissed as they watched a skirmish develop between three auxiliaries and some of the slower horse archers, who had drawn long bladed swords.

'I don't know,' Titus said, amazed by how calm his voice sounded. He could feel his body shaking – with fear? He had never believed he would be a coward in the face of battle. But was it fear? He felt full of energy, almost superhuman, divine. He wanted to be out in the fray.

He saw the Sarmatian lancers were gaining speed, stirring up dust as they crossed the dry tussocks of the valley bottom. Their ponies' hooves drummed on the dry grass, their lances and their dragon standards quivered like aspens above them, howling in the rushing wind. This close, Titus could see their cruel faces, their barbaric armour and garb, and was amazed to see how small their ponies seemed, beneath their armoured figures. They were gaining on the ranks of legionaries as the auxiliaries pursued the horse archers and fell one by one, to the backward shots of their quarry.

'First three ranks - javelins!' Decimus bellowed. Hurriedly, the legionaries of the first three ranks readied their javelins. Titus stood poised with his as the Sarmatian heavy horse thundered towards them in a tumbling haze of dust. The Sarmatians screamed war cries that struck fear into Titus' heart. His hand trembled, and he felt as if he was about to drop the heavy javelin. He saw a slight figure clad in armour that seemed to be made of bone to his bewildered sight, leading the charge.

'Now!' Decimus barked. With relief, Titus flung his javelin forward, and watched

in silence as the long black shape left his hand and seemed to drift across the narrowing space between the legionaries and the galloping Sarmatian cavalry, drifting in a flock of javelins, drifting, drifting, then seeming to gather speed and weight and mass as it whipped down out of the windy air and sank out of sight into the dust clouds that rose from the charging ponies' hooves.

Several javelins hit their marks, and lancers tumbled from their saddles with long shafts jutting from their torsos to be ridden down by cavalry coming up behind. A volley from the Parthian archers followed, and the arrows shot over the legionaries' heads to swoop down on the charging horsemen. But this did nothing to deter the great horde as pounded came closer and closer to the ranks of the legions.

'Shields – lock!' Decimus bellowed.

The first line of legionaries, Titus and Aulus included, lifted their shields in an unbroken wall. As they did so, the hedge of towering Sarmatian lances dipped abruptly, and Titus found himself looking head on at the wicked tip of a lance as it plunged straight towards him.

'Out swords!' Decimus bellowed, and with a scraping noise, the legionaries produced their short swords.

Everything seemed to become slower, and Titus realised numbly that he could see details all around him that he hadn't noticed before. He stared at the arrow that stood out from his shield and thought vaguely that he should have removed it before they marched out. Dust clouds boiled up on all sides, and the thunder of hooves blurred into a wall of noise as the armoured Sarmatians rode straight into the line of legionaries.

A lance dipped, and came up again with a screaming legionary writhing on one end of it. Then Titus saw nothing but chaos all around him.

The lances plunged into the iron ranks of legionaries, and men fell on every side. Titus hacked at the rearing horse before him with his gladius. He saw the rider had dropped the heavy lance and drawn a large sword, wielding it two-handed. Titus brought his shield up to fend off the attack, and the heavy blade smashed through the shield rim. Titus stabbed upwards, and the horse reared back. All around him, Titus was dimly aware, legionaries of the first rank were cutting and thrusting at the lancers as javelins and arrows from the ranks behind them poured into the mass of horsemen.

The horses seemed to stagger, en masse, and in an instant the pressure on Titus and his fellow legionaries lessened. Titus saw that the auxiliary cavalry had circled round the mass of lancers and were charging into them, their own lances sinking into Sarmatian bodies. Horses screamed, and Sarmatians yelled defiance, but almost at once the press of battle had degenerated into a multitude of tiny combats and duels, scattered across the dusty grass of the hillside. Soon the extent of the battle was obscured by the rising clouds of dust and Titus caught only occasional glimpses of men struggling in small groups, of riderless horses and dismounted nomads stumbling through the murk. Above the dusty air birds were circling, kites and ravens and crows, all waiting patiently to feast upon the carrion.

A horse fell writhing at Titus' feet, a long cavalry javelin buried in its chest. Its eyes rolled madly, and bloody froth seeped from its great lips as its chest shuddered and spasmed into stillness. A lancer lay fallen to one side of the dead beast, a broken lance to one side. The Sarmatian rose as Titus and three other legionaries stepped forward, and charged at Titus with a broken lance. Titus brought his sword up hastily, and found himself almost knocked back by the force of the blow he parried. He looked down at his assailant, a slight figure wearing a hauberk of horse hooves and a helmet made of curved iron plates on a framework of hooped iron. A long piece of

iron covered the warrior's nose, and two ear-guards served to cover most of the face, but what Titus could see of the warrior's chin was softy and beardless. His attacker was little more than a boy.

But the strength that sent the lance stabbing at him a second time was that of a grown man. As other dismounted Sarmatians appeared, and Titus' comrades found themselves fighting for their lives in the choking dust, Titus was forced to parried the thrust and cut at the warrior's armoured chest.

The youthful warrior screamed with rage and fury and knocked Titus' sword to one side, following this up with a thrust at Titus' heart. Gasping for breath, Titus swung his shield to deflect the lunge and found the warrior's slim left hand seizing him by his breastplate. Pulled off balance, Titus staggered to one side. In a flash, the warrior brought the broken lance thrusting down towards his exposed neck. Titus ducked at the last moment, but the lance still caught him a ringing blow across the neck guard that deafened him and sent flashes of light wincing through his brain. He stumbled and fell.

His wits returned to him almost instantly, but now he was flat out on the yellow grass with the panting figure of the Sarmatian warrior standing over him, lance raised for the final thrust. Titus moved painfully to see two legionaries confronting his opponent over his fallen form.

The Sarmatian snarled like an animal, and it seemed to Titus that his attacker stank like a beast, too. One of the legionaries stepped forward, and the Sarmatian lunged warningly at Titus.

'Titus, can't you get up?' one of the legionaries shouted, and Titus recognised his brother's voice. The roar of battle all around them was deafening. Warriors fought in the dust and horsemen galloped across the dead grass. Titus struggled to move, and halted as he felt the razor sharp tip of the Sarmatian's lance pressed against his throat. He looked up. The nomad was gesturing at the two legionaries to back off.

'Titus!' Aulus cried out. The ground thundered to a horse's hooves. Snarling, the Sarmatian suddenly lifted the lance, then stabbed down.

The stab went awry as Titus heard a resounding thunk and saw his attacker spin sideways and fall to the ground with a clatter. The helmet fell off revealing long, bloodstained blonde tresses that surrounded a face Titus realised, as he got to his knees, was that of a woman.

He looked up at the whinny of a horse to see Dubigalos looking down at him from the saddle. He brandished a reversed javelin with a grin.

'No point killing them,' he said. 'This one'll fetch a fine price in Rome.' He peered at the exposed face, then laughed as Titus got unsteadily to his feet.

'You got yourself an Amazon!' he exclaimed. 'I'd heard the stories, but never expected to meet 'em in the flesh.'

Titus recalled something he had heard as a boy, about the Scythians of the steppes and their Amazon neighbours. Was this an Amazon? This warrior woman, whose body stank like a slaughter house, whose armour was made of hooves, and – as Titus realised as he inspected the comatose body – whose lance had been tipped with splintered bone. He shook his head wearily, and looked about the battlefield as a trumpet blew the call to regroup.

The legionaries drew together, forming into their ranks once more. Titus saw Cicatrix staggering to join the rest of the squad, his helmet missing, his face drenched in gore, a jagged cut running up his brow and into his scalp.

Dubigalos rode past, followed by the rest of the auxiliary cavalry. The dust was beginning to settle as a group of officers rode out, accompanying the Legate,

resplendent on his steed with his billowing red cloak.

‘Battle’s over,’ Vibius said sardonically. ‘The Legate wouldn’t be making himself so conspicuous if we were still fighting.’

Titus looked about him as Decimus stamped up to his men, barking orders. The bottom of the hill was scattered with bodies, human and equine. He glimpsed a group of fugitive riders galloping frantically up the further hillside, pursued by yelling auxiliaries. Nearby, a Sarmatian dragon standard lay in the dust.

Legionaries from another century came forward with a large cart, and began to herding captives into the back. Two men inspected the unconscious warrior woman.

‘She’ll live,’ Titus heard one of them say.

‘Fetch a good price in Rome.’ The other laughed as they heaved her up and flung her onto the cart. ‘One for the arena.’

Marius Maximus, the Legate, trotted his horse forward, and turned to address the legionaries and auxiliaries from the nervous beast.

‘You have fought well, men,’ he told them. ‘A victory for Rome – for the Emperor! These Sarmatians have once again learnt their lesson. What tutors you make! But the war is not yet over. Messengers have already been despatched to the governor in his base in Aquincum with news of our progress. My orders, however, were not simply to win a battle against these horse-loving bandits, but to pursue and destroy them all, to seek out their encampments and drive them from the vicinity of the river. We will wait two days. I have requested reinforcements, and as soon as they reach us we will start out into the prairie.’

Aulus groaned. ‘Not more marching,’ he moaned. Titus was silent.

Chapter Twelve

Titus stood to attention with the rest of the legion as Severus walked grimly towards the podium positioned in front of the men. Looking to the group of staff officers behind Severus, Titus noticed Plautianus with them. ‘What’s *he* doing over there?’ He nodded in Plautianus’ direction.

‘Moving up in the world,’ Lucianus said. ‘He always did know which arse to kiss.’

‘Doesn’t seem right, a catamite like that getting such a cushy assignment. I’m still on latrine duty.’

‘Well, boy, perhaps you should pucker up as well. Then you might get to wear a pretty uniform too, like Aelius, our new tribune.’

Titus snorted and glared at Plautianus preening himself in his breastplate and plumed helmet.

‘Men!’ Severus’ clear strong voice cut through the chill spring air. ‘It is time to leave Carnuntum. A large force of Quadi are raiding across the border. We are going to stop them. You are to show this pack of feckless barbarians the might and power of Rome! These savages think they can slaughter Rome’s allies and subjects without fear of retribution – and the possibility remains that some connection exists with last year’s disturbances among the Sarmatians. Well, men, you are going to show them the error of their ways.’

‘You are legionaries of Rome, beloved of Mithras. Your enemies cannot withstand you! Prepare yourselves, men. We leave today.’

Silence dominated the scene as Severus strode from the parade ground. All at once centurions were barking orders and men were running to and fro. As Titus made his

way from the parade ground he was pleased to note that Plautianus' smug expression had vanished.

By midday the camp was almost deserted. The legion was moving into Quadi territory. Two miles from the riverbanks the area of felled trees and scorched heath reached an abrupt end at the forest wall. Oak and ash trees loomed above the road as the legion journeyed northwards. The forest up ahead was dark and silent. A raven took flight from a tree branch and sailed lightly across the blue spring sky before vanishing into the forest canopy. Titus felt his heart stir with strange, indefinable emotions as the forest swallowed them up.

It was colder in the shadow of the trees, and the smell of rotting wood and rank boggy earth hung in the air. The tramp of legionary boots echoed monotonously from the avenue of trees on either side of the road, punctuated by the jingle of armour and the clip-clop of horse hooves.

Titus, Aulus and the rest of the squad were stationed near the rear of the column, guarding the baggage train. Governor Severus had told their legate to muster five cohorts, leaving only a skeleton crew back at the fort. Even Ajax and Zeno accompanied them, sitting in a hospital wagon in the baggage train near the escorting legionaries.

'It's alright for some,' Aulus said as they marched behind the wagon. Zeno's eyes were wide as he stared around at the dank forest.

'This place is even worse than Pannonia,' he muttered.

'At least you're not walking,' Aulus told him.

'Aulus!' Titus said warningly. He had just spotted Decimus stamping down the long line of legionaries in their direction.

'Eyes forward!' Decimus bellowed. He glared at Aulus. 'Oh! Rather be in the back of the cart with your pretty Greek friend, eh? I thought that kind of thing would be right up your alley, kitchen boy! And you!' - Decimus pointed at Zeno - 'keep it down! We don't want to alert any enemy scouts to our whereabouts.'

Zeno flinched, and glanced at the ancient woodland surrounding them.

'I hardly think the Quadi could hear anything over the noise of four thousand men stamping through unfamiliar terrain, centurion,' Ajax said, looking levelly at Decimus.

Aulus glanced at Ajax, then Decimus, expecting the centurion to leap onto the hospital wagon and throttle Ajax. Long seconds passed, then Decimus said:

'The safety of you and your boy is my responsibility, Greek. Pray that I am here to protect you when our enemies attack.' With that, he turned and stalked off down the column shouting and bawling at unfortunate legionaries who met his gaze.

'Don't permit him to perturb you, lads,' Ajax said reassuringly. 'He hasn't changed in over ten years. I was stationed with him back in Britain.'

'With the Second Legion?' Lucianus asked.

'No, the Twentieth. It was around the time of the uprising. Some of the men had a little nickname for your beloved centurion. They called him "The Scorpion".'

'The Scorpion?' Aulus repeated. 'Why?'

'Because,' said Ajax, with a wicked gleam, 'he's small and unpleasant.'

'And what you'd least like to find sharing your bedroll of a night,' added Lucianus, straight-faced.

Aulus, Titus and their comrades tried to stifle their laughter.

'Anyway, lads,' Ajax continued, 'on a more serious note - keep your wits about you. That one is liable to get you all killed if you give him half a chance.' Ajax turned, and clambered into the covered section of the cart.

Several hours later, as the sun set over the western trees, the cohorts halted in a large clearing covered by scrub and heath. By the time Titus and his century had reached the area, the cohorts of the vanguard had already been busy digging ditches and raising the palisade of a temporary camp.

Under Decimus' bellowed directions they escorted the baggage train to a central position amid the growing lines of tents. The murk deepened into dusk and the western trees were standing out stark against the sunset as they began to pitch their tents. A brief supper of gruel and sour wine passed in weary silence. Even Aulus had nothing to say as they nodded over a campfire. The camp as a whole was almost silent, except for the moaning north wind that blew down its grassy streets, tugging at guy ropes and tent flaps.

The helmeted heads of sentries were silhouetted up on the dark palisade, and the jingle of equipment and occasional muttered watchwords drifted on the air like the guttering smoke of their campfire. Beyond the palisade, the forest was still and quiet, but it was a brooding, expectant silence. Titus yawned mightily, rose to his feet and slapped his thighs.

'I'm off to bed,' he mumbled, before crawling into the musty tent and throwing himself down on his sleeping roll. Hordes of blood-crazed barbarians could wait, he needed his sleep.

The blare of the trumpet rudely awakened him and his comrades. They tumbled confusedly out of the tent to find the entire camp awake. After hastily donning armour, they hurried bleary-eyed down towards the parade ground at the centre of the camp.

'Doesn't the Governor ever sleep?' Aulus moaned.

Severus surveyed his troops with grim pride. Some day soon, these men would accompany him on the road to power, his fore-ordained assumption of the imperial dignity. For the moment, however, it would be necessary for him to lead them against the barbarians – or he might become the ruler of nothing more than a fallen empire.

He turned to Marius Maximus, Legate of the First Legion. 'The scouts sent out at dawn have still not returned,' he commented.

'They're Caledonians,' Tribune Plautianus said from his side. 'Doubtless they found the nearest tavern and are lying drunk somewhere!' The other staff tribunes laughed, but Severus looked disapprovingly at his cousin. He was starting to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake when he transferred Plautianus to the staff.

'Look!' cried Marius Maximus. Five or six auxiliaries were riding into the camp. They galloped round the ranks of legionaries on the parade ground and halted before the Governor and his staff. Severus saw that a body lay over the crupper of the lead horse.

'Hail, Governor,' the auxiliary said, throwing an insouciant salute. 'We rode out as you ordered, and explored the woods ahead. About a quarter of a mile north we found this lad. He was scouting as well, but... he didn't report back.' He grabbed the body with both hands and hauled it round to fling to the dirt at the Governor's feet.

Severus took a step backward as the corpse of a topknotted Quadi scout hit the ground before him. The warrior had a freshly slit throat.

'Show respect!' Plautianus shouted at the auxiliary. 'Make your report in the prescribed manner! Don't come here throwing corpses around!'

The Caledonian sat his horse and yawned insolently. Severus gave his cousin a quelling look and addressed the auxiliary.

'Did you see any further sign of the enemy's location?' he asked.

'We spotted a few riders up ahead, through the trees,' the scout replied. 'We were

outnumbered, otherwise we'd have followed and cut them down. Doubtless they're reporting to their chieftain now.'

Severus cursed. 'Then they know we're coming,' he muttered. 'Very well, return to your troop, men!' he ordered. As the Caledonians rode away, Severus turned to Marius Maximus. 'We must strike camp at once and advance!' The Legate turned away and soon orders were being barked all along the lines of legionaries.

Titus shouldered his pack grimly and marched alongside his comrades. All around them, tents were coming down and equipment was being gathered together as the legion prepared for the advance. The auxiliaries had ridden from the camp shortly before, followed by the advance guard. Now it was time for Decimus' century, which was still guarding the baggage train. They marched through the gate as it was being disassembled, and the boles of the surrounding trees echoed back their tramping feet as they moved out into the forest.

Century by gleaming century, the cohorts of the legion filed out into the trees and marched north. The forest beyond them was unearthly still and as the legionaries marched in silence, apart from occasional barked orders from the centurions, their progress was marked only by the sound of their boots on the roadway. Titus wondered when they would get to grips with the enemy.

He felt himself trembling slightly, and was afraid he might turn coward in the face of battle, like Servius last year. But it wasn't fear that washed through his body as they marched out from the trees and saw the heath ahead of them covered with savage, warlike figures. It was exultation.

Decimus shouted the order to halt, and his command was echoed all down the line. The legion ground to a halt with a clatter and crash of metal, and it faced the dark, silent warriors unmoving. At last, Rome and the barbarians were once more face to face.

Noonday sun baked down on clearing and assembled men alike. The forest itself was still, as the opposed armies stared at one another across the heath.

Severus' gaze shifted from the left flank as it formed up, to the Quadi warriors in front of them. He noted the position of enemy commanders and the apparent strength of their battle lines. A group of light cavalry was visible near the centre of the line.

'I can't help noticing the Sarmatians aren't here,' said Plautianus, eying the riders with a languid shudder. 'That should make life easier.' He had not enjoyed last year's war on the prairies.

But where were the Sarmatians? Were they in league with the Quadi, or was there no link between these raids and those of the previous year? Severus' musings were interrupted as Plautianus' horse shifted uncomfortably. He gently scratched his own unmoving mount behind its ear as the tribune fought to control his skittish beast.

'Their right flank is weak,' said Marius Maximus, staring intently into the Quadi lines. 'But their light cavalry do look prepared...'

Marius Maximus' voice trailed off as a booming roar burst out from the Quadi infantry. They were holding their shields at an angle to their bearded lips and the so-called "shield song" filled the clearing. Plautianus lost control of his horse once more.

'Do you think they could get any further away from the battle without going back to Rome?' Aulus asked, indicating Severus and his staff officers.

'Feeling vulnerable?' Vibius asked.

Aulus looked left and right. On one side Mustela was grinding his teeth and panting heavily; on the other Cicatrix was mumbling prayers to gods Aulus had never even heard of. 'Oh no!' he replied breezily. 'I fell quite safe.'

'So who wanted to join up for the fancy uniform?' Titus asked, leaning over to his

brother.

‘I wanted to join the Praetorian Guard. You don’t see them anywhere round here, do you?’

‘Of course not,’ said Lucianus. ‘Their uniforms cost far too much for the Emperor to send them all the way to the frontier. Anyway, they’re too busy murdering senators to join in the fun over here.’

Titus watched the groups of German warriors standing on the far side of the clearing, their bright-painted shields gaudy, the drab greens and browns and russets of their cloaks and the skins they wore blending into the forest wall behind them, as if the trees had come to life and sent forth their forces to combat these men of iron who had invaded their inviolate glades. It was as if the world of marble and metal had marched out to fight the forest itself.

The booming battle cry that had resounded from the Germans’ raised shields now ceased. Now the warriors began to bang their axes and spears against the bosses of their shields. The cavalymen on their stocky ponies trotted forwards until they were some way out from the main body of the army. The riders also seemed to be working themselves up into a battle frenzy, and their ponies reared and whinnied, pawing at their air with their hooves. Titus thought he could hear an echo of it in the surge of his own blood, and felt closer in spirit than ever to the barbarians.

The warriors danced a war dance and bellowed at the heavens as Titus and his comrades stood like an impenetrable wall flung across the heath. The noise built up into a crescendo and Titus saw Aulus mouthing despairing words to himself. Still the legion stood motionless.

Abruptly, without any apparent order given, a mixed body of light cavalry and running infantry charged towards them.

‘Stand! Stand!’ Decimus bellowed.

Severus watched from his horse as the wave of barbarians came charging and leaping across the heath. His lip curled. They lacked subtlety, these Germans – their tactics were nothing more than a killing rage, soon ignited, soon sated. He remembered all he had read of them in the works of Tacitus and the Elder Pliny. His legion would easily counter the headlong charge.

The riders and runners came into range of the first rank of legionaries and a volley of javelins shot out like a skein of geese, swooping through the air and plunging into German flesh or German soil. Shrieking piteously, top-knotted warriors fell from their mounts and vanished into the springy heather. But more and more galloped on, their hair bouncing atop their heads, their lances glittering in the noonday sun as their steeds pounded the earth with their hooves. Lightly armoured warriors raced alongside them.

The cavalry and infantry collided with the first rank of legionaries with an almighty crash that echoed from the trees, and suddenly the battle had begun in earnest.

‘They’re attacking our central position,’ Severus shouted over the roar of battle. ‘Maximus, send some of the auxiliaries round on either side. Flank them! Then withdraw the central forces.’ But even as he spoke, he saw the Quadi were beginning to retreat towards the main force.

‘What now?’ Plautianus asked with a mocking expression. ‘We’ve come all this way and they’re just going to give up now?’

‘Cancel that last order,’ Severus said. ‘Hold the centre!’

The combined wave of Quadi infantry and cavalry crashed against the centre once again, then just as quickly retreated back to their lines.

Severus' gaze followed them. It was unusual, this level of discipline, he realised. He looked past the front rank of warriors into the main body of Quadi. Amongst the loose ranks of warriors, chieftains were exhorting their men to attack once again, shouting, bellowing and calling upon their gods to grant them victory. Amidst this tumult, Severus' gaze fell upon a single man; tall, even for a German, he did not shout or brandish a weapon but stood stock still, staring at his foes. Severus could not see his face, only a beard dyed crimson erupting in a tangle from beneath a snarling wolf-skin helmet.

A chill ran down Severus' spine. The control this man held over his troops was tremendous. Again and again they charged into the Roman ranks. More were cut down each time, and yet they still came.

Severus wondered if even the might of Rome could defeat this kind of power.

Sweat streamed into Titus' eyes as he lashed about him with his sword. The rank of men staggered under another rush from the Quadi and Titus felt a sandaled foot tramp down on his instep as one man crashed into him and he fell heavily against another legionary. He pushed against the crush that surrounded him, his nostrils full of the smell of hot metal, rank leather and sweat.

'Advance!' Decimus barked. The century moved forwards a few yards as the wave of barbarians withdrew towards the wall of warriors and the black trees that loomed behind them.

Again, German infantry and cavalry raced forward, meeting the legionaries halfway. Titus saw mounted auxiliaries riding in from the right flank, cutting about them with their long swords. He fought on grimly.

Aulus was at his brother's side. His fear had gone; he had to concentrate so hard on reacting to the chaos that assailed him on every side to permit himself the luxury of fear. His sword arm was aching and his shield arm seemed numb. A barked order came from Decimus. Aulus could not make it out but as everybody was marching forward he gathered it was another call to advance. He ran to keep up with his brother.

Still the Germans were retreating before them. The cowards! Aulus thought. They wouldn't stand and fight. Good thing, too. He hoped they would retreat straight back into their smelly forests and never come out again. Suddenly he realised that their cohort had advanced far into the centre of the clearing and were a long way from the rest of the legion. Aulus felt horribly isolated.

A great cry burst from behind them. Aulus craned his neck round and froze in horror.

Riding from the trees on the far side of the clearing was a horde of familiar mounted troops. Their armour flashed in the sun, their dragon standards howled and streamed in the breeze.

The Sarmatian newcomers lowered the lances and charged.

'What are those fools up to?' Severus growled as he watched the cohort on the right flank advance after the retreating Quadi. He turned in his saddle. 'Bring them back!' he snapped at a nearby trumpeter. As the man raised the instrument to his lips, Marius Maximus pointed at the forest's edge.

'Sarmatians!'

Titus scrambled to his feet. All around him, Romans and Sarmatians were locked in mortal combat. He remembered the Sarmatian charge that had decimated the cohort's line. Now all was chaos.

He ducked just in time to avoid a Sarmatian lance dipping towards him. Slashing with his sword he took off the passing horse's hind leg. The beast crashed to the ground, flinging its rider to the earth. Titus rushed forward and smashed his shield rim

into the rider's neck, crushing his windpipe.

He looked up from the motionless corpse to see Aulus running from two Sarmatian lancers who were riding inexorably towards him. Suddenly Vibius appeared, throwing himself up at one nomad and dragging him from the saddle. The second Sarmatian reined his horse and turned it towards the struggling pair. Aulus spun round and took in the scene.

'Aulus!' Titus bellowed, seizing a fallen spear from the turf beside him. He flung it to Aulus. His brother grabbed it automatically, turned, and thrust it up into the mounted warrior's ribs.

Titus took stock of the situation. He saw Decimus on his hands and knees nearby, helmetless, clutching at a bruised forehead. The century had been scattered by the Sarmatians who were riding up and down the field, slaughtering as they went. The Quadi were locked in combat with the main body of the legion. Titus' century were cut off, with a battlefield full of angry barbarians between them and their comrades. He strode over to Decimus, and hauled him to his feet.

'Tell them to regroup!' he shouted in his centurion's face. Decimus growled something and stared around him in a daze. Despairingly, Titus turned away.

'Aulus, Vibius, get here!' he shouted over the roar of the battle. 'Where's the standard bearer? Cicatrix! To me, men! To me!'

A ragged group of legionaries, many of them walking wounded, gathered around Titus and their dazed centurion. Titus saw a group of auxiliary cavalrymen riding across the field nearby, pursued by Sarmatian lancers. Even as they watched, the heavy cavalry smashed into the fleeing riders and cut them down. One man tumbled from his horse and rolled out of the way of the charging barbarians, winding up in a hollow near Titus and his comrades. The man's helmet fell off to reveal red hair and beard and a blue, tattooed face. It was Dubigalos.

'Good work, Titus,' he shouted. 'You've managed to get the survivors together. Too late though. That last charge destroyed my troop. And now we're cut off!'

Titus stared about him. The legion was still visible on the far side of the clearing, stolidly retreating under the attacks of Sarmatians and Quadi. Between them and Titus was a churned-up morass littered with bodies and filled with barbarian warriors. The auxiliary was right. There was no way they could rejoin their comrades.

Dubigalos saw the confusion in Titus' eyes, and glanced at Decimus, still dazed.

'What do we do?' Aulus shouted.

Dubigalos cast a glance around him. He indicated the looming forest wall to the north.

'This way!' he shouted, and led them at a run into the primeval woodland of Germany.

They crouched in the undergrowth some way from the edge of the forest, still and silent. Titus could still hear the noise of combat from the large clearing, but it was drawing further and further away from them. He took a deep breath and leant against the rough bark of an oak. What were they going to do now?

Dubigalos moved silently to his side. The barbarian's face was calm but his pale blue eyes burned. Glancing at the other legionaries, all waiting silently, some staring at Decimus' slumped form, Dubigalos leant over to Titus.

'No sign of any Germans here,' he remarked. 'For the moment, we're safe.'

Titus looked wonderingly at him. 'We're cut off from the legion,' he pointed out. 'Half Germany lies between us and the river, and the whole country is up in arms.'

Aulus appeared at his side. 'But we're going to get home, aren't we Titus?'

Before Titus could reply, Dubigalos gave him a warning glance. ‘Of course we are, aren’t we?’

Dumbly, Titus nodded. He looked over at Decimus, who was staring around him in bewilderment. The centurion was clearly in no fit state to command.

Titus sat in silence. A mumbling and muttering came from one of the other legionaries, and he looked up to see it was Cicatrix, praying fervently. A few fresh cuts were incised on his scarred face, but otherwise his incredible luck seemed to have served him well. Titus was about to tell him to keep quiet before he brought the barbarians down on them when a crashing noise of someone blundering through the undergrowth caused every crouching figure to look up in alarm.

Titus felt the attitude of the men alter. Lost, separated from the relative safety of the legion, alone in a foreign land, now they had an enemy to deal with. Tension raced through the crouching men.

Titus motioned for silence, and quietly drew his sword. Mustela had a dreamlike expression as he ran his thumb along his blade. He watched the spot from which the noise came, and waited.

Dubigalos caught Titus’ eye and motioned to the men. Realising they were too close together, Titus signalled them to spread out.

The men fanned out into a rough semi-circle, their eyes sharp. They crouched in the gloom with their swords held low.

Suddenly a figure was amongst them. As one, they leapt towards the enemy. Mustela was the first to reach the target, a low growl in his throat. With ease, he bore the figure to the ground and raised his sword for the killing blow.

‘Wait!’ Titus said. Mustela’s blade continued to fall.

Aulus jumped forward, seizing Mustela’s brawny arm. He glared into his comrade’s eyes and jerked his head in the direction of the prone figure.

‘Stop it, you idiot! It’s Zeno!’

‘Don’t touch me!’ Mustela hissed, bringing his face close to Aulus’. Aulus dropped away, his eyes downcast. Shrugging, he indicated the Greek boy who was only now getting to his feet.

Titus strode forwards and the other legionaries gave way at his approach.

‘What are you doing here?’ Titus demanded angrily. ‘You should be with your master.’

Zeno looked away. ‘He’s dead,’ he said quietly. ‘Ajax is dead.’

‘How did that happen?’

Zeno’s voice was hoarse. ‘Those nomads – the Scythians...’

‘Sarmatians,’ Aulus corrected him.

‘Sarmatians, then,’ Zeno said. ‘They broke through to the baggage train. They slaughtered us. I saw them cut Ajax down. As he fell, he told me to run. I didn’t know where I was. Barbarians were all around me – Romans and worse.’

Mustela growled low in his throat, offended by the Greek’s parochialism. Zeno shrugged. ‘That’s how I got here.’

Dubigalos had joined them. ‘That’s all we need,’ he muttered. ‘Caught behind enemy lines and now we’re lumbered with a civvie.’

‘Cut his throat and leave him,’ Mustela advised.

Titus rounded on him. ‘Speak when you’re spoken to!’ he hissed. ‘That goes for all of you! We’re trying to hide here. Zeno – make yourself useful. Tend to the wounded.’ He indicated Cicatrix and the other wounded men, including Decimus and Laurentius. Then he drew Dubigalos to one side.

‘What do we do now?’ he asked out of the side of his mouth.

Dubigalos grinned. 'Is the Roman asking advice of a barbarian?'

'We're in barbarian country,' Titus said. 'I expect you to advise me. Help me, Dubigalos! What do we do now?'

'What about your centurion?' Dubigalos asked, indicating Decimus' dazed figure, swiping angrily at Zeno as the Greek attempted to inspect his wounds.

'He's not giving orders now,' Titus said impatiently. 'Dubigalos! Stop fooling around. We've got to avoid the Germans and get back to the legion. What do we do?'

Dubigalos surveyed the forest with a grin.

'We'll never get back through Quadi country,' he told the young Roman. 'If we go back that way, yours will be just another lost century.'

Titus slumped. 'Isn't there anywhere safe in this country?'

Dubigalos laughed. 'Matter of fact, there is,' he said. 'We can head for the territory of a friendly tribe. Trouble is, it means going up north – away from the river.'

Titus relaxed a little. He looked suspiciously at the Caledonian.

'And what are they called, this friendly tribe of yours?'

Dubigalos looked nonchalantly northward. He whistled between his teeth.

'Vandals,' he said after a moment.

Chapter Thirteen

Half an hour later they were creeping down an animal trail in single file. The trees loomed over them, ascending into primeval gloom above, illuminated by occasional shafts of light where the sun pierced the canopy. Titus had lost count of the times he had stumbled over roots in the darkness, but Dubigalos at his side was a silent figure who walked effortlessly on like a senator strolling through Caesar's Gardens, seemingly unconcerned by their desperate situation.

Behind them the line of men stretched into the murky distance. Aulus and Lucianus were visible, and behind them Zeno leading the walking wounded, Cicatrix, Laurentius and a few others, with Decimus staggering and blundering alongside them, guided at times by Mustela. Titus could hardly see the rest of the survivors but he knew they were still there by the soft curses and oaths the legionaries muttered as they made their painful progress through the endless forest.

Dubigalos raised his hands and halted. Titus turned and motioned to the nearest men to stop. With a grumble of complaint, the legionaries ground to a halt.

'What is it?' Lucianus asked. Titus looked to Dubigalos. The Caledonian beckoned him to one side.

'This area is barely inhabited,' the auxiliary explained, 'but up ahead we'll be entering a stretch of farmland. We need to veer to the east and then turn north. Vandal country is north of the mountains. We...'

'What's going on?' Decimus suddenly bellowed.

Agonised, Titus spun round. The centurion was staring angrily around him, a hand to his head. 'What are we doing in the forest?' he demanded.

Titus sprang towards him, motioning to him to keep his voice down.

'We're deep in enemy territory!' he hissed. 'Quiet! You'll bring the Quadi down on us!'

Decimus' face darkened, and he opened his mouth to bellow.

As Aulus watched the two men, the forest seemed to close in round them all. Every sound echoed like thunder. Aulus' breath caught in his throat. He tensed and

peered into the gloom, expecting hordes of Quadi to rush out of the claustrophobic wood and overrun them. When nothing happened, Aulus sighed and looked back towards Titus and Decimus.

The two men were standing almost face to face, Decimus staring up at the taller Titus.

‘Who put you in charge, cook?’ Decimus demanded, his hoarse voice hardly audible. Aulus saw Decimus’ hand drop slowly to his sword hilt.

Titus glanced quickly around. ‘You were unconscious and we’d been cut off. We had to retreat into the forest or we would have been killed.’

Decimus stared at Titus, then bellowed; ‘Who put this fucking cook in charge?’

As a man, the group of legionaries tensed as Decimus’ voice echoed through the trees.

‘Ah, centurion, sir,’ Dubigalos said. ‘The legion was defeated, sir. The right flank decimated, sir. There was no way back to the main force, sir. I was leading everyone to the territory of a friendly tribe.’

‘Defeated, nonsense!’ Decimus said. ‘The choice is obvious. We will go back to the field and rejoin the rest of the legion.’

Despairing, Titus and Dubigalos exchanged glances.

‘Sir, I don’t think...’ Titus began. Decimus rounded on him.

‘That’s right, cook! You don’t think! You obey orders! When we get back to camp I’ll have you flogged each morning for a month and put you on latrine fatigues until next year. Now get moving!’

The legionaries, Dubigalos and Zeno all followed Decimus as he strode proudly through the forest they had traversed in such fear. No barbarians appeared to impede them. The journey that had seemed so long was over in a quarter of an hour.

They reached the edge of the trees. Decimus halted abruptly. Titus followed his horrified gaze.

The clearing was a scene of destruction. Corpses littered the churned-up ground, Roman bodies outnumbering Quadi or Sarmatians by far. Towards the centre of the heath, barbarian warriors were bundling corpse after corpse onto a huge pyre that burned greedily as they fed it. Ravens strutted among the fallen, and as Titus watched, the grey, ghostly shapes of wolves slunk away from the piles of the slain. One paused, and stared directly at Titus with yellow eyes. Titus saw its jaws were crimson with blood. Then the entire pack vanished fleetly into the trees. Elsewhere, women and children moved among the bodies, collecting booty.

Decimus was silent for a moment. Suddenly, he turned.

‘Whose idiot idea was it to go back?’ he hissed. ‘We can’t return to Carnuntum. We’ve got to take shelter with a friendly tribe until the hue and cry dies down. You – Caledonian! You know the barbarians. Lead us to a friendly tribe!’

It was growing dark before Decimus called a halt, after a whispered discussion with Dubigalos. They had penetrated deep into the lonely forests, diving into the sea of green, deep beneath the waving leaved, in the musty darkness of the forest floor. Titus was beginning to wonder how far away this friendly tribe had their territory. Dubigalos had said something vague about mountains. He hadn’t seen any mountains yet.

‘Right, men!’ Decimus bellowed. After another whispered conversation with Dubigalos, he beckoned them all close and spoke quietly. ‘We’re going to make camp here. I’ve designated Auxiliary Dubigalos as soldier in charge of foraging. We’re in a different land, men – you can forget all you learnt back with the legion! Though not a native to these parts, Dubigalos has ranged these forests far and wide, and he’ll show

you how to keep yourselves alive. Auxiliary – over to you.’

Dubigalos swaggered forwards. ‘You, you and you – gather firewood. You lot, the wounded – gather brushwood. I’ll show you how to make bivouacs with it in a moment. The rest of you, follow me. We’re going foraging.’

Sometime later, Titus and Aulus were sitting over a smouldering fire, supping a broth made of nettles and wild garlic stewed in a stock made from boiled pebbles. It wasn’t bad, they both agreed. Titus looked up as a tall figure approached their fireside. Behind him, the little valley they had chosen as a campsite was dotted with little fires, their smoke drifting on the night breeze.

‘Is the soup to your liking, sirs?’ Dubigalos’ tattooed face looked eerie, animalistic in the flickering firelight.

‘Not bad,’ Aulus said. ‘We’ll have to give Father the recipe when we get back home.’

Titus nodded. ‘Is this how everyone lives, up in Britain?’ he asked the auxiliary. Dubigalos squatted down beside them.

‘What are ye talkin’ about?’ he asked, sounding outraged. ‘We do have crops and herds in Caledonia, same as you Romans. But when we’re on the warpath we travel light, and live off the land.’

Titus sighed, imagining a free and easy life of wandering and adventure in the wilds, independent, penniless – but by no means poor, with the wealth of the wilds for the taking. He settled down by the fire with this in mind and soon thoughts and dreams became inseparable.

Titus awoke in the cold pre-dawn. Decimus was up and shouting orders. As Titus cast aside his blanket, he noticed frost crusting the ground. He was cold. Romantic notions of living off the land seemed somehow less attractive now. He remembered waking up in Rome to the aroma of baking bread and the warmth of a proper bed. As he massaged the knots out of his back, he looked around them.

Lucianus and Vibius were up and busy re-heating the remnants of last night’s stew, with Dubigalos’ aid. Mustela was nearby, sharpening his sword. Aulus was staring balefully at the surrounding forest.

‘You, cook! Wake those men!’ Decimus barked, indicating the still forms of Laurentius and another legionary.

Titus clambered to his feet and trudged over.

‘Get up! Surely the forest floor isn’t that comfortable!’

Neither man stirred.

‘Get up!’ he repeated, and kicked Laurentius. The man did not move. Titus knelt down and peeled back Laurentius’ blanket with numb fingers. He looked at the cold, pale skin, reached out a tentative hand toward Laurentius’ exposed arm. It was so very cold. The image of Macro’s dead face flashed into his mind.

‘Zeno!’ he called. The Greek hurried to his side and examined the two unmoving legionaries. Zeno sighed.

‘I did all I could for them,’ he said apologetically as Decimus loomed over them all. ‘But it wasn’t enough. They must have died from their wounds in the night. The walk can’t have helped, either.’

Titus felt hollow inside.

By now the rest of the legionaries were ready to move off. Decimus looked around impatiently. ‘Come on, leave them!’ he barked. ‘We can’t stay here.’

Titus looked at the centurion, shocked. He glanced at Dubigalos, who stood on the far side. The Caledonian shrugged. Titus looked away. Suddenly Cicatrix stepped forward.

‘We can’t do that, centurion!’ he exclaimed. Decimus’ face suffused with purple.

‘Can’t? Why not?’ he bellowed. ‘Get moving!’

Cicatrix stood his ground. ‘We can’t leave them unburied,’ he insisted. ‘Their ghosts will hunt us down! Our luck will turn sour!’

Decimus raised an arm to strike the legionary, but halted at a muttering from the men.

‘Aye, well, he could be right,’ said Dubigalos doubtfully. ‘We’ll need all the luck we can get, where we’re going.’

‘Leave them!’ Decimus bellowed, but with less conviction.

‘If we cut the ground open with our entrenching tools,’ Titus said, ‘we can bury them in a quarter of an hour.’

‘That earth is like iron this morning,’ Decimus objected, but before he could say anymore, Cicatrix produced his entrenching spade from his pack and began attacking the ground near the stream. The other legionaries gathered round, and dug a double grave under Titus’ direction. Decimus watched in fury.

By the time Cicatrix had prayed to the spirits of the dead and the gods of the grove, and made offerings of last night’s stew, over an hour had passed, and Decimus’ anger had grown. He led the group at a fast pace through the trackless woods, brushing aside brambles and bracken without seeming to notice them. They made good progress that day, although Titus’ heart was heavy.

He was still wondering how far they had to go. Dubigalos, when asked, had been unusually reticent, saying only that they “had a fair way to go yet.” Now their journey led them over wooded hills and down overgrown valleys, through less dense forest than that they had seen previously, at one point crossing an area of overgrown fields in the midst of which was a small huddle of huts. Dubigalos explained that the Germans frequently moved location after exhausting the soil in one area.

Night was approaching, and Titus’ belly was rumbling. They had not eaten all day, except for an impromptu salad of beech leaves sometime in the morning. What he wouldn’t give for a hearthbread platter with onions and sausages, washed down with rough wine. Or even gruel and beer would keep him happy. He was cold, tired and hungry, and he wanted to get back to camp as soon as possible.

‘Quiet!’

He looked up to see Dubigalos gesturing them urgently to keep down. They had nearly crested a wooded rise and the Caledonian had gone on ahead to scout. Now he was back, and his eyes were wide with fear.

The men crouched down, and Decimus and Dubigalos had a muttered conversation. Titus heard something about a patrol of Germans. Decimus turned to him.

‘Go with the auxiliary and have a look down the next valley,’ he ordered. ‘He says he thinks he saw Quadi ahead.’

Titus followed Dubigalos over the rise, and together they crouched in the lea of a bush, peering down into the deepening gloom of the next valley. Up ahead, it seemed to open out, and Titus thought he saw what could be an area of fields. But moving figures were visible down a trail to the right; men in cloaks and breeches, with red-dyed hair knotted in topknots. As Titus and Dubigalos watched, they vanished into the twilight.

Dubigalos cursed. ‘Seems they’ve sent patrols out,’ he said. ‘Scouring the forest for any survivors. We’d better put as much space between us and here as we can.’

‘We can’t go much further tonight, Dubigalos,’ Titus said. ‘We need rest, food,

and shelter.'

Dubigalos looked at the Roman in concern. 'Aye, well, maybe we do,' he said. 'But where are we going to get it?'

'Look over there,' Titus said, indicating the open space beyond the trees. Drifting into the darkening sky was a trail of smoke. Dubigalos watched it uneasily.

'You think we should ask to stay the night?' he muttered.

'Don't be stupid!' Decimus barked, after they had outlined the plan. 'They'll murder us in our beds!'

Dubigalos scratched his beard thoughtfully. 'Titus might have a point,' he said. 'Germans are hospitable folk, and this farm is out on the fringes. They'll have little to do with tribal politics.'

'And we need food and shelter,' Titus added.

Decimus regarded him disgustedly.

'You, you just want luxury, cook! This life not good enough for you? This is the life to make a man of you. We don't need more than a bivouac. We're Roman soldiers!'

'How much food can you find in this wilderness?' Titus demanded.

'Why, you insubordinate little bastard!' Decimus bellowed, glaring up at the legionary. 'I'll...!'

But before the centurion could finish his sentence, Dubigalos pushed between the two of them and picked his way down the side of the valley. He was heading for the huts.

'Where's he going?' Decimus demanded. 'Legionary get after him! Bring him back here. We need that auxiliary!'

By the time Titus caught up with Dubigalos, the Caledonian had reached the edge of the trees. He shook off Titus's hand and strode on across the muddy fields. The sun was sinking behind the hill where Decimus and the others crouched, as Titus looked back. He turned to follow Dubigalos, and froze.

The auxiliary was standing by the gate, talking to a wizened man clad in a simple homespun tunic. As Titus watched, Dubigalos turned, and beckoned to him.

'I told ye about German hospitality,' Dubigalos was saying half an hour later. The central fire sent shadows flickering across the wattle and daub walls, playing on the faces of the legionaries who had piled into the place, and on the half-afraid faces of the Quadian peasant, his wife, and his children, a young boy of about ten, and a pretty girl about eighteen. The girl was offering Titus another beaker of beer. He shook his head with a smile. The brew was potent, and despite the filling meal of veal stew they had all eaten, his head was spinning.

Zeno sat next to him. As the girl offered him the beer, he took it with a smile, allowing his fingers to brush against hers as he did so. The Greek boy and the German girl exchanged long, lingering glances.

Dubigalos was still explaining German customs to Decimus, who was deep in his fifth beaker of beer. The Quadian farmer sat between them, smiling vaguely at the feasting legionaries. His wife squatted before him, raking at the fire. Its smoke drifted towards a hole in the roof, which was festooned with joints of curing meat, before escaping into the night sky beyond.

The peasant leaned forward to Decimus, and addressed him in his own tongue, indicating his wife, a broad-faced woman with the look of a Sarmatian. Decimus scowled.

'What's he offering now?' he growled at Dubigalos.

Dubigalos guffawed. 'The ultimate hospitality!' he said. 'He reckons you're the

leader of his guests, so it's you who gets to sleep with his wife.'

Decimus drew back, startled. He peered at the peasant, who smiled broadly and nodded. 'He wants me to fuck his wife?'

'It's a local custom,' Dubigalos told him. 'It's a shame we're not like that in Caledonia, or I might never have left the place. But that's another story. Go on, centurion. He'll be insulted if you turn her down.'

Decimus glared at the woman, who cowered back. 'This raddled old sow?' he bellowed. He shot angry looks about him, and caught sight of the girl, staring at him like a startled deer. 'If he's all that hospitable,' the centurion added, lumbering drunkenly to his feet and seizing the girl by the wrist, 'he'll give me his daughter!'

Everyone leapt to their feet, shouting. Zeno grabbed at Decimus, but the centurion batted him away with his free hand. The farmer shook a fist at the centurion and Decimus stepped towards him threateningly.

'Don't be stupid, centurion!' Dubigalos shouted, losing his temper. 'Ye've got your men in enough trouble as it is!'

'I'd expect you to take their side, barbarian!' Decimus replied. 'You're no different from them! I'm a Roman!'

The peasant's wife ran forward, and tried to drag Decimus from her daughter. Decimus knocked her aside with a brutal slap. The farmer squared up to Decimus. Decimus flung the girl to one side and drew his sword.

Suddenly all the legionaries had bared swords, all except Titus and Aulus, and Lucianus.

'This is getting out of hand,' Lucianus said. Decimus was looking threateningly at the Germans. Suddenly the boy leapt to his feet and ran for the door-flap.

'It's a trap!' Decimus shouted. 'Kill them!' He plunged his sword into the peasant's breast.

'Stop it! Stop it!' Titus shouted, rushing forward as the drunken legionaries threw themselves at the rest of the family. Dubigalos was shouting, his face showing despair. Decimus was grinning as he hacked about him. Titus saw Mustela nearby, his blade bloodied.

The young boy attacked Decimus, flailing at him with his little fists. The centurion's face was alive with unholy glee as he turned to cut the boy down. Titus seized the little whirlwind from behind, pinioning his arms and dragging him from Decimus' reach. The boy fought in Titus' arms like a wildcat, clawing free, flailing at him. Titus felt a sudden choking pressure round his throat, then it was gone. The boy turned and raced from the hut.

The boy fled sobbing into the trees. Behind him, the sky suddenly reddened. A snatched glimpse over his shoulder showed that the Romans had set fire to the hut. Flames licked at the sky as if it was the day of doom.

He ran blindly through the trees and undergrowth, tripping and stumbling, then rising again and staggering on. Finally he took shelter in a thicket. As he crouched there trembling, gazing back at the fire that burned deep in the night, he became aware of something hard and uncomfortable in his hand. Looking down, he saw in his palm a disc of metal attached to a leather thong. He looked closer. Unreadable runes were etched on one face. He realised he had tore it from round the neck of the Roman who had grabbed him as he was struggling free. He stared at the runes for a long time.

A movement from in front of him broke his reverie and he looked up. Towering above him, silhouetted against the light from the distant burning farm, was a tall figure. Upon its head it wore a wolf skin. The boy crouched motionless as the figure came closer.

Chapter Fourteen

Titus awoke with the smell of smoke in his nostrils and Decimus' hectoring voice in his ears. Imprudently, he opened his eyes. Morning sunlight stabbed knife-like into his brain. He lay on the hard earth feeling nauseous as Decimus continued to shout, memories of the previous night returned in a confused flurry.

Painfully, he rose as Decimus' shouting had stopped. The legionaries had slept out in the yard after the hut burnt down. A black wreck thrust charred timbers to the cold morning sky. Recumbent legionaries lay groaning on the ground.

Titus turned to see Decimus stamping across the yard towards him.

'Cook! Where's Lucianus?'

Titus winced, and looked around. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Where was he supposed to be?'

Decimus, seemingly none the worse for the previous night, glared up at him.

'I put him on watch at the gate last night,' he snarled. 'He's gone. Scarpered, I reckon. Deserted.'

Dubigalos appeared from the trees. He gave Decimus a nakedly hostile look.

'He won't have gone far if he has, centurion,' the Caledonian stated.

Decimus glared at him. Dubigalos returned stare for stare. The centurion turned away.

'Wake up!' he shouted, kicking at the sleeping legionaries.

Titus could not help but remember events from the previous night's bloody business. These Germans had fed and sheltered them. And in return, the legionaries had slaughtered them and burned their farm down.

Titus stared at Decimus in disgust. Ajax was right. This man would be the death of them all if something wasn't done.

'I know what you're thinkin' lad,' said Dubigalos. 'But are you really prepared to do what has to be done?' He stared at Titus.

Titus changed the subject. 'Lucianus didn't desert his post. I'd bet a year's wages on it.'

'Aye, Lucianus was a good man. Didn't know how to drink, but none of you do. Keep your eyes open, lad. That boy you saved last night might have friends hereabouts. When I went on my little reccie before, I saw nothing except a few wolf tracks. But I felt eyes on me all the time.'

Titus felt the hairs crawl on his neck. He wondered if he had done the right thing in saving the boy. He hoped the boy had run far from here.

'Rome does not pay you to talk and stand around!' Decimus barked. 'We will put as much distance between ourselves and this sorry spot as possible today. We will get to Vandal territory in a few days, and then return to the legion when the Quadi settle down.'

The small man ordered them out, with Dubigalos scouting ahead. Decimus had taken great pleasure in placing Titus at the rear of the column, "guarding the Greek."

Zeno had been silent since the previous night. Titus was worried about him.

'I feel filthy,' Zeno muttered as he staggered along the winding path. 'We killed them for no reason and then left them to rot.'

Cicatrix, ahead of the boy, turned his scarred face to the Greek and spoke in an undertone.

'You're right, boy. Their ghosts will haunt us. Mark my words, that's why Lucianus has gone.'

‘He couldn’t stand the guilt?’ Zeno asked doubtfully, his black eyes wide in his olive face. ‘Is that why he ran off?’

‘He didn’t run off,’ said Cicatrix. ‘I knew Lucianus since I joined the legions. He was never one to run away.’

‘So what happened to him?’ Zeno whispered.

‘They took him,’ Cicatrix said ghoulishly. ‘Thy...’

‘That’s enough of that,’ Titus broke in. ‘Keep your eye on the trail!’

A wolf-howl rang out from the distant trees. The legionaries halted, staring about them. Dubigalos returned to Decimus.

‘Wolves sleep in the day,’ he reminded the centurion. Decimus looked at him and for a moment the fear in his eyes was painfully clear.

‘What made that noise?’ he hissed.

Dubigalos shrugged. ‘I reckon we keep going. But stay alert!’

Decimus relayed this to the legionaries. They started on up the trail again. It was beginning to climb, and Titus wondered if this meant they were anywhere near the mountains Dubigalos had mentioned. And then – Vandal land, where they could lay low until it was possible to return to Carnuntum.

Aulus dropped back to speak with him.

‘What do you reckon that wolf-howl was about?’ he asked. ‘Why’s Dubigalos ignoring it?’

Titus shrugged. ‘Germans,’ he speculated. ‘Signalling to each other.’

Aulus shrank back, eyeing the surrounding trees frantically. ‘They’re following us? But why?’

Titus looked remorselessly down at him.

‘Don’t you remember last night?’ he asked.

‘I do,’ said Zeno quietly.

The slope began to incline more steeply, and Dubigalos scouted ahead. He returned to tell them that they had a long way to go as yet, but the Carpathian Mountains would be visible in a few days.

He fell back to speak with Titus.

‘We’re being followed,’ he said out of the corner of his mouth. ‘Don’t tell anyone else. I want you and me to let the line move on up the hillside. Let *then* think we’ve all marched on. Then we might catch a glimpse of our pursuers. They’ve been on our tail since we left the farm...’

‘What are they?’ Titus asked. ‘Wolves?’

Dubigalos laughed humourlessly. ‘You could call them that, aye. Come on, let’s drop back.’

As the group marched deeper into the forest, Titus and Dubigalos crept through the shadows. Titus was amazed by how silently the Caledonian moved. As he watched the auxiliary’s broad back, Titus decided that he was glad Dubigalos was on his side.

The two men reached a point where they could look down on the clearing that their column had just passed. Dubigalos motioned for Titus to stop. They both crouched unseen in the undergrowth and waited.

Some time later, a fur-clad warrior crept out of the further side of the clearing, crouching, almost on all fours. He sniffed the air. Titus tensed, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stir. His blood pounded in his veins. Images of one-eyed warriors crashed bewilderingly through his mind.

He managed to calm himself, and looked toward the clearing. As he did so, he almost bolted back into the wood.

Moving stealthily into the clearing was a heavily armed warband. This alone would not have caused Titus to panic; the cause of his fear stood in the middle of the fur-clad warriors. Titus' breath caught in his throat. He crouched deeper into the undergrowth. About eight warriors were in the clearing now, moving quickly, following the tracks led by the Romans. Titus did not know why, but felt sure more warriors were moving through the forest on either side.

As the warriors loped out into the open, they came to a halt. The leader stared up the slope, apparently eyeing the bushes where Titus and Dubigalos crouched. Titus tensed as yellow eyes seemed to lock on his.

He saw a tall figure wearing a wolf skin. A red-dyed beard resembled a torrent of blood from the mouth. Titus was sure that this figure was looking directly at him. For a moment their eyes met, locked... A confusion of images jumbled through Titus' mind.

He started, as Dubigalos' hairy hand landed on his shoulder.

'Hush!' the Caledonian hissed. 'Seems like they're staying there for now. Time we got back to the others.'

Night was rapidly descending and still the legionaries pushed on through the labyrinth of the forest trails. The knowledge that Germans were on their tail weighed heavily on their hearts, but spurred them on at the same time. Their pursuers had shown no sign of catching them up, apparently content to shadow them throughout the day, chivvying them like wolves after a herd of deer, so the legionaries dared not rest or eat but staggered on wearily until they were close to dropping.

As the sun began to descend over the trees, Titus heard a chorus of wolf howls ring out from the trees behind them. He felt as if an icy hand had run skeletal fingers down his spine.

'Those aren't wolves,' Dubigalos said flatly.

'Are they going to attack?' Decimus hissed. 'How many are there? There've got to be more than you and the cook saw.'

'I think they're massing for an attack,' Titus said.

Decimus looked at him levelly. 'You could be right,' he said grudgingly. 'Still, the might of Rome can easily withstand any number of werewolves. To me, you lazy bastards! Form up! Circle formation – swords out. Women and children' – he looked at Zeno – 'and Greeks – in the middle!'

The weary legionaries staggered into formation, holding their swords pointing outwards and scanning the rapidly darkening trees. The wolf howls came from all sides.

The last of the daylight faded, plunging the legionaries into darkness. All about them they could hear movement. Shadows in the moonlight darted between skeletal trees. Without warning, shrill howls sounded in the darkness, coming from all around them, making it impossible for the exhausted men to guess how many foes they faced.

'Ghosts!' Cicatrix hissed, staring into the darkness with wild eyes, gripping one of his many charms in his shield hand.

'Quiet!' Decimus said. 'They're men!' Titus was painfully aware of the uncertainty in the centurion's voice. 'Hold! They're just men – and you are legionaries of Rome. Hold, I say!'

They heard a blood-chilling howl. Shields rose and swords flashed. Titus could hear the heavy breathing of the men around him.

As he shifted his grip on his shield, the handle slick with sweat, something large and heavy plunged from the branches above Titus.

It was a blur of fur and claws in the darkness. One of the men shouted and fell to one knee with a vicious gash across his leg. Before the legionaries could react it let out a savage roar and disappeared into the trees.

‘What’s happened?’ someone shouted.

‘Demons!’ said another

‘Just men! Just men,’ Decimus repeated obsessively.

Something impacted against Dubigalos’ shield, sending the Caledonian staggering. Decimus turned to face the new threat, not noticing the deadly shape moving to his left.

Titus was about to shout out when he saw a flash of movement and hot blood splashed across Decimus’ face, blinding him. Vibius, standing on his left, fell to the floor, clutching at the bloody ruin of his throat.

As Decimus staggered unseeing in the darkness, the night erupted with screams. Someone shouted ‘Run!’ and before Titus knew anything he was blundering through the darkness as whip-like twigs lashed at his body.

He could see nothing, but the darkness was filled with screams and shouts, the clash of steel and gurgling death-rattles. Gradually, the noise died away – but he could hear people forcing their way through the trees on all sides. The wolf-howls receded into the distance.

Titus felt alone. He raced on.

Why had he run? Someone had given the order – or had it been an order? Surely it hadn’t been Decimus’ voice, that high-pitched, despairing shriek. And yet Titus had run.

He slowed down as he pushed his way through a thicket. The blackness about him was impenetrable. It was impossible to distinguish between earth and sky. The rough boles of trees were a crazy labyrinth detectable only by touch.

His legs were aching and he began to flounder. Why had he run? Run like an animal, a frightened deer with the hounds at his heels. That wasn’t like him. What sorcery had brought cowardice into his heart?

He collided with another running figure and got a brief impression of iron hard limbs, armour, unshaven jowls and a stink of sweat. The man began punching at him in a frenzy.

‘Who’s that?’ Titus shouted, trying to hold the man back with difficulty. ‘Who is it?’

The figure went still.

‘Titus?’ Dubigalos asked. The Caledonian’s voice was trembling. ‘Is that you, Titus?’

‘It’s me,’ he replied, laughing with relief. ‘It’s me! Where’s everyone else?’ They were lost in the depths of the dark forest. Where was Aulus? Where was everyone else? He frowned, detecting a rank smell in the chill air around them. It smelled like rotting meat.

Someone else came crashing through the trees.

‘Who’s that?’ Titus shouted.

‘By the gods! Keep your voice down,’ Cicatrix whispered as he stumbled through the darkness toward the sound of his companion’s voice. ‘You’ll bring them all down on us! Be quiet!’

As Cicatrix slowly made his way through the blackness, Titus heard the rattle of the charms the man wore. He could imagine the legionary praying to every god

imaginable as he ran, and smiled in the darkness.

‘Is there anyone with you?’ Titus asked.

‘No. And since you’re clearly so concerned, I’m fine too, thank you very much.’

‘Aye, well, you might have known he’d make it,’ Dubigalos commented.

‘You can’t have too many friends,’ Cicatrix said cryptically. Titus imagined him tapping the side of his scarred, bulbous nose as he spoke. Titus had to stifle a laugh. Calm down, he thought. Control yourself; don’t let the panic get the better of you.

Cicatrix began to speak but Dubigalos silenced him.

‘Can you hear it?’ the Caledonian whispered. Titus became aware of movement nearby, something coming straight for them. In the distance, the noise of pursuit was still audible but it seemed to be moving further away.

‘Who’s that?’ Titus hissed, gripping his sword hilt. Was it Aulus? Or had his brother been killed by their mysterious attackers? He hoped, prayed anxiously that it wasn’t so. ‘Who are you?’ he asked again.

‘Titus?’ a tremulous Greek voice asked. ‘Wait, centurion, wait?’ it added, addressing someone else.

‘Zeno?’ Titus asked in a low voice. ‘Is Decimus with you?’

‘That’s Centurion Decimus to you!’ the centurion’s voice was loud, breaking the still that hung over the grove.

The wolf howls of their pursuers were still too close for comfort. ‘Sorry sir,’ Titus apologised. ‘But please keep quiet!’

‘Cook? Is that you? Who’s with you?’ Decimus lowered his voice.

‘I am,’ Dubigalos muttered.

‘The cook and the barbarian,’ Decimus began, sneering. ‘I might have...’

The cracking of branches and jingle of armour made Titus swing round, blindly peering into the darkness. He unsheathed his sword and heard Decimus and Dubigalos do the same.

‘It’s me!’

Titus sighed with relief, hearing Aulus’ voice. ‘Who’s with you?’ he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued. ‘Quick, hide here – and keep quiet.’

Aulus and his companions moved to join them, and Titus felt a woollen military cloak brush against him. He sheathed his sword.

He crouched there, his surviving comrades around him. The wolf howls and the noise of figures forcing their way through the trees was distant now.

Somebody screamed, high and shrill – and then the voice was cut off abruptly. But that was some way down the valley. Silence fell. Titus and his comrades crouched in the blackness, unspeaking. As he waited for any sign of pursuit, Titus became more aware of the stench in the air.

He heard someone gag. ‘What’s that smell?’ Aulus choked.

‘Quiet!’ Dubigalos hissed. ‘Listen!’

The forest was dead silent now. Titus could hear the men shifting uneasily. He heard someone move, then a crash.

‘Get some light in here, barbarian,’ Decimus ordered. After a moment, Titus saw sparks in front of him and heard flint striking steel. Then the clearing was filled with light. Titus saw Dubigalos holding a flaming torch.

Some of the men groaned and turned their faces away. Titus winced. But for all the pain of his eyes that had become adjusted to the darkness, Titus could not look away from the forest floor. Scattered around them were small piles of broken weapons and armour, some of German design, but Titus also saw Sarmatian scale mail and Roman helmets. Also piled among the booty were the skeletal remains of animals.

Near his feet, a horse's skull grinned up at him, its eye sockets flickering in the torchlight.

'What is this place?' Aulus asked.

'Holy ground! It's holy ground! We shouldn't be here!' Cicatrix babbled. 'We must leave, now!'

'Quiet!' Decimus snapped. 'You, Caledonian. Scout out the area. You men, light another torch.'

Titus saw that he stood near a tree in the centre of the clearing. Beyond the tree stood the banks of a pool, its water like an obsidian mirror in the darkness. Titus saw something drip into the pool, sending ripples dancing across the glassy black surface.

Dubigalos was about to move off with his torch to scout out the surrounding forest when Titus gripped his arm and silently pointed at the upper branches of the old gnarled tree before them.

Dubigalos lifted the torch slowly. Its flame roared and crackled as he did so, and it illuminated a pair of legs dangling in the gloom, feet clad in military boots. As it rose, the torch revealed a tunic, a military belt, armour – and finally the head, lolling in the grip of a noose that hung from the tree.

'I know that face,' Dubigalos said quietly.

Titus looked again. The expression of horror had transformed the familiar bluff, stolid features into a tortured mask. But as the torch blazed and shadows played around the hanging corpse, Titus too recognised the face.

It was Lucianus.

TO BE CONTINUED

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XIX.

FLORA IN HER CHAMBER.—HER FEARS.—THE MANUSCRIPT.—AN ADVENTURE.

Henry found Flora in her chamber. She was in deep thought when he tapped at the door of the room, and such was the state of nervous excitement in which she was that even the demand for admission made by him to the room was sufficient to produce from her a sudden cry of alarm.

“Who—who is there?” she then said, in accents full of terror.

“‘Tis I, dear Flora,” said Henry.

She opened the door in an instant, and, with a feeling of grateful relief, exclaimed—

“Oh, Henry, is it only you?”

“Who did you suppose it was, Flora?”

She shuddered.

“I—I—do not know; but I am so foolish now, and so weak-spirited, that the slightest noise is enough to alarm me.”

“You must, dear Flora, fight up, as I had hoped you were doing, against this nervousness.”

“I will endeavour. Did not some strangers come a short time since, brother?”

“Strangers to us, Flora, but not to Charles Holland. A relative of his—an uncle whom he much respects, has found him out here, and has now come to see him.”

“And to advise him,” said Flora, as she sunk into a chair, and wept bitterly; “to advise him, of course, to desert, as he would a pestilence, a vampyre bride.”

“Hush, hush! for the sake of Heaven, never make use of such a phrase, Flora. You know not what a pang it brings to my heart to hear you.”

“Oh, forgive me, brother.”

“Say no more of it, Flora. Heed it not. It may be possible—in fact, it may well be supposed as more than probable—that the relative of Charles Holland may shrink from sanctioning the alliance, but do you rest securely in the possession of the heart which I feel convinced is wholly yours, and which, I am sure, would break ere it surrendered you.”

A smile of joy came across Flora’s pale but beautiful face, as she cried,—

“And you, dear brother—you think so much of Charles’s faith?”

“As Heaven is my judge, I do.”

“Then I will bear up with what strength God may give me against all things that seek to depress me; I will not be conquered.”

“You are right, Flora; I rejoice to find in you such a disposition. Here is some manuscript which Charles thinks will amuse you, and he bade me ask you if you would be introduced to his uncle.”

“Yes, yes—willingly.”

“I will tell him so; I know he wishes it, and I will tell him so. Be patient, dear Flora, and all may yet be well.”

“But, brother, on your sacred word, tell me do you not think this Sir Francis Varney is the vampyre?”

“I know not what to think, and do not press me for a judgment now. He shall be watched.”

Henry left his sister, and she sat for some moments in silence with the papers before her that Charles had sent her.

“Yes,” she then said, gently, “he loves me—Charles loves me; I ought to be very, very happy. He loves me. In those words are concentrated a whole world of joy—Charles loves me—he will not forsake me. Oh, was there ever such dear love—such fond devotion?—never, never. Dear Charles. He loves me—he loves me!”

The very repetition of these words had a charm for Flora—a charm which was sufficient to banish much sorrow; even the much-dreaded vampyre was forgotten while the light of love was beaming upon her, and she told herself,—

“He is mine!—he is mine! He loves me truly.”

After a time, she turned to the manuscript which her brother had brought her, and, with a far greater concentration of mind than she had thought it possible she could bring to it, considering the many painful subjects of contemplation that she might have occupied herself with, she read the pages with very great pleasure and interest.

The tale was one which chained her attention both by its incidents and the manner of its recital. It commenced as follows, and was entitled, “Hugo de Verole; or, the Double Plot.”

In a very mountainous part of Hungary lived a nobleman whose paternal estates covered many a mile of rock and mountain land, as well as some fertile valleys, in which reposed a hardy and contented peasantry. The old Count de Hugo de Verole had quitted life early, and had left his only son, the then Count Hugo de Verole, a boy

of scarcely ten years, under the guardianship of his mother, an arbitrary and unscrupulous woman.

The count, her husband, had been one of those quiet, even-tempered men, who have no desire to step beyond the sphere in which they are placed; he had no cares, save those included in the management of his estate, the prosperity of his serfs, and the happiness of those, around him.

His death caused much lamentation throughout his domains, it was so sudden and unexpected, being in the enjoyment of his health and strength until a few hours previous, and then his energies became prostrated by pain and disease. There was a splendid funeral ceremony, which, according to the usages of his house, took place by torch-light.

So great and rapid were the ravages of disease, that the count's body quickly became a mass of corruption. All were amazed at the phenomena, and were heartily glad when the body was disposed of in the place prepared for its reception in the vaults of his own castle. The guests who came to witness the funeral, and attend the count's obsequies, and to condole with the widow on the loss she had sustained, were entertained sumptuously for many days.

The widow sustained her part well. She was inconsolable for the loss of her husband, and mourned his death bitterly. Her grief appeared profound, but she, with difficulty, subdued it to within decent bounds, that she might not offend any of her numerous guests.

However, they left her with the assurances of their profound regard, and then when they were gone, when the last guest had departed, and were no longer visible to the eye of the countess, as she gazed from the battlements, then her behaviour changed totally.

She descended from the battlements, and then with an imperious gesture she gave her orders that all the gates of the castle should be closed, and a watch set. All signs of mourning she ordered to be laid on one side save her own, which she wore, and then she retired to her own apartment, where she remained unseen.

Here the countess remained in profound meditation for nearly two days, during which time the attendants believed she was praying for the welfare of the soul of their deceased master, and they feared she would starve herself to death if she remained any longer.

Just as they had assembled together for the purpose of either recalling her from her vigils or breaking open the door, they were amazed to see the countess open the room-door, and stand in the midst of them.

“What do you here?” she demanded, in a stern voice.

The servants were amazed and terrified at her contracted brow, and forgot to answer the question she put to them.

“What do you do here?”

“We came, my lady, to see—see—if—if you were well.”

“And why?”

“Because we hadn’t seen your ladyship these two days, and we thought that your grief was so excessive that we feared some harm might befall you.”

The countess’s brows contracted for a few seconds, and she was about to make a hasty reply, but she conquered the desire to do so, and merely said,—

“I am not well, I am faint; but, had I been dying, I should not have thanked you for interfering to prevent me; however, you acted for the best, but do so no more. Now prepare me some food.”

The servants, thus dismissed, repaired to their stations, but with such a degree of alacrity, that they sufficiently showed how much they feared their mistress.

The young count, who was only in his sixth year, knew little about the loss he had sustained; but after a day or two’s grief, there was an end of his sorrow for the time.

That night there came to the castle-gate a man dressed in a black cloak, attended by a servant. They were both mounted on good horses, and they demanded to be admitted to the presence of the Countess de Hugo de Verole.

The message was carried to the countess, who started, but said,—

“Admit the stranger.”

Accordingly the stranger was admitted, and shown into the apartment where the countess was sitting.

At a signal the servants retired, leaving the countess and the stranger alone. It was some moments ere they spoke, and then the countess said in a low tone,—

“You are come?”

“I am come.”

“You cannot now, you see, perform your threat. My husband, the count, caught a putrid disease, and he is no more.”

“I cannot indeed do what I intended, inform your husband of your amours; but I can do something as good, and which will give you as much annoyance.”

“Indeed.”

“Aye, more, it will cause you to be hated. I can spread reports.”

“You can.”

“And these may ruin you.”

“They may.”

“What do you intend to do? Do you intend that I shall be an enemy or a friend? I can be either, according to my will.”

“What, do you desire to be either?” inquired the countess, with a careless tone.

“If you refuse my terms, you can make me an implacable enemy, and if you grant them, you can make me a useful friend and auxiliary,” said the stranger.

“What would you do if you were my enemy?” inquired the countess.

“It is hardly my place,” said the stranger, “to furnish you with a knowledge of my intentions, but I will say this much, that the bankrupt Count of Morven is your lover.”

“Well?”

“And in the second place, that you were the cause of the death of your husband,”

“How dare you, sir—”

“I dare say so much, and I dare say, also, that the Count of Morven bought the drug of me, and that he gave it to you, and that you gave it to the count your husband.”

“And what could you do if you were my friend?” inquired the countess, in the same tone, and without emotion.

“I should abstain from doing all this; should be able to put any one else out of your way for you, when you get rid of this Count of Morven, as you assuredly will; for I know him too well not to be sure of that.”

“Get rid of him!”

“Exactly, in the same manner you got rid of the old count.”

“Then I accept your terms.”

“It is agreed, then?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Well, then, you must order me some rooms in a tower, where I can pursue my studies in quiet.”

“You will be seen—and noticed—all will be discovered.”

“No, indeed, I will take care of that, I can so far disguise myself that he will not recognise me, and you can give out I am a philosopher or necromancer, or what you will; no one will come to me—they will be terrified.”

“Very well.”

“And the gold?”

“Shall be forthcoming as soon as I can get it. The count has placed all his gold in safe keeping, and all I can seize are the rents as they become due.”

“Very well; but let me have them. In the meantime you must provide for me, as I have come here with the full intention of staying here, or in some neighbouring town.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; and my servant must be discharged, as I want none here.”

The countess called to an attendant and gave the necessary orders, and afterwards remained some time with the stranger, who had thus so unceremoniously thrust himself upon her, and insisted upon staying under such strange and awful circumstances.

The Count of Morven came a few weeks after, and remained some days with the countess. They were ceremonious and polite until they had a moment to retire from before people, when the countess changed her cold disdain to a cordial and familiar address.

“And now, my dear Morven,” she exclaimed, as soon as they were unobserved—”and now, my dear Morven, that we are not seen, tell me, what have you been doing with yourself?”

“Why, I have been in some trouble. I never had gold that would stay by me. You know my hand was always open.”

“The old complaint again.”

“No; but having come to the end of my store, I began to grow serious.”

“Ah, Morven!” said the countess, reproachfully.

“Well, never mind; when my purse is low my spirits sink, as the mercury does with the cold. You used to say my spirits were mercurial—I think they were.”

“Well, what did you do?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Was that what you were about to tell me?” inquired the countess.

“Oh, dear, no. You recollect the Italian quack of whom I bought the drug you gave to the count, and which put an end to his days—he wanted more money. Well, as I had no more to spare, I could spare no more to him, and he turned vicious, and threatened. I threatened, too, and he knew I was fully able and willing to perform any promise I might make to him on that score. I endeavoured to catch him, as he had already begun to set people off on the suspicious and marvellous concerning me, and if I could have come across him, I would have laid him very low indeed.”

“And you could not find him?”

“No, I could not.”

“Well, then, I will tell you where he is at this present moment.”

“You?”

“Yes, I.”

“I can scarcely credit my senses at what you say,” said Count Morven. “My worthy doctor, you are little better than a candidate for divine honours. But where is he?”

“Will you promise to be guided by me?” said the countess.

“If you make it a condition upon which you grant the information, I must.”

“Well, then, I take that as a promise.”

“You may. Where—oh, where is he?”

“Remember your promise. Your doctor is at this moment in this castle.”

“This castle?”

“Yes, this castle.”

“Surely there must be some mistake; it is too much fortune at once.”

“He came here for the same purpose he went to you.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, to get more money by extortion, and a promise to poison anybody I liked.”

“D—n! it is the offer he made to me, and he named you.”

“He named you to me, and said I should be soon tired of you.”

“You have caged him?”

“Oh, dear, no; he has a suite of apartments in the eastern tower, where he passes for a philosopher, or a wizard, as people like best.”

“How?”

“I have given him leave there.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; and what is more amazing is, that he is to aid me in poisoning you when I have become tired of you.”

“This is a riddle I cannot unravel; tell me the solution.”

“Well, dear, listen,—he came to me and told me of something I already knew, and demanded money and a residence for his convenience, and I have granted him the asylum.”

“You have?”

“I have.”

“I see; I will give him an inch or two of my Andrea Ferrara.”

“No—no.”

“Do you countenance him?”

“For a time. Listen—we want men in the mines; my late husband sent very few to them of late years, and therefore they are getting short of men there.”

“Aye, aye.”

“The thing will be for you to feign ignorance of the man, and then you will be able to get him seized, and placed in the mines, for such men as he are dangerous, and carry poisoned weapons.”

“Would he not be better out of the world at once; there would be no escape, and no future contingencies?”

“No—no. I will have no more lives taken; and he will be made useful; and, moreover, he will have time to reflect upon the mistake he had made in threatening me.”

“He was paid for the job, and he had no future claim. But what about the child?”

“Oh, he may remain for some time longer here with us.”

“It will be dangerous to do so,” said the count; “he is now ten years old, and there is no knowing what may be done for him by his relatives.”

“They dare not enter the gates of this castle Morven.”

“Well, well; but you know he might have travelled the same road as his father, and all would be settled.”

“No more lives, as I told you; but we can easily secure him some other way, and we shall be equally as free from him and them.”

“That is enough—there are dungeons, I know, in this castle, and he can be kept there safe enough.”

“He can; but that is not what I propose. We can put him into the mines and confine him as a lunatic.”

“Excellent!”

“You see, we must make those mines more productive somehow or other; they would be so, but the count would not hear of it; he said it was so inhuman, they were so destructive of life.”

“Paha! what were the mines intended for if not for use?”

“Exactly—I often said so, but he always put a negative to it.”

“We’ll make use of an affirmative, my dear countess, and see what will be the result in a change of policy. By the way, when will our marriage be celebrated?”

“Not for some months.”

“How, so long? I am impatient.”

“You must restrain your impatience—but we must have the boy settled first, and the count will have been dead a longer time then, and we shall not give so much scandal to the weak-minded fools that were his friends, for it will be dangerous to have so many events happen about the same period.”

“You shall act as you think proper—but the first thing to be done will be, to get this cunning doctor quietly out of the way.”

“Yes.”

“I must contrive to have him seized, and carried to the mines.”

“Beneath the tower in which he lives is a trap-door and a vault, from which, by means of another trap and vault, is a long subterranean passage that leads to a door that opens into one end of the mines; near this end live several men whom you must give some reward to, and they will, by concert, seize him, and set him to work.”

“And if he will not work?”

“Why, they will scourge him in such a manner, that he would be afraid even of a threat of a repetition of the same treatment.”

“That will do. But I think the worthy doctor will split himself with rage and malice, he will be like a caged tiger.”

“But he will be denuded of his teeth and claws,” replied the countess, smiling “therefore he will have leisure to repent of having threatened his employers.”

Some weeks passed over, and the Count of Morven contrived to become acquainted with the doctor. They appeared to be utter strangers to each other, though each knew the other; the doctor having disguised himself, he believed the disguise impenetrable and therefore sat at ease.

“Worthy doctor,” said the count to him, one day; “you have, no doubt, in your studies, become acquainted with many of the secrets of science.”

“I have, my lord count; I may say there are few that are not known to Father Aldrovani. I have spent many years in research.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; the midnight lamp has burned till the glorious sun has reached the horizon, and brings back the day, and yet have I been found beside my books.”

“‘Tis well; men like you should well know the value of the purest and most valuable metals the earth produces?”

“I know of but one—that is gold!”

“‘Tis what I mean.”

“But ‘tis hard to procure from the bowels of the earth—from the heart of these mountains by which we are surrounded.”

“Yes, that is true. But know you not the owners of this castle and territory possess these mines and work them?”

“I believe they do; but I thought they had discontinued working them some years.”

“Oh, no! that was given out to deceive the government, who claimed so much out of its products.”

“Oh! ah! aye, I see now.”

“And ever since they have been working it privately, and storing bars of gold up in the vaults of this—”

“Here, in this castle?”

“Yes; beneath this very tower—it being the least frequented—the strongest, and perfectly inaccessible from all sides, save the castle—it was placed there for the safest deposit.”

“I see; and there is much gold deposited in the vaults?”

“I believe there is an immense quantity in the vaults.”

“And what is your motive for telling me of this hoard of the precious metal?”

“Why, doctor, I thought that you or I could use a few bars; and that, if we acted in concert, we might be able to take away, at various times, and secrete, in some place or other, enough to make us rich men for all our lives.”

“I should like to see this gold before I said anything about it,” replied the doctor, thoughtfully.

“As you please; do you find a lamp that will not go out by the sudden draughts of air, or have the means of relighting it, and I will accompany you.”

“When?”

“This very night, good doctor, when you shall see such a golden harvest you never yet hoped for, or even believed in.”

“To-night be it, then,” replied the doctor. “I will have a lamp that will answer our purpose, and some other matters.”

“Do, good doctor,” and the count left the philosopher’s cell.

“The plan takes,” said the count to the countess, “give me the keys, and the worthy man will be in safety before daylight.”

“Is he not suspicious?”

“Not at all.”

That night, about an hour before midnight,—the Count Morven stole towards the philosopher’s room. He tapped at the door.

“Enter,” said the philosopher.

The count entered, and saw the philosopher seated, and by him a lamp of peculiar construction, and incased in gauze wire, and a cloak.

“Are you ready?” inquired the count.

“Quite,” he replied.

“Is that your lamp?”

“It is.”

“Follow me, then, and hold the lamp tolerably high, as the way is strange, and the steps steep.”

“Lead on.”

“You have made up your mind, I dare say, as to what share of the undertaking you will accept of with me.”

“And what if I will not?” said the philosopher, coolly.

“It falls to the ground, and I return the keys to their place.”

“I dare say I shall not refuse, if you have not deceived me as to the quantity and purity of the metal they have stored up.”

“I am no judge of these metals, doctor. I am no assayest; but I believe you will find what I have to show you will far exceed your expectations on that head.”

“‘Tis well: proceed.”

They had now got to the first vault, in which stood the first door, and, with some difficulty, they opened the vault door.

“It has not been opened for some time,” said the philosopher.

“I dare say not, they seldom used to go here, from what I can learn, though it is kept a great secret.”

“And we can keep it so, likewise.”

“True.”

They now entered the vault, and came to the second door, which opened into a kind of flight of steps, cut out of the solid rock, and then along a passage cut out of the mountain, of some kind of stone, but not so hard as the rock itself.

“You see,” said the count, “what care has been taken to isolate the place, and detach it from the castle, so that it should not be dependent upon the possessor of the castle. This is the last door but one, and now prepare yourself for a surprise, doctor, this will be an extraordinary one.”

So saying, the count opened the door, and stepped on one side, when the doctor approached the place, and was immediately thrust forward by the count and he rolled down some steps into the mine, and was immediately seized by some of the miners, who had been stationed there for that purpose, and carried to a distant part of the mine, there to work for the remainder of his life.

The count, seeing all secure, refastened the doors, and returned to the castle. A few weeks after this the body of a youth, mangled and disfigured, was brought to the castle, which the countess said was her son's body.

The count had immediately secured the real heir, and thrust him into the mines, there to pass a life of labour and hopeless misery.

There was a high feast held. The castle gates were thrown open, and everybody who came were entertained without question.

This was on the occasion of the count's and countess's marriage. It seemed many months after the death of her son, whom she affected to mourn for a long time.

However, the marriage took place, and in all magnificence and splendour. The countess again appeared arrayed in splendour and beauty: she was proud and haughty, and the count was imperious.

In the mean time, the young Count de Hugo de Verole was confined in the mines, and the doctor with him.

By a strange coincidence, the doctor and the young count became companions, and the former, meditating projects of revenge, educated the young count as well as he was able for several years in the mines, and cherished in the young man a spirit of revenge. They finally escaped together, and proceeded to Leyden, where the doctor had friends, and where he placed his pupil at the university, and thus made him a most efficient means of revenge, because the education of the count gave him a means of appreciating the splendour and rank he had been deprived of. He, therefore, determined to remain at Leyden until he was of age, and then apply to his father's friends, and then to his sovereign, to dispossess and punish them both for their double crime.

The count and countess lived on in a state of regal splendour. The immense revenue of his territory, and the treasure the late count had amassed, as well as the revenue that the mines brought in, would have supported a much larger expenditure than even their tastes disposed them to enjoy.

They had heard nothing of the escape of the doctor and the young count. Indeed, those who knew of it held their peace and said nothing about it, for they feared the consequences of their negligence. The first intimation they received was at the hands of a state messenger, summoning them to deliver up the castle revenues and treasure of the late count.

This was astounding to them, and they refused to do so, but were soon after seized upon by a regiment of cuirassiers sent to take them, and they were accused of the crime of murder at the instance of the doctor.

They were arraigned and found guilty, and, as they were of the patrician order, their execution was delayed, and they were committed to exile. This was done out of favour to the young count, who did not wish to have his family name tainted by a public execution, or their being confined like convicts.

The count and countess quitted Hungary, and settled in Italy, where they lived upon the remains of the Count of Morven's property, shorn of all their splendour but enough to keep them from being compelled to do any menial office.

The young count took possession of his patrimony and his treasure at last, such as was left by his mother and her paramour.

The doctor continued to hide his crime from the young count, and the perpetrators denying all knowledge of it, he escaped; but he returned to his native place, Leyden, with a reward for his services from the young count.

Flora rose from her perusal of the manuscript, which here ended, and even as she did so, she heard a footstep approaching her chamber door.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DREADFUL MISTAKE.—THE TERRIFIC INTERVIEW IN THE CHAMBER.—THE ATTACK OF THE VAMPYRE.

The footstep which Flora, upon the close of the tale she had been reading, heard approaching her apartment, came rapidly along the corridor.

“It is Henry, returned to conduct me to an interview with Charles's uncle,” she said. “I wonder, now, what manner of man he is. He should in some respects resemble Charles; and if he do so, I shall bestow upon him some affection for that alone.”

Tap—tap came upon the chamber door. Flora was not at all alarmed now, as she had been when Henry brought her the manuscript. From some strange action of the nervous system, she felt quite confident, and resolved to brave everything. But then she felt quite sure that it was Henry, and before the knocking had taken her by surprise.

“Come in,” she said, in a cheerful voice. “Come in.”

The door opened with wonderful swiftness—a figure stepped into the room, and then closed it as rapidly, and stood against it. Flora tried to scream, but her tongue refused its office; a confused whirl of sensations passed through her brain—she trembled, and an icy coldness came over her. It was Sir Francis Varney, the vampyre!

He had drawn up his tall, gaunt frame to its full height, and crossed his arms upon his breast; there was a hideous smile upon his sallow countenance, and his voice was deep and sepulchral, as he said,—

“Flora Bannerworth, hear that which I have to say, and hear it calmly. You need have nothing to fear. Make an alarm—scream, or shout for help, and, by the hell beneath us, you are lost!”

There was a death-like, cold, passionless manner about the utterance of these words, as if they were spoken mechanically, and came from no human lips.

Flora heard them, and yet scarcely comprehended them; she stepped slowly back till she reached a chair, and there she held for support. The only part of the address of Varney that thoroughly reached her ears, was that if she gave any alarm some dreadful consequences were to ensue. But it was not on account of these words that she really gave no alarm; it was because she was utterly unable to do so.

“Answer me,” said Varney. “Promise that you will hear that which I have to say. In so promising you commit yourself to no evil, and you shall hear that which shall give you much peace.”

It was in vain she tried to speak; her lips moved, but she uttered no sound.

“You are terrified,” said Varney, “and yet I know not why. I do not come to do you harm, although harm have you done me. Girl, I come to rescue you from a thralldom of the soul under which you now labour.”

There was a pause of some moments’ duration, and then, faintly, Flora managed to say,—

“Help! help! Oh, help me, Heaven!”

Varney made a gesture of impatience, as he said,—

“Heaven works no special matters now. Flora Bannerworth, if you have as much intellect as your nobility and beauty would warrant the world in supposing, you will listen to me.”

“I—I hear,” said Flora, as she still, dragging the chair with her, increased the distance between them.

“‘Tis well. You are now more composed.”

She fixed her eyes upon the face of Varney with a shudder. There could be no mistake. It was the same which, with the strange, glassy looking eyes, had glared upon her on that awful night of the storm when she was visited by the vampyre. And Varney returned that gaze unflinchingly. There was a hideous and strange contortion of his face now as he said,—

“You are beautiful. The most cunning statuary might well model some rare work of art from those rounded limbs, that were surely made to bewitch the gazer. Your skin rivals the driven snow—what a face of loveliness, and what a form of enchantment.”

She did not speak, but a thought came across her mind, which at once crimsoned her cheek—she knew she had fainted on the first visit of the vampyre, and now he, with a hideous reverence, praised beauties which he might have cast his demoniac eyes over at such a time.

“You understand me,” he said. “Well, let that pass. I am something allied to humanity yet.”

“Speak your errand,” gasped Flora, “or come what may, I scream for help to those who will not be slow to render it.”

“I know it.”

“You know I will scream?”

“No; you will hear me. I know they would not be slow to tender help to you, but you will not call for it; I will present to you no necessity.”

“Say on—say on.”

“You perceive I do not attempt to approach you; my errand is one of peace.”

“Peace from you! Horrible being, if you be really what even now my appalled imagination shrinks from naming you, would not even to you absolute annihilation be a blessing?”

“Peace, peace. I came not here to talk on such a subject. I must be brief, Flora Bannerworth, for time presses. I do not hate you. Wherefore should I? You are young, and you are beautiful, and you bear a name which should command, and does command, some portion of my best regard.”

“There is a portrait,” said Flora, “in this house.”

“No more—no more. I know what you would say.”

“It is yours.”

“The house, and all within, I covet,” he said, uneasily. “Let that suffice. I have quarrelled with your brother—I have quarrelled with one who just now fancies he loves you.”

“Charles Holland loves me truly.”

“It does not suit me now to dispute that point with you. I have the means of knowing more of the secrets of the human heart than common men. I tell you, Flora Bannerworth, that he who talks to you of love, loves you not but with the fleeting fancy of a boy; and there is one who hides deep in his heart a world of passion, one who has never spoken to you of love, and yet who loves you with a love as far surpassing the evanescent fancy of this boy Holland, as does the mighty ocean the most placid lake that ever basked in idleness beneath a summer’s sun.”

There was a wonderful fascination in the manner now of Varney. His voice sounded like music itself. His words flowed from his tongue, each gently and properly accented, with all the charm of eloquence.

Despite her trembling horror of that man—despite her fearful opinion, which might be said to amount to a conviction of what he really was, Flora felt an irresistible wish to hear him speak on. Ay, despite too, the ungrateful theme to her heart which he had

now chosen as the subject of his discourse, she felt her fear of him gradually dissipating, and now when he made a pause, she said,—

“You are much mistaken. On the constancy and truth of Charles Holland, I would stake my life.”

“No doubt, no doubt.”

“Have you spoken now that which you had to say?”

“No, no. I tell you I covet this place, I would purchase it, but having with your bad-tempered brothers quarrelled, they will hold no further converse with me.”

“And well they may refuse.”

“Be, that as it may, sweet lady, I come to you to be my mediator. In the shadow of the future I can see many events which are to come.”

“Indeed.”

“It is so. Borrowing some wisdom from the past, and some from resources I would not detail to you, I know that if I have inflicted much misery upon you, I can spare you much more. Your brother or your lover will challenge me.”

“Oh, no, no.”

“I say such will happen, and I can kill either. My skill as well as my strength is superhuman.”

“Mercy! mercy!” gasped Flora. “I will spare either or both on a condition.”

“What fearful condition?”

“It is not a fearful one. Your terrors go far before the fact. All I wish, maiden, of you is to induce these imperious brothers of yours to sell or let the Hall to me.”

“Is that all?”

“It is. I ask no more, and, in return, I promise you not only that I will not fight with them, but that you shall never see me again. Rest securely, maiden, you will be undisturbed by me.”

“Oh, God! that were indeed an assurance worth the striving for,” said Flora.

“It is one you may have. But—”

“Oh, I knew—my heart told me there was yet some fearful condition to come.”

“You are wrong again. I only ask of you that you keep this meeting a secret.”

“No, no, no—I cannot.”

“Nay, what so easy?”

“I will not; I have no secrets from those I love.”

“Indeed, you will find soon the expediency of a few at least; but if you will not, I cannot urge it longer. Do as your wayward woman’s nature prompts you.”

There was a slight, but a very slight, tone of aggravation in these words, and the manner in which they were uttered.

As he spoke, he moved from the door towards the window, which opened into a kitchen garden. Flora shrunk as far from him as possible, and for a few moments they regarded each other in silence.

“Young blood,” said Varney, “mantles in your veins.”

She shuddered with terror.

“Be mindful of the condition I have proposed to you. I covet Bannerworth Hall.”

“I—I hear.”

“And I must have it. I will have it, although my path to it be through a sea of blood. You understand me, maiden? Repeat what has passed between us or not, as you please. I say, beware of me, if you keep not the condition I have proposed.”

“Heaven knows that this place is becoming daily more hateful to us all,” said Flora.

“Indeed!”

“You well might know so much. It is no sacrifice to urge it now. I will urge my brother.”

“Thanks—a thousand thanks. You may not live to regret even having made a friend of Varney—”

“The vampyre!” said Flora.

He advanced towards her a step, and she involuntarily uttered a scream of terror.

In an instant his hand clasped her waist with the power of an iron vice; she felt hot breath flushing on her cheek. Her senses reeled, and she found herself sinking. She gathered all her breath and all her energies into one piercing shriek, and then she fell to the floor. There was a sudden crash of broken glass, and then all was still.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CONFERENCE BETWEEN THE UNCLE AND NEPHEW, AND THE ALARM.

Meanwhile Charles Holland had taken his uncle by the arm, and led him into a private room.

“Dear uncle,” he said, “be seated, and I will explain everything without reserve.”

“Seated!—nonsense! I’ll walk about,” said the admiral. “D—n me! I’ve no patience to be seated, and very seldom had or have. Go on now, you young scamp.”

“Well—well; you abuse me, but I am quite sure, had you been in my situation, you would have acted precisely as I have done.”

“No, I shouldn’t.”

“Well, but, uncle—”

“Don’t think to come over me by calling me uncle. Hark you, Charles—from this moment I won’t be your uncle any more.”

“Very well, sir.”

“It ain’t very well. And how dare you, you buccaneer, call me sir, eh? I say, how dare you?”

“I will call you anything you like.”

“But I won’t be called anything I like. You might as well call me at once Morgan, the Pirate, for he was called anything he liked. Hilloa, sir! how dare you laugh, eh? I’ll teach you to laugh at me. I wish I had you on board ship—that’s all, you young rascal. I’d soon teach you to laugh at your superior officer, I would.”

“Oh, uncle, I did not laugh at you.”

“What did you laugh at, then?”

“At the joke.”

“Joke. D—n me, there was no joke at all!”

“Oh, very good.”

“And it ain’t very good.”

Charles knew very well that, this sort of humour, in which was the old admiral, would soon pass away, and then that he would listen to him comfortably enough; so he would not allow the least exhibition of petulance or mere impatience to escape himself, but contented himself by waiting until the ebullition of feeling fairly worked itself out.

“Well, well,” at length said the old man, “you have dragged me here, into a very small and a very dull room, under pretence of having something to tell me, and I have heard nothing yet.”

“Then I will now tell you,” said Charles. “I fell in love—”

“Bah!”

“With Flora Bannerworth, abroad; she is not only the most beautiful of created beings—”

“Bah!”

“But her mind is of the highest order of intelligence, honour, candour, and all amiable feelings—”

“Bah!”

“Really, uncle, if you say ‘Bah!’ to everything, I cannot go on.”

“And what the deuce difference, sir, does it make to you, whether I say ‘Bah!’ or not?”

“Well, I love her. She came to England, and, as I could not exist, but was getting ill, and should, no doubt, have died if I had not done so, I came to England.”

“But d——e, I want to know about the mermaid.”

“The vampyre, you mean, sir?”

“Well, well, the vampyre.”

“Then, uncle, all I can tell you is, that it is supposed a vampyre came one night and inflicted a wound upon Flora’s neck with his teeth, and that he is still endeavouring to renew his horrible existence from the young, pure blood that flows through her veins.”

“The devil he is!”

“Yes. I am bewildered, I must confess, by the mass of circumstances that have combined to give the affair a horrible truthfulness. Poor Flora is much injured in health and spirits; and when I came home, she, at once, implored me to give her up, and think of her no more, for she could not think of allowing me to unite my fate with hers, under such circumstances.”

“She did?”

“Such were her words, uncle. She implored me—she used that word, ‘implore’—to fly from her, to leave her to her fate, to endeavour to find happiness with some one else.”

“Well?”

“But I saw her heart was breaking.”

“What o’ that?”

“Much of that, uncle. I told her that when I deserted her in the hour of misfortune that I hoped Heaven would desert me. I told her that if her happiness was wrecked, to cling yet to me, and that with what power and what strength God had given me, I would stand between her and all ill.”

“And what then?”

“She—she fell upon my breast and wept and blessed me. Could I desert her—could I say to her, ‘My dear girl, when you were full of health and beauty, I loved you, but now that sadness is at your heart I leave you?’ Could I tell her that, uncle, and yet call myself a man?”

“No!” roared the old admiral, in a voice that made the room echo again; “and I tell you what, if you had done so, d—n you, you puppy, I’d have braced you, and—and married the girl myself. I would, d——e, but I would.”

“Dear uncle!”

“Don’t dear me, sir. Talk of deserting a girl when the signal of distress, in the shape of a tear, is in her eye!”

“But I—”

“You are a wretch—a confounded lubberly boy—a swab—a d——d bad grampus.”

“You mistake, uncle.”

“No, I don’t. God bless you, Charles, you shall have her—if a whole ship’s crew of vampyres said no, you shall have her. Let me see her—just let me see her.”

The admiral gave his lips a vigorous wipe with his sleeve, and Charles said hastily,—

“My dear uncle, you will recollect that Miss Bannerworth is quite a young lady.”

“I suppose she is.”

“Well, then, for God’s sake, don’t attempt to kiss her.”

“Not kiss her! d——e, they like it. Not kiss her, because she’s a young lady! D——e, do you think I’d kiss a corporal of marines?”

“No, uncle; but you know young ladies are very delicate.”

“And ain’t I delicate—shiver my timbers, ain’t I delicate? Where is she? that’s what I want to know.”

“Then you approve of what I have done?”

“You are a young scamp, but you have got some of the old admiral’s family blood in you, so don’t take any credit for acting like an honest man—you couldn’t help it.”

“But if I had not so acted,” said Charles, with a smile, “what would have become of the family blood, then?”

“What’s that to you? I would have disowned you, because that very thing would have convinced me you were an impostor, and did not belong to the family at all.”

“Well, that would have been one way of getting over the difficulty.”

“No difficulty at all. The man who deserts the good ship that carries him through the waves, or the girl that trusts her heart to him, ought to be chopped up into meat for wild monkeys.”

“Well, I think so to.”

“Of course you do.”

“Why, of course?”

“Because it’s so d——d reasonable that, being a nephew of mine, you can’t possibly help it.”

“Bravo, uncle! I had no idea you were so argumentative.”

“Hadn’t you, spooney; you’d be an ornament to the gun-room, you would; but where’s the ‘young lady’ who is so infernal delicate—where is she, I say?”

“I will fetch her, uncle.”

“Ah, do; I’ll be bound, now, she’s one of the right build—a good figure-head, and don’t make too much stern-way.”

“Well, well, whatever you do, now don’t pay her any compliments, for your efforts in that line are of such a very doubtful order, that I shall dread to hear you.”

“You be off, and mind your own business; I haven’t been at sea forty years without picking up some out-and-out delicate compliments to say to a young lady.”

“But do you really imagine, now, that the deck of a man-of-war is a nice place to pick up courtly compliments in?”

“Of course I do. There you hear the best of language, d——e! You don’t know what you are talking about, you fellows that have stuck on shore all your lives; it’s we seamen who learn life.”

“Well, well—hark!”

“What’s that?”

“A cry—did you not hear a cry?”

“A signal of distress, by G—d!”

In their efforts to leave the room, the uncle and nephew for about a minute actually blocked up the door-way, but the superior bulk of the admiral prevailed, and after nearly squeezing poor Charles flat, he got out first.

But this did not avail him, for he knew not where to go. Now, the second scream which Flora had uttered when the vampyre had clasped her waist came upon their ears, and, as they were outside the room, it acted well as a guide in which direction to come.

Charles fancied correctly enough at once that it proceeded from the room which was called “Flora’s own room,” and thitherward accordingly he dashed at tremendous speed.

Henry, however, happened to be nearer at hand, and, moreover, he did not hesitate a moment, because he knew that Flora was in her own room; so he reached it first, and Charles saw him rush in a few moments before he could reach the room.

The difference of time, however, was very slight, and Henry had only just raised Flora from the floor as Charles appeared.

“God of Heaven!” cried the latter, “what has happened?”

“I know not,” said Henry; “as God is my judge, I know not. Flora, Flora, speak to us! Flora! Flora!”

“She has fainted!” cried Charles. “Some water may restore her. Oh, Henry, Henry, is not this horrible?”

“Courage! courage!” said Henry although his voice betrayed what a terrible state of anxiety he was himself in; “you will find water in that decanter, Charles. Here is my mother, too! Another visit! God help us!”

Mrs. Bannerworth sat down on the edge of the sofa which was in the room, and could only wring her hands and weep.

“Avast!” cried the admiral, making his appearance. “Where’s the enemy, lads?”

“Uncle,” said Charles, “uncle, uncle, the vampyre has been here again—the dreadful vampyre!”

“D—n me, and he’s gone, too, and carried half the window with him. Look there!”

It was literally true; the window, which was a long latticed one, was smashed through.

“Help! oh, help!” said Flora, as the water that was dashed in her face began to recover her.

“You are safe!” cried Henry, “you are safe!”

“Flora,” said Charles; “you know my voice, dear Flora? Look up, and you will see there are none here but those who love you.”

Flora opened her eyes timidly as she said,—

“Has it gone?”

“Yes, yes, dear,” said Charles. “Look around you; here are none but true friends.”

“And tried friends, my dear,” said Admiral Bell, “excepting me; and whenever you like to try me, afloat or ashore, d—n me, shew me Old Nick himself, and I won’t shrink—yard arm and yard arm—grapnel to grapnel—pitch pots and grenades!”

“This is my uncle, Flora,” said Charles.

“I thank you, sir,” said Flora, faintly.

“All right!” whispered the admiral to Charles; “what a figure-head, to be sure! Poll at Swansea would have made just about four of her, but she wasn’t so delicate, d—n me!”

“I should think not.”

“You are right for once in a way, Charley.”

“What was it that alarmed you?” said Charles, tenderly, as he now took one of Flora’s hands in his.

“Varney—Varney, the vampyre.”

“Varney!” exclaimed Henry; “Varney here!”

“Yes, he came in at that door: and when I screamed, I suppose—for I hardly was conscious—he darted out through the window.”

“This,” said Henry, “is beyond all human patience. By Heaven! I cannot and will not endure it.”

“It shall be my quarrel,” said Charles; “I shall go at once and defy him. He shall meet me.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Flora, as she clung convulsively to Charles. “No, no; there is a better way.”

“What way?”

“The place has become full of terrors. Let us leave it. Let him, as he wishes, have it.”

“Let him have it?”

“Yes, yes. God knows, if it purchase an immunity from these visits, we may well be overjoyed. Remember that we have ample reason to believe him more than human. Why should you allow yourselves to risk a personal encounter with such a man, who might be glad to kill you that he might have an opportunity of replenishing his own hideous existence from your best heart’s blood?”

The young men looked aghast.

“Besides,” added Flora, “you cannot tell what dreadful powers of mischief he may have, against which human courage might be of no avail.”

“There is truth and reason,” said Mr. Marchdale, stepping forward, “in what Flora says.”

“Only let me come across him, that’s all,” said Admiral Bell, “and I’ll soon find out what he is. I suppose he’s some long slab of a lubber after all, ain’t he, with no strength.”

“His strength is immense,” said Marchdale. “I tried to seize him, and I fell beneath his arm as if I had been struck by the hammer of a Cyclops.”

“A what?” cried the admiral.

“A Cyclops.”

“D—n me, I served aboard the Cyclops eleven years, and never saw a very big hammer aboard of her.”

“What on earth is to be done?” said Henry.”

“Oh,” chimed in the admiral, “there’s always a bother about what’s to be done on earth. Now, at sea, I could soon tell you what was to be done.”

“We must hold a solemn consultation over this matter,” said Henry. “You are safe now, Flora.”

“Oh, be ruled by me. Give up the Hall.”

“You tremble.”

“I do tremble, brother, for what may yet ensue. I implore you to give up the Hall. It is but a terror to us now—give it up. Have no more to do with it. Let us make terms with Sir Francis Varney. Remember, we dare not kill him.”

“He ought to be smothered,” said the admiral.

“It is true,” remarked Henry, “we dare not, even holding all the terrible suspicions we do, take his life.”

“By foul means certainly not,” said Charles, “were he ten times a vampyre. I cannot, however, believe that he is so invulnerable as he is represented.”

“No one represents him here,” said Marchdale. “I speak, sir, because I saw you glance at me. I only know that, having made two unsuccessful attempts to seize him, he eluded me, once by leaving in my grasp a piece of his coat, and the next time he struck me down, and I feel yet the effects of the terrific blow.”

“You hear?” said Flora.

“Yes, I hear,” said Charles.

“For some reason,” added Marchdale, in a tone of emotion, “what I say seems to fall always badly upon Mr. Holland’s ear. I know not why; but if it will give him any satisfaction, I will leave Bannerworth Hall to-night.”

“No, no, no,” said Henry; “for the love of Heaven, do not let us quarrel.”

“Hear, hear,” cried the admiral. “We can never fight the enemy well if the ship’s crew are on bad terms. Come now, you Charles, this appears to be an honest, gentlemanly fellow—give him your hand.”

“If Mr. Charles Holland,” said Marchdale, “knows aught to my prejudice in any way, however slight, I here beg of him to declare it at once, and openly.”

“I cannot assert that I do,” said Charles.

“Then what the deuce do you make yourself so disagreeable for, eh?” cried the admiral.

“One cannot help one’s impression and feelings,” said Charles; “but I am willing to take Mr. Marchdale’s hand.”

“And I yours, young sir,” said Marchdale, “in all sincerity of spirit, and with good will towards you.”

They shook hands; but it required no conjuror to perceive that it was not done willingly or cordially. It was a handshaking of that character which seemed to imply on each side, “I don’t like you, but I don’t know positively any harm of you.”

“There now,” said the admiral, “that’s better.”

“Now, let us hold counsel about this Varney,” said Henry. “Come to the parlour all of you, and we will endeavour to come to some decided arrangement.”

“Do not weep, mother,” said Flora. “All may yet be well. We will leave this place.”

“We will consider that question, Flora,” said Henry; “and believe me your wishes will go a long way with all of us, as you may well suppose they always would.”

They left Mrs. Bannerworth with Flora, and proceeded to the small oaken parlour, in which were the elaborate and beautiful carvings which have been before mentioned.

Henry’s countenance, perhaps, wore the most determined expression of all. He appeared now as if he had thoroughly made up his mind to do something which should have a decided tendency to put a stop to the terrible scenes which were now day by day taking place beneath that roof.

Charles Holland looked serious and thoughtful, as if he were revolving some course of action in his mind concerning which he was not quite clear.

Mr. Marchdale was more sad and depressed, to all appearance, than any of them.

As for the admiral, he was evidently in a state of amazement, and knew not what to think. He was anxious to do something, and yet what that was to be he had not the most remote idea, any more than as if he was not at all cognisant of any of those circumstances, every one of which was so completely out of the line of his former life and experience.

George had gone to call on Mr. Chillingworth, so he was not present at the first part of this serious council of war.

Babbage Must Die

Chapter One

At this hour of the morning, the supermarket was almost deserted. Brian slouched up and down the aisles, filling his basket with the makings of a good weekend: beer, pizzas, pot noodles, a cheap DVD of some film that had been out about three years ago. Toothpaste. Toilet roll. Vitamin tablets – well, he was allergic to fresh fruit and vegetables. The basket grew heavier, but at least he didn't have the usual crowds getting in his way. He should come to the supermarket at 9.00 am more often, he thought. Not that he usually saw nine in the morning. Usually he got up about 10.45. But today was a special day.

Today he signed on.

By the end of the day his jobseekers' allowance would have been paid into his account by electronic fund transfer, making up for the sizeable dint in his finances he was making this morning. Time to party. He'd invite a few friends round, maybe. Not that he saw much of them these days. Too skint to go out.

He reached the automated tills and began beeping his purchases. When he passed the beer over the screen flashed up in red.

PLEASE CONFIRM AGE. PRODUCT RESTRICTED TO OVER 18s.

Idly, he swiped his national insurance smart card and the machine relented. He transferred his purchases into his rucksack and left the shop.

The job centre was a train ride away, but the station itself was only a minute's walk from the supermarket. Reaching the ticket machine, he swiped it with his smart card and tapped in the name of his destination. The platform was as deserted as the supermarket had been. Brian didn't really pay much attention to the news, but he had noticed that the once perennial references to rising unemployment had become less common in recent years, replaced by happy stories about pet rescues and celebrity divorces. Maybe they were out of the recession! But he still couldn't find a job.

The train pulled up and he got on. As the doors hissed shut behind him, the automated voice welcomed him to the carriage and listed the stations along the route at. Brian slouched in his seat and idly read the back of his DVD, *Revenant: Myth of the Vampire*. As they pulled up at the next station, his own destination, the automated voice calmly announced a security alert, warning him to be vigilant and report suspicious packages to the transport police. It was a long time since Brian had last seen a transport policeman.

The job centre was an easy amble away from the station, on the second floor of a building that had once been local government offices. He went up the wide staircase, as usual feeling strangely nervous, and went through the automatic doors.

Inside, the room was deserted. A line of cubicles took up the opposite wall. Brian sat

down on one and swiped his national insurance card. The screen lit up.

‘Card swiped is the property of Brian Wells. Please confirm your date of birth and post code.’

Brian did so, speaking loudly and slowly. The job centre robots got confused if you did anything else.

‘Thank you, Brian Wells,’ the machine added. ‘Please detail your job seeking activity since previous signing date, Brian Wells.’

‘I’ve looked in the local papers, but there was nothing I could do,’ said Brian. ‘Everything expected you to have three years previous experience and an NVQ level two at least.’

‘Have you considered retraining, Brian Wells?’ the machine asked. Brian sighed. Same old questions.

‘I’ve been on dozens of retraining courses,’ he said. ‘They’re all the same. E-learning programmes that tell you everything there is to know about the job, and a shiny new certificate to put with all the others if you answer all the questions correctly. But the jobs always expect you to have an NVQ. You can only get an NVQ if you’re already working. And they want you to have previous experience. How do you get the experience if every job out there expects you to have previous experience?’

‘Have you considered relocating, Brian Wells?’ the machine asked, giving every impression that it hadn’t been listening.

‘Why bother? The situation’s the same all over the country. There just aren’t any jobs! Are you listening, you stupid bloody machine?’ Brian was suddenly furious. He banged savagely on the side of the machine. Lights flashed and the screen went red.

‘Doncaster?’ it demanded. Brian frowned. He must have upset some important circuitry. He hadn’t mentioned the place.

‘Will you get on with it?’ he demanded. ‘Just transfer the money into my account and let me go.’

The screen seemed to have frozen now. Brian sighed heavily. He banged on the side of it again, several times. Now he really was getting annoyed. The useless box of bolts was just sitting there. He rose, and started kicking it furiously. He hurt his foot, but it felt good to express his rage against the machine.

A metal shutter slammed down, blocking off the cubicle. A hissing noise came from vents up near the roof. He could smell something, a strange gas-like smell. The blood surged in his ears and he felt as if he was drowning. He began to fall but the fall never ended.

He awoke with a terrible headache. The shutters had opened again and he couldn’t smell the gas any more. He saw a dent in the side of the machine, but as he rose he

realised that its screen was working again.

‘You have been tried and found guilty of vandalism of public property, Brian Wells,’ the machine told him calmly. ‘CCTV footage of your actions has been studied and clear evidence has been produced to establish guilt. £500 pounds in fines and legal costs has been removed from account belonging to Brian Wells.’

Brian stared at the machine in horror. That would take him beyond his overdraft limit! Shit! His gaze fell on his rucksack, and he was glad that he had been forethoughtful enough to buy his groceries before signing on rather than afterwards.

His phone quivered in his pocket like a frightened small animal, and he answered it to hear an automated voice.

‘Are you currently mired in debt? Can you see no way out of it? Why not consolidate all your debts into one easily repayable loan...?’

Brian switched the phone off in irritation. He was fucked.

‘This job centre will now close down for maintenance,’ the machine added suddenly. ‘Please vacate the area.’ In a daze, Brian went outside, and the doors slammed closed.

Coming up the steps was a girl. She looked at Brian questioningly.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked. ‘This is my signing on time.’

Brian shrugged. ‘Beats me,’ he said. ‘I think some fucker’s vandalised the thing. Don’t know who! It says it’s closing for maintenance.’

The girl sighed deeply. She was quite pretty, Brian noticed; small and dark haired with soulful eyes ‘This sucks,’ she snapped. ‘Now they’ll say I didn’t turn up to sign and insist I make a fresh claim! This is not the right time to be skint! I need that money.’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Brian. ‘I’m just glad I bought my groceries before signing on instead of after.’

‘Groceries!’ the girl said. ‘I was going to spend mine on a bit more than groceries.’ She turned to go. Brian hurried after her as she went back down the stairs.

‘Hey, do you want a drink?’ he asked, trying to keep up. She looked back over her shoulder, her mouth a thin line.

‘Are you paying?’ she retorted.

‘Yeah, ‘course,’ Brian replied.

‘Great,’ she said. ‘I could do with a drink.’ Brian remembered that he had just been fined £500 he didn’t have and debt management companies were already ringing him up. But this girl was a real looker. He wanted to get to know her better.

He patted his rucksack. 'Fancy going down the park?' he said in a small voice.

The girl laughed sardonically. Brian's shoulders drooped.

'Oh, okay,' she relented, tossing back her bobbed hair. 'You make me laugh. Anyway, I don't think any bars are still going.'

'I haven't done this since school,' she was saying a quarter of an hour later, as they walked through the park sipping own brand lager from cans.

'Oh, yeah,' said Brian, who hadn't started drinking until he was at college – though he'd hardly stopped since. 'School, eh. Bet you were a real rebel.'

The girl had introduced herself as Ada, a rather old-fashioned name in Brian's opinion. She'd been teaching physics at the local university until she'd been replaced by an e-learning program. Brian had a horrible feeling she was a lot brighter than he was.

She flashed him a smile, showing teeth that were perfect, except for two slightly crooked top ones. 'I grew out of it. Started working hard because I didn't want to end up on the dole like my mum. I did my degree at Cambridge in the end.'

'Cambridge?' Brian asked, impressed. Then he grinned cheekily. 'And now you're on the dole?'

'Who isn't?' Ada replied. 'Everyone is. The whole human race has been made redundant.'

Brian laughed.

'I'm serious,' she said. 'We're on the scrapheap.'

'But there are jobs advertised all the time,' Brian protested. 'If you've got the experience and the qualifications...'

'Have you?' Ada asked. 'Do you know anyone who has?'

'Well, you must have,' Brian replied. 'A degree from Cambridge...'

Ada looked broodingly out over the duck pond. 'It got me a job in the last days. By then the only jobs were in education or the civil services. Replacing job centre workers with automated systems was the last nail in the coffin.'

'I could never get a job,' he said. 'But I'm a lazy bastard. I don't care. I'd rather not work. Don't hassle me about getting a job and I'll happily vegetate. Just pay me my dole and my housing benefit...'

'What it is to be ambitious!' Ada said with heavy sarcasm. 'But some of us actually want to work. We want to make a difference.' She shrugged. 'Well, we can forget that

now. They can't even manage to pay us the dole properly.'

'I suppose I'd better get a job,' said Brian regretfully, knocking back the dregs from his can. 'Can't live on these groceries for ever, can I? And my bank account must be way overdrawn by now.'

'Haven't you been listening?' Ada asked. 'There are no jobs. Do you not pay any attention to the world around you? Everyone has been replaced. The process began twenty years ago but it's reached its peak now. Or its nadir. The human race has replaced itself with computers and automated systems. Even the job centre is automated. We're a planet full of slackers, kept alive by jobseekers' allowance – but there are no jobs to seek.'

Brian grinned. 'Say I believe you – though I've seen nothing about unemployment on this scale on the telly –'

'They replaced TV presenters with CGI constructs ten years ago,' Ada told him. 'And they just recycle the same programmes over and over again, even the news...'

'Say I believe you,' Brian repeated. 'Why don't you do something about it? You care, don't you? You want to change the world. Why don't you?'

Ada turned on him furiously and Brian realised that this date wasn't going well.

'I was trying!' she snarled. 'Me and Percy, we had a plan...'

'Who's Percy?' Brian asked, feeling slightly jealous.

'He's my old boss at university,' she said. 'Made redundant just as he made his breakthrough in temporal physics. He was about to publish his theory. A practical method of time travel.'

'Time travel?' Brian hooted. Ada gave him a frosty look.

'It is possible,' she insisted. Brian wondered if she wasn't one of those care in the community types. Trust him to pick a nutter. 'Theoretically, at least,' she went on. 'Building the time machine while unemployed has been the difficult bit. We've had to save up all our dole to buy even the basic components. Now the job centre's been vandalised by some oik and I won't get any money this month. It'll set the programme back by weeks.'

'Why don't you just steal the components?' Brian asked.

'Steal them?' Ada gave him a blank look. She shrugged. 'I don't really know much about stealing. I mean, I used to steal from school, but...'

Brian looked modest. 'I think I could say I know a bit about theft,' he said, glad to finally find some way in which he was superior to her.

'Really?' Ada asked, looking at him in a new way. 'Could you break into a top

security vault and remove some highly specialised equipment?’

‘Be a breeze,’ he said. ‘I’ll just have to make a few phone calls...’

Ada brightened considerably. ‘What a stroke of luck, meeting you,’ she said abstractedly. ‘I’d never considered stealing. But the cause is worth any crime.’

‘Of course it is,’ Brian replied, exuberant from her enthusiasm and the ale he’d been downing. ‘By the way, what is the cause? You’ve invented time travel, you say. But what are you going to do with it?’

Ada took a deep breath. ‘You were talking about changing the world, getting us out of this mess. Well, that’s what we’re going to do. Humanity has been made redundant by computers. But we have developed time travel, right? So it’s obvious.’

‘It is?’ Brian asked. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Go back in time and assassinate Charles Babbage.’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Brigands of the Moon

Chapter One

Our ship, the space-flyer, Planetara, whose home port was Greater New York, carried mail and passenger traffic to and from both Venus and Mars. Of astronomical necessity, our flights were irregular. The spring of 2070, with both planets close to the Earth, we were making two complete round trips. We had just arrived in Greater New York, one May evening, from Grebhar, Venus Free State. With only five hours in port here, we were departing the same night at the zero hour for Ferrok-Shahn, capital of the Martian Union.

We were no sooner at the landing stage than I found a code flash summoning Dan Dean and me to Divisional Detective Headquarters. Dan “Snap” Dean was one of my closest friends. He was electron-radio operator of the Planetara. A small, wiry, red-headed chap, with a quick, ready laugh and the kind of wit that made everyone like him.

The summons to Detective-Colonel Halsey’s office surprised us. Dean eyed me.

“You haven’t been opening any treasure vaults, have you, Gregg?”

“He wants you, also,” I retorted.

He laughed. “Well, he can roar at me like a traffic switch-man and my private life will remain my own.”

We could not think why we should be wanted. It was the darkness of mid-evening when we left the Planetara for Halsey’s office. It was not a long trip. We went on the upper monorail, descending into the subterranean city at Park Circle 30.

We had never been to Halsey’s office before. Now we found it to be a gloomy, vaultlike place in one of the deepest corridors. The door lifted.

“Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean.”

The guard stood aside. “Come in.”

I own that my heart was unduly thumping as we entered. The door dropped behind us. It was a small blue-lit apartment—a steel-lined room like a vault.

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk. And the big, heavy-set, florid Captain Carter—our commander on the Planetara—was here. That surprised us: we had not seen him leave the ship.

Halsey smiled at us gravely. Captain Carter spoke with an ominous calmness: “Sit down, lads.”

We took the seats. There was an alarming solemnity about this. If I had been guilty of

anything that I could think of, it would have been frightening. But Halsey's words reassured me.

"It's about the Grantline Moon Expedition. In spite of our secrecy, the news has gotten out. We want to know how. Can you tell us?"

Captain Carter's huge bulk—he was about as tall as I am—towered over us as we sat before Halsey's desk. "If you lads have told anyone—said anything—let slip the slightest hint about it...."

Snap smiled with relief; but he turned solemn at once. "I haven't. Not a word!"

"Nor have I!" I declared.

The Grantline Moon Expedition! We had not thought of that as a reason for this summons. Johnny Grantline was a close friend of ours. He had organized an exploring expedition to the Moon. Uninhabited, with its bleak, forbidding, airless, waterless surface, the Moon—even though so close to the Earth—was seldom visited. No regular ship ever stopped there. A few exploring parties of recent years had come to grief.

But there was a persistent rumor that upon the Moon, mineral riches of fabulous wealth were awaiting discovery. The thing had already caused some interplanetary complications. The aggressive Martians would be only too glad to explore the Moon. But the United States of the World, which came into being in 2067, definitely warned them away. The Moon was Earth territory, we announced, and we would protect it as such.

There was, nevertheless, a realization by our government, that whatever riches might be upon the Moon should be seized at once and held by some reputable Earth Company. And when John Grantline applied, with his father's wealth and his own scientific record of attainment, the government was glad to grant him its writ.

The Grantline Expedition had started six months ago. The Martian government had acquiesced to our ultimatum, yet brigands have been known to be financed under cover of a government disavowal. And so our expedition was kept secret.

My words need give no offence to any Martian who comes upon them. I refer to the history of our Earth only. The Grantline Expedition was on the Moon now. No word had come from it. One could not flash helios even in code without letting all the universe know that explorers were on the Moon. And why they were there, anyone could easily guess.

And now Colonel Halsey was telling us that the news was abroad! Captain Carter eyed us closely; his flashing eyes under the white bushy brows would pry a secret from anyone.

"You're sure? A girl of Venus, perhaps, with her cursed, seductive lure! A chance word, with you lads befuddled by alcolite?"

We assured him that we had been careful. By the heavens, I know that I had been. Not a whisper, even to Snap, of the name Grantline in six months or more.

Captain Carter added abruptly, “We’re insulated here, Halsey?”

“Yes. Talk as freely as you like. An eavesdropping ray will never get through to us.”

They questioned us. They were satisfied at last that, though the secret had escaped, we had not given it away. Hearing it discussed, it occurred to me to wonder why Carter was concerned. I was not aware that he knew of Grantline’s venture. I learned now the reason why the Planetara, upon each of her last voyages, had managed to pass fairly close to the Moon. It had been arranged with Grantline that if he wanted help or had any important message, he was to flash it locally to our passing ship. And this Snap knew, and had never mentioned it, even to me.

Halsey was saying, “Well, apparently we can’t blame you: but the secret is out.”

Snap and I regarded each other. What could anyone do? What would anyone dare do?

Captain Carter said abruptly, “Look here, lads, this is my chance now to talk plainly to you. Outside, anywhere outside these walls, an eavesdropping ray may be upon us. You know that? One may never even dare to whisper since that accursed ray was developed.”

Snap opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. My heart was pounding.

Captain Carter went on: “I know I can trust you two more than anyone under me on the Planetara.”

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded. “What—”

He interrupted me. “Just what I said.”

Halsey smiled grimly. “What he means, Haljan, is that things are not always what they seem these days. One cannot always tell a friend from an enemy. The Planetara is a public vessel. You have—how many is it, Carter?—thirty or forty passengers this trip tonight?”

“Thirty-eight,” said Carter.

“There are thirty-eight people listed for the flight to Ferrok-Shahn tonight,” Halsey said slowly. “And some may not be what they seem.” He raised his thin dark hand. “We have information....” He paused. “I confess, we know almost nothing—hardly more than enough to alarm us.”

Captain Carter interjected, “I want you and Dean to be on your guard. Once on the Planetara it is difficult for us to talk openly, but be watchful. I will arrange for us to be doubly armed.”

Vague, perturbing words! Halsey said, “They tell me George Prince is listed for the

voyage. I am suggesting, Haljan, that you keep your eye especially on him. Your duties on the Planetara leave you comparatively free, don't they?"

"Yes," I agreed. With the first and second officers on duty, and the Captain aboard, my routine was more or less that of an understudy.

I said, "George Prince? Who is he?"

"A mechanical engineer," said Halsey. "An underofficial of the Earth Federated Catalyst Corporation. But he associates with bad companions—particularly Martians."

I had never heard of this George Prince, though I was familiar with the Federated Catalyst Corporation, of course. A semigovernment trust, which controlled virtually the entire Earth supply of radiactum, the catalyst mineral which was revolutionizing industry.

"He was in the Automotive Department," Carter put in. "You've heard of the Federated Radiactum Motor?"

We had, of course. It was a recent Earth discovery and invention. An engine of a new type, using radiactum as its fuel.

Snap demanded, "What in the stars has this got to do with Johnny Grantline?"

"Much," said Halsey quietly, "or perhaps nothing. But George Prince some years ago mixed in rather unethical transactions. We had him in custody once. He is known as unusually friendly with several Martians in Greater New York of bad reputation."

"Well?"

"What you don't know," Halsey said, "is that Grantline expects to find radiactum on the Moon."

We gasped.

"Exactly," said Halsey. "The ill-fated Ballon Expedition thought they had found it on the Moon, shortly after its merit was discovered. A new type of ore—a lode of it is there somewhere, without doubt."

He added vehemently, "Do you understand now why we should be suspicious of this George Prince? He has a criminal record. He has a thorough technical knowledge of radium ores. He associates with Martians of bad reputation. A large Martian company has recently developed a radiactum engine to compete with our Earth motor. There is very little radiactum available on Mars, and our government will not allow our own supply to be exported. What do you suppose that company on Mars would pay for a few tons of richly radioactive radiactum such as Grantline may have found on the Moon?"

"But," I objected, "That is a reputable Martian company. It's backed by the

government of the Martian Union. The government of Mars would not dare—”

“Of course not!” Captain Carter exclaimed sardonically. “Not openly! But if Martian Brigands had a supply of radiactum I don’t imagine where it came from would make much difference. The Martian company would buy it, and you know that as well as I do!”

Halsey added, “And George Prince, my agents inform me, seems to know that Grantline is on the Moon. Put it all together, lads. Little sparks show the hidden current.

“More than that: George Prince knows that we have arranged to have the Planetara stop at the Moon and bring back Grantline’s ore.... This is your last voyage this year. You’ll hear from Grantline this time, we’re convinced. He’ll probably give you the signal as you pass the Moon on your way out. Coming back, you’ll stop at the Moon and transport whatever radiactum ore Grantline has ready. The Grantline Flyer is too small for ore transportation.”

Halsey’s voice turned grimly sarcastic. “Doesn’t it seem queer that George Prince and a few of his Martian friends happen to be listed as passengers for this voyage?”

In the silence that followed, Snap and I regarded each other. Halsey added abruptly:

“We had George Prince typed that time we arrested him four years ago. I’ll show him to you.”

He snapped open an alcove, and said to his waiting attendant “Flash on the type of George Prince.”

Almost at once, the image glowed on the grids before us. He stood smiling sourly before us as he repeated the official formula:

“My name is George Prince. I was born in Greater New York twenty-five years ago.”

I gazed at this televised image of George Prince. He stood somber in the black detention uniform, silhouetted sharply against the regulation backdrop of vivid scarlet. A dark, almost femininely handsome fellow, well below medium height—the rod checking him showed five foot four inches. Slim and slight. Long, wavy black hair, falling about his ears. A pale, clean-cut, really handsome face, almost beardless. I regarded it closely. A face that would have been beautiful without its masculine touch of heavy black brows and firmly set jaw. His voice as he spoke was low and soft; but at the end, with the concluding words, “I am innocent!” it flashed into strong masculinity. His eyes, shaded with long girlish black lashes, by chance met mine. “I am innocent.” His curving sensuous lips drew down into a grim sneer....

Halsey snapped a button. He turned back to Snap and me as his attendant drew the curtain, hiding the black grid.

“Well, there he is. We have nothing tangible against him now. But I’ll say this: he’s a clever fellow, one to be afraid of. I would not blare it from the newscasters’ stadium,

but if he is hatching any plot, he has been too clever for my agents!”

We talked for another half-hour, and then Captain Carter dismissed us. We left Halsey’s office with Carter’s final words ringing in our ears. “Whatever comes, lads, remember I trust you....”

Snap and I decided to walk part of the way back to the ship. It was barely more than a mile through this subterranean corridor to where we could get the vertical lift direct to the landing stage.

We started off on the lower level. Once outside the insulation of Halsey’s office we did not dare talk of this thing. Not only electrical ears, but every possible eavesdropping device might be upon us. The corridor was two hundred feet or more below the ground level. At this hour of the night the business section was comparatively deserted. The stores and office arcades were all closed.

Our footfall echoed on the metal grids as we hurried along. I felt depressed and oppressed. As though prying eyes were upon me. We walked for a time in silence, each of us busy with memory of what had transpired at Halsey’s office.

Suddenly Snap gripped me. “What’s that?”

“Where?” I whispered.

We stopped at a corner. An entryway was here. Snap pulled me into it. I could feel him quivering with excitement.

“What is it?” I demanded in a whisper.

“We’re being followed. Did you hear anything?”

“No!” Yet I thought now that I could hear something. Vague footfalls. A rustling. And a microscopic whine, as though some device were within range of us.

Snap was fumbling in his pocket. “Wait! I’ve got a pair of low-scale detectors.”

He put the little grids against his ears. I could hear the sharp intake of his breath. Then he seized me, pulled me down to the metal floor of the entryway.

“Back, Gregg! Get back!” I could barely hear his whisper. We crouched as far back into the doorway as we could get. I was armed. My official permit for the carrying of the pencil heat ray allowed me always to have it with me. I drew it now. But there was nothing to shoot at. I felt Snap clamping the grids on my ears. And now I heard something! An intensification of the vague footsteps I had thought I heard before.

There was something following us! Something out in the corridor there now! The corridor was dim, but plainly visible, and as far as I could see it was empty. But there was something there. Something invisible! I could hear it moving. Creeping toward

us. I pulled the grids off my ears.

Snap murmured, "You've got a local phone?"

"Yes. I'll get them to give us the street glare!"

I pressed the danger signal, giving our location to the operator. In a second we got the light. The street in all this neighborhood burst into a brilliant actinic glare. The thing menacing us was revealed! A figure in a black cloak, crouching thirty feet away across the corridor.

Snap was unarmed but he flung his hands out menacingly. The figure, which may perhaps not have been aware of our city safeguard, was taken wholly by surprise. A human figure, seven feet tall at the least, and therefore, I judged, a Martian man. The black cloak covered his head. He took a step toward us, hesitated, and then turned in confusion.

Snap's shrill voice was bringing help. The whine of a street guard's alarm whistle nearby sounded. The figure was making off! My pencil ray was in my hand and I pressed its switch. The tiny heat ray stabbed through the air, but I missed. The figure stumbled but did not fall. I saw a bare gray arm come from the cloak, flung up to maintain its balance. Or perhaps my pencil ray had seared his arm. The gray-skinned arm of a Martian.

Snap was shouting, "Give him another!" But the figure passed beyond the actinic glare and vanished.

We were detained in the turmoil of the corridor for ten minutes or more with official explanations. Then a message from Halsey released us. The Martian who had been following us in his invisible cloak was never caught.

We escaped from the crowd at last and made our way back to the Planetara, where the passengers were already assembling for the outward Martian voyage.

The Summer Country

Part One

The storm had passed.

For an hour it had raged around the survey vessel, lashing at the sides, causing it to pitch and sway alarmingly and giving Professor Higgins of Westchester University, who was more accustomed to air travel, terrible sea-sickness. He had spent most of the storm in his cabin, retching and praying to a God he'd deserted forty years before, when he'd first attended Westchester as a callow Archaeology student. But now the worst was over and presumably the boat was sailing sedately across the North Sea towards their enigmatic destination, the mystery island that had risen from the sea-bed earlier that week.

He staggered out of his cabin and made his way cautiously down the passage towards the bridge. As he did so, another door opened ahead of him and out stepped the thin, dark-haired figure of Dr. Tristram Urquhart, the marine biologist.

'There you are, Higgins,' he said merrily. 'I must say! you're looking a little green around the gills.' Urquhart, of course, seemed entirely unaffected by the battering that the ship had received.

Higgins nodded grimly. 'I think my breakfast disagreed with me,' he said coolly. 'Come on, I'm going to the bridge. I want to know where we are.'

'Good thinking,' said the marine biologist with just a little too much enthusiasm.

When they entered the bridge, Captain Andrews and his mate, Jenkins, were crouched over the instrument banks.

'Storm seems to be heading off south-south-east, captain,' Jenkins was reporting.

'Well, I think we've seen the worst of it... Just a second, man! What's that?'

'Oh yes, I see!' Jenkins replied, peering out of the window, following the captain's finger.

'Is it the island?' Higgins inquired. The captain turned and straightened up.

'No sir,' he replied and looked reproving. 'I thought I told all passengers to remain in their cabins.'

'Come on, captain,' Urquhart grinned. 'The storm is over. What's the fuss?'

'We've just spotted what appears to be a sinking yacht,' the captain said grudgingly. Higgins stepped forward.

'A yacht?' he said dubiously. 'In this weather?' The wind was still howling ear-splittingly outside.

'Perhaps that's why it's sinking.' Urquhart laughed quietly. Higgins felt foolish. Urquhart looked at the captain.

'Probably rich kids with no experience,' he said, smiling pleasantly. 'Well, our mission is too important to be delayed by idiots. Radio the RNLI and leave them.'

'I say, that's a bit off, isn't it?' Higgins complained.

The captain nodded. 'The Professor's right,' he said. 'We can't just leave them. Rich kids or not, we have to help. They might die otherwise.'

'Anyone stupid enough to set sail during the winter if they don't know what they're doing deserves such a fate.' Urquhart grinned. 'But I see that I'm outvoted by sentimentalists. Very well, go ahead. But if this jeopardises our mission, captain, remember that the Government are funding us.' His smile seemed a little forced now.

'I hardly think it will, Dr. Urquhart,' the captain replied. He turned to his mate.

‘Get the men to unship a lifeboat and rescue these idiots.’

They watched from the bridge as the lifeboat headed for the sinking yacht. Higgins borrowed a pair of field-glasses and trained them on the rolling swell, eventually managing to settle them on the heaving wreck. He caught a glimpse of three figures being ushered into the lifeboat - all of them young. It seemed that Urquhart’s assessment was factually right, if not ethically.

He stared at the yacht. It didn’t seem much like a sea-going vessel, he thought to himself. Admittedly, he wasn’t as much of an expert in such matters as Urquhart claimed to be, but the sinking yacht looked to him more the kind of boat that might cruise the Western Isles, or perhaps the Channel, than something in which even the most foolhardy of amateurs might decide to brave the rolling swell of the ocean. Had their voyage perhaps been inadvertent? He trained the binoculars on the lifeboat, which was coasting back towards the ship. The three figures were surrounded by crewmen, but as far as he could ascertain, none of them, neither the girl nor the two young men, were dressed suitably even for messing about on the river. They reminded him of his students. Such absurd fashions they had - he wasn’t at all sure whether long hair or short hair was ‘in’ these days. Neither did the two young men, it seemed - one had a shock of rather mangy brown hair while the other’s head was brutally cropped short. A ‘skinhead’ cut, he understood. The young lady was presumably equally fashion-conscious - either that or she was on her way to a funeral. In her black clothes, she reminded him of the Existentialists who’d infested the Paris of his own youth...

The three teenagers were aboard now and the crew were leading them below. Higgins put down the glasses and turned to see Urquhart studying him quizzically.

‘And who are our visitors?’ he asked.

‘It would see that you’re right,’ the Professor remarked blandly. ‘Teenagers. They resemble students.’

‘Idiots,’ the captain snapped. ‘I’m going to give them a piece of my mind.’ He swept from the bridge.

Higgins turned to follow him.

‘Coming?’ he asked Urquhart. The doctor shrugged and followed him out.

They followed the captain into a cabin below-decks. Inside it, the three teenagers were sitting on bunks, wrapped in towels and being examined by the MO. The captain stood in the centre of the room, his hands behind his back.

‘Are they alright, doctor?’ he asked impatiently. The MO looked up and shrugged.

‘They’ll survive. More than can be said for the yacht. Someone’s insurance company is going to see red.’

‘Get out, then, man,’ the captain ordered irritably, in no mood for small talk. The MO gave him a resentful look, which the captain studiously ignored, then he turned to the two scientists for sympathy. Higgins smiled politely. The MO grinned back and slowly began to pack away his instruments. Once he had departed, Captain Andrews turned on the teenagers. Higgins followed his gaze.

The girl was a pretty little thing, he thought. Long, curly dark hair - still a little wet - framed a pale, mysterious face and two intense, brown eyes. Her black blouse and pleated skirt were heavy with water and a little shabby, while the combat boots - a little incongruous with her down-at-heel elegance - were muddy and worn. But despite the poor quality of her clothes and her subdued appearance, Higgins could tell that this was a girl of breeding.

Reclining beside her was a figure who contrasted with her in almost every way.

His shaven head gleamed in the harsh electric light and his brutal face glowered sullenly in their direction. His jeans were soaked and his white T-shirt clung limply to his muscular torso.

The other teenager reminded Higgins of those freeloading New Age Travellers he had seen on the television. This boy had his long hair in the Rastafarian style known as 'dreadlocks', which hung rattily around his equally rat-like features. His ripped jeans and green coat - ex-Army issue, Higgins noted absently - were also sopping.

'What're you looking at?' the shaven-headed teenager barked in a Glaswegian accent. The captain returned his glare.

'Hamish!' the girl remonstrated in an elegant, cultured voice. She turned to the captain, who seemed about to explode and favoured him with a sudden, dazzling smile. 'Excuse my friend,' she said warmly. 'He's a little ungrateful sometimes. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance, but could you get us some spare clothes to wear while we dry our old ones? We're all wet through.'

'Well, miss,' said the captain, mollified by her apologies. 'I'll do what I can.' He turned to his mate. 'See to it, Jenkins. Don't keep the young lady waiting.' He turned back to the girl, clearly taken by her. 'But we must contact your parents and tell them of the loss of their yacht. Who are your parents, please? In fact, if you could give me your names; that would be useful.'

'Och, Ah'm John Smith,' stated the boy previously referred to as 'Hamish.' The captain looked doubtfully at him.

'And my name is Eloise Payne - er, Smith,' said the girl. 'Not related,' she added helpfully, as the captain turned back to her. He frowned and looked at the other teenager, sitting silently on the bed. The boy looked up.

'Oh, Ah'm, er, Ah'm Nick Robinso... I mean, John Smith as well,' he said in a broad Scouse accent.

The captain sighed. 'Well, if you refuse to help us, we can't very well help you, can we?' he said. 'Not that we can take time off to return you to your parents now - it's imperative that we reach our destination ASAP. We're already behind in our schedule, thanks to you.'

'Maybe I was right, then, captain,' Urquhart murmured, referring to his earlier suggestion.

'Please,' Eloise piped up. 'Where are you going?'

'We're the survey mission the Government have sent to investigate the new island,' said Professor Higgins. The statement confused the teenagers.

'Ahh,' said Eloise, nodding wisely. She frowned. 'New island?'

'What new island?' Nick asked.

'Don't you kids ever listen to the news?' asked Higgins. 'You're as bad as my students. Let me start from the beginning.'

'A few days ago - last Tuesday, in fact - a completely unexpected seismological event occurred in the North Sea, on the edge of British waters; an entire island arose from the sea-bed, although strangely there was hardly a ripple, let alone the tidal wave one could reasonably expect. The Germans sent out a spotter plane which radioed back a brief message before contact was lost. The pilot said, impossibly, that he had seen signs of habitation. The Government despatched us to discover the truth. That's why they sent me, Professor Higgins of Westchester University Archaeology Department, on the assumption that the pilot saw the ruins of Mesolithic dwellings from back when the North Sea was dry land.'

'They also sent Dr. Urquhart here, my colleague from the Department of Marine

Biology, since the pilot's brief report could have described certain rock formation know from the Pacific, though what they'd be doing on a prehistoric island in the North Sea is beyond me. They also sent a crack contingent of marines, in case there prove to be aggressive inhabitants...'

'Okay,' said Eloise brightly. 'So, can we help you explore the place?'

'Hey, cool,' said the long-haired boy.

'Certainly not!' remonstrated the captain. 'This place is bound to be dangerous. We still don't know why the pilot disappeared. This expedition is predominantly military in nature.'

Eloise shrugged. 'Whatever,' she said carelessly. 'Well, I think we're all feeling a little tired now, so after we've got out clothes dry, I think we'd like to have a sleep.'

The adults took the hint and departed.

Once they had left the cabin, Eloise turned to her companions.

'We're in the North Sea. Anyone got any comments to make? Hamish?'

'We were heading for Wales,' Hamish growled.

'Right,' Eloise replied. 'How did we get here?' She turned to her other companion. 'Nick? You were steering the boat.'

'Look, when we robbed it, I said I knew nothing about sailing,' Nick said defensively. 'Well, when they sail back home we can head for Wales again, then. Where are they from?'

'Westchester,' said Eloise. 'It's on the borders of the Black Country. I went there once, before I became a traveller - one of my friends was sent to a public school there. But weren't you listening? We're going to be exploring a mysterious island. How about that?'

'No we're not,' Hamish said. 'Fuckface there said we weren't.'

'And you're going to let him push you around, are you?' Eloise demanded determinedly.

'Well, no...' Hamish began.

'This isn't helping us get to Wales,' Nick broke in. 'I thought you wanted to go there.'

Eloise bit her lip. It wasn't just a whim that had urged her on towards that land of bleak mountains and mean, rain swept towns. A passage in the notebook of an occultist in the West Country and the tragic death of her own sister were both spurring her on in her quest for the Welsh village of Caer Pedryfan, beneath which she hoped to find the legendary Cauldron of Rebirth. So far, they had met little luck in their endeavours; an attempt to stow away on a train to Wales had landed them up in Scotland; then, after stealing a yacht in Ayr, they had found themselves blown far off course, winding up, it would appear, in the North Sea.

There was a knock at the door.

'That'll be our change of clothes,' said Nick.

Meanwhile, Higgins and Urquhart had been standing quietly in a corner of the bridge. The captain and Jenkins were busy steering the boat towards their destination.

'Is that the island?'

Urquhart suddenly broke off from his desultory conversation with the Professor to indicate a dark smudge that had crept up over the horizon. The captain glanced over his shoulder.

'It's certainly in the right position,' he said briefly and he returned to his work. Urquhart turned to Higgins.

'Well, professor,' he said triumphantly. 'Here's the moment of proof. Is it or is

it not the Isle of Abalos?’

The worst kind of crank was a scholar whose hobby was another academic discipline, Professor Higgins reflected grimly, prepared to pour his habitual scorn on the fellow’s ideas until a soft voice at his elbow asked;

‘Abalos?’

Higgins turned to see the three teenagers standing in the doorway, back in their old clothes but looking much cleaner. The professor was pleased to note that Eloise shone even more than before. It had been she who had asked the question.

‘I thought you were sleeping,’ he said.

‘One of the crew told us we’d reached the island. What’s this about Abalos?’

‘Well, young lady,’ said Higgins, swelling with self-importance, ‘Abalos is a semi-mythical island referred to by the Greek writer Pytheas, who wrote about the amber trade in the fourth century BC...’

‘Yes, I know what Abalos was,’ Eloise replied impatiently. ‘Isn’t it supposed to be the original Ynys Wydryn of Celtic mythology?’

Higgins deflated.

‘I see you subscribe to the same cranky notions as Dr. Urquhart here,’ he said disapprovingly. ‘His theory is that the island we are approaching is the original homeland of the Celts.’

‘The Celts?’ said Hamish, suddenly interested by the conversation. ‘The Celts were cool,’ he said, glowering at the professor. ‘Ah’m a Celt. What are you saying against the Celts?’

‘I’m saying nothing against them!’ the professor replied. ‘It’s simply that archaeology proves that the Celts came from Austria and Switzerland.’

‘The prehistoric artisans of Hallstatt and La Tène, whose material culture was adopted by the Celts and later came to be identified with them,’ Urquhart corrected. ‘Their own accounts tell a different story. And so far as I can ascertain, this is where many of them originated - the Isle of Abalos.’

He indicated the island, which was growing larger and larger as they approached. A coastline thick with trees was visible and towering over it, a smoking volcano.

The professor sighed. ‘I’d stick to marine biology if I were you, old man. That’s a new formation. See that volcano? Unusual for the North Sea, admittedly, but it proves that even if there was an Isle of Abalos once, this isn’t it.’

‘What about those trees?’ Nick asked. ‘They don’t look recent.’

Higgins peered closer. Flummoxed by the facts, he began to bluster. ‘Ridiculous, lad. They’re not trees - they must be some kind of marine plant-life raised from the sea-bed.’

‘Nothing resembling trees grows on the sea-bed,’ said Urquhart with more than a hint of smugness. ‘Touché, I think?’

‘I wonder where we are,’ Eloise murmured. ‘Is it Abalos, returned from the sea-bed after three thousand years? Or is it merely coincidence?’

‘Well,’ said Hamish, ‘ma money’s on it being the homeland of the Celts. It looks just the kind of place that would breed the Master Race.’

‘The Master Race?’ said Urquhart quickly.

Once again, Eloise felt that she had to apologise for her friend. ‘I’m afraid Hamish here holds some rather reactionary views...’ she mumbled.

‘Ah’m white and Ah’m proud,’ the Scot declared, adding vehemently; ‘But Ah’ve got nuhin’ to do with German keeches.’

‘Really...’ Urquhart drawled.

Higgins looked uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid there are far too many cranky views here,' he said loudly. 'This is a serious scientific expedition. There may perhaps be Mesolithic remains on the island, which is why I'm here. But the chances of it having any connection with a mythical "master race" are slight.'

The captain turned, his darkly handsome face drawn.

'Well, here's your chance to find out. We've discovered an inlet - a river estuary. We're going up it to find somewhere to tie up.'

The wooded shoreline was coming closer. Between two spits of land lay the estuary. They were heading straight for it. As the ship passed between the tree-lined banks, its passengers stared out of the windows in wonder. Lush, primeval forest rose around them, showing no sign of any human presence; it was as the world might have been at the dawn of time. The dark waters of the river flowed sluggishly past them, overhung by clumps of writhing vegetation. Clouds of mist trailed above them.

'It looks like the Amazon basin,' Higgins gasped. Urquhart turned to him.

'Of course, in the Iron Age, Northern Europe had a warm climate. As evidenced by the vitrified forts of Scotland; phenomena that are inconceivable in any temperate zone.' He paused. 'Unless you prefer the crankier alternative notion that they were atom-bombed by Hindu Gods from Atlantis.'

Eloise glanced at him. 'What are you implying?' she asked hesitantly.

Urquhart smiled blandly and returned his attention to the view.

Round a bend in the river they discovered a natural harbour, into which the captain guided the boat. Once the engine noise ceased, a deep, impenetrable silence fell over the brooding, dark green forest wall and the slow-flowing water. They continued to gaze out of the window for a while, awed by the oppressive silence.

Eventually, the captain reached a decision.

'Professor, Doctor - and our inadvertent guests. I want you all to remain here with me while we send the marines out to explore the surrounding area. Is that understood? No-one is to leave the boat.'

'Can't we at least go ashore?' Eloise pleaded winsomely. 'Stretch our legs?' The captain shot a quick glance at the members in question and softened.

'Alright. I'll tell Commander Johnstone to leave a couple of men to guard you. But the rest are to scout out the area.'

A few minutes later, the marines were out on the deck, fully armed. The civilians stood with the captain, at a distance from the soldiers as Commander Johnstone briefed them.

The Commander was a tall, lean man, handsome and well-built; but despite being an excellent soldier with a spotless track record, it seemed that he lacked the imagination to question the situation and faced his surroundings as if they were merely part of another exercise. This troubled the professor.

'Do you think Johnstone is the right man for the job?' he asked the captain.

'He's one of the best!' Captain Andrews replied. 'Veteran of the Falklands, hero of the Gulf; cut his milk teeth in Northern Ireland. Now seconded to the Navy. One of our best junior officers - I've heard rumours that the SAS want him. What's the problem?'

'He seems a little pedestrian. When you called him to the bridge, he accepted the situation unquestioningly. Surely the first man to explore this island should be of higher intelligence?'

The captain raised his eyebrows. 'He's going to make sure the island is safe for you scientist chaps,' he replied. 'Remember the German pilot. You don't want your studies to be disturbed, do you?'

At that moment, Johnstone marched up to the captain and saluted.

‘Ready to go ashore, captain,’ he bellowed. The captain returned the salute.

‘Ah, if you could leave a couple of men with us,’ he asked. The Commander nodded and told off two of his troops to remain behind. Then, without further ado, the marines leapt ashore and marched forward, rapidly disappearing into the looming wall of trees.

Once they had departed, Professor Higgins’ curiosity got the better of him. He strode across the deck and clambered over the side. The captain nodded to the two marines.

‘Keep an eye on the civilians,’ he commanded. They followed the professor.

The captain looked at Urquhart and the others.

‘You can go ashore as well,’ he said grudgingly. ‘But only along the shore itself. No one is to enter the forest.’

‘Cool!’ cried Nick and he headed for the side. Eloise and Hamish followed, laughing excitedly as if they were on a school trip. The captain raised an eyebrow at Urquhart.

‘Not going ashore?’

The marine biologist laughed. ‘Not much for me to do here,’ he replied. ‘Still, I think I’ll go and get my camera from my cabin. You and your men are staying aboard, then?’

The captain nodded. Urquhart looked briefly disconcerted, but he quickly vanished down the hatch.

On the shore, Higgins gazed around him in fascination. The three teenagers came up to him, with the marines trailing them.

‘Isn’t this fantastic?’ Eloise bubbled. ‘It’s like... like...’ Words failed her.

Higgins stared up at the towering trees.

‘How could all this rise up out of the sea?’ he was heard to murmur.

‘And why is it so warm?’ Eloise asked, scratching herself. ‘It’s really weird!’

Higgins shrugged. He shook his head. ‘This is the North Sea, but it reminds me of my visit to Brazil, two years ago,’ he said. They heard a squelching thud from behind them and turned to see Urquhart loping up the shore towards them.

‘Last time it was like this in these waters,’ he called, ‘was in the Iron Age.’

Higgins shook his head again as the marine biologist reached them. ‘I fail to see the relevance,’ he insisted.

‘It’s like we’ve gone back in time,’ said Nick quietly. Eloise turned to him.

‘That’s it!’ she exclaimed. ‘That’s exactly it!’

Higgins shook his head, grimly amused by their childish imaginations.

Commander Johnstone led his men up a steep, wooded valley, keeping his eyes out, alert for any attack. He’d done peace-keeping work in Africa at one point in his career and these dense, antediluvian woods reminded him unpleasantly of the dark jungles inhabited by the LRV rebels. Though the sun had filtered sluggishly through the trees back by the river, here it was almost pitch black. He called a halt.

‘Right, men,’ he said abruptly. ‘We’ve established that the trees are penetrable, but I would bloody hate to ferry civilians through this murk. These scientists are likely to make things hot for us back home if we don’t let them make all the discoveries, however, so I think we should continue until we find some high ground, a vantage point of some description, get an idea of the general lie of the land and then make a quick shuftie back to base. If we can get up to the volcano - there seems to be clear ground up there...’

He broke off as a whistling, hissing sound cut through the silent blackness. One

of the marines pitched forward. Johnstone grabbed the body and turned it over.

An arrow jutted from the man's heart. As Johnstone stared at it, a shower of similar arrows came whistling down from the trees. Johnstone swore under his breath. This was just like Elaweiland all over again.

'Enemy up in the trees, armed with primitive projectile weaponry. Fire at will, men.'

The marines opened up at the unseen attackers in the forest canopy and the trees resounded with the hammering chatter of gunfire. After a few seconds, Commander Johnstone ordered them to cease fire.

Silence fell.

'I think that scared the blighters off... ' He up whipped his gun as something came crashing through the trees above them.

A limp figure fell through the tangled branches and landed with a thud before them. Commander Johnstone paced forward. He knelt down beside the corpse.

'Tall, well-muscled male - Caucasian, with dark hair. Naked except for ornamental collar; body decorated with blue war paint,' he said. 'Weapons - primitive bow, ornamented short sword.' He looked up at his men. 'Looks like an Ancient Briton!'

The marines stared down at the naked corpse.

'Where are we, sir?' one of the marines whispered nervously. But before the Commander had a chance to speculate, the rumble of an explosion burst out from behind them.

Johnstone swung round.

'The boat!' he cried. He led his men at a run through the trees.

Saga of the Ere-Dwellers

Chapter 51 - It Rains Blood At Frodis-Water. Of Thorgunna, And How She Died And Was Buried At Skalaholt.

The summer was something wet, but nigh autumn befell good drying weather, and the haymaking at Frodis-water was by then come so far that all the home-mead was mown, and nigh half thereof was fully dry. Then befell a good drying day, calm and clear, so that no cloud was seen in the heavens.

Goodman Thorod got up early in the morning and set folk awork, and some fell to carrying the hay, while others ricked it. But Thorod set the women to spreading it, and the work was shared betwixt them, and Thorgunna set to work at as much as a neat's winter-fodder.

So the work went on well the day long, but when it had well-nigh worn three hours from noon, a black cloud-fleck came across the heaven from the north above Skor, and swiftly drew over the heavens, and thitherward straight over the stead. Folk deemed they saw rain in that cloud, and Thorod bade men rake up the hay. But Thorgunna brought hers into ridges, nor would she fall to rake it up though she were so bidden.

The cloud-fleck came up swiftly, and when it stood over the homestead of Frodis-water, there followed therewith so great a darkness, that men might not see out of the home-field, or scarce their hands before them. Then fell so great a rain from the cloud that all the hay that was spread was wetted; but the cloud drew off swiftly and the weather cleared. Then men saw that it had rained blood in that shower. But that evening good drying weather set in again, and the blood dried off all the hay but that which Thorgunna had spread; that dried not, or the rake either which she had handled. Thurid asked Thorgunna what she thought that wonder might forbode. She said that she wotted not. "But that seems to me most like," says she, "that it will be the weird of some one of those that are here."

Thorgunna went home in the evening and into her berth, and put off her bloodied clothes, and then lay down in her bed and sighed heavily, and men deemed that she had fallen sick.

Now that shower had come nowhere else but to Frodis-water.

But Thorgunna might eat no meat that evening, but in the morning goodman Thorod came to her and asked her what end she looked to have of her ailing. She said that she was minded to think that she would not fall sick again.

Then she said: "I deem thee the wisest man of the homestead, therefore will I tell thee all my will as to what I would have made of the goods I leave behind me and of myself. For things will go," says she, "even as I say, though ye think there is little to be noted in me, and I deem it will avail but little to turn away from my behests; for things have begun in such wise, that to no narrow ends deem I they will come, if strong stays be not raised thereagainst."

Thorod answered and said: "Methinks there is no little likelihood that thou wilt have deemed aright about this; yet I will promise thee," says he, "to turn not from thy behests."

Then said Thorgunna: "This would I have done: I would be borne to Skalaholt if I die of this sickness, because my mind tells me that that stead will be for one while the most worshipped stead in the land; and I wot also," says she, "that there will be priests to do the singing over me; so I pray thee to bring me there, and of my goods shalt thou have so much as that thou wilt have no loss thereby; but from my undivided goods shall Thurid have the scarlet cloak that I own; and this I do to the end that she may be content that I see to my other goods in such wise as I will; but I will that thou take for the cost thou hast for me that which thou wilt, or that pleases her, from such things alone as I leave thereto. A gold ring I have which shall go to church with me, but I will that my bed and my bed-hangings be burned up with fire, for that they will be of no good to any man; and I say this not because I grudge anyone to enjoy those good things, if I knew that they would be of good avail to any; but now I say so much thereover," says she, "because I deem it ill that folk should have so much heavy trouble from me, as well I wot will be, if ye turn away from that which I now ordain."

Thorod promised to do after her bidding; and so the sickness grew on her after that, and Thorgunna lay there not many days before she died.

The corpse was first borne into the church there, and Thorod let make a chest for the corpse, and the next day he had the bed-gear borne out into the air, and brought faggots together, and let pile up a bonfire there beside. Then goodwife Thurid went to him and asked what he was minded to do with the bed-gear. He said that he would burn it up with fire, even as Thorgunna had charged.

She answered: "It mislikes me that such precious things should be burned."

Thorod said: "She spake much thereon, and how it would not do to turn aside from that she had laid down."

Thurid said: "Such words were of nought but her envious mind; she grudged that any should enjoy these, therefore did she lay such charge on thee; but nought ill-omened will come of it, in whatsoever way such things are departed from."

"I know not," said he, "that things will go well but if we do as she has bidden."

Then Thurid put her arms round his neck, and prayed him not to burn the bed-gear, and pressed him so eagerly that he changed his mind and she brought matters about in such wise that Thorod burned the bolster and the mattress, but she took to her the quilt and sheets, and all the hangings; and yet withal it misliked them both.

Thereafter was the burial journey got ready, and trusty men got to go with the corpse, and good horses that Thorod owned. The body was swathed in linen, but not sewn up, and then laid in the chest. So then they went south over the heath as the road lies, and nought is told of their journey till they came south past Valbiorns-vales. There they got amongst flows exceeding soft, and the corpse was often upset. Then they went south to Northwater, and crossed it by Islefjord. Deep was the river, and a storm befell

with much rain; but they came at last to a stead that was within Staffholts-tongue and is called Nether-ness, and there asked for guesting, but the bonder would give them no cheer; so whereas the night was at hand, they deemed they might go no further, for belike it was nought easy to deal with Whitewater by night; so they unloaded their horses, and bore the corpse into a house over against the outer door, and then went into the hall and did off their clothes, and deemed they would abide there unfed that night. But the home-men went to bed by daylight, and when they were abed, they heard a great clatter in the buttery, and so they went to see what was toward, if perchance thieves had not broken in there, and when they came to the buttery there was to behold a tall woman, naked, with nothing on her, busied at bringing out victuals. So when they saw her, they were so afeard they durst go nowhere anigh.

But when the corpse-bearers knew thereof they went there, and saw what was toward, that thither was Thorgunna come, and good it seemed to all not to meddle with her. So when she had wrought such things there as she would, she bore meat into the hall, and laid the table and set out meat thereon. Then spake the corpse-bearers to the bonder: "Maybe things will end so or ever we part that thou wilt deem that thou hast paid dear enough for not giving us any cheer."

Then said the goodman and goodwife: "We will surely give you meat, and do for you all other things that ye may need."

And forthwith, when the goodman had bidden them good cheer, Thorgunna went out of the hall and out adooors, and was not seen after. And after that, light was brought into the hall, and the wet clothes pulled off from the guests and dry clothes got them in their stead, and they went to table and crossed the meat, while the goodman had all the house besprinkled with holy water.

So the guests eat the meat, and none had harm therefrom, though Thorgunna had set it out.

There they slept through the night, and were in a most hospitable place belike; but in the morning they got them ready for their journey, and right well it sped with them; but wheresoever these haps were known, there it seemed best rede to most folk to give them all the cheer they stood in need of.

So after this nought befell to tell of in their journey. And when they came to Skalaholt, the good things were yielded up which Thorgunna had given thereto, and the priests took them, corpse and all, gladly enow, and there was Thorgunna laid in earth, but the corpse-bearers fared home, and all went well with their journey, and they all came home in good case.

Chapter 52 - The Beginning Of Wonders At Frodis-Water.

At Frodis-water was there a great fire-hall, and lock-beds in therefrom, as the wont then was. Out from the hall there were two butteries, one on either hand, with stock-fish stored in one, and meal in the other. There were meal-fires made every evening in the fire-hall, as the wont was, and men mostly sat thereby or ever they went to meat.

Now that same night that the corpse-bearers carne home, as men sat by the meal-fires

at Frodiswater, they saw how by the panelling of the house-wall was come a half-moon, and all might see it who were in the house; and it went backward and withershins round about the house, nor did it vanish away while folk sat by the fires. So Thorod asked Thorir Wooden-leg what that might bode.

Thorir said it was the Moon of Weird, "and the deaths of men will follow thereafter," says he.

So a whole week this thing endured, that the Moon of Weird came in there evening after evening.

Chapter 53 - Now Men Die At Frodis-Water, More Wonders.

This happed next to tell of at Frodis-water, that the shepherd came in exceeding hushed. Little he said, and what he said was peevish; so men deemed it most like that he was bewitched, for he fared in distraught wise, and was ever talking to himself; and so things went on awhile.

But when two weeks of winter were worn, the shepherd came home on a night, and went straight to his bed and lay down, and in the morning when men carne to him he was dead. So he was buried at the church there.

A little after that great hauntings befell; and on a night as Thorir Wooden-leg went out for his needs, and turned off aside from the door, when he would go in again, he saw how the shepherd was come before the door. Then would he go in again, but the shepherd would nowise have it so; and Thorir was fain to get away, but the shepherd went at him, and got hold of him, and cast him homeward up against the door. At this he was affrighted exceedingly; yet he got him to his bed, and he was by then grown coal-blue all over.

Now from this he fell sick and died, and was buried there at the church; but ever after were the twain, the shepherd and Thorir Wooden-leg, seen in company, and therefrom were folk full of dread, as was like to be.

After Thorir's death a house-carle of Thorod fell sick, and lay there three nights or ever he died. Then one after another died, till six were dead; and by then it was hard on the Yule-fast, though at that time there was no fasting in Iceland.

Now the pile of stock-fish was so heaped up in the buttry that it filled it up, so that the door might not be opened, and it went right up to the tie-beam, and a ladder was needed to get the stock-fish from the top.

So one evening when men sat by the meal-fires, they heard how the stock-fish was being riven out of its skin, but when men looked thereto, they found there nought quick. But in the winter a little before Yule, goodman Thorod went out to Ness after his stock-fish. They were six together in a ten-oarer, and were out there night-long.

The same evening that Thorod went from home, it fell out at Frodis-water, when the meal-fires were lighted and men came gathering into the hall, that they saw how a seal's head came up through the floor of the fire-hall. A certain home-woman came

forth first and saw that hap, and caught up a club that lay in the doorway, and drave it at the seal's head; but it rose up under the blow, and glared up at Thorgunna's bed-gear.

Then went a house-carle thereto, and beat on the seal, but at every blow it kept rising till it was up as far as below the flappers. Then fell the house-carle swooning, and all that were thereby were fulfilled of mighty dread.

Then the swain Kiartan ran thereto, and took up a great sledge-hammer and smote on the seal's head, and great was that blow, but the seal only shook its head and looked round about; but Kiartan smote one blow on another till the seal sank down therewith, as if he were at the knocking down of a peg; but he smote on till the seal went down so far that he might beat down the floor over the head of him. And so indeed it fell out the winter through, that all the portents dreaded Kiartan the most of all.

Chapter 54 - The Death Of Thorod Scat-Catcher; The Dead Walk At Frodis-Water.

The morning that Thorod and his men went out westaway from Ness, they were all lost off Enni; the ship and the fish drave ashore there under Enni, but the corpses were not found. But when this news was known at Frodiswater, Kiartan and Thurid bade their neighbours to the arvale, and their Yule ale was taken and used for the arvale. But the first evening whenas men were at the feast, and were come to their seats, in came goodman Thorod and his fellows into the hall, all of them dripping wet. Men gave good welcome to Thorod, for a good portent was it deemed, since folk held it for sooth that those men should have good cheer of Ran if they, who had been drowned at sea, came to their own burial-ale; for in those days little of the olden lore was cast aside, though men were baptized and were Christian by name.

Now Thorod and his company went down the endlong sitting-hall, which was double-doored, and went into the fire-hall, and took no man's greeting, and set them down by the fire. Then the homemen fled away from the fire-hall, but Thorod and his folk sat behind there till the fires slaked, and then gat them gone. And thus it befell every evening while the arvale lasted, that they came to the fire. Much talk was hereover at the arvale, and some guessed that it would leave off when the feast was over. The guests went home after the feast, and somewhat dreary was that household left.

Now the evening that the guests went away were the meal-fires made as wont was. But when they burned up, in came Thorod and his company all dripping wet, and they sat down by the fire and fell to wringing their raiment. And so when they were sat down, in came Thorir Wooden-leg and his six followers, and they were all be-moulded, and they shook their raiment and cast the mould at Thorod and his folk.

Then the home-men fled away from the fire-hall, as might be looked for, and had neither light nor warm stones nor any matter wherewith they had any avail of the fire.

But the evening next after were fires made in another chamber, and it was deemed that they would be less likely to come thither, but it fell not out so, and all went in the same way as the night before, and both companies came to the fires. The third evening Kiartan gave counsel to make a long fire in the fire-hall, and meal-fires in another chamber. So was it done, and this availed thus much, that Thorod and his folk

sat by the long fire and the home-men by the little fire; and so things went till over Yuletide.

Now it befell that more and more were things going on in the stock-fish heap, and night and day men might hear how the stock-fish was torn. And after this the time came when need was of stock-fish, and men went to search the heap; and the man who went up thereon saw this to tell of, that up from the heap came a great tail as big as a singed neat's tail, and it was short-haired and seal-haired; he who went up on to the heap caught at the tail and tugged, and called on other men to come help, him. So folk fared up on to the heap, both men and women, and tugged at the tail, and got nought done, and they thought none otherwise than that the tail was dead; but lo, as they pulled, the tail drew down through their hands, so that the skin came off the palms of those who had the firmest hold thereon, and nought was known afterwards of that tail.

Then was the stock-fish heap taken down, and every fish therein was found torn from the skin, so that there was no fish found in his skin in the lower part of the heap; but nought quick was found therein.

After these haps Thorgrima Witch-face, the wife of Thorir Wooden-leg, fell sick and lay but a little while or she died, and the very same evening that she was buried, she was seen in the company of Thorir her husband. Then the sickness fell on folk anew after the tail was seen, and more women than men died; and yet six men died in that brunt. But some fled before those hauntings and ghosts. At harvest-tide there had been thirty serving-folk there, but eighteen were dead, and five fled away, and but seven were left behind at Goi.

Chapter 55 - A Door-Doom At Frodis-Water.

Now when those wonders had gone so far, one day Kiartan went east unto Holyfell to go see Snorri the Priest, his mother's brother, and asked rede of him what he should do in the matter of those wonders that had fallen on them. At that time was come to Holyfell the priest that Gizur the White had sent to Snorri the Priest. So Snorri sent the priest out to Frodis-water with Kiartan, as well as his son Thord Kausi, and six men more. Thereto he added the counsel to burn Thorgunna's bed-gear, and summon all those who walked, to a door-doom; and he bade the priest sing the hours there, and hallow water and shrive all folk. So these summoned men from the highest steads on the road, and came to Frodis-water on the eve of Candlemas at such time as the meal-fires were lighted.

By then had goodwife Thurid fallen sick even in such wise as those who had died.

Now Kiartan went in straightway and saw how Thorod and his folk sat by the fire as their wont was. So he took down Thorgunna's bed-gear, and went into the fire-hall, and caught up brands from the fire, and went out therewith, and then was all the bed-array burned that Thorgunna had owned.

Thereafter Kiartan summoned Thorir Woodenleg, and Thord Kausi summoned goodman Thorod, in that they went about that household without leave, and despoiled men both of life and luck; all were summoned who sat by the fires.

Then was a door-doom named, and these cases put forward; and it was done in all matters even as at a doom of the Thing: verdicts were delivered, cases summed up, and doom given.

But as soon as the sentence on Thorir Woodenleg was given out, he arose and said: "Here have I sat while sit I might;" and thereafter he went out by the door before which the court was not set.

Then was the sentence on the shepherd passed. But when he heard it he stood up and said: "Go I now hencefrom; I ween erst it had more seemly been."

And when Thorgrima Witch-face heard the doom on her ended, she also arose and said: "Here while abiding was meet I abode."

Then they charged one after the other, and each arose as the sentence fell on him, and all said somewhat at their going forth; but ever it seemed by the words of each that they were all loth to depart. At last was judgment given on goodman Thorod, and when he heard it he stood up and said: "Meseems little peace is here; so get us all gone elsewhere ;" and therewith he went out.

Then in walked Kiartan and his folk, and the priest bare hallowed water and the holy things throughout the house, and on the next day they sang all the hours and mass with great solemnity, and so there was an end thereafter to all walkings and hauntings at Frodis-water. But Thurid got better of her sickness so that she was healed.

In the spring after these wonders Kiartan took to him serving- folk, and dwelt long after at Frodis-water, and was the greatest of the doughty.

Chapter 56 - Of Snorri The Priest And The Blood-Suit After Stir.

Snorri the Priest dwelt at Holyfell eight winters after Christ's faith was made law in Iceland. The last winter he dwelt there was the one wherein his father-in-law Stir was slain at Iorvi in Flisa-wharf. Then Snorri the Priest went south thither after the corpse; and he went against Stir in the women's bower at Horseholt, whenas he was sitting upright and was holding the bonder's daughter by the middle.

That spring Snorri changed lands with Gudrun Osvif's daughter, and brought his household to Tongue in Saelings-dale; that was two winters after the slaying of Bolli Thorleikson, Gudrun's husband.

The same spring Snorri went south to Burgfirth with four hundred men to follow up the suit for the slaying of Stir. In his company was Vermund the Slender, the brother of Stir, who dwelt as then at Waterfirth; Steinthor of Ere withal, and Thorod Thorbrandson of Swanfirth; Thorleik Brandson of Crossness, the brother's son of Stir, also, and many other men of worth.

The furthest south they came was to Whitewater at Howeford over against By. There they found before them, south of the river, Illugi the Black, Kleppiarn the Old, Thorstein Gislison, Gunnlaug the Wormtongue, Thorstein Thorgilson of Hafsfirthisle,

who had to wife Vigdis, the daughter of Illugi the Black; and many other men of account were there, with a band of more than five hundred men.

So Snorri the Priest and his folk might nowise ride south over the river, but set forth the suit when they had gone the furthest they might without risk, and Snorri summoned Guest for the slaying of Stir.

But this same suit Thorstein Gislison brought to nought for Snorri the Priest in the summer at the Althing.

The same summer Snorri the Priest rode south to Burgfirth, and took the life of Thorstein Gislison and Gunnar his son; and still was Steinthor of Ere with him, and Thorod Thorbrandson, and

Brand Hoskuldson, and Thorleik Brandson, and they were fifteen in all.

The next spring they met at the Thing of Thorsness, Snorri the Priest to wit, and Thorstein of Hafsfirthisle, the son-in-law of Illugi the Black. Thorstein was the son of Thorgils, the son of Thorfinn, the son of Seal-Thorir of Redmel, but his mother was Aud, the daughter of Alf-a-dales; but Thorstein was the cousin of Thorgils Arison of Reek-knolls, and Thorgeir Havarson, and Thorgils Hallason, and Bitter-Oddi, and those Swanfirthers, Thorleif Kimbi and the other sons of Thorbrand.

Thorstein had at that time set on foot many cases for the Thorsness Thing. So one day on the Thing-brent, Snorri the Priest asked if Thorstein had set on foot many suits for the Thing. Thorstein answered that he had set on foot certain ones.

Then said Snorri: "Now belike wilt thou that we further thy cases for thee, even as ye Burgrifthers furthered ours last spring."

Thorstein said: "I nowise long for this."

But when Snorri had so spoken, his sons and many other kinsmen of Stir laid heavy words thereto, and said that it would serve Thorstein right well, if every one of his suits there should come to an end as it now stood, and said it was right meet that he himself should now pay for that shame which he and Illugi his father-in-law had done to them the past summer.

Thorstein answered few words thereto, and men went therewith from the Thing-brent. However, Thorstein and his kin, the men of Redmel, had brought together a great company, and when men should go to the courts, Thorstein got ready to push forward all these suits of his which he had set on foot for the courts to adjudge. But when the kin of Stir and folk allied to him knew that, they armed themselves, and went betwixt the courts, and the Redmel-folk as they would go to the courts, and a fight befell betwixt them.

Thorstein of Hafsfirthisle would pay no heed to aught but making for the place whereas Snorri the Priest was. Both big and stark was Thorstein, and a deft man-at-arms, but when he fell fiercely on Snorri, Kiartan of Frodis-water, Snorri's sister's son, ran before him, and Thorstein and he fought long together, and their weapon-play

was exceeding hard-fought.

But thereafter friends of both sides came thither, and went between them, and brought about truce.

After the battle spake Snorri to Kiartan his kinsman, and said: "Well wentest thou forth today, Broadwicking!"

Kiartan answered somewhat wrathfully: "No need to throw my kin in my teeth," said he. In this fight fell seven of Thorstein's men, but many were wounded on either side.

These matters were settled straightly at the Thing, and Snorri the Priest was the more generous in all peace-makings, because he would not that these matters should come to the Althing, whereas the slaughter of Thorstein Gislison was yet unatoned for; and it seemed to him that he would have full enough to answer to at the Althing, though this were not brought against him. About all these things, the slaying of Thorstein Gislison, and Gunnar his son, and also about the battle at the Thorsness Thing, thus sings Thorrood Trefilson in the Raven-song:

"Again now the great-heart,
The Rhine-fires waster,
Slew two men in spear-storm
South over the water.
Thereafter lay seven
Life-bereft on the Ness
Of the bane of the troll-wives.
Thereof are there tokens."

Chapter 57 - Of Uspak Of Ere In Bitter And Of His Injustice.

Whenas Snorri the Priest had dwelt a few winters at Saelings-dale-Tongue, there dwelt a man at Ere in Bitter called Uspak. He was a married man, and had a son called Glum, who was young in those days. Uspak was the son of Kiallak of Kiallak's-river of Skridinsenni. Uspak was the biggest and strongest of men; he was unloved and the most unjust of men, and had with him seven or eight carles who were much in the way of picking quarrels with men in those northern parts; they had ever a ship off the land, and took from every man his goods and his drifts as it seemed them good.

A man called Alf the Little dwelt at Thambardale in Bitter. He had wealth enow, and was the greatest of men in his housekeeping; he was a Thingman of Snorri the Priest, and had the ward of his drifts round Gudlaugs-head. Alf, too, deemed himself to feel cold from Uspak and his men, and made plaint thereof to Snorri the Priest whensoever they met.

Thorir, son of Gullhard, dwelt at Tongue in Bitter in those days. He was a friend of Sturla Thiodrekson, who was called Slaying-Sturla, who dwelt at Stead-knoll in Saurby. Thorir was a rich bonder, and a foremost man among those of Bitter, and had withal the wardship of Sturla's drifts there in the north. Full oft was grey silver in the fire betwixt Thorir and Uspak, and now one now the other came off best.

Uspak was the foremost man there about Crosswater-dale and Enni.

One winter the hard weather came on early, and straightway was there earth-ban about Bitter, whereof men had great loss of live-stock; but some drave their beasts south over the heath.

The summer before had Uspak let build a work at his stead of Ere, a wondrous good fighting-stead, if men were therein for defence.

In the winter at Goi came on a great snowstorm and held on for a week; a great northern gale it was. But when the storm abated, men saw that the ice from the main was come thither all over the outer firth, but no ice was as then come into Bitter, so men went to scan their foreshores.

Now it is to be told, that out betwixt Stika and Gudlaugs-head was a great whale driven ashore; in that whale Snorri the Priest and Sturla Thiodrekson had the greatest share; but Alf the Little and more bonders yet had certain shares in it also. So men from all Bitter go thither and cut up the whale under the ordering of Thorir and Alf.

But as men were at the cutting they saw a craft come rowing from the other side of the firth from Ere, and knew it for a great twelve-oarer that Uspak owned.

Now these landed by the whale and went up there, fifteen men all- armed in company; and when Uspak came aland he went to the whale and asked who had the rule thereover. Thorir said that he was over the share that Sturla had, but Alf over his share and that of Snorri the Priest; and that of the other bonders each saw to his own share. Uspak asked what they would hand over to him of the whale. Thorir answers: "Nought will I give thee of the portion that I deal with; but I wot not but that the bonders will sell thee of that which they own. What wilt thou pay therefor?"

"Thou knowest, Thorir," said Uspak, "that I am not wont to buy whale of you men of Bitter."

"Well," said Thorir, "I am minded to think that thou gettest none without price."

Now such of the whale as was cut lay in a heap, and was not yet apportioned out; so Uspak bid his men go thereto and bear it down to his keel; and those who were at the whale had but few weapons except the axes wherewith they were cutting it up. But when Thorir saw that Uspak and his folk went at the whale, he called out to the men not to let themselves be robbed. Then they ran to the other side of the heap, and those about the uncut whale ran therefrom, and Thorir was the swiftest of them.

Uspak turned to meet him and fetched a blow at him with his axe- hammer, and smote him on the ear so that he fell swooning; but those who were nighest caught hold of him and dragged him to them, and stood over him while he lay in the swoon, but then was the whale not guarded.

Then came up Alf the Little and bade them not take the whale. Uspak answered: "Come not nigh, Alf; thin is thy skull and heavy my axe, and far worse than Thorir shalt thou fare, if thou makest one step further forward."

This wholesome counsel thus taught him Alf followed. Uspak and his folk bore the whale down to their keel, and had got it done or ever Thorir woke up. But when he knew what had betid, he blamed his men that they had done slothfully in standing by him while some were robbed and some beaten; and therewith he sprang up. But Uspak had by then got his keel afloat, and they thrust off from the land. Then they rowed west over the firth to Ere, and Uspak let none go from him who had been in this journey; but there they had their abode and got matters ready in the work.

Thorir and his folk shared the whale, and let the loss of that which was taken fall equally on all, even according to the share which each man owned in the whale, and thereafter all went home.

And now full great enmity there was betwixt Thorir and Uspak, but whereas Uspak had a many men, the booty was soon on the wane.

Chapter 58 - Uspak Robs Alf The Little. Thorir Chases Uspak.

Now on a night Uspak and his men went into Thambardale fifteen in company, and set on the house of Alf the Little, and drove him and all his men into the hall while they robbed there, and bore thence four horseloads of goods.

From Firth-horn men had gotten ware of their goings, and therefore was a man sent to Tongue to tell Thorir. Thorir gathered men, and he was eighteen strong, and they went down to the firth-bottom. Then Thorir saw where Uspak and his men had passed him, and went east on the other side of Firth-horn; and when Uspak saw the chase, he said:

“Men are coming after us, and there will Thorir be going,” says he; “and now will he be minded to pay me back for my blow wherewith I smote him last winter. They are eighteen, but we fifteen, yet better arrayed. Now it will not be easy to see which of us will be fainest of blows; but those horses which we have taken from Thambardale will be fain of home, yet never will I let that be taken from me which we have laid hands on; so two of us who are the worst armed shall drive the laden horses before us out to Ere, and let those men who are at home come to meet us; but we thirteen will withstand these men even as we may.”

So they did as Uspak bade. But when Thorir came up, Uspak greeted him, and asked for tidings, and was soft-spoken, that so he might delay Thorir and his folk. Thorir asked whence they had those goods. Uspak says: “From Thambardale.”

“How camest thou thereby?” says Thorir.

Says Uspak: “They were neither given, nor paid, nor sold at a price.”

“Will ye let them go, and give them into our hands?” said Thorir.

Uspak said he could not bring himself to that, and therewith they ran each at each, and a fight befell; and Thorir and his men were of the eagerest, but Uspak and his folk defended themselves well and manly, yet some were wounded, and some slain.

Thorir had a bear-bill in his hand, and therewith he ran at Uspak and smote at him, but Uspak put the thrust from him, and whereas Thorir had thrown all his might into the blow, and there was nought before the bill, he fell on his knees and louted forward. Then Uspak smote Thorir on the back with his axe, and loud rang the stroke; and Uspak said: "That shall stay thy long journeys, Thorir," says he.

"Maybe," says Thorir; "yet methinks a full day's journey may I go for all thee and that stroke of thine."

For Thorir had a chain-knife round his neck, as the fashion then was, and had cast it aback behind him, and the blow had come thereon, and he had but been scratched in the muscles on either side of his spine, and little enough withal.

Then ran up a fellow of Thorir's and smote at Uspak, but he thrust forth his axe, and the blow took the shaft thereof and struck it asunder, and down fell the axe. Then cried out Uspak, and bade his men flee away, and himself fell to running; but as soon as Thorir arose, he cast his bill at Uspak and smote him on the thigh, and cut through it on the outer side of the bone. Uspak drew the bill from the wound and cast it back, and it smote the man in the midst who had erst cut at Uspak, and down he fell dead to the earth.

Thereafter away ran Uspak and his following, and Thorir and his company chased them out along the foreshores well-nigh to Ere. Then came folk from the homestead, both men and women, and Thorir and his folk turned back.

And no more onslaughts were made on either side thenceforth through the winter.

At that meeting fell three of Uspak's men and one of Thorir's, but many were wounded on either side.

Chapter 59 - Uspak And His Men At The Strands. They Give Up Their Work.

Snorri the Priest took up all the cases of Alf the Little at the hands of Uspak and his men, and made all those guilty at the Thorsness Thing; and after the Thing he went home to Tongue, and sat at home until the time came for the court of forfeiture to sit; and then he went north to Bitter with a great company. But when he came there, then was Uspak gone with all his; and they had gone north to the Strands fifteen in company, and had five keels. They were at the Strands through the summer, and did there many unpeaceful deeds.

They set them down north in Wrackfirth, and gathered men to them, and thither came he who is called Raven and was bynamed the Viking. He was nought but an ill-doer, and had lain out north about the Strands. There they wrought great warfare with robbing and slaying of men, and held all together till towards winter-nights.

Then gathered together the Strand-men, Olaf Eyvindson, of Drangar, and other bonders with him, and fell on them. They had there a work once more about their stead in Wrackfirth, and were well-nigh thirty in company. Olaf and his folk sat down before the work, and hard to deal with they deemed it to be. So both sides talked together, and the evil-doers offered to get them gone from the Strands, and do no

more unpeaceful deeds there henceforth, while the others should depart from before the work; and whereas they deemed it nowise an easy play to have to do with them, they took that choice, and both sides bound themselves by oath to this settlement, and the bonders fared home withal.

Chapter 60 - Uspak Goes Back To Ere In Bitter: He Robs And Slays.

Now is it to be told of Snorri the Priest that he went to the court of forfeiture north in Bitter, as is written afore, but when he came to Ere, then was Uspak gone. So Snorri held the court of forfeiture there according to law, and laid hands on all the forfeit goods, and divided them betwixt those men as had had the most ill deeds done them, Alf the Little to wit, and the other men who had had harm from robberies. Thereafter Snorri the Priest rode home to Tongue, and so wore the summer.

Now Uspak and his men went from the Strands about the beginning of winter-nights, and had two big boats. They went in past the Strands, and then south across the bay to Waterness. There they went up and robbed, and loaded both the boats up to the gunwale, and then stretched north away over the bay into Bitter and landed at Ere, and bore their spoil up into the work. There had Uspak's wife and his son Glum abode the summer through, with but two cows. Now on the very same night that they came home, they rowed both the boats down to the firth-bottom, and went up to the farm at Tongue, and broke into the house there, and took goodman Thorir from his bed, and led him out and slew him. Then they robbed all the goods that were stored there within doors, and brought them to the boats, and then rowed to Thambardale, and ran up and brake open the doors there, as at Tongue.

Alf the Little had lain down in his clothes, and when he heard the door broken open, he ran out to the secret door that was at the back of the house, and went out there through and ran up the dale. But Uspak and his folk robbed all they might lay hands upon, and brought it to their boats, and then went home to Ere with both boats laden, and brought both the liftings into the work. They brought the boats into the work withal, and filled them both with water, and then closed the work, and the best of fighting-steads it was. So thereafter they sat there the winter long.

The Pendragon Inheritance

Prologue

Merlin watched bleakly as artillery boomed and smoke billowed from the valley below. King Uther's cannon continued to bombard the Duke of Cornwall's position. Gorlois, the Duke, was entrenched on the far side of a run-down council estate that straggled along the main road.

The big guns boomed, and far off, amid the jerry-built buildings, another shell exploded, sending up another plume of dust. Retaliatory gunfire cracked out from the houses, causing a line of infantry advancing cautiously across the muddy field to fling themselves to the ground and return fire. Again the big guns boomed. Merlin turned to look sardonically at his king.

Clad in his best battledress uniform, Uther Pendragon was watching the carnage through a pair of field-glasses. His red dragon standard fluttered from the bonnet of his staff car nearby. Around him, his officers were talking quietly amongst themselves.

There was the bluff Scot, Urien, Earl of Moray, who was brigadier over several regiments; his carrot-haired fellow-countryman Lot, Marquis of Lothian, Chief of the Defence Staff, stood sneering at his side. Standing a little away from them, his eyes on the king, was young Leodegrance of Cameliard, whose forces were small but whose courage and loyalty undoubted. Merlin knew that they had been Uther's right-hand men since the struggle against the dictator Vortigern. Before Uther had succeeded his brother as king, before he had succumbed to the arrogance, the blind passion, the mad folly that had led him to this – war with his own people.

King Uther lowered the field glasses and stroked his thick black beard with a gauntleted hand. He gave a self-satisfied smirk.

'We'll hammer him,' he shouted above the roar of the guns. 'We'll draw him out and crush the rebel!'

'Uther,' said Merlin, in his soft South Welsh lilt. 'This lunacy has gone on long enough. Admit you were in the wrong; make peace. Igraine doesn't even want you.'

'But I want her,' Uther replied passionately. 'I am the King. I rule by divine right. My subjects must obey me – or suffer the consequences. Who gave the order to cease the bombardment?' he demanded suddenly, as quiet settled on the battlefield.

'Nentres of Garlot is in command of the artillery,' Lot told the king. 'Do you want the bombardment to continue?'

'Yes,' said Uther. Then his eyes widened as he saw the reason for the halt. A contingent of rebel tanks issued from the cover of the council estate. 'No! He's trying to break his way out. Advance the anti-tank guns! Move the infantry up for a close assault!'

Orders were given, and soon the Duke's tanks were met with a hail of anti-tank gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades. Uther seemed satisfied. He watched intently as the royalist infantry charged forwards; the two sides soon met amidst the mud and confusion in the lea of the ruinous council estate.

Merlin regarded the king impatiently as the staccato noise of gunfire broke out afresh. Was there no reasoning with the man? This war might spread; the men who had supported Uther's rise would not accept his tyranny, even if the heathen militants had been pacified. It was ever the way; the British always turned to conflict amongst themselves when external threats were absent.

The King wanted the Duke's young wife, Igraine. She was a beauty, Merlin had

seen that himself when she came to the king's coronation; and he had little time for women. But she was the cause of all this war; she, or Uther's lust for her. Reports suggested that Gorlois had entrusted his family to the protection of an armed compound several miles behind the lines. A thrust in that direction would be countered immediately by the Duke's forces. Any mass troop movements would be identified for what they were, and the Duke's army was big enough to fight Uther's current forces on equal terms.

Could the woman be abducted in a commando raid? Would Merlin be able then to broker some kind of peace deal? At the moment he had no hope of bringing about peace between the proud stubborn men who confronted each other across the battlefield. The work of many years might be wrecked in a single day. Before anyone knew it, the heathens would be rising in the east, bringing over more of their supporters from Germany and Scandinavia; it would be as if they were back in the darkest days of the ineffectual, corrupt Vortigern regime.

An idea occurred to Merlin. He smiled craftily, and went to the king's side.

Uther regarded the old man as he outlined his plan. Merlin had been his brother Ambrosius' counsellor before, and Vortigern's before that, if unwillingly. They had known each other for a long time, but their acquaintance had not always been a happy one. Uther often suspected Merlin of manipulating events to achieve obscure ends of his own: he was determined to be no man's puppet. But was Merlin really a man?

'You say you'll smuggle me behind the lines?' he broke in. Merlin looked levelly at him from beneath his bushy eyebrows. 'You can get me into Igraine's presence – into her bed? Even if I believed you, what do you get out of this? You've opposed me so far.'

'That is because you are tearing the country apart,' Merlin snapped. 'The country your brother won back from Vortigern and his mutinous allies. If you get what you want, you'll have no reason to continue this suicidal war.' The old man smiled thinly. 'But there is a price to pay, Uther.'

Uther grimaced and laughed cynically.

'A Faustian pact?' he said. 'Do you know what they say about you in the press, Merlin? That you're the Devil's own son; that you were born to be the Antichrist. Am I to believe that superstitious nonsense now? What do you want?'

'If you sleep with Igraine tonight,' Merlin said, looking off into the distance, where gunfire and explosions lit up the darkening sky, 'you will father a son upon her. That son will grow up to be greater than his father. I want you to give me the child, as soon as he is born.'

Uther gazed at him incredulously. 'How can you be so certain?' he demanded. 'Is this more of the nonsense you bewildered Vortigern with, you Welsh wizard? He was a superstitious fool. I won't fall for it. Anyway, what are the chances of me fathering a son on Igraine tonight? It'll be a long fight before I can break through Gorlois' lines.'

'I could make it quicker,' Merlin said. 'But you must agree to my terms.'

Uther regarded him for a moment, then shrugged. 'I swear, on my honour as king, that if you can get me to Igraine before tonight's over,' he said, 'you can have anything you ask for. But you won't. It's impossible.'

Merlin smiled coldly.

As the battle raged on in the valley below, the king's companions retreated to the canteen tent to eat their supper. Uther ate in his own tent alone except for his personal bodyguard Ulfin. Merlin appeared again, at the tent flap.

'All is ready,' he told the king, standing between the two sentries on duty outside. Uther looked quizzically at the old man.

'What is this?' he asked. 'Don't tell me you've worked out some way to smuggle me across the lines.'

Ulfin looked from Uther to Merlin and back. 'Don't trust him, your majesty,' he said urgently. 'There's no way you could cross the lines, even at night. This is some trick.'

'It is the Duke who will be tricked,' Merlin said. 'I tell you, Uther, I can ensure you cross the lines, reach the house in Tintagel where Gorlois' wife is staying, get you past the guards, and into her bed. But you must trust me.'

Ulfin put his hand on the king's arm. 'And I say don't trust him,' the bodyguard said in a low voice. 'You've heard all the stories about Merlin. Vortigern trusted him. See what happened to him.'

Uther threw off Ulfin's hand. 'Merlin has always worked for the benefit of the Pendragon dynasty,' he said slowly. 'I trust him not to betray me. But how can I believe,' he added, addressing Merlin, 'that you can do what you say? How will you accomplish this?'

'Follow me,' said Merlin. Abruptly, he turned on his heel and vanished from the tent. Uther looked after him in annoyance. He turned to Ulfin. Wordlessly, the bodyguard shook his head. Uther scowled, rose from his camp stool, and strode past the guards and after Merlin.

After a moment's hesitation, Ulfin followed them both.

He caught up with his king and Merlin at the edge of the camp. Occasional flares lit up the night, and the wind's moan was broken by a distant chatter of small arms fire and the dull crump of explosives. A helicopter stood on the churned up grass beyond the last line of tents.

'This will get past the lines?' Uther said. 'They'll pick it up on their radar, and shoot it down.'

Merlin smiled humourlessly. 'It is fitted with a device that makes it invisible to radar,' he said. 'The device transmits a high frequency beam that jams the enemy's transmitters. We can slip over the lines undetected.'

He opened the helicopter door. Uther halted and looked at Merlin. 'An ingenious invention,' he remarked. 'It'll help with the war effort. Care to share it with your king?'

Merlin smiled again. 'No,' he replied. He leapt up into the cockpit, and beckoned Uther to follow him.

Ulfin didn't believe a word of it. How could Merlin have such a device when no one else did? Had he invented it? If so, why not put the device on the market, make himself a millionaire? Uther followed the old man. Ulfin hurried up to join him. Uther caught sight of his bodyguard.

'I didn't tell you to come,' he snapped. Ulfin halted with one hand on the helicopter's side, anxious. He couldn't let the king fly off into danger without him.

'Leave him be,' said Merlin from inside. 'He could come in handy.'

Ulfin followed Uther into the small, cramped cockpit. He sat quietly at the back as Merlin prepared for takeoff, studying the old man suspiciously. Merlin's

unexpected kindness made him warm to the old man slightly, but he still could not believe that they would cross the lines in safety. Perhaps he should have told Lot or one of the other Lords.

Moments later, it was too late. They were airborne, and the noise of the rotor blades stifled all attempt to talk. Ulfin gazed grimly down at the battlefield far below them, where explosions blossomed soundlessly like roses of fire and tracer fire seared the blackness. So far so good. But surely the Duke's forces would spot them soon. Was this how he would die, at his king's side? All those years he had served Uther, since the days of foreign exile, and all through the years of war against first Vortigern and then his mutinous heathen allies. Was it all to end like this?

They flew on into the battle-lit darkness.

Ulfin woke from a kind of daze as he felt the helicopter descending. Peering out into the blackness he could see lights, searchlights and landing lights; a helipad like a single constellation in the empty dark. Merlin shouted over his shoulder,

'We're almost there. I'll have to turn off our camouflage. In the meantime, Uther, take this. There's a phial for you too, Ulfin.'

Merlin handed both of them small glass phials, containing an unidentifiable colourless liquid.

'What is this?' the king shouted, voicing Ulfin's own thoughts.

Merlin chuckled. 'This is my masterstroke. The drug will transform our appearances in the eyes of others. You will resemble the Duke, I shall look like Brastias, and Ulfin will take on the appearance of Jordan of Tintagel. We will say that the Duke has returned from the front to spend the night with his wife.'

Ulfin couldn't understand Merlin. He saw the king drink the phial and wanted to leap forward, to knock the drug from his hands, but too late. 'Don't take it, your majesty,' he said in anguish. Then Uther turned to look at him, and Ulfin saw to his confusion that this was another man. An older man, with pale, watery eyes rather than the piercing ice-blue eyes of the king. Ulfin recognised him as Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall.

He looked in bewilderment at Merlin to see that another man sat at the controls, a black-bearded man he did not recognise.

'Take the drug,' said the man who resembled Gorlois. 'We're almost down.'

A voice crackled from the radio, and the man in Merlin's place leaned forward to answer it. 'Brastias here,' he said. 'His grace is returning for the night.'

With an overpowering sense of unreality, Ulfin took the drug. Shortly after, they were touching down on the helipad. The man who had been Merlin opened the door and ushered Ulfin out. He held it open as ... Uther? leapt out.

He looked exactly how Ulfin remembered Duke Gorlois from the war council before the Battle of Mount Damen, when he helped the British stem the tide of their heathen enemies. Even his clothes had altered, and now he wore the uniform of a colonel. Ulfin looked down at himself and saw that he, too, had changed, not just in appearance but in dress as well; he now wore military uniform rather than the civilian clothes he usually wore. He patted the moustache that grew on his upper lip in wonder. How could Merlin's drugs have changed them?

Men in the livery of His Grace the Duke of Cornwall were approaching across the tarmac. Uther stood his ground as Merlin came to join him.

'Your grace,' said one man. 'We were not expecting you. How goes the war with the tyrant?'

Uther marched forward, brushing the man aside. 'Well enough,' he snapped. 'I have little time. Take me to Igraine.'

‘Your wife went to bed shortly after the children did. They wanted to know when you would come back. I...’

‘Take me to her bedroom,’ Uther demanded. The men exchanged glances, bewildered. ‘Jordan, Brastias,’ Uther added, ‘follow me.’

Everyone looked at Ulfin, who remembered that that was now his name. He followed the disguised Merlin as they went with the king and the Duke’s staff towards the large house that stood a short way from the helipad. Shortly after, he and Merlin were standing at either side of a bedroom door as the king hammered on it.

‘You can go now,’ said Ulfin dismissively to the hovering staff. ‘His maj... his grace will not be needing your services.’ As the anxious-looking staff began to drift away, the bedroom door opened. Ulfin heard a querulous female voice. Uther stepped through the door and it closed with a bang behind him. Ulfin glanced over at Merlin.

‘It’s still a long time before dawn,’ the old man murmured.

Spent at last, Uther lay back on the bed. Igraine nuzzled against him, and satisfied grin on her face. Uther stared morbidly at the liver spots that dusted his hands, at the scrawny skin of his legs. This was all Merlin’s illusion, but one day he would be like this for real. No wonder Igraine had blossomed under his attentions, if her husband looked like this beneath his immaculately tailored clothes.

He had achieved his goal at last; he had slept with the woman he had desired ever since he first met her, during the celebrations after what the media had called the Battle of Mount Damen. She was by no means the first; he’d not suffered from the Christian scruples of his brother Ambrosius. He had known many women, but few had stirred him on first glimpse like Gorlois’ wife. She had had a brief modelling career before the Duke of Cornwall snapped her up and saddled her with two children; a boy, Cador, and a girl, Morgaine. If what Merlin had said, she would be bearing another child. Gazing at her, he saw that motherhood had affected her beauty very little.

But Merlin was a madman. True, he had some tricks up his sleeve, to smuggle Uther behind his enemy’s lines to sleep with his wife, but who could put trust in his prophecies? He had beguiled the dictator Vortigern with his wild words, but Vortigern had been a superstitious maniac. Uther believed only in what he could see and touch. He reached out to caress Igraine.

She stirred, and turned her face towards him, grinning. She stretched her long limbs, white arms, and ran her fingers through the mat of hair on Uther’s chest. Her eyes met his, and something glimmered in the depths of them.

‘War suits you, Gorlois,’ she said. ‘Civil war brings something out in you that crushing a few heathen militants never did. I never thought you had it in you.’

Uther growled, and pretended to slap her. She laughed, and buried her face in his chest.

‘I’ve fathered children on you, haven’t I?’ he demanded. ‘I could do it again.’

Igraine kissed him. ‘They were worried about their daddy,’ she told him.

‘They thought you would never come home from the wars. I told them that you fought the heathens and became a great hero.’ She scowled. ‘They said that now you were fighting the king, things might be different. That was Morgaine. She’s bright as a button, that one.’

‘Things might be different,’ said Uther. ‘What do you think of the king? He showed you favour. Be honest. We have no secrets.’

‘No secrets?’ Igraine hooted. ‘Except a mistress or two, I’ll be bound. Is that why you’ve never shown so much passion before; some common little tart? You were jealous when the king was speaking to me. I thought he was a charming... young... man.’ She clawed him with her nails like a kitten as she spoke the last three words.

‘Charming?’ Uther asked. ‘Only charming?’

‘He wasn’t quite how he looked in the magazines,’ Igraine admitted, and Uther felt a cold twist of insecurity. ‘But he was quite the heartthrob. Still, wasn’t my husband the mastermind behind the victory over the heathen?’

‘Maybe,’ said Uther impatiently, ‘but you say you thought the king was a heartthrob? Could you fall in love with him?’

Igraine, puzzled by his intensity, pulled back and gazed into his eyes. ‘What are you talking about?’ she asked. ‘Are you worried he’ll drag me away from you?’

Uther said, ‘He has a bigger army.’

Igraine smiled archly. ‘Size isn’t everything.’ Uther was about to respond when someone banged on the door. The first light of morning crept in through the shutters. He heard a voice:

‘Your grace? Your grace, you are needed at the front. Your grace!’ After a moment he recognised it as that of Brastias – Merlin in disguise.

He looked regretfully at Igraine.

‘It seems I must go,’ he said. ‘But... the war can wait a moment longer.’ He bent to kiss her but she pushed him away.

‘Go!’ she urged. ‘You must fight this lecherous tyrant. Save me from him.’ Seeing his face fall, she added: ‘Too bad you couldn’t wait until the children were up. They’ll be sorry they missed their father. But hurry up! Get dressed. You’ve got to get back to your army. For me!’

Sighing, Uther rose, and started pulling on his clothes. Igraine dragged the duvet up, and watched with her head on the pillow.

‘Go!’ she whispered once he had dressed. ‘My hero!’

Uther went to the door. He flung it open to find Brastias and Jordan – Merlin and Ulfin, he reminded himself – waiting in the corridor for him. Brastias-Merlin gave him a significant glance.

‘You can’t stay here all day,’ he said. ‘You have a war to win.’

They hurried down the wide sweeping steps of the house and through the hall. The place was silent, deserted at this hour. But as Uther and his companions approached the doors to the garden, he heard a voice from behind him.

‘Leaving, Your grace?’

He turned to see one of the men who had greeted him on his arrival last night. Seeing the man’s bulky build, and noticing the discreet bulge of a shoulder-holster beneath his left arm, Uther realised this man must belong to the Duke’s security forces. He hoped Merlin’s drugs were still working. A fight with this man would slow them down, and attract attention.

‘I must be back at the front at once,’ Uther snapped. ‘Don’t delay me.’

The security man stared strangely at Uther, peering into his face with an expression that suggested he was trying to remember something, perhaps a dream.

‘Well?’ Merlin barked. ‘What is it, man? What are you staring at? You heard his grace. He’s in a hurry.’

The security man shook his head, and apologised.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but somehow his grace... doesn’t seem quite himself this morning.’ He moved away as a telephone began to ring inside the house.

‘Quickly,’ Merlin muttered. ‘The drugs are beginning to wear off. We should

have been gone hours ago.'

Soon they were back in the helicopter, flying low over the dew-glittering morning fields. Peering ahead, Uther saw no sign of battle.

'What's happened?' Brastias asked. He was now in his own form, as they all were. The effect of the drugs had worn off. 'Has our army retreated?'

'They're still there,' said Merlin. 'Look!'

As they began to rise, they saw the battlefield open up before them. It lay silent, empty but for the occasional wreck of a tank. A white flag hung over Gorlois' command post on the edge of the council estate. As the helicopter flew over, Uther saw jeeps approaching from the direction of the royalist lines, with red dragon pennants fluttering from them.

'The Duke's surrendered?' Uther demanded. 'Like that? My intelligence reports suggested he was expecting support from Ireland. What's brought this about?'

'We should investigate,' said Merlin thoughtfully. The helicopter began to descend.

Uther stepped out of the helicopter shortly after landing to see the jeeps parked on the road. Leaping down from the first jeep was Lot. He strode forwards.

'What's happened here?' he barked. He could see men in the uniform of the Duke's forces waiting at the entrance of the command post. Still the white flag fluttered in the morning breeze. Uther saw signs that the post had sustained a direct hit.

'Your majesty!' said Lot gruffly. 'Where did you get to last night? You were missing from your tent when the rebels radioed us the news. We couldn't wait for you to return so we came to negotiate in your absence.'

'A nocturnal excursion,' Uther said breezily. 'But what news? Have the rebels surrendered?'

An oddly familiar figure stepped forward from among the rebels; a moustachioed man in military uniform. Uther glanced at Brastias, who returned his grimace. He realised that this must be Jordan of Tintagel.

'His grace was fatally wounded in the night, after a direct hit,' the man said sombrely. 'He was rushed to the nearest hospital but remained in a critical condition until the early hours, when he... passed away.'

Uther grinned like a wolf. The Duke had died at the very moment that he, King Uther Pendragon, was cuckolding the man in his own bed! How ironic. How satisfying!

'You did well to surrender,' he barked. 'I'll accept reasonable terms. Convey my respects to the widow, and tell her that her king would speak with her. There is much we would discuss.'

Merlin touched his arm, and Uther looked at him questioningly.

'In nine months time she will give birth to a boy' Merlin told him. 'By then she will have accepted you as her husband. You must give the baby to me. I will see to his upbringing.'

'Of course,' Uther replied after a moment's consideration. 'You'll have much in common. Another boy without a father. Take him away from me. I don't need to be reminded of last night.'

Merlin turned, and walked away.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Herbert West - Reanimator

IV. The Scream of the Dead

The scream of a dead man gave to me that acute and added horror of Dr. Herbert West which harassed the latter years of our companionship. It is natural that such a thing as a dead man's scream should give horror, for it is obviously not a pleasing or ordinary occurrence; but I was used to similar experiences, hence suffered on this occasion only because of a particular circumstance. And, as I have implied, it was not of the dead man himself that I became afraid.

Herbert West, whose associate and assistant I was, possessed scientific interests far beyond the usual routine of a village physician. That was why, when establishing his practice in Bolton, he had chosen an isolated house near the potter's field. Briefly and brutally stated, West's sole absorbing interest was a secret study of the phenomena of life and its cessation, leading toward the reanimation of the dead through injections of an excitant solution. For this ghastly experimenting it was necessary to have a constant supply of very fresh human bodies; very fresh because even the least decay hopelessly damaged the brain structure, and human because we found that the solution had to be compounded differently for different types of organisms. Scores of rabbits and guinea-pigs had been killed and treated, but their trail was a blind one. West had never fully succeeded because he had never been able to secure a corpse sufficiently fresh. What he wanted were bodies from which vitality had only just departed; bodies with every cell intact and capable of receiving again the impulse toward that mode of motion called life. There was hope that this second and artificial life might be made perpetual by repetitions of the injection, but we had learned that an ordinary natural life would not respond to the action. To establish the artificial motion, natural life must be extinct—the specimens must be very fresh, but genuinely dead.

The awesome quest had begun when West and I were students at the Miskatonic University Medical School in Arkham, vividly conscious for the first time of the thoroughly mechanical nature of life. That was seven years before, but West looked scarcely a day older now—he was small, blond, clean-shaven, soft-voiced, and spectacled, with only an occasional flash of a cold blue eye to tell of the hardening and growing fanaticism of his character under the pressure of his terrible investigations. Our experiences had often been hideous in the extreme; the results of defective reanimation, when lumps of graveyard clay had been galvanised into morbid, unnatural, and brainless motion by various modifications of the vital solution.

One thing had uttered a nerve-shattering scream; another had risen violently, beaten us both to unconsciousness, and run amuck in a shocking way before it could be placed behind asylum bars; still another, a loathsome African monstrosity, had clawed out of its shallow grave and done a deed—West had had to shoot that object. We could not get bodies fresh enough to shew any trace of reason when reanimated, so had perforce created nameless horrors. It was disturbing to think that one, perhaps two, of our monsters still lived—that thought haunted us shadowingly, till finally West disappeared under frightful circumstances. But at the time of the scream in the cellar laboratory of the isolated Bolton cottage, our fears were subordinate to our anxiety for extremely fresh specimens. West was more avid than I, so that it almost seemed to me that he looked half-covetously at any very healthy living physique.

It was in July, 1910, that the bad luck regarding specimens began to turn. I had been on a long visit to my parents in Illinois, and upon my return found West in a

state of singular elation. He had, he told me excitedly, in all likelihood solved the problem of freshness through an approach from an entirely new angle—that of artificial preservation. I had known that he was working on a new and highly unusual embalming compound, and was not surprised that it had turned out well; but until he explained the details I was rather puzzled as to how such a compound could help in our work, since the objectionable staleness of the specimens was largely due to delay occurring before we secured them. This, I now saw, West had clearly recognised; creating his embalming compound for future rather than immediate use, and trusting to fate to supply again some very recent and unburied corpse, as it had years before when we obtained the negro killed in the Bolton prize-fight. At last fate had been kind, so that on this occasion there lay in the secret cellar laboratory a corpse whose decay could not by any possibility have begun. What would happen on reanimation, and whether we could hope for a revival of mind and reason, West did not venture to predict. The experiment would be a landmark in our studies, and he had saved the new body for my return, so that both might share the spectacle in accustomed fashion.

West told me how he had obtained the specimen. It had been a vigorous man; a well-dressed stranger just off the train on his way to transact some business with the Bolton Worsted Mills. The walk through the town had been long, and by the time the traveller paused at our cottage to ask the way to the factories his heart had become greatly overtaxed. He had refused a stimulant, and had suddenly dropped dead only a moment later. The body, as might be expected, seemed to West a heaven-sent gift. In his brief conversation the stranger had made it clear that he was unknown in Bolton, and a search of his pockets subsequently revealed him to be one Robert Leavitt of St. Louis, apparently without a family to make instant inquiries about his disappearance. If this man could not be restored to life, no one would know of our experiment. We buried our materials in a dense strip of woods between the house and the potter's field. If, on the other hand, he could be restored, our fame would be brilliantly and perpetually established. So without delay West had injected into the body's wrist the compound which would hold it fresh for use after my arrival. The matter of the presumably weak heart, which to my mind imperiled the success of our experiment, did not appear to trouble West extensively. He hoped at last to obtain what he had never obtained before—a rekindled spark of reason and perhaps a normal, living creature.

So on the night of July 18, 1910, Herbert West and I stood in the cellar laboratory and gazed at a white, silent figure beneath the dazzling arc-light. The embalming compound had worked uncannily well, for as I stared fascinatedly at the sturdy frame which had lain two weeks without stiffening I was moved to seek West's assurance that the thing was really dead. This assurance he gave readily enough; reminding me that the reanimating solution was never used without careful tests as to life; since it could have no effect if any of the original vitality were present. As West proceeded to take preliminary steps, I was impressed by the vast intricacy of the new experiment; an intricacy so vast that he could trust no hand less delicate than his own. Forbidding me to touch the body, he first injected a drug in the wrist just beside the place his needle had punctured when injecting the embalming compound. This, he said, was to neutralise the compound and release the system to a normal relaxation so that the reanimating solution might freely work when injected. Slightly later, when a change and a gentle tremor seemed to affect the dead limbs, West stuffed a pillow-like object violently over the twitching face, not withdrawing it until the corpse appeared quiet and ready for our attempt at reanimation. The pale enthusiast now applied some last perfunctory tests for absolute lifelessness, withdrew satisfied, and finally injected into

the left arm an accurately measured amount of the vital elixir, prepared during the afternoon with a greater care than we had used since college days, when our feats were new and groping. I cannot express the wild, breathless suspense with which we waited for results on this first really fresh specimen—the first we could reasonably expect to open its lips in rational speech, perhaps to tell of what it had seen beyond the unfathomable abyss.

West was a materialist, believing in no soul and attributing all the working of consciousness to bodily phenomena; consequently he looked for no revelation of hideous secrets from gulfs and caverns beyond death's barrier. I did not wholly disagree with him theoretically, yet held vague instinctive remnants of the primitive faith of my forefathers; so that I could not help eyeing the corpse with a certain amount of awe and terrible expectation. Besides—I could not extract from my memory that hideous, inhuman shriek we heard on the night we tried our first experiment in the deserted farmhouse at Arkham.

Very little time had elapsed before I saw the attempt was not to be a total failure. A touch of colour came to cheeks hitherto chalk-white, and spread out under the curiously ample stubble of sandy beard. West, who had his hand on the pulse of the left wrist, suddenly nodded significantly; and almost simultaneously a mist appeared on the mirror inclined above the body's mouth. There followed a few spasmodic muscular motions, and then an audible breathing and visible motion of the chest. I looked at the closed eyelids, and thought I detected a quivering. Then the lids opened, shewing eyes which were grey, calm, and alive, but still unintelligent and not even curious.

In a moment of fantastic whim I whispered questions to the reddening ears; questions of other worlds of which the memory might still be present. Subsequent terror drove them from my mind, but I think the last one, which I repeated, was: "Where have you been?" I do not yet know whether I was answered or not, for no sound came from the well-shaped mouth; but I do know that at that moment I firmly thought the thin lips moved silently, forming syllables I would have vocalised as "only now" if that phrase had possessed any sense or relevancy. At that moment, as I say, I was elated with the conviction that the one great goal had been attained; and that for the first time a reanimated corpse had uttered distinct words impelled by actual reason. In the next moment there was no doubt about the triumph; no doubt that the solution had truly accomplished, at least temporarily, its full mission of restoring rational and articulate life to the dead. But in that triumph there came to me the greatest of all horrors—not horror of the thing that spoke, but of the deed that I had witnessed and of the man with whom my professional fortunes were joined.

For that very fresh body, at last writhing into full and terrifying consciousness with eyes dilated at the memory of its last scene on earth, threw out its frantic hands in a life and death struggle with the air; and suddenly collapsing into a second and final dissolution from which there could be no return, screamed out the cry that will ring eternally in my aching brain:

"Help! Keep off, you cursed little tow-head fiend—keep that damned needle away from me!"