



Edited by Gavin Chappell

Schlock! Webzine

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Schlock! Webzine 2.1

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DEDICATION

To all our readers and contributors.

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EDITORIAL

As the long dark winter nights draw ever closer, once again we witness both ends and beginnings at *Schlock!* Coming to a close: the final, devastating chapter of *Babbage Must Die* and the penultimate chapter of James Rhodes' long-running serial *Super Duper*.

Fantasmagoriana continues with John Polidori's influential tale *The Vampyre*.

Also: new fiction from R Todd Woodstock, who wishes his readers "Many nightmares." His fiction has previously been published on www.horrormasters.com and his story *Stinky Bob* was anthologised four years ago.

And last but not least, we welcome to our pages **Obsidian Mercurio Tesla**, a time traveller from the nineteenth century, who begins his contributions to the 'zine with *The Secret of Glenwraith Hall*, "a dark tale of Estelle Rycroft, lady of the manor... the immortal custodian of Pandora's Box and its plague cargo of blood-consuming creatures..."

All that and more, plus another excellent cover featuring graphics by artist/writer Gavin Roach and graphic design by the multi-talented C. Priest Brumley. Where else would you find such a horrifically talented crew, but *Schlock! Webzine*?

Enjoy.

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If you dare....

Gavin Chappell.

FANTASMAGORIANA, OR, TALES OF
THE DEAD FROM THE VILLA DIODATI:
Part Three - *The Vampyre*
by John Polidori

In the previous story by Lord Byron, the explanation for Darvell's long life is never given since the story is incomplete: certainly, there is nothing to suggest that Darvell is a vampire. However, Byron's account inspired his physician John Polidori to write the following tale, in which for the first time in literature, we encounter an aristocratic vampire who preys upon the great and the good – particularly women. The similarity of Lord Ruthven to Byron's outrageous public persona is marked, and indeed the name had appeared previously, as that of a thinly-disguised Byronic figure in Glenarvon, a novel by Lady Caroline Lamb. Certainly, the relationship between Aubrey and Lord Ruthven parallels that between Polidori and Byron.

Like the other stories in this anthology, The Vampyre was a product of the gloomy summer of 1816. Shortly after he wrote it, Polidori was dismissed from Byron's service (was Byron offended by reading an early draft?) and he returned to England after a journey through Italy. The story itself was published without Polidori's permission in April 1819, in the New Monthly Magazine, whose editor attributed it to Byron himself. Both Polidori and Byron were to repudiate this, and Byron published his 'Fragment' in an attempt to make matters clear, but for a long time after, it continued to be attributed to him. Two years later, close to bankruptcy due to gambling debts, Polidori died. Although it was suspected at the time that he had committed suicide, the coroner's verdict was death by natural causes.

The story itself lived on, and was adapted, dramatised, turned into opera, and inspired a literary 'vampire craze' almost as virulent as the eighteenth century vampire controversy. Eventually, it inspired Stoker's portrayal of Dracula, and the rest you know...

Perhaps the strangest element of the tale is its prophetic description of Ruthven's death in Greece, a country in which Byron himself was to die, a few years after Polidori's own demise. Yet even the most baroque of Greek folklore does not suggest that their saviour Lord Byron rose again...

THE VAMPYRE by John Polidori

IT happened that in the midst of the dissipations attendant upon a London winter, there appeared at the various parties of the leaders of the town a nobleman, more remarkable for his singularities, than his rank. He gazed upon the mirth around him, as if he could not participate therein. Apparently, the light laughter of the fair only attracted his attention, that he might by a look quell it, and throw fear into those breasts where thoughtlessness reigned. Those who felt this sensation of awe, could not explain whence it arose: some attributed it to the dead grey eye, which, fixing upon the object's face, did not seem to penetrate, and at one glance to pierce through to the inward workings of the heart; but fell upon the cheek with a leaden ray that weighed upon the skin it could not pass. His peculiarities caused him to be invited to every house; all wished to see him, and those who had been accustomed to violent excitement, and now felt the weight of ennui, were pleased at having something in their presence capable of engaging their attention. In spite of the deadly hue of his face, which never gained a warmer tint, either from the blush of modesty, or from the strong emotion of passion, though its form and outline were beautiful, many of the female hunters after notoriety attempted to win his attentions, and gain, at least, some marks of what they might term affection: Lady Mercer, who had been the mockery of every monster shewn in drawing-rooms since her marriage, threw herself in his way, and did all but put on the dress of a mountebank, to attract his

notice:—though in vain:—when she stood before him, though his eyes were apparently fixed upon her's, still it seemed as if they were unperceived;—even her unappalled impudence was baffled, and she left, the field. But though the common adultress could not influence even the guidance of his eyes, it was not that the female sex was indifferent to him: yet such was the apparent caution with which he spoke to the virtuous wife and innocent daughter, that few knew he ever addressed himself to females. He had, however, the reputation of a winning tongue; and whether it was that it even overcame the dread of his singular character, or that they were moved by his apparent hatred of vice, he was as often among those females who form the boast of their sex from their domestic virtues, as among those who sully it by their vices.

About the same time, there came to London a young gentleman of the name of Aubrey: he was an orphan left with an only sister in the possession of great wealth, by parents who died while he was yet in childhood. Left also to himself by guardians, who thought it their duty merely to take care of his fortune, while they relinquished the more important charge of his mind to the care of mercenary subalterns, he cultivated more his imagination than his judgment. He had, hence, that high romantic feeling of honour and candour, which daily ruins so many milliners' apprentices. He believed all to sympathise with virtue, and thought that vice was thrown in by Providence merely for the picturesque effect of the scene, as we see in romances: he thought

that the misery of a cottage merely consisted in the vesting of clothes, which were as warm, but which were better adapted to the painter's eye by their irregular folds and various coloured patches. He thought, in fine, that the dreams of poets were the realities of life. He was handsome, frank, and rich: for these reasons, upon his entering into the gay circles, many mothers surrounded him, striving which should describe with least truth their languishing or romping favourites: the daughters at the same time, by their brightening countenances when he approached, and by their sparkling eyes, when he opened his lips, soon led him into false notions of his talents and his merit. Attached as he was to the romance of his solitary hours, he was startled at finding, that, except in the tallow and wax candles that flickered, not from the presence of a ghost, but from want of snuffing, there was no foundation in real life for any of that congeries of pleasing pictures and descriptions contained in those volumes, from which he had formed his study. Finding, however, some compensation in his gratified vanity, he was about to relinquish his dreams, when the extraordinary being we have above described, crossed him in his career.

He watched him; and the very impossibility of forming an idea of the character of a man entirely absorbed in himself, who gave few other signs of his observation of external objects, than the tacit assent to their existence, implied by the avoidance of their contact: allowing his imagination to picture every thing that flattered its propensity to extravagant ideas, he soon formed this object into the hero of a romance,

and determined to observe the offspring of his fancy, rather than the person before him. He became acquainted with him, paid him attentions, and so far advanced upon his notice, that his presence was always recognised. He gradually learnt that Lord Ruthven's affairs were embarrassed, and soon found, from the notes of preparation in —— Street, that he was about to travel. Desirous of gaining some information respecting this singular character, who, till now, had only whetted his curiosity, he hinted to his guardians, that it was time for him to perform the tour, which for many generations has been thought necessary to enable the young to take some rapid steps in the career of vice towards putting themselves upon an equality with the aged, and not allowing them to appear as if fallen from the skies, whenever scandalous intrigues are mentioned as the subjects of pleasantry or of praise, according to the degree of skill shewn in carrying them on. They consented: and Aubrey immediately mentioning his intentions to Lord Ruthven, was surprised to receive from him a proposal to join him. Flattered by such a mark of esteem from him, who, apparently, had nothing in common with other men, he gladly accepted it, and in a few days they had passed the circling waters.

Hitherto, Aubrey had had no opportunity of studying Lord Ruthven's character, and now he found, that, though many more of his actions were exposed to his view, the results offered different conclusions from the apparent motives to his conduct. His companion was profuse in his liberality;—the idle, the vagabond, and the beggar, received from his hand more than

enough to relieve their immediate wants. But Aubrey could not avoid remarking, that it was not upon the virtuous, reduced to indigence by the misfortunes attendant even upon virtue, that he bestowed his alms;—these were sent from the door with hardly suppressed sneers; but when the profligate came to ask something, not to relieve his wants, but to allow him to wallow in his lust, or to sink him still deeper in his iniquity, he was sent away with rich charity. This was, however, attributed by him to the greater importunity of the vicious, which generally prevails over the retiring bashfulness of the virtuous indigent. There was one circumstance about the charity of his Lordship, which was still more impressed upon his mind: all those upon whom it was bestowed, inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were all either led to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and the most abject misery. At Brussels and other towns through which they passed, Aubrey was surprized at the apparent eagerness with which his companion sought for the centres of all fashionable vice; there he entered into all the spirit of the faro table: he betted, and always gambled with success, except where the known sharper was his antagonist, and then he lost even more than he gained; but it was always with the same unchanging face, with which he generally watched the society around: it was not, however, so when he encountered the rash youthful novice, or the luckless father of a numerous family; then his very wish seemed fortune's law—this apparent abstractedness of mind was laid aside, and his eyes sparkled with more fire than that of the cat whilst dallying with the half-dead mouse. In every

town, he left the formerly affluent youth, torn from the circle he adorned, cursing, in the solitude of a dungeon, the fate that had drawn him within the reach of this fiend; whilst many a father sat frantic, amidst the speaking looks of mute hungry children, without a single farthing of his late immense wealth, wherewith to buy even sufficient to satisfy their present craving. Yet he took no money from the gambling table; but immediately lost, to the ruiner of many, the last gilder he had just snatched from the convulsive grasp of the innocent: this might but be the result of a certain degree of knowledge, which was not, however, capable of combating the cunning of the more experienced. Aubrey often wished to represent this to his friend, and beg him to resign that charity and pleasure which proved the ruin of all, and did not tend to his own profit;—but he delayed it—for each day he hoped his friend would give him some opportunity of speaking frankly and openly to him; however, this never occurred. Lord Ruthven in his carriage, and amidst the various wild and rich scenes of nature, was always the same: his eye spoke less than his lip; and though Aubrey was near the object of his curiosity, he obtained no greater gratification from it than the constant excitement of vainly wishing to break that mystery, which to his exalted imagination began to assume the appearance of something supernatural.

They soon arrived at Rome, and Aubrey for a time lost sight of his companion; he left him in daily attendance upon the morning circle of an Italian countess, whilst he went in search of the memorials of another almost deserted city. Whilst he was thus

engaged, letters arrived from England, which he opened with eager impatience; the first was from his sister, breathing nothing but affection; the others were from his guardians, the latter astonished him; if it had before entered into his imagination that there was an evil power resident in his companion, these seemed to give him sufficient reason for the belief. His guardians insisted upon his immediately leaving his friend, and urged, that his character was dreadfully vicious, for that the possession of irresistible powers of seduction, rendered his licentious habits more dangerous to society. It had been discovered, that his contempt for the adultress had not originated in hatred of her character; but that he had required, to enhance his gratification, that his victim, the partner of his guilt, should be hurled from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation: in fine, that all those females whom he had sought, apparently on account of their virtue, had, since his departure, thrown even the mask aside, and had not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public gaze.

Aubrey determined upon leaving one, whose character had not yet shown a single bright point on which to rest the eye. He resolved to invent some plausible pretext for abandoning him altogether, purposing, in the mean while, to watch him more closely, and to let no slight circumstances pass by unnoticed. He entered into the same circle, and soon perceived, that his Lordship was endeavouring to work upon the inexperience of the daughter of the lady whose house he chiefly frequented. In Italy, it is

seldom that an unmarried female is met with in society; he was therefore obliged to carry on his plans in secret; but Aubrey's eye followed him in all his windings, and soon discovered that an assignation had been appointed, which would most likely end in the ruin of an innocent, though thoughtless girl. Losing no time, he entered the apartment of Lord Ruthven, and abruptly asked him his intentions with respect to the lady, informing him at the same time that he was aware of his being about to meet her that very night. Lord Ruthven answered, that his intentions were such as he supposed all would have upon such an occasion; and upon being pressed whether he intended to marry her, merely laughed. Aubrey retired; and, immediately writing a note, to say, that from that moment he must decline accompanying his Lordship in the remainder of their proposed tour, he ordered his servant to seek other apartments, and calling upon the mother of the lady, informed her of all he knew, not only with regard to her daughter, but also concerning the character of his Lordship. The assignation was prevented. Lord Ruthven next day merely sent his servant to notify his complete assent to a separation; but did not hint any suspicion of his plans having been foiled by Aubrey's interposition.

Having left Rome, Aubrey directed his steps towards Greece, and crossing the Peninsula, soon found himself at Athens. He then fixed his residence in the house of a Greek; and soon occupied himself in tracing the faded records of ancient glory upon monuments that apparently, ashamed of chronicling the deeds of freemen only before slaves, had hidden

themselves beneath the sheltering soil or many coloured lichen. Under the same roof as himself, existed a being, so beautiful and delicate, that she might have formed the model for a painter, wishing; to pourtray on canvass the promised hope of the faithful in Mahomet's paradise, save that her eyes spoke too much mind for any one to think she could belong to those who had no souls. As she danced upon the plain, or tripped along the mountain's side, one would have thought the gazelle a poor type of her beauties; for who would have exchanged her eye, apparently the eye of animated nature, for that sleepy luxurious look of the animal suited but to the taste of an epicure. The light step of Ianthe often accompanied Aubrey in his search after antiquities, and often would the unconscious girl, engaged in the pursuit of a Kashmere butterfly, show the whole beauty of her form, floating as it were upon the wind, to the eager gaze of him, who forgot the letters he had just decyphered upon an almost effaced tablet, in the contemplation of her sylph-like figure. Often would her tresses falling, as she flitted around, exhibit in the sun's ray such delicately brilliant and swiftly fading hues, its might well excuse the forgetfulness of the antiquary, who let escape from his mind the very object he had before thought of vital importance to the proper interpretation of a passage in Pausanias. But why attempt to describe charms which all feel, but none can appreciate?—It was innocence, youth, and beauty, unaffected by crowded drawing-rooms and stifling balls. Whilst he drew those remains of which he wished to preserve a memorial for his future hours, she would stand by, and watch the magic

effects of his pencil, in tracing the scenes of her native place; she would then describe to him the circling dance upon the open plain, would paint, to him in all the glowing colours of youthful memory, the marriage pomp she remembered viewing in her infancy; and then, turning to subjects that had evidently made a greater impression upon her mind, would tell him all the supernatural tales of her nurse. Her earnestness and apparent belief of what she narrated, excited the interest even of Aubrey; and often as she told him the tale of the living vampyre, who had passed years amidst his friends, and dearest ties, forced every year, by feeding upon the life of a lovely female to prolong his existence for the ensuing months, his blood would run cold, whilst he attempted to laugh her out of such idle and horrible fantasies; but Ianthe cited to him the names of old men, who had at last detected one living among themselves, after several of their near relatives and children had been found marked with the stamp of the fiend's appetite; and when she found him so incredulous, she begged of him to believe her, for it had been, remarked, that those who had dared to question their existence, always had some proof given, which obliged them, with grief and heartbreaking, to confess it was true. She detailed to him the traditional appearance of these monsters, and his horror was increased, by hearing a pretty accurate description of Lord Ruthven; he, however, still persisted in persuading her, that there could be no truth in her fears, though at the same time he wondered at the many coincidences which had all

tended to excite a belief in the supernatural power of Lord Ruthven.

Aubrey began to attach himself more and more to Ianthe; her innocence, so contrasted with all the affected virtues of the women among whom he had sought for his vision of romance, won his heart; and while he ridiculed the idea of a young man of English habits, marrying an uneducated Greek girl, still he found himself more and more attached to the almost fairy form before him. He would tear himself at times from her, and, forming a plan for some antiquarian research, he would depart, determined not to return until his object was attained; but he always found it impossible to fix his attention upon the ruins around him, whilst in his mind he retained an image that seemed alone the rightful possessor of his thoughts. Ianthe was unconscious of his love, and was ever the same frank infantile being he had first known. She always seemed to part from him with reluctance; but it was because she had no longer any one with whom she could visit her favourite haunts, whilst her guardian was occupied in sketching or uncovering some fragment which had yet escaped the destructive hand of time. She had appealed to her parents on the subject of Vampyres, and they both, with several present, affirmed their existence, pale with horror at the very name. Soon after, Aubrey determined to proceed upon one of his excursions, which was to detain him for a few hours; when they heard the name of the place, they all at once begged of him not to return at night, as he must necessarily pass through a wood, where no Greek would ever remain, after the

day had closed, upon any consideration. They described it as the resort of the vampyres in their nocturnal orgies, and denounced the most heavy evils as impending upon him who dared to cross their path. Aubrey made light of their representations, and tried to laugh them out of the idea; but when he saw them shudder at his daring thus to mock a superior, infernal power, the very name of which apparently made their blood freeze, he was silent.

Next morning Aubrey set off upon his excursion unattended; he was surprised to observe the melancholy face of his host, and was concerned to find that his words, mocking the belief of those horrible fiends, had inspired them with such terror. When he was about to depart, Ianthe came to the side of his horse, and earnestly begged of him to return, ere night allowed the power of these beings to be put in action;—he promised. He was, however, so occupied in his research, that he did not perceive that day-light would soon end, and that in the horizon there was one of those specks which, in the warmer climates, so rapidly gather into a tremendous mass, and pour all their rage upon the devoted country.—He at last, however, mounted his horse, determined to make up by speed for his delay: but it was too late. Twilight, in these southern climates, is almost unknown; immediately the sun sets, night begins: and ere he had advanced far, the power of the storm was above—its echoing thunders had scarcely an interval of rest—its thick heavy rain forced its way through the canopying foliage, whilst the blue forked lightning seemed to fall and radiate at his very feet.

Suddenly his horse took fright, and he was carried with dreadful rapidity through the entangled forest. The animal at last, through fatigue, stopped, and he found, by the glare of lightning, that he was in the neighbourhood of a hovel that hardly lifted itself up from the masses of dead leaves and brushwood which surrounded it. Dismounting, he approached, hoping to find some one to guide him to the town, or at least trusting to obtain shelter from the pelting of the storm. As he approached, the thunders, for a moment silent, allowed him to hear the dreadful shrieks of a woman mingling with the stifled, exultant mockery of a laugh, continued in one almost unbroken sound;— he was startled: but, roused by the thunder which again rolled over his head, he, with a sudden effort, forced open the door of the hut. He found himself in utter darkness: the sound, however, guided him. He was apparently unperceived; for, though he called, still the sounds continued, and no notice was taken of him. He found himself in contact with some one, whom he immediately seized; when a voice cried, “Again baffled!” to which a loud laugh succeeded; and he felt himself grappled by one whose strength seemed superhuman: determined to sell his life as dearly as he could, he struggled; but it was in vain: he was lifted from his feet and hurled with enormous force against the ground:—his enemy threw himself upon him, and kneeling upon his breast, had placed his hands upon his throat—when the glare of many torches penetrating through the hole that gave light in the day, disturbed him;—he instantly rose, and, leaving his prey, rushed through the door, and in a moment the crashing of the brandies, as he broke

through the wood, was no longer heard. The storm was now still; and Aubrey, incapable of moving, was soon heard by those without. They entered; the light of their torches fell upon the mud walls, and the thatch loaded on every individual straw with heavy flakes of soot. At the desire of Aubrey they searched for her who had attracted him by her cries; he was again left in darkness; but what was his horror, when the light of the torches once more burst upon him, to perceive the airy form of his fair conductress brought in a lifeless corse. He shut his eyes, hoping that it was but a vision arising from his disturbed imagination; but he again saw the same form, when he unclosed them, stretched by his side. There was no colour upon her cheek, not even upon her lip; yet there was a stillness about her face that seemed almost as attaching as the life that once dwelt there:—upon her neck and breast was blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein:—to this the men pointed, crying, simultaneously struck with horror, “A Vampyre! a Vampyre!” A litter was quickly formed, and Aubrey was laid by the side of her who had lately been to him the object of so many bright and fairy visions, now fallen with the flower of life that had died within her. He knew not what his thoughts were—his mind was benumbed and seemed to shun reflection, and take refuge in vacancy—he held almost unconsciously in his hand a naked dagger of a particular construction, which had been found in the hut. They were soon met by different parties who had been engaged in the search of her whom a mother had missed. Their lamentable cries, as they approached the city, forewarned the parents of some

dreadful catastrophe. —To describe their grief would be impossible; but when they ascertained the cause of their child's death, they looked at Aubrey, and pointed to the corse. They were inconsolable; both died broken-hearted.

Aubrey being put to bed was seized with a most violent fever, and was often delirious; in these intervals he would call upon Lord Ruthven and upon Ianthe—by some unaccountable combination he seemed to beg of his former companion to spare the being he loved. At other times he would imprecate maledictions upon his head, and curse him as her destroyer. Lord Ruthven, chanced at this time to arrive at Athens, and, from whatever motive, upon hearing of the state of Aubrey, immediately placed himself in the same house, and became his constant attendant. When the latter recovered from his delirium, he was horrified and startled at the sight of him whose image he had now combined with that of a Vampyre; but Lord Ruthven, by his kind words, implying almost repentance for the fault that had caused their separation, and still more by the attention, anxiety, and care which he showed, soon reconciled him to his presence. His lordship seemed quite changed; he no longer appeared that apathetic being who had so astonished Aubrey; but as soon as his convalescence began to be rapid, he again gradually retired into the same state of mind, and Aubrey perceived no difference from the former man, except that at times he was surprised to meet his gaze fixed intently upon him, with a smile of malicious exultation playing upon his lips: he knew not why,

but this smile haunted him. During the last stage of the invalid's recovery, Lord Ruthven was apparently engaged in watching the tideless waves raised by the cooling breeze, or in marking the progress of those orbs, circling, like our world, the moveless sun;—indeed, he appeared to wish to avoid the eyes of all.

Aubrey's mind, by this shock, was much weakened, and that elasticity of spirit which had once so distinguished him now seemed to have fled for ever. He was now as much a lover of solitude and silence as Lord Ruthven; but much as he wished for solitude, his mind could not find it in the neighbourhood of Athens; if he sought it amidst the ruins he had formerly frequented, Ianthe's form stood by his side—if he sought it in the woods, her light step would appear wandering amidst the underwood, in quest of the modest violet; then suddenly turning round, would show, to his wild imagination, her pale face and wounded throat, with a meek smile upon her lips. He determined to fly scenes, every feature of which created such bitter associations in his mind. He proposed to Lord Ruthven, to whom he held himself bound by the tender care he had taken of him during his illness, that they should visit those parts of Greece neither had yet seen. They travelled in every direction, and sought every spot to which a recollection could be attached: but though they thus hastened from place to place, yet they seemed not to heed what they gazed upon. They heard much of robbers, but they gradually began to slight these reports, which they imagined were only the invention of individuals, whose interest it was to excite the

generosity of those whom they defended from pretended dangers. In consequence of thus neglecting the advice of the inhabitants, on one occasion they travelled with only a few guards, more to serve as guides than as a defence. Upon entering, however, a narrow defile, at the bottom of which was the bed of a torrent, with large masses of rock brought down from the neighbouring precipices, they had reason to repent their negligence; for scarcely were the whole of the party engaged in the narrow pass, when they were startled by the whistling of bullets close to their heads, and by the echoed report of several guns. In an instant their guards had left them, and, placing themselves behind rocks, had begun to fire in the direction whence the report came. Lord Ruthven and Aubrey, imitating their example, retired for a moment behind the sheltering turn of the defile: but ashamed of being thus detained by a foe, who with insulting shouts bade them advance, and being exposed to unresisting slaughter, if any of the robbers should climb above and take them in the rear, they determined at once to rush forward in search of the enemy. Hardly had they lost the shelter of the rock, when Lord Ruthven received a shot in the shoulder, which brought him to the ground. Aubrey hastened to his assistance; and, no longer heeding the contest or his own peril, was soon surprised by seeing the robbers' faces around him—his guards having, upon Lord Ruthven's being wounded, immediately thrown up their arms and surrendered.

By promises of great reward, Aubrey soon induced them to convey his wounded friend to a neighbouring

cabin; and having agreed upon a ransom, he was no more disturbed by their presence—they being content merely to guard the entrance till their comrade should return with the promised sum, for which he had an order. Lord Ruthven's strength rapidly decreased; in two days mortification ensued, and death seemed advancing with hasty steps. His conduct and appearance had not changed; he seemed as unconscious of pain as he had been of the objects about him: but towards the close of the last evening, his mind became apparently uneasy, and his eye often fixed upon Aubrey, who was induced to offer his assistance with more than usual earnestness—"Assist me! you may save me—you may do more than that—I mean not my life, I heed the death of my existence as little as that of the passing day; but you may save my honour, your friend's honour."—"How? tell me how? I would do any thing," replied Aubrey.—"I need but little—my life ebbs apace—I cannot explain the whole—but if you would conceal all you know of me, my honour were free from stain in the world's mouth—and if my death were unknown for some time in England—I—I—but life."—"It shall not be known."—"Swear!" cried the dying man, raising himself with exultant violence, "Swear by all your soul reveres, by all your nature fears, swear that, for a year and a day you will not impart your knowledge of my crimes or death to any living being in any way, whatever may happen, or whatever you may see. "—His eyes seemed bursting from their sockets: "I swear!" said Aubrey; he sunk laughing upon his pillow, and breathed no more.

Aubrey retired to rest, but did not sleep; the many circumstances attending his acquaintance with this man rose upon his mind, and he knew not why; when he remembered his oath a cold shivering came over him, as if from the presentiment of something horrible awaiting him. Rising early in the morning, he was about to enter the hovel in which he had left the corpse, when a robber met him, and informed him that it was no longer there, having been conveyed by himself and comrades, upon his retiring, to the pinnacle of a neighbouring mount, according to a promise they had given his lordship, that it should be exposed to the first cold ray of the moon that rose after his death. Aubrey astonished, and taking several of the men, determined to go and bury it upon the spot where it lay. But, when he had mounted to the summit he found no trace of either the corpse or the clothes, though the robbers swore they pointed out the identical rock: on which they had laid the body. For a time his mind was bewildered in conjectures, but he at last returned, convinced that they had buried the corpse for the sake of the clothes.

Weary of a country in which he had met with such terrible misfortunes, and in which all apparently conspired to heighten that superstitious melancholy that had seized upon his mind, he resolved to leave it, and soon arrived at Smyrna. While waiting for a vessel to convey him to Otranto, or to Naples, he occupied himself in arranging those effects he had with him belonging to Lord Ruthven. Amongst other things there was a case containing several weapons of offence, more or less adapted to ensure the death of

the victim. There were several daggers and ataghans. Whilst turning them over, and examining their curious forms, what was his surprise at finding a sheath apparently ornamented in the same style as the dagger discovered in the fatal hut—he shuddered—hastening to gain further proof, he found the weapon, and his horror may be imagined when he discovered that it fitted, though peculiarly shaped, the sheath he held in his hand. His eyes seemed to need no further certainty—they seemed gazing to be bound to the dagger; yet still he wished to disbelieve; but the particular form, the same varying tints upon the haft and sheath were alike in splendour on both, and left no room for doubt; there were also drops of blood on each.

He left Smyrna, and on his way home, at Rome, his first inquiries were concerning the lady he had attempted to snatch from Lord Ruthven's seductive arts. Her parents were in distress, their fortune ruined, and she had not been heard of since the departure of his lordship. Aubrey's mind became almost broken under so many repeated horrors; he was afraid that this lady had fallen a victim to the destroyer of Ianthe. He became morose and silent; and his only occupation consisted in urging the speed of the postilions, as if he were going to save the life of some one he held dear. He arrived at Calais; a breeze, which seemed obedient to his will, soon wafted him to the English shores; and he hastened to the mansion of his fathers, and there, for a moment, appeared to lose, in the embraces and caresses of his sister, all memory of the past. If she before, by her infantine

caresses, had gained his affection, now that the woman began to appear, she was still more attaching as a companion.

Miss Aubrey had not that winning grace which gains the gaze and applause of the drawing-room assemblies. There was none of that light brilliancy which only exists in the heated atmosphere of a crowded apartment. Her blue eye was never lit up by the levity of the mind beneath. There was a melancholy charm about it which did not seem to arise from misfortune, but from some feeling within, that appeared to indicate a soul conscious of a brighter realm. Her step was not that light footing, which strays where'er a butterfly or a colour may attract—it was sedate and pensive. When alone, her face was never brightened by the smile of joy; but when her brother breathed to her his affection, and would in her presence forget those griefs she knew destroyed his rest, who would have exchanged her smile for that of the voluptuary? It seemed as if those eyes,—that face were then playing in the light of their own native sphere. She was yet only eighteen, and had not been presented to the world, it having been thought by her guardians more fit that her presentation should be delayed until her brother's return from the continent, when he might be her protector. It was now, therefore, resolved that the next drawing-room, which was fast approaching, should be the epoch of her entry into the "busy scene." Aubrey would rather have remained in the mansion of his fathers, and fed upon the melancholy which overpowered him. He could not fed interest about the

frivolities of fashionable strangers, when his mind had been so torn by the events he had witnessed; but he determined to sacrifice his own comfort to the protection of his sister. They soon arrived in town, and prepared for the next day, which had been announced as a drawing-room.

The crowd was excessive—a drawing-room had not been held for a long time, and all who were anxious to bask in the smile of royalty, hastened thither. Aubrey was there with his sister. While he was standing in a corner by himself, heedless of all around him, engaged in the remembrance that the first time he had seen Lord Ruthven was in that very place—he felt himself suddenly seized by the arm, and a voice he recognized too well, sounded in his ear—”Remember your oath.” He had hardly courage to turn, fearful of seeing a spectre that would blast him, when he perceived, at a little distance, the same figure which had attracted his notice on this spot upon his first entry into society. He gazed till his limbs almost refusing to bear their weight, he was obliged to take the arm of a friend, and forcing a passage through the crowd, he threw himself into his carriage, and was driven home. He paced the room with hurried steps, and fixed his hands upon his head, as if he were afraid his thoughts were bursting from his brain. Lord Ruthven again before him—circumstances started up in dreadful array—the dagger—his oath.—He roused himself, he could not believe it possible—the dead rise again!—He thought his imagination had conjured up the image, his mind was resting upon. It was impossible that it could be real—he determined,

therefore, to go again into society; for though he attempted to ask concerning Lord Ruthven, the name hung upon his lips, and he could not succeed in gaining information. He went a few nights after with his sister to the assembly of a near relation. Leaving her under the protection of a matron, he retired into a recess, and there gave himself up to his own devouring thoughts. Perceiving, at last, that many were leaving, he roused himself, and entering another room, found his sister surrounded by several, apparently in earnest conversation; he attempted to pass and get near her, when one, whom he requested to move, turned round, and revealed to him those features he most abhorred. He sprang forward, seized his sister's arm, and, with hurried step, forced her towards the street: at the door he found himself impeded by the crowd of servants who were waiting for their lords; and while he was engaged in passing them, he again heard that voice whisper close to him—"Remember your oath!" —He did not dare to turn, but, hurrying his sister, soon reached home.

Aubrey became almost distracted. If before his mind had been absorbed by one subject, how much more completely was it engrossed, now that the certainty of the monster's living again pressed upon his thoughts. His sister's attentions were now unheeded, and it was in vain that she intreated him to explain to her what had caused his abrupt conduct. He only uttered a few words, and those terrified her. The more he thought, the more he was bewildered. His oath startled him;—was he then to allow this monster to roam, bearing ruin upon his breath, amidst all he held dear, and not

avert its progress? His very sister might have been touched by him. But even if he were to break his oath, and disclose his suspicions, who would believe him? He thought of employing his own hand to free the world from such a wretch; but death, he remembered, had been already mocked. For days he remained in this state; shut up in his room, he saw no one, and eat only when his sister came, who, with eyes streaming with tears, besought him, for her sake, to support nature. At last, no longer capable of bearing stillness and solitude, he left his house, roamed from street to street, anxious to fly that image which haunted him. His dress became neglected, and he wandered, as often exposed to the noon-day sun as to the midnight damps. He was no longer to be recognized; at first he returned with the evening to the house; but at last he laid him down to rest wherever fatigue overtook him. His sister, anxious for his safety, employed people to follow him; but they were soon distanced by him who fled from a pursuer swifter than any—from thought. His conduct, however, suddenly changed. Struck with the idea that he left by his absence the whole of his friends, with a fiend amongst them, of whose presence they were unconscious, he determined to enter again into society, and watch him closely, anxious to forewarn, in spite of his oath, all whom Lord Ruthven approached with intimacy. But when he entered into a room, his haggard and suspicious looks were so striking, his inward shudderings so visible, that his sister was at last obliged to beg of him to abstain from seeking, for her sake, a society which affected him so strongly. When, however, remonstrance proved unavailing, the guardians

thought proper to interpose, and, fearing that his mind was becoming alienated, they thought it high time to resume again that trust which had been before imposed upon them by Aubrey's parents.

Desirous of saving him from the injuries and sufferings he had daily encountered in his wanderings, and of preventing him from exposing to the general eye those marks of what they considered folly, they engaged a physician to reside in the house, and take constant care of him. He hardly appeared to notice it, so completely was his mind absorbed by one terrible subject. His incoherence became at last so great, that he was confined to his chamber. There he would often lie for days, incapable of being roused. He had become emaciated, his eyes had attained a glassy lustre;—the only sign of affection and recollection remaining displayed itself upon the entry of his sister; then he would sometimes start, and, seizing her hands, with looks that severely afflicted her, he would desire her not to touch him. “Oh, do not touch him—if your love for me is aught, do not go near him!” When, however, she inquired to whom he referred, his only answer was, “True! true!” and again he sank into a state, whence not even she could rouse him. This lasted many months: gradually, however, as the year was passing, his incoherences became less frequent, and his mind threw off a portion of its gloom, whilst his guardians observed, that several times in the day he would count upon his fingers a definite number, and then smile.

The time had nearly elapsed, when, upon the last day of the year, one of his guardians entering his room, began to converse with his physician upon the melancholy circumstance of Aubrey's being in so awful a situation, when his sister was going next day to be married. Instantly Aubrey's attention was attracted; he asked anxiously to whom. Glad of this mark of returning intellect, of which they feared he had been deprived, they mentioned the name of the Earl of Marsden. Thinking this was a young Earl whom he had met with in society, Aubrey seemed pleased, and astonished them still more by his expressing his intention to be present at the nuptials, and desiring to see his sister. They answered not, but in a few minutes his sister was with him. He was apparently again capable of being affected by the influence of her lovely smile; for he pressed her to his breast, and kissed her cheek, wet with tears, flowing at the thought of her brother's being once more alive to the feelings of affection. He began to speak with all his wonted warmth, and to congratulate her upon her marriage with a person so distinguished for rank and every accomplishment; when he suddenly perceived a locket upon her breast; opening it, what was his surprise at beholding the features of the monster who had so long influenced his life. He seized the portrait in a paroxysm of rage, and trampled it under foot. Upon her asking him why he thus destroyed the resemblance of her future husband, he looked as if he did not understand her—then seizing her hands, and gazing on her with a frantic expression of countenance, he bade her swear that she would never wed this monster, for he—— But he could not

advance—it seemed as if that voice again bade him remember his oath—he turned suddenly round, thinking Lord Ruthven was near him but saw no one. In the meantime the guardians and physician, who had heard the whole, and thought this was but a return of his disorder, entered, and forcing him from Miss Aubrey, desired her to leave him. He fell upon his knees to them, he implored, he begged of them to delay but for one day. They, attributing this to the insanity they imagined had taken possession of his mind, endeavoured to pacify him, and retired.

Lord Ruthven had called the morning after the drawing-room, and had been refused with every one else. When he heard of Aubrey's ill health, he readily understood himself to be the cause of it; but when he learned that he was deemed insane, his exultation and pleasure could hardly be concealed from those among whom he had gained this information. He hastened to the house of his former companion, and, by constant attendance, and the pretence of great affection for the brother and interest in his fate, he gradually won the ear of Miss Aubrey. Who could resist his power? His tongue had dangers and toils to recount—could speak of himself as of an individual having no sympathy with any being on the crowded earth, save with her to whom he addressed himself;—could tell how, since he knew her, his existence, had begun to seem worthy of preservation, if it were merely that he might listen to her soothing accents;—in fine, he knew so well how to use the serpent's art, or such was the will of fate, that he gained her affections. The title of the elder branch falling at length to him, he obtained an

important embassy, which served as an excuse for hastening the marriage, (in spite of her brother's deranged state,) which was to take place the very day before his departure for the continent.

Aubrey, when he was left by the physician and his guardians, attempted to bribe the servants, but in vain. He asked for pen and paper; it was given him; he wrote a letter to his sister, conjuring her, as she valued her own happiness, her own honour, and the honour of those now in the grave, who once held her in their arms as their hope and the hope of their house, to delay but for a few hours that marriage, on which he denounced the most heavy curses. The servants promised they would deliver it; but giving it to the physician, he thought it better not to harass any more the mind of Miss Aubrey by, what he considered, the ravings of a maniac. Night passed on without rest to the busy inmates of the house; and Aubrey heard, with a horror that may more easily be conceived than described, the notes of busy preparation. Morning came, and the sound of carriages broke upon his ear. Aubrey grew almost frantic. The curiosity of the servants at last overcame their vigilance, they gradually stole away, leaving him in the custody of an helpless old woman. He seized the opportunity, with one bound was out of the room, and in a moment found himself in the apartment where all were nearly assembled. Lord Ruthven was the first to perceive him: he immediately approached, and, taking his arm by force, hurried him from the room, speechless with rage. When on the staircase, Lord Ruthven whispered in his ear—

”Remember your oath, and know, if not my bride to day, your sister is dishonoured. Women are frail!” So saying, he pushed him towards his attendants, who, roused by the old woman, had come in search of him. Aubrey could no longer support himself; his rage not finding vent, had broken a blood-vessel, and he was conveyed to bed. This was not mentioned to his sister, who was not present when he entered, as the physician was afraid of agitating her. The marriage was solemnized, and the bride and bridegroom left London.

Aubrey’s weakness increased; the effusion of blood produced symptoms of the near approach of death. He desired his sister’s guardians might be called, and when the midnight hour had struck, he related composedly what the reader has perused—he died immediately after.

The guardians hastened to protect Miss Aubrey; but when they arrived, it was too late. Lord Ruthven had disappeared, and Aubrey’s sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!

THE FORTRESS UNVANQUISHABLE,
SAVE FOR SACNOTH
by Lord Dunsany

In a wood older than record, a foster brother of the hills, stood the village of Allathurion; and there was peace between the people of that village and all the folk who walked in the dark ways of the wood, whether they were human or of the tribes of the beasts or of the race of the fairies and the elves and the little sacred spirits of trees and streams.

Moreover, the village people had peace among themselves and between them and their lord, Lorendiac. In front of the village was a wide and grassy space, and beyond this the great wood again, but at the back the trees came right up to the houses, which, with their great beams and wooden framework and thatched roofs, green with moss, seemed almost to be a part of the forest.

Now in the time I tell of, there was trouble in Allathurion, for of an evening fell dreams were wont to come slipping through the tree trunks and into the peaceful village; and they assumed dominion of men's minds and led them in watches of the night through the cindery plains of Hell. Then the magician of that village made spells against those fell dreams; yet still the dreams came flitting through the trees as soon as the dark had fallen, and led men's minds by night into terrible places and caused them to praise Satan openly with their lips.

And men grew afraid of sleep in Allathurion. And they grew worn and pale, some through the want of rest, and others from fear of the things they saw on the cindery plains of Hell.

Then the magician of the village went up into the tower of his house, and all night long those whom fear kept awake could see his window high up in the night glowing softly alone. The next day, when the twilight was far gone and night was gathering fast, the magician went away to the forest's edge, and uttered there the spell that he had made. And the spell was a compulsive, terrible thing, having a power over evil dreams and over spirits of ill; for it was a verse of forty lines in many languages, both living and dead, and had in it the word wherewith the people of the plains are wont to curse their camels, and the shout wherewith the whalers of the north lure the whales shoreward to be killed, and a word that causes elephants to trumpet; and every one of the forty lines closed with a rhyme for 'wasp'.

And still the dreams came flitting through the forest, and led men's souls into the plains of Hell. Then the magician knew that the dreams were from Gaznak. Therefore he gathered the people of the village, and told them that he had uttered his mightiest spell--a spell having power over all that were human or of the tribes of the beasts; and that since it had not availed the dreams must come from Gaznak, the greatest magician among the spaces of the stars. And he read to the people out of the Book of Magicians, which tells the comings of the comet and foretells his coming again. And he told them how Gaznak rides upon the comet, and how he visits Earth once in every two hundred and thirty years, and makes for himself a vast, invincible fortress and sends out dreams to feed on the minds of men, and may never be vanquished but by the sword Sacnoth.

And a cold fear fell on the hearts of the villagers when they found that their magician had failed them.

Then spake Leothric, son of the Lord Lorendiac, and twenty years old was he: 'Good Master, what of the sword Sacnoth?'

And the village magician answered: 'Fair Lord, no such sword as yet is wrought, for it lies as yet in the hide of Tharagavverug, protecting his spine.'

Then said Leothric: 'Who is Tharagavverug, and where may he be encountered?'

And the magician of Allathurion answered: ‘He is the dragon-crocodile who haunts the Northern marshes and ravages the homesteads by their marge. And the hide of his back is of steel, and his under parts are of iron; but along the midst of his back, over his spine, there lies a narrow strip of unearthly steel. This strip of steel is Sacnoth, and it may be neither cleft nor molten, and there is nothing in the world that may avail to break it, nor even leave a scratch upon its surface. It is of the length of a good sword, and of the breadth thereof. Shouldst thou prevail against Tharagavverug, his hide may be melted away from Sacnoth in a furnace; but there is only one thing that may sharpen Sacnoth’s edge, and this is one of Tharagavverug’s own steel eyes; and the other eye thou must fasten to Sacnoth’s hilt, and it will watch for thee. But it is a hard task to vanquish Tharagavverug, for no sword can pierce his hide; his back cannot be broken, and he can neither burn nor drown. In one way only can Tharagavverug die, and that is by starving.’

Then sorrow fell upon Leothric, but the magician spoke on:

‘If a man drive Tharagavverug away from his food with a stick for three days, he will starve on the third day at sunset. And though he is not vulnerable, yet in one spot he may take hurt, for his nose is only of lead. A sword would merely lay bare the uncleavable bronze beneath, but if his nose be smitten constantly with a stick he will always recoil from the pain, and

thus may Tharagavverug, to left and right, be driven away from his food.'

Then Leothric said: 'What is Tharagavverug's food?'

And the magician of Allathurion said: 'His food is men.'

But Leothric went straightway thence, and cut a great staff from a hazel tree, and slept early that evening. But the next morning, awaking from troubled dreams, he arose before the dawn, and, taking with him provisions for five days, set out through the forest northwards towards the marshes. For some hours he moved through the gloom of the forest, and when he emerged from it the sun was above the horizon shining on pools of water in the waste land. Presently he saw the claw-marks of Tharagavverug deep in the soil, and the track of his tail between them like a furrow in a field. Then Leothric followed the tracks till he heard the bronze heart of Tharagavverug before him, booming like a bell.

And Tharagavverug, it being the hour when he took the first meal of the day, was moving towards a village with his heart tolling. And all the people of the village were come out to meet him, as it was their wont to do; for they abode not the suspense of awaiting Tharagavverug and of hearing him sniffing brazenly as he went from door to door, pondering slowly in his metal mind what habitant he should choose. And none dared to flee, for in the days when the villagers fled from Tharagavverug, he, having

chosen his victim, would track him tirelessly, like a doom. Nothing availed them against Tharagavverug. Once they climbed the trees when he came, but Tharagavverug went up to one, arching his back and leaning over slightly, and rasped against the trunk until it fell. And when Leothric came near, Tharagavverug saw him out of one of his small steel eyes and came towards him leisurely, and the echoes of his heart swirled up through his open mouth. And Leothric stepped sideways from his onset, and came between him and the village and smote him on the nose, and the blow of the stick made a dint in the soft lead. And Tharagavverug swung clumsily away, uttering one fearful cry like the sound of a great church bell that had become possessed of a soul that fluttered upward from the tombs at night--an evil soul, giving the bell a voice. Then he attacked Leothric, snarling, and again Leothric leapt aside, and smote him on the nose with his stick. Tharagavverug sounded like a bell howling. And whenever the dragon-crocodile attacked him, or turned towards the village, Leothric smote him again.

So all day long Leothric drove the monster with a stick and he drove him further and further from his prey, with his heart tolling angrily and his voice crying out for pain.

Towards evening Tharagavverug ceased to snap at Leothric, but ran before him to avoid the stick, for his nose was sore and shining; and in the gloaming the villagers came out and danced to cymbal and psaltery. When Tharagavverug heard the cymbal and psaltery, hunger and anger came upon him, and he felt as some

lord might feel who was held by force from the banquet in his own castle and heard the creaking spit go round and round and the good meat crackling on it. And all that night he attacked Leothric fiercely, and oft-times nearly caught him in the darkness; for his gleaming eyes of steel could see as well by night as by day. And Leothric gave ground slowly till the dawn, and when the light came they were near the village again; yet not so near to it as they had been when they encountered, for Leothric drove Tharagavverug further in the day than Tharagavverug had forced him back in the night. Then Leothric drove him again with his stick till the hour came when it was the custom of the dragon-crocodile to find his man. One third of his man he would eat at the time he found him, and the rest at noon and evening. But when the hour came for finding his man a great fierceness came on Tharagavverug, and he grabbed rapidly at Leothric, but could not seize him, and for a long while neither of them would retire. But at last the pain of the stick on his leaden nose overcame the hunger of the dragon-crocodile, and he turned from it howling. From that moment Tharagavverug weakened. All that day Leothric drove him with his stick, and at night both held their ground; and when the dawn of the third day was come the heart of Tharagavverug beat slower and fainter. It was as though a tired man was ringing a bell. Once Tharagavverug nearly seized a frog, but Leothric snatched it away just in time. Towards noon the dragon-crocodile lay still for a long while, and Leothric stood near him and leaned on his trusty stick. He was very tired and sleepless, but had more leisure

now for eating his provisions. With Tharagavverug the end was coming fast, and in the afternoon his breath came hoarsely, rasping in his throat. It was as the sound of many huntsmen blowing blasts on horns, and towards evening his breath came faster but fainter, like the sound of a hunt going furious to the distance and dying away, and he made desperate rushes towards the village; but Leothric still leapt about him, battering his leaden nose. Scarce audible now at all was the sound of his heart: it was like a church bell tolling beyond hills for the death of some one unknown and far away. Then the sun set and flamed in the village windows, and a chill went over the world, and in some small garden a woman sang; and Tharagavverug lifted up his head and starved, and his life went from his invulnerable body, and Leothric lay down beside him and slept. And later in the starlight the villagers came out and carried Leothric, sleeping, to the village, all praising him in whispers as they went. They laid him down upon a couch in a house, and danced outside in silence, without psaltery or cymbal. And then next day, rejoicing, to Allathurion they hauled the dragon-crocodile. And Leothric went with them, holding his battered staff; and a tall, broad man, who was smith of Allathurion, made a great furnace, and melted Tharagavverug away till only Sacnoth was left, gleaming among the ashes. Then he took one of the small eyes that had been chiselled out, and filed an edge on Sacnoth, and gradually the steel eye wore away facet by facet, but ere it was quite gone it had sharpened redoubtable Sacnoth. But the other eye they set in the butt of the hilt, and it gleamed there bluely.

And that night Leothric arose in the dark and took the sword, and went westwards to find Gaznak; and he went through the dark forest till the dawn, and all the morning and till the afternoon. But in the afternoon he came into the open and saw in the midst of The Land Where No Man Goeth the fortress of Gaznak, mountainous before him, little more than a mile away.

And Leothric saw that the land was marsh and desolate. And the fortress went up all white out of it, with many buttresses, and was broad below but narrowed higher up, and was full of gleaming windows with the light upon them. And near the top of it a few white clouds were floating, but above them some of its pinnacles reappeared. Then Leothric advanced into the marshes, and the eye of Tharagavverug looked out warily from the hilt of Sacnoth; for Tharagavverug had known the marshes well, and the sword nudged Leothric to the right or pulled him to the left away from the dangerous places, and so brought him safely to the fortress walls.

And in the wall stood doors like precipices of steel, all studded with boulders of iron, and above every window were terrible gargoyles of stone; and the name of the fortress shone on the wall, writ large in letters of brass: 'The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save For Sacnoth.'

Then Leothric drew and revealed Sacnoth, and all the gargoyles grinned, and the grin went flickering from face to face right up into the cloud-abiding gables.

And when Sacnoth was revealed and all the gargoyles grinned, it was like the moonlight emerging from a cloud to look for the first time upon a field of blood, and passing swiftly over the wet faces of the slain that lie together in the horrible night. Then Leothric advanced towards a door, and it was mightier than the marble quarry, Sacremona, from which old men cut enormous slabs to build the Abbey of the Holy Tears. Day after day they wrenched out the very ribs of the hill until the Abbey was builded, and it was more beautiful than anything in stone. Then the priests blessed Sacremona, and it had rest, and no more stone was ever taken from it to build the houses of men. And the hill stood looking southwards lonely in the sunlight, defaced by that mighty scar. So vast was the door of steel. And the name of the door was The Porte Resonant, the Way of Egress for War.

Then Leothric smote upon the Porte Resonant with Sacnoth, and the echo of Sacnoth went ringing through the halls, and all the dragons in the fortress barked. And when the baying of the remotest dragon had faintly joined in the tumult, a window opened far up among the clouds below the twilit gables, and a woman screamed, and far away in Hell her father heard her and knew that her doom was come.

And Leothric went on smiting terribly with Sacnoth, and the grey steel of the Porte Resonant, the Way of

Egress for War, that was tempered to resist the swords of the world, came away in ringing slices.

Then Leothric, holding Sacnoth in his hand, went in through the hole that he had hewn in the door, and came into the unlit, cavernous hall.

An elephant fled trumpeting. And Leothric stood still, holding Sacnoth. When the sound of the feet of the elephant had died away in the remoter corridors, nothing more stirred, and the cavernous hall was still.

Presently the darkness of the distant halls became musical with the sound of bells, all coming nearer and nearer.

Still Leothric waited in the dark, and the bells rang louder and louder, echoing through the halls, and there appeared a procession of men on camels riding two by two from the interior of the fortress, and they were armed with scimitars of Assyrian make and were all clad with mail, and chain-mail hung from their helmets about their faces, and flapped as the camels moved. And they all halted before Leothric in the cavernous hall, and the camel bells clanged and stopped. And the leader said to Leothric:

‘The Lord Gaznak has desired to see you die before him. Be pleased to come with us, and we can discourse by the way of the manner in which the Lord Gaznak has desired to see you die.’

And as he said this he unwound a chain of iron that was coiled upon his saddle, and Leothric answered:

‘I would fain go with you, for I am come to slay Gaznak.’

Then all the camel-guard of Gaznak laughed hideously, disturbing the vampires that were asleep in the measureless vault of the roof. And the leader said:

‘The Lord Gaznak is immortal, save for Sacnoth, and weareth armour that is proof even against Sacnoth himself and hath a sword the second most terrible in the world.’

Then Leothric said: ‘I am the Lord of the sword Sacnoth.’

And he advanced towards the camel-guard of Gaznak, and Sacnoth lifted up and down in his hand as though stirred by an exultant pulse. Then the camel-guard of Gaznak fled, and the riders leaned forward and smote their camels with whips, and they went away with a great clamour of bells through colonnades and corridors and vaulted halls, and scattered into the inner darkneses of the fortress. When the last sound of them had died away, Leothric was in doubt which way to go, for the camel-guard was dispersed in many directions, so he went straight on till he came to a great stairway in the midst of the hall. Then Leothric set his foot in the middle of a wide step, and climbed steadily up the stairway for five minutes. Little light was there in the great hall through which Leothric

ascended, for it only entered through arrow slits here and there, and in the world outside evening was waning fast. The stairway led up to two folding doors, and they stood a little ajar, and through the crack Leothric entered and tried to continue straight on, but could get no further, for the whole room seemed to be full of festoons of ropes which swung from wall to wall and were looped and draped from the ceiling. The whole chamber was thick and black with them. They were soft and light to the touch, like fine silk, but Leothric was unable to break any one of them, and though they swung away from him as he pressed forward, yet by the time he had gone three yards they were all about him like a heavy cloak. Then Leothric stepped back and drew Sacnoth, and Sacnoth divided the ropes without a sound, and without a sound the severed pieces fell to the floor. Leothric went forward slowly, moving Sacnoth in front of him up and down as he went. When he was come into the middle of the chamber, suddenly, as he parted with Sacnoth a great hammock of strands, he saw a spider before him that was larger than a ram, and the spider looked at him with eyes that were little, but in which there was much sin, and said:

‘Who are you that spoil the labour of years all done to the honour of Satan?’

And Leothric answered: ‘I am Leothric, son of Lorendiac.’

And the spider said: ‘I will make a rope at once to hang you with.’

Then Leothric parted another bunch of strands, and came nearer to the spider as he sat making his rope, and the spider, looking up from his work, said: ‘What is that sword which is able to sever my ropes?’

And Leothric said: ‘It is Sacnoth.’

Thereat the black hair that hung over the face of the spider parted to left and right, and the spider frowned: then the hair fell back into its place, and hid everything except the sin of the little eyes which went on gleaming lustfully in the dark. But before Leothric could reach him, he climbed away with his hands, going up by one of his ropes to a lofty rafter, and there sat, growling. But clearing his way with Sacnoth, Leothric passed through the chamber, and came to the further door; and the door being shut, and the handle far up out of his reach, he hewed his way through it with Sacnoth in the same way as he had through the Porte Resonant, the Way of Egress for War. And so Leothric came into a well-lit chamber, where Queens and Princes were banqueting together, all at a great table; and thousands of candles were glowing all about, and their light shone in the wine that the Princes drank and on the huge gold candelabra, and the royal faces were irradiant with the glow, and the white table-cloth and the silver plates and the jewels in the hair of the Queens, each jewel having a historian all to itself who wrote no other chronicles all his days. Between the table and the door there stood two hundred footmen in two rows of one hundred facing one another. Nobody looked at

Leothric as he entered through the hole in the door, but one of the Princes asked a question of a footman, and the question was passed from mouth to mouth by all the hundred footmen till it came to the last one nearest Leothric; and he said to Leothric, without looking at him:

‘What do you seek here?’

And Leothric answered: ‘I seek to slay Gaznak.’

And footman to footman repeated all the way to the table: ‘He seeks to slay Gaznak.’

And another question came down the line of footmen: ‘What is your name?’

And the line that stood opposite took his answer back.

Then one of the Princes said: ‘Take him away where we shall not hear his screams.’

And footman repeated it to footman till it came to the last two, and they advanced to seize Leothric.

Then Leothric showed to them his sword, saying, ‘This is Sacnoth,’ and both of them said to the man nearest: ‘It is Sacnoth,’ then screamed and fled away.

And two by two, all up the double line, footman to footman repeated: ‘It is Sacnoth,’ then screamed and fled, till the last two gave the message to the table, and all the rest had gone. Hurriedly then arose the

Queens and Princes, and fled out of the chamber. And the goodly table, when they were all gone, looked small and disorderly and awry. And to Leothric, pondering in the desolate chamber by what door he should pass onwards, there came from far away the sounds of music, and he knew that it was the magical musicians playing to Gaznak while he slept.

Then Leothric, walking towards the distant music, passed out by the door opposite to the one through which he had cloven his entrance, and so passed into a chamber vast as the other, in which were many women, weirdly beautiful. And they all asked him of his quest, and when they heard that it was to slay Gaznak, they all besought him to tarry among them, saying that Gaznak was immortal, save for Sacnoth, and also that they had need of a knight to protect them from the wolves that rushed round and round the wainscot all the night and sometimes broke in upon them through the mouldering oak. Perhaps Leothric had been tempted to tarry had they been human women, for theirs was a strange beauty, but he perceived that instead of eyes they had little flames that flickered in their sockets, and knew them to be the fevered dreams of Gaznak. Therefore he said:

‘I have a business with Gaznak and with Sacnoth,’ and passed on through the chamber.

And at the name of Sacnoth those women screamed, and the flames of their eyes sank low and dwindled to sparks.

And Leothric left them, and, hewing with Sacnoth, passed through the further door.

Outside he felt the night air on his face, and found that he stood upon a narrow way between two abysses. To left and right of him, as far as he could see, the walls of the fortress ended in a profound precipice, though the roof still stretched above him; and before him lay the two abysses full of stars, for they cut their way through the whole Earth and revealed the under sky; and threading its course between them went the way, and it sloped upward and its sides were sheer. And beyond the abysses, where the way led up to the further chambers of the fortress, Leothric heard the musicians playing their magical tune. So he stepped on to the way, which was scarcely a stride in width, and moved along it holding Sacnoth naked. And to and fro beneath him in each abyss whirred the wings of vampires passing up and down, all giving praise to Satan as they flew. Presently he perceived the dragon Thok lying upon the way, pretending to sleep, and his tail hung down into one of the abysses.

And Leothric went towards him, and when he was quite close Thok rushed at Leothric.

And he smote deep with Sacnoth, and Thok tumbled into the abyss, screaming, and his limbs made a whirring in the darkness as he fell, and he fell till his scream sounded no louder than a whistle and then could be heard no more. Once or twice Leothric saw a star blink for an instant and reappear again, and this

momentary eclipse of a few stars was all that remained in the world of the body of Thok. And Lunk, the brother of Thok, who had lain a little behind him, saw that this must be Sacnoth and fled lumbering away. And all the while that he walked between the abysses, the mighty vault of the roof of the fortress still stretched over Leothric's head, all filled with gloom. Now, when the further side of the abyss came into view, Leothric saw a chamber that opened with innumerable arches upon the twin abysses, and the pillars of the arches went away into the distance and vanished in the gloom to left and right.

Far down the dim precipice on which the pillars stood he could see windows small and closely barred, and between the bars there showed at moments, and disappeared again, things that I shall not speak of.

There was no light here except for the great Southern stars that shone below the abysses, and here and there in the chamber through the arches lights that moved furtively without the sound of footfall.

Then Leothric stepped from the way, and entered the great chamber.

Even to himself he seemed but a tiny dwarf as he walked under one of those colossal arches.

The last faint light of evening flickered through a window painted in sombre colours commemorating the achievements of Satan upon Earth. High up in the

wall the window stood, and the streaming lights of candles lower down moved stealthily away.

Other light there was none, save for a faint blue glow from the steel eye of Tharagavverug that peered restlessly about it from the hilt of Sacnoth.

Heavily in the chamber hung the clammy odour of a large and deadly beast. Leothric moved forward slowly with the blade of Sacnoth in front of him feeling for a foe, and the eye in the hilt of it looking out behind.

Nothing stirred.

If anything lurked behind the pillars of the colonnade that held aloft the roof it neither breathed nor moved.

The music of the magical musicians sounded from very near.

Suddenly the great doors on the far side of the chamber opened to left and right. For some moments Leothric saw nothing move, and waited clutching Sacnoth. Then Wong Bongeroke came towards him, breathing.

This was the last and faithfulest guard of Gaznak, and came from slobbering just now his master's hand.

More as a child than a dragon was Gaznak wont to treat him, giving him often in his fingers tender pieces of man all smoking from his table.

Long and low was Wong Bongerok, and subtle about the eyes, and he came breathing malice against Leothric out of his faithful breast, and behind him roared the armoury of his tail, as when sailors drag the cable of the anchor all rattling down the deck.

And well Wong Bongerok knew that he now faced Sacnoth, for it had been his wont to prophesy quietly to himself for many years as he lay curled at the feet of Gaznak.

And Leothric stepped forward into the blast of his breath, and lifted Sacnoth to strike.

But when Sacnoth was lifted up, the eye of Tharagavverug in the butt of the hilt beheld the dragon and perceived his subtlety.

For he opened his mouth wide, and revealed to Leothric the ranks of his sabre teeth, and his leather gums flapped upwards. But while Leothric made to smite at his head, he shot forward scorpion-wise over his head the length of his armoured tail. All this the eye perceived in the hilt of Sacnoth, who smote suddenly sideways. Not with the edge smote Sacnoth, for, had he done so, the severed end of the tail had still come hurtling on, as some pine tree that the avalanche has hurled point foremost from the cliff right through the broad breast of some mountaineer. So had Leothric been transfixed; but Sacnoth smote sideways with the flat of his blade, and sent the tail whizzing over Leothric's left shoulder; and it rasped

upon his armour as it went, and left a groove upon it. Sideways then Leothric smote the foiled tail of Wong Bongerok, and Sacnoth parried, and the tail went shrieking up the blade and over Leothric's head. Then Leothric and Wong Bongerok fought sword to tooth, and the sword smote as only Sacnoth can, and the evil faithful life of Wong Bongerok the dragon went out through the wide wound.

Then Leothric walked on past that dead monster, and the armoured body still quivered a little. And for a while it was like all the ploughshares in a county working together in one field behind tired and struggling horses; then the quivering ceased, and Wong Bongerok lay still to rust.

And Leothric went on to the open gates, and Sacnoth dripped quietly along the floor.

By the open gates through which Wong Bongerok had entered, Leothric came into a corridor echoing with music. This was the first place from which Leothric could see anything above his head, for hitherto the roof had ascended to mountainous heights and had stretched indistinct in the gloom. But along the narrow corridor hung huge bells low and near to his head, and the width of each brazen bell was from wall to wall, and they were one behind the other. And as he passed under each the bell uttered, and its voice was mournful and deep, like to the voice of a bell speaking to a man for the last time when he is newly dead. Each bell uttered once as Leothric came under it, and their voices sounded solemnly and wide apart

at ceremonious intervals. For if he walked slow, these bells came closer together, and when he walked swiftly they moved further apart. And the echoes of each bell tolling above his head went on before him whispering to the others. Once when he stopped they all jangled angrily till he went on again.

Between these slow and boding notes came the sound of the magical musicians. They were playing a dirge now very mournfully.

And at last Leothric came to the end of the Corridor of the Bells, and beheld there a small black door. And all the corridor behind him was full of the echoes of the tolling, and they all muttered to one another about the ceremony; and the dirge of the musicians came floating slowly through them like a procession of foreign elaborate guests, and all of them boded ill to Leothric.

The black door opened at once to the hand of Leothric, and he found himself in the open air in a wide court paved with marble. High over it shone the moon, summoned there by the hand of Gaznak.

There Gaznak slept, and around him sat his magical musicians, all playing upon strings. And even sleeping Gaznak was clad in armour, and only his wrists and face and neck were bare.

But the marvel of that place was the dreams of Gaznak; for beyond the wide court slept a dark abyss, and into the abyss there poured a white cascade of

marble stairways, and widened out below into terraces and balconies with fair white statues on them, and descended again in a wide stairway, and came to lower terraces in the dark, where swart uncertain shapes went to and fro. All these were the dreams of Gaznak, and issued from his mind, and, becoming marble, passed over the edge of the abyss as the musicians played. And all the while out of the mind of Gaznak, lulled by that strange music, went spires and pinnacles beautiful and slender, ever ascending skywards. And the marble dreams moved slow in time to the music. When the bells tolled and the musicians played their dirge, ugly gargoyles came out suddenly all over the spires and pinnacles, and great shadows passed swiftly down the steps amid terraces, and there was hurried whispering in the abyss.

When Leothric stepped from the black door, Gaznak opened his eyes. He looked neither to left nor right, but stood up at once facing Leothric.

Then the magicians played a deathspell on their strings, and there arose a humming along the blade of Sacnoth as he turned the spell aside. When Leothric dropped not down, and they heard the humming of Sacnoth, the magicians arose and fled, all wailing, as they went, upon their strings.

Then Gaznak drew out screaming from its sheath the sword that was the mightiest in the world except for Sacnoth, and slowly walked towards Leothric; and he smiled as he walked, although his own dreams had foretold his doom. And when Leothric and Gaznak

came together, each looked at each, and neither spoke a word; but they smote both at once, and their swords met, and each sword knew the other and from whence he came. And whenever the sword of Gaznak smote on the blade of Sacnoth it rebounded gleaming, as hail from off slated roofs; but whenever it fell upon the armour of Leothric, it stripped it off in sheets. And upon Gaznak's armour Sacnoth fell oft and furiously, but ever he came back snarling, leaving no mark behind, and as Gaznak fought he held his left hand hovering close over his head. Presently Leothric smote fair and fiercely at his enemy's neck, but Gaznak, clutching his own head by the hair, lifted it high aloft, and Sacnoth went cleaving through an empty space. Then Gaznak replaced his head upon his neck, and all the while fought nimbly with his sword; and again and again Leothric swept with Sacnoth at Gaznak's bearded neck, and ever the left hand of Gaznak was quicker than the stroke, and the head went up and the sword rushed vainly under it.

And the ringing fight went on till Leothric's armour lay all round him on the floor and the marble was splashed with his blood, and the sword of Gaznak was notched like a saw from meeting the blade of Sacnoth. Still Gaznak stood unwounded and smiling still.

At last Leothric looked at the throat of Gaznak and aimed with Sacnoth, and again Gaznak lifted his head by the hair; but not at his throat flew Sacnoth, for Leothric struck instead at the lifted hand, and through

the wrist of it went Sacnoth whirring, as a scythe goes through the stem of a single flower.

And bleeding, the severed hand fell to the floor; and at once blood spurted from the shoulders of Gaznak and dripped from the fallen head, and the tall pinnacles went down into the earth, and the wide fair terraces all rolled away, and the court was gone like the dew, and a wind came and the colonnades drifted thence, and all the colossal halls of Gaznak fell. And the abysses closed up suddenly as the mouth of a man who, having told a tale, will for ever speak no more.

Then Leothric looked around him in the marshes where the night mist was passing away, and there was no fortress nor sound of dragon or mortal, only beside him lay an old man, wizened and evil and dead, whose head and hand were severed from his body.

And gradually over the wide lands the dawn was coming up, and ever growing in beauty as it came, like to the peal of an organ played by a master's hand, growing louder and lovelier as the soul of the master warms, and at last giving praise with all its mighty voice.

Then the birds sang, and Leothric went homeward, and left the marshes and came to the dark wood, and the light of the dawn ascending lit him upon his way. And into Allathurion he came ere noon, and with him brought the evil wizened head, and the people rejoiced, and their nights of trouble ceased.

This is the tale of the vanquishing of The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save For Sacnoth, and of its passing away, as it is told and believed by those who love the mystic days of old.

Others have said, and vainly claim to prove, that a fever came to Allathurion, and went away; and that this same fever drove Leothric into the marshes by night, and made him dream there and act violently with a sword.

And others again say that there hath been no town of Allathurion, and that Leothric never lived.

Peace to them. The gardener hath gathered up this autumn's leaves. Who shall see them again, or who wot of them? And who shall say what hath befallen in the days of long ago?

THE SECRET OF GLENWRAITH HALL

By Obsidian M. Tesla

Megan cursed angrily as the wheels of the little red van bounced from one waterlogged pot-hole to another, November rain battering the windshield as cleaning equipment rattled noisily in the rear compartment. Megan's companion, a surly eighteen-year-old called Hope, sat silently in the passenger seat, the steady drone of rock music emanating from earphones that were permanently lodged in her ears. Megan doubted she'd ever had more than four words out of the girl over the previous three times she'd worked with her. She seemed a moody little cow, all pent up teenage angst and Cleopatra-style eye make up.

The van followed the muddy track and stopped at a set of huge granite gateposts. The heavy wrought iron gates were open, the ancient cobbled driveway extending all the way up to the house. The sodden

ground beneath the van shook with the rumble of thunder as a fork of lightning split the dark pewter sky over their heads, illuminating Glenwraith Hall for a fleeting magnificent instant. This celestial snapshot revealed the silhouette of the Great Hall crouching in its grounds, lashed by curtains of freezing rain and set against the spectacular desolate backdrop of the Scottish Highlands.

“Bloody hell. The map says this is the place...just look at the size of it!” Megan grumbled, folding the now redundant map and putting it on the damp dashboard.

Hope switched off her MP3 player and gazed at the imposing building, her expression as enigmatic as ever.

“The woman who owns this place only wants the ground floor cleaning...thank God for that. How many rooms do you think there are?”

Hope shrugged despondently without hazarding a guess and Megan sighed loudly, shaking her head in exasperation. “Sometimes I wonder why I bother talking to you at all...I really do! I’ll park up and you can take the gear out the van.” She just wanted to get inside and was not willing to catch hypothermia getting the gear out in this winter deluge. Besides, she was Hope’s senior and this was a matter of ‘staff delegation.’ She smiled smugly to herself as the van pulled up by the doors, unaware of the eyes watching

them from behind discoloured lace curtains as she ran out to ring the bell by the huge oak door.

“Hello, my name is Estelle Rycroft.” The voice was softly spoken, definitely English, but with a hint of something else in the accent, possibly Middle Eastern? The woman the voice belonged to was no more than thirty years of age. She had waist length straight black hair, flawless pale skin and striking green eyes. Her high, well defined cheekbones accentuated her warm smile as she introduced herself. She was wearing a long finely woven purple silk dress which fell to her slender bare feet, with intricate floral designs on the neckline and sleeves. “Do come in...the weather is dreadful.” She opened the door wider, an invitation for the women to enter.

Megan hated her instantly. She was probably some stuck-up toff from London who'd moved up north and was living off a wheezing geriatric sugar-daddy who had worked ‘in the City.’ Folk like her were buying up all the decent property, even converting old barns and making it harder for locals like herself to make ends meet or get on the housing ladder.

Estelle added, “I was wondering if you could clean in the library, hallway and drawing room today.” As she spoke, she gestured towards a room through an ornate archway and two of the three closed doors leading from the hall.

Megan just nodded in reply.

“If you need anything just give me a shout. I’ll be in the kitchen.” Estelle smiled more broadly, her bright eyes scrutinizing the older woman momentarily before moving gracefully down the hall and through the archway.

Megan muttered, “Hippy freak,” under her breath as a soaking Hope struggled through the door, her freezing arms clutching wet mops and plastic buckets.

The library was vast. She noticed that the massive bay window was made of old stained glass, each piece fixed into place with strips of lead. The windows at the sides of the bay were made of clear glass, but the flat central panel facing her depicted a strange image. The picture was of a white tree or vine, with ornate flowers on it and little pink birds resting on its branches. The twisted vine was planted in some kind of box that seemed to be giving off beams of light that extended outwards to the window frame, like rays of sunlight in a child’s drawing. The rain drumming incessantly against the glass sounded like frantic fingers tapping on its surface, desperate to escape the storm outside. Megan shivered and moved over to the desk. It looked hundreds of years old, hand crafted oak panels with crude brass handles. As she quickly wiped a duster over it, she noticed a small animal skull resting on top of a sheaf of papers. It looked like a cat’s skull, with its sharp eye-teeth and large eye sockets blindly staring at her.

The bookshelves lining the walls were crammed with old books, most bound in dark leather. Megan

couldn't understand why anyone would want so many books. She briefly scanned the titles as she pretended to dust between them. Some were on Greek and Roman history, others were on witchcraft, witch trials and Scottish folklore. A few were written in some funny language she couldn't even read. All rubbish! She pulled a small book off the shelf and opened it at a random page, her eyes transfixed by the ancient drawing on the yellowed paper. The ink picture seemed hand drawn and was of a monk tied to a stake. He was surrounded by flames and there were naked figures dancing around the fire, arms raised in wild celebration. Her eyes were drawn to the expression on his tortured face, his eyes looking upwards to the heavens for salvation.

The roar of thunder and a dazzling flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the stained glass window behind her, throwing her shadow the full length of the room.

Megan nearly dropped the book in shock, slapping it shut and stuffing it back on the shelf, her heart pounding. "Jesus Christ! Bloody storm..."

Hope, who was dusting a suit of armour standing against the opposite wall, looked over at her.

"Let's just get this job done." She heard a slight nervous tremor in her own voice, adrenaline still pouring through her veins. "Have you heard the rumour about this place?"

The girl shook her head indicating that she hadn't and turned her MP3 player off.

Megan put the duster down and lowered her voice to little more than a whisper. There was nothing she liked more than a good gossip, especially when the subject matter was as mysterious as this and when she had a captive audience to hand.

“Well, I met Maggie Nesbit in the pub last Saturday night. I told her we had this job on and she told me this place was haunted! Load of old cobblers I think, but Maggie did this job last month for the first time and refused to come back again. She left the village a few days ago and hasn't been seen since.” She nodded at the girl as if to emphasise this last point and checked her watch. “Anyhow, it's time we started on the hall.”

The hall carpet was deep burgundy in colour and very thick, muffling their footfalls as they walked over it. Megan turned to Hope and said, “You carry on dusting the skirting boards. I'll polish the mirror and do the suits of armour.” She polished an antique side table then came to a large full-length mirror in a bronze frame which was next to one of the closed doors. As she polished the mirror, she heard a noise from behind the door that sounded like a muffled groan. Her arm stopped polishing, yellow duster held inches away from the glass as she strained to hear another sound. Was it just her imagination? She could hear her own heartbeat as she held out her free hand, reaching towards the door handle in slow motion.

Slim white fingers gently touched her shoulder, making her drop her duster in surprise.

Estelle Rycroft was standing right behind her. “The library looks so much better. I was wondering if you and Hope could make a start in the drawing room now? I have friends coming over tonight.”

Megan bent down to retrieve the duster, feeling foolish for being so skittish. “I just thought I heard something in that room...”

“That room is empty. It’s just a guest room.” Estelle’s smile faded slightly, a hard note creeping into her voice. “I don’t need it cleaning. If you could start on the drawing room...?” The question hung in the air, sounding more like an order with each passing second. Megan just nodded, avoiding eye contact and shuffled through the archway, followed by Hope.

The drawing room was more lavishly furnished than the other rooms they had been in. The heat radiating from the huge open fire hit them as soon as they entered, the flames casting long writhing shadows across the walls. There were two brass lamps with dull bulbs each end of the room, but the extreme corners were in near darkness. The fire surround, which acted as a centrepiece to the room, caught Megan’s attention first. It was sculpted from

black marble, with serpents carved up each side coiled around Grecian pillars.

Then she saw the plant to the left of the fireplace, set back in an alcove. It looked like a vine, with thick white runners trailing up the wall. There were flowers that looked like lilies growing along each vine and small dark red berries that hung in tight clusters. She stood there for a second taking it in as Hope started polishing a sideboard on the other side of the room. The thicker stems lower down the plant had red veins that stood out prominently from the milk white stalks. The flowers were mostly white in colour, but had subtle pinks and reds mixed into the edges of their delicate silky petals.

Megan turned to Hope, “Hey! Look at this. You ever see a plant like this?”

The girl ignored her, seemingly engrossed in her duties, deafened by the buzz of music that Megan could clearly make out from the other side of the room.

Megan shook her head, turning away from the girl and moved closer to the plant, now fascinated by the strange container it grew out of. It was about three feet long and eighteen inches wide and looked to be made from some sort of metal. The box was crudely made but was obviously very old, possibly even older than the house itself. In terms of colour it was somewhere between silver and bronze. With the soil it had inside, it would take at least two men to lift it

and she tried to guess what it was. Perhaps it had been some kind of medieval treasure chest?

The outside of the box was engraved with some sort of complex design. Megan took a step closer, straining her eyes to make out the shapes in the half-light. The more she looked at it, the less clear it became, lines blending into swirls and vague contours. There was also an unpleasant smell coming from the plant that Megan recognised, a smell that reminded her of rotten meat. The idea of spraying the plant with air freshener ran through her mind when she suddenly remembered the stained glass window in the library. This was the plant in the window! The pattern on the box caught her eye again, the swirls seeming to come together to form recognisable shapes...

“I thought you might be thirsty so I made you some drinks.” Estelle drifted into the room and Hope jumped up so quickly that her earphones fell out, an expression on the girl’s face that Megan recognised as raw fear. Estelle placed a tray of drinks on a table and gestured for the cleaners to sit down on the sofa.

Megan took a seat opposite Estelle, who curled up on an oriental couch and tucked her bare feet under herself in an almost feline manner. Hope sat silently next to Megan on the sofa, looking down at the hot drinks. Megan decided to break the ice. “I was just looking at your plant. I’ve not seen one of those before.” She leaned forwards and took a sip of her sweet coffee. Somehow she always felt

uncomfortable making small talk with wealthy clients.

Estelle smiled more broadly. “Yes, I had it imported at great expense. It’s very old, though not as old as the box is.” Her bright green eyes shimmered in the amber glow of the fire, seeming to scan Megan’s face for signs of emotion.

“Where’s it from?” Megan sipped her coffee, the warmth of the fire seeming to flow under her skin, warming her from within.

“Oh, it’s just something I picked up on my travels many years ago. It originated from the area that was to later become Persia. I collect old items. You could call it my hobby...my idle passion.” Estelle lifted a small crystal glass filled with red liquid from the tray. “You can distil a liquor from the berries of the plant.” She raised the glass by way of example. “It’s quite delicious.”

A rustling noise made the cleaners look up. Megan saw movement on one of the vine’s translucent stalks. A tiny pink bird hopped along the vine, quickly joined by two others that emerged from behind one of the blooms. Megan blinked in disbelief, a slight mist drifting through her mind as she felt her fingers start to tingle.

“Ahhh...my babies!” Estelle’s face lit up with delight as she extended her slim right arm. One of the birds jumped from the vine, fluttering down towards

her. It stopped in front of her hand, hovering in mid air like a humming bird.

Megan stared at it, her mind starting to generate fear through the fog. The drugged coffee fell from her numb hand, the china cup shattering on the floor. After the noise of the cup breaking she could hear the throbbing beat of its tiny wings. She struggled to form words, her mouth opening silently in wonderment.

“These are my other hobby, my finches. I look after them myself in my aviary. I think they’re hungry. Are you hungry, my babies?” Estelle talked to them like children as two more hopped off the vine and took flight.

Megan noticed more of them jostling for space near the ceiling. She saw more clearly the peculiar shape of the creature hovering next to Estelle. It had a body shaped somewhat like a bird’s, but its beak was long and viciously sharp. Instead of feathers, its body was covered in pale pink scales, a carapace that resembled the exterior of a ghastly mutated prawn. Thin legs dangled beneath it as it turned its unnatural face towards Hope.

Estelle turned to the girl. “Could you be a dear and feed my babies?”

Hope silently got to her feet and rolled up the sleeves of her uniform as high as they’d go, holding both slim arms out in front of her. The gesture was both submissive and hideous to behold.

Megan looked frantically around the room, her eyes once again alighting on the strange box. The design slowly took the shape of human figures, screaming tortured faces and torn limbs. She could make out leering horned devils and shredded torsos, skewered through with pitchforks and barbed lances. It was a vision of Hell.

The creature nearest Estelle darted at Hope, landing on her right forearm. Two more landed on her other arm whilst another hovered by her exposed neck. The first stuck its beak into her skin like a syringe. As if this were a signal, the others all drove their beaks hungrily into the girl's flesh as more of them fluttered down to feed.

Megan struggled to her feet, feeling as if she were going to vomit. She stumbled into the table and lurched towards the archway, making for the hall. She ran blindly, gripped by pure terror, her vision spinning out of focus. She crashed into the full length mirror, groping for any door handle that could offer salvation. She found one, tearing at it frantically until it opened and she tumbled through, hitting something hard and knocking it over. The sight before her made her scream.

She was standing in the forbidden downstairs room. Lying on a bed, tied firmly down with a length of old hemp rope, was Maggie Nesbit. Every inch of the woman's exposed body was covered with puncture marks. Between the matted locks of grey

hair that masked her face Megan could see that Maggie's eyes had been pecked out, jelly from the burst eyeballs dried to her sunken waxy cheeks. The emaciated face slowly turned to face Megan, the mouth opening and closing wordlessly, exposing a bleeding tongue and cracked gums, lips moving in silent agony like a weeping sphincter. The only sound that emanated from Maggie was a liquid hissing that ended in a quiet forlorn moan.

Megan's stomach gave up its fight as she fled from the room, smashing into a suit of armour in the hallway. She tumbled over her own feet, the dark shape of the armour falling, the sound of crashing metal, the blade of a pike-staff falling down towards her screaming upturned hysterical face.

“Megan.” The voice softly coaxed her from unconsciousness. “Megan.”

Her eyes opened slowly.

Estelle sat opposite her with Hope by her side, two creatures still feasting on the girl's arm. Hope was covered in small weeping puncture wounds. “Are you familiar with the legend of Pandora's Box, Megan?” Estelle took a sip from her glass.

Megan was lying on the sofa, but felt herself drifting into shock. One of the creatures flew from Hope's arm and hovered in front of the plant, moving closer to the flower. It probed its long beak carefully into the bloom, injecting some of the blood into the

centre of the petals. The red veins spread further down the stem with this new infusion.

“Pandora had a box, Megan...a box she should never have opened. Inside were creatures that swept across the ancient world like a deadly biblical plague.” Estelle nodded towards the metal box then leaned forward, her full lips and perfect teeth stained red by the sticky drink. “But my name was never really Pandora. Like with Chinese whispers, these ancient stories become distorted over the passage of time as they pass from one civilisation to another. I struck a bargain with my charges...immortality, if I keep both them and the tree of life well fed. Look upon it as the best gardening job in history.”

Her girlish laughter seemed to echo in Megan’s spinning mind, seeming to fill her head completely.

“Young Hope here is my watering can...my little helper. She is a being not unlike myself and is bound to me for all of eternity.” She stroked Hope’s hand lovingly. The silent girl was engrossed in feeding one of the creatures from her wrist. “She also brings us a steady supply of guests to my home...a steady supply of food.” Estelle smiled one last time and made a clucking sound.

Megan heard the desperate beating of eager wings, felt tiny clawed feet scuttling all over her body. The last thing she saw was the multitude of tiny black eyes hungrily swarming towards her screaming face.

OLAF STAPLEDON AND I by Gavin Chappell

I first became interested in Olaf Stapledon as a writer. He's hardly a household name, even in the kind of household where science fiction writers are often mentioned. But in his day, he was incredibly influential. His book *Star Maker* describes an epic mental journey across the entire cosmos, travelling from planet to planet to planet, which begins and ends on a suburban hillside, and has inspired not only countless science fiction writers, but inventors also. My interest in him as a man grew, however, when I discovered that I *knew* that suburban hillside very well. In fact, I now live on its very slopes, and less than ten minute's walk away is the house in which Stapledon lived for much of his married life. I became increasingly interested in him both as a writer and as a local figure, and so I decided to learn more about him.

Stapledon was born on 10 May 1886, in Wallasey, Wirral, in North West England. His full name was William Olaf, but everyone always called him Olaf. Despite spending much of his early years in Port Said, he lived in Wirral for the best part of his life. Even when he became a successful literary figure, Stapledon remained in Wirral, living in West Kirby (where the current writer now lives) for many years before building his own house in a nearby village.

As a science fiction writer, he is highly influential, if perhaps not the most accessible. His two greatest works, *Last and First Men*, and *Star Maker*, describe vast epochs of future history or immense expanses of space. Civilisations rise and fall, and the individual is insignificant in the face of infinity. Although individual characters are often blotted out by the vast scope of his imagination, Stapledon's own somewhat provincial life informs them – including his years in Wirral. Despite the wildness of his imagination, he always drew on personal experience for his inspiration.

Mere paragraphs in both works have been taken as the inspiration for entire science fiction works by other writers and indeed inventors. Freeman Dyson invented the Dyson Sphere after being inspired by *Star Maker*. Others found Stapledon a source of negative inspiration: CS Lewis cites Stapledon, with his Socialist, agnostic (and, it has to be admitted, imperialist) view of the universe as one reason why he wrote his Christian science fiction Space Trilogy, to propagate his contrary *Weltanschauung*. Stapledon

is said to have been the inspiration for the villain Professor Weston. Lewis, like JRR Tolkien, was a regular visitor to Wirral resident and fellow-Inkling Roger Lancelyn Green, but there is no evidence that Lewis and Stapledon ever met. However, in a talk given in Manchester in October 1948, Stapledon mentioned Lewis's *Space Trilogy* as one of his favourite works of science fiction.

In 1936, Stapledon gave a brief autobiographical sketch to the *Saturday Review of Literature*, in which he said that he was

...born in the Wirral, across the water from Liverpool. The Wirral has nearly always been my headquarters. I now live at the opposite corner of the peninsula, across the water from Wales.

The area of his birth was Poulton-cum-Seacombe, of which he saw little, spending his first six years in Port Said in Egypt, where his father worked as the manager of a shipping firm. After Stapledon's father returned from Port Said in 1901, they moved into a house in West Kirby, 2 Marine Park. Ten years later, as the family fortunes continued to burgeon, they bought a house on Caldy Hill named Annery. From here an observer could look north across West Kirby and to the sea, and west across the Dee estuary to the mountains of Wales. Caldy Hill came to have great significance in Stapledon's work.

Stapledon was educated in various schools in Liverpool, before going to Abbotsholme School, a utopian private school that emphasised physical fitness as much as intellectual rigour and inspired Stapledon to remain highly active for his entire life. This was followed by Baliol College, Oxford, where he graduated with an MA in 1913.

For some time after graduation, Stapledon was at a loose end as to a career (so was I!). His Socialist inclinations and the inspiration provided by nearby Port Sunlight inspired him to toy with a career as an architect. His parents discouraged him, since this would require further schooling. He worked briefly in shipping and education, with little success, by his own admission, and had his first book published, a collection of poetry entitled *Latter-Day Psalms*, before the outbreak of World War One. As a conscientious objector, he did not join up, but instead became a driver in the Friends' Ambulance Unit.

On his return from the war, Stapledon married his cousin, Agnes Miller. He had loved her since childhood. However, he was later to carry on affairs with her unenthusiastic acquiescence, and to immortalise her in *Star Maker* as “merely a useful, but often infuriating adjunct” to his personal life. They had two children, Mary (born 1920) and John (born 1923). As a wedding present Stapledon's father gave them the house on Grosvenor Avenue that appears in *Star Maker*, described as a “mean little villa” in the posthumously published early draft known as *Nebula Maker*. It is in West Kirby, across

the road from Ashton Park, on whose lake Stapledon sailed the model boats he enjoyed making for his children. Personally, I think it looks quite nice.

After the war, Stapledon spent much of his time lecturing extramurally for the University of Liverpool and for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). At the same time, he was studying towards the Ph. D. in philosophy that he was awarded in 1925. His next book, *A Modern Theory of Ethics* (1929), failed to ensure him a regular post at a university, and this lack of academic success may have been one reason why he turned to writing fiction. Ironically, his "speculative fiction" made him the most influential philosopher Merseyside has produced.

His first novel was published in 1930. The initial inspiration for *Last and First Men* came to him while watching seals from the cliffs of Llanbadrig peninsula during a family outing to Anglesey in the summer of 1928. He later compared his Anglesey vision with the experience of "stout Cortez" in Keats's poem:

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific - and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise -
Silent upon a peak in Darien.*

The seals he saw on the rocks below were sunning themselves and squealing when the waves hit and they were drenched in spray, and their vulnerability

seemed almost human to Stapledon. According to his later book *The Opening of the Eyes*, it was then that he “had a sudden fantasy of man’s whole future, aeon upon aeon of strange vicissitudes and gallant endeavours in world after world...”

The resulting work described the future history of the human race until its last days inhabiting Neptune after two billion years of mutation and evolution, during which it has navigated such hazards and horrors as invasion from Mars and even “an Americanized planet.” The Llanbadrig seals directly inspired the “fifth men,” who live on Venus after Earth has become uninhabitable, and adapt to the planet’s watery conditions. However, their descendants, the flying men who represent the seventh evolution of humanity now living on Venus, were inspired by the seabirds of the Dee estuary, which Olaf, a keen ornithologist, studied and watched for much of his life.

Stapledon wrote *Last and First Men* in West Kirby, in an attic study at his house in Grosvenor Avenue. He would write until eleven in the morning, when he had tea with his wife and daughter, sometimes telling them about his labours. Agnes also worked as proofreader and critic, looking through his many drafts with “devastating sanity.”

Last and First Men was hailed as a “masterpiece” by none other than JB Priestley. Its sequel, *Last Men in London*, was a semi-autobiographical work examining the condition of modern man. This was

followed by *Odd John*, a story of a mutant superhuman, John Wainwright, who establishes a utopian colony of other superhumans which is ultimately destroyed by normal society. This theme is reiterated yet reversed in his later work *Sirius* (1944) where a dog appears as the superior being. However, this book was preceded by Stapledon's magnum opus.

Star Maker, which takes its reader on a journey away from Earth, out across the entire universe and back again, begins with its narrator, after a domestic argument, going up onto the hill behind his house. The bleakness of the scene echoes Dante at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, "midway through the journey of our life." The narrator describes the heather-clad hilltop, the suburb below, the "curtained windows" of his home, the hills, the sea. Thus far, it is autobiographical: the hill is Caldly Hill, which is also the hill behind my own house; the house is 7 Grosvenor Avenue in West Kirby. The surrounding landscape consists of Wirral, Wales, and the Irish Sea.

From the hilltop, the narrator travels outwards on a mental journey across the limitless wastes of space, encountering world after world, alien race after alien race, galactic empires and worlds at war. One place he reaches is the "other Earth," a world very much like our own at the time of writing, the late 1930s. The place where he lands on this other Earth is described as "a maritime country in the temperate zone, a brilliantly green peninsula": in fact, a parallel Wirral: perhaps the only such example in all the annals of science fiction.

On his eventual return from the immensity of infinity to the littleness of Caldly Hill, following his encounter with the super-divine Star Maker, the narrator experiences a vision of the entire world on the brink of global war. The novel ends with a description of the land below him, West Kirby and the surrounding area.

While *Last and First Men* had been hailed as a masterpiece, *Star Maker*, as Stapledon had predicted, raised “thunder on the Left and on the Right.” On the political and religious right, CS Lewis was quick to disapprove of the book, whose depiction of an entirely amoral deity was “sheer devil-worship” to his mind.

Later works included the previously mentioned *Sirius*, and *Darkness and the Light*, which shows two alternative futures for the human race. Stapledon also wrote *Death into Life*, *The Flames* and *A Man Divided*, while *The Opening of the Eyes* and *Four Encounters* were published posthumously. *The Opening of the Eyes* includes a chapter, echoing the beginning of *Star Maker*, where the narrator goes up onto Caldly Hill but its title “The Heavens Declare – Nothing” suggest a bleak and entirely godless universe.

Caldly Hill was very dear to Stapledon, and he, along with Sir A V Paton and other local benefactors, was one of the people who “had the imagination and the

courage to save this natural beauty spot from the builder as a heritage for the people for all time.”1[1]

In 1940, Stapledon built his own house at Simon’s Field on Barton Hey Road in Caldby, where he lived until his death. In 1949, he reached international prominence, even notoriety, when his Socialist convictions led to his participation in the Soviet backed Cultural and Scientific Conference for Peace, in New York.

According to Patrick A McCarthy, to his neighbours he seemed “a friendly fellow, rather eccentric” who apparently “swam in the lake at all times of year.” Lakes are in short supply in West Kirby: if he swam in the lake in Ashton Park (or the Marine Lake, for that matter), it is no wonder he was considered an eccentric. When he was in his fifties, his neighbours were amazed to see him, cracking the ice on the estuary to go for a swim in January. One of his short stories, (*East is West* written in 1934) set in a parallel West Kirby in a world where the Chinese and Japanese have become the dominant culture, also describes him swimming in the estuary.

The Dee certainly was important to him; as a keen birdwatcher, like fellow West Kirby writer Norman “Nomad” Ellison, the ornithology of the area fascinated him, and as mentioned previously, the estuary birds provided the inspiration for his avian race of humans in *Last and First Men*. His reputation

for eccentricity and extravagant “keep-fit” was a legacy of his Abbotsholme education, and in his diary (5th Jan 1914), Stapledon records that he “Ran in storm & hail to Oxton & back, being paced part way back by a cyclist. It was about 13 miles. All the while I could have shouted for joy.”

Despite this, at the age of 64 he suffered a coronary heart occlusion that led to his death. He was cremated at Landican Crematorium, where the vice-chancellor of Liverpool University gave the eulogy. After his death, in accordance with his will, his family took his ashes from Simon’s Field, over the railway bridge, across the golf course, and then scattered them on the low cliffs overlooking the Dee, where the birds Stapledon had loved in life still soared, like the fantastic seventh race of humanity he had prophesied in *Last and First Men*.

The railway in question has been a public footpath since before I was born. Simon’s Field still stands, as does the railway bridge. Birds still wheel above the Dee estuary, although its marshes have spread since Stapledon’s days, almost as far as West Kirby. Caldy Hill remains the heather-clad hillside from which Stapledon’s nameless narrator ascended into the cosmos on his epic journey to meet the equally nameless Star Maker. I often walk there myself.

I have yet to encounter the Star Maker.

A DAY OF DARKNESS by R Todd Woodstock

The news was everywhere. Strange, luminous phenomena had filled the night skies for the past couple of nights. Different colored rays streaked a rainbow show for the townspeople to view. It kept many folk up late, wondering what marvelous creations of light had invaded their tiny community.

Dave Madison owned the local diner and had heard many talking about the bizarre events over fried eggs and toast in his establishment. This talk was different from discussions about Fred Miller's corn cobs and how he had won several awards for its astounding sweet taste, or how Bessy May was elected to the P.T.A. No, this was different from the regular gossip that occurred at the D.M. Diner. Many were curious to find out more about this amazing spectacle, which had the entire town in a state of

perplexity.

“So whatcha think ‘bout what’s causing dem lights to going on, Dave?” Bill Markem questioned, with his lack of schooling background.

Not many were educated in the town of Willowby, but Bill was probably one of the least educated. His parents started raising pigs long before Bill was born and he quit school at an extremely early age (10 to be exact), to utilize his years of swine knowledge to assist with the family farm. His kindness certainly overshadowed his lack of intelligence, but his stink hindered others from noticing his gentle demeanor.

This didn’t keep Dave Madison from Bill’s warm personality and inept conversations. As a matter of fact, Dave enjoyed Bill’s company and hospitable attitude, even if Bill was often teased for his absence of a bath and his sloppy appearance by the kids of the town. It made Dave feel compassion for Bill’s livelihood and made him realize how lucky he was to have gone to fine schools in a generous city. It was the kind of person Dave was, a good man who left his diner doors open to anyone, noticing only the inside of every individual and not the outside cover. This is what brought Dave and his family to Willowby nearly five years ago when he was searching for a quaint, little town to open a small diner. Many came from miles around to taste his menu. He felt the city had offered too much hostility and self-indulgence.

“I really don’t know, but I’ve been watching the television lately and we aren’t the only ones experiencing this kind of phenomenon. I saw on the news that sightings have been occurring in different parts of the world,” Dave said.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed it, too,” interrupted Max Warecore, another local from Willowby and a regular at the D.M. Diner. “I saw the same type of lights over there in Canada and Nova...something or other from the T.V.”

“Nova Scotia. It’s an island off the coast of Canada. Do you want some more coffee, Max?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, I’ll have some more. Thanks.”

Dave grabbed a glass pot that was half empty and poured some black water into a white cup that sat in front of Max. “Have either one of you noticed different attitudes since the lights have appeared?”

“Whatcha mean, Dave?” Bill inquired.

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but doesn’t it seem like the town folk are beginning to get a little edgy? Like they are impatient or easily irritable?”

Max shook his head. “No, not really. Oh, now wait a minute, now that you mention it, yeah, I do think there is. I was walking through town and remembered I had to get something at Joe Billing’s Pharmacy, a prescription, so I turned quick and bumped into Fred Miller. Well, Fred didn’t appreciate me bumpin’ into him, if ya know what I mean. He

called me every name in the book. I mean words I never heard Fred say.” Max lowered his voice and leaned forward. “He even called me a filthy, diseased cunt.”

“Fred said that?” Dave’s eyes blew open.

“Sure enough did; couldn’t believe my ears.”

“Damn, Fred’s da most Christian man I do know,” Bill moved his head back and forth. “I can’t believe he’d say somedin’ like dat.”

“That is amazing. It’s got me worried,” Dave looked at both of them. “There has to be some type of connection between the lights and what you just explained about what Fred did, but what?”

All three men continued to ponder about Mr. Miller’s reactions and the strange lights that entered the night skies above the small town of Willowby.

As the days continued, so did the uncharacteristic dispositions. Simple conversation turned to arguments and half the time conflict would occur right on the streets of the normally sweet, little town. Churches began to feel the effects of the personality changes from the town folk. Just as the churches were nearly empty at Sunday Mass, the streets were becoming nearly just as vacant, for so many had slept in from observing the extravaganza of bright colors that scattered the night. This was needed as time had passed, due to the intense animosity that plagued the

community. The more individuals were inebriated with the night-time fireworks, the stronger grew the compulsion to view. Daytime became a sleep period to many. The night was activity, but with apathy toward one another, and at times, increased tension between loved ones. The urge to continue with the happy lifestyle that once thrived had created a downward spiral of hate toward the majority of the town. Each and every soul was beginning to turn inside and out.

Bill strolled into D.M. Diner with his head down as he approached his normal counter seat. A familiar but disgusting scent filled the counter area as he sat down. Bill's flannel shirt appeared wet.

"Bill, you need some coffee?" Dave asked and then had a sour look on his face within seconds.

"Damn, kids. I'm really, really gettin' sick of da game playin' they do on me." Bill looked extremely upset.

"Holy heck! What did happen to you, Bill? You smell like piss," Max blurted from two seats away and holding his laughter in.

"It is piss," Bill said. "They trew it at me."

"Who threw what at you?" questioned Dave.

"Piss, they trew piss at me. Those damn kids trew piss at me. I didn't believe 'em at first, but then I did smell it comin' off strong."

"Who threw the urine at you, do you know, Bill? Because we can definitely get the sheriff involved."

Dave had a concerned look in his eyes, as he began to walk toward the phone.

“Naw, I have saw ‘em before, but I doenst know who they be. I haven’t got any names to think of either. I just doenst understand why they do such a thing.”

Max stopped jiggling from holding in his laughter. He saw the pain in Bill’s eyes. He listened to what Dave was saying.

“See, this is what we talked about yesterday. It’s gotten worse. Those kids would have never done such a horrible act if something strange wasn’t going on.”

“I know, I haven’t been witnessing those crazy lights for the past month, because they start a-glowin’ so late at night, but I did get a little might curious last night and I took me a peek,” Max said.

“And what did you see? Because personally I haven’t seen them yet, except what I’ve viewed on the television for the same reason.”

“It’s kinda eerie-like. Like some kinda weird travel away from here. It don’t even seem like you’re in Willowby no more. The lights is beautiful and I guess that’s why folks is makin’ such a fuss over ‘em, ‘cause they are so beautiful. It keeps you wanting to keep viewin’, like something is pullin’ ya to keep viewing. I never felt nothing like it. It was like some kinda magnetinetic pull or something or other.”

“Magnetic pull. It has the individual allured to the peculiar colored lights.”

“Sounds like some kinda trance or somedin’ like dat,” Bill blurted.

Suddenly, tornado sirens began blaring throughout the streets of the small community and interrupted the conversation. There were only a couple more patrons in the D.M. Diner, but all were alarmed by the signals. Within minutes, a red pickup with “Willowby Fire Department” printed on the doors slowly migrated down the center of town.

“Please head to your homes, this is not a drill. The mayor has issued a twenty-four hour curfew for all residents of Willowby. Please go to your homes. This is not a drill,” announced an attached loud speaker from the truck. It continued to announce the regulation, as it moved out of sight.

“Well, don’t that just beat all,” Max stated. “I had some serious work to get done at the Mullford Farm.”

Dave turned the television on, which was placed in the corner of the restaurant to see what was on the news. There was a picture of the strange lights that absorbed the screen. He turned up the volume. “...This is the scene from the night skies over Paris, France,” the anchorman said. “These strange lights have continued to mystify the scientific community and all that have witnessed the bizarre events. There have been many that have claimed to notice the phenomenon for over a month now in certain parts of the U.S. and other portions of the world. We’ve received reports in the past few minutes that an

eclipse is to take place within the hour, and it will be viewed from all over the world. The public is to be aware that the eclipse is not to be watched with the naked eye. The intense rays may blind within seconds of witnessing. It is important that all individuals remain indoors. Although scientists and physicians have not confirmed this to be true at this point, they have stated it is possible and to remain indoors...”

“I guess I’m headin’ home then.” Max had a look of disgust on his face. He got up from his seat. “I’ll see ya later. Hopefully this won’t last long, I got a lotta work to get done at the Mullford Farm. Oh, and ah, Bill, take a bath will ya.”

“Tanks a lot,” Bill smiled, as Max left through the front door.

“Yeah, I’ll see ya, Max. Okay folks, I’m closin’ up the shop. You heard the newscaster and the fire department; it’s time for everyone to go home.” Dave flipped the “Open” sign. “That means you too Bill, time to head home.”

“I know, I know. How long do you think dis will last, Dave?”

“I don’t know, but from what I’ve seen on normal eclipses, about a few minutes, but this isn’t anything normal. So there is no tellin’. As you heard, they want everyone off the street for twenty-four hours. I’m not sayin’ it’s gonna last that long, but it sure as hell is gonna be longer than a few minutes.”

Bill got up with the stains of urine streaked across

his flannel shirt. The odor was extremely pungent as he stood up. "Well, then I'm outta here. I'll see ya tamarra. Bye, Dave."

"Bye, Bill." Bill opened the front door and began exiting. Dave stopped him.

"Oh, and Bill, don't bother washing the shirt, just throw it out, okay," Dave smiled and winked at him.

Bill smiled back. "Oh, all right den."

Dave entered his house and his wife and two children were crowded around the television. This time there was a night sky view from Bangladesh. The cameras had panned down toward the people running in the streets. They were screaming in fear. Dave drew closer to the set.

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad you're home. It's just horrible," said his wife.

"Hi baby, I saw some of it at the diner."

"Dad, there's people going nuts over there. I watched some guy use a knife and slit his own throat on T.V." His son pointed to the screen.

"What?" Dave grabbed his wife's hand. "Melissa, is this true?"

"Yes, John and Sara were screaming at the T.V. when I was in the kitchen. That's when I ran out and saw what they were watching. I couldn't believe it. It looked like people were tryin' to kill themselves or something. It's horrible."

Just as he did at the diner, Dave increased the volume. A man with a microphone was standing in the middle of a crowded street. "...As you can see there is pandemonium in the streets of Dhaka, the capital. People don't know what's going on. The skies are lit up with these luminous streaks that are overpowering the surrounding areas. Chaos is what I call it, a total loss of control. One man attempted to gouge his eyes out with his own fingers, apparently to avoid looking at the strange glowing colors from above. A woman had tossed her child into a burning blaze for no reason and then began screaming. She then threw her body onto a metal fence. Jim, there have been scenes of violence in every part of the city here. It is totally inexplicable; rape and murder happening...I mean, it is just a difficult thing to see."

The lead anchorman questioned the field journalist. "Steve, are there any police on the streets trying to quiet the happenings down a bit or..."

"No, nothing Jim, it's as if no one cares. The only thing we have witnessed from some type of law and order has come from members of local churches, who have tried, but failed. It really is horrendous, Jim."

Again, the camera panned to see a group of people surrounding a female. They began tearing clothes from her as she tried to scream. Men and women grabbed whatever extremities they could from her and began pulling. One of her arms was torn away and thrown into a mob of another group of raging

people. They looked like starving animals, as the crowd sank their teeth into her. Blood sprayed from her neck and other parts of her body.

“Oh my dear God, Jim, can you see this?” His voice was shaken.

“Yes, yes we can, Steve.” Just then, the news crew from Bangladesh was cut off. “These were disturbing images from Dhaka, and I’m sure these had been difficult for anyone to view. This is happening in many parts of the world and to let us possibly understand a little better on what is occurring, is our news analyst, Robert Henry.

“Mr. Henry, can you give us an insight of what is going on, and is there some type of connection to these strange lights?”

“Well, I have done research in the field of the paranormal and there really is no explanation for what is happening; only speculation. It is possible the energy being transferred back and forth from the strange lighting may be interfering with rational decision making of some sort. As I said, I have no solid answers...”

Melissa turned to her husband. “Dave, I’m scared. What if these strange lights start affecting us here, what will we do?”

“I really don’t know.” Dave was in disarray. “I really don’t.”

The news was right and soon the sky began to get darker from the eclipse. Soon, Dave and Melissa

turned lights on in the house because it had gotten so dark outside. Both John and Sara ran to the windows.

“No, both of you away from the windows,” Dave demanded.

“Didn’t you see what was happening on the news? They let us know not to look at the eclipse, so both of you get away from the windows!” Melissa said firmly.

“But Mom, only for a second,” Sara pleaded.

“Are you nuts? Get away from the windows!” Melissa pointed to the carpet.

Both of them returned to the center of the living room. Suddenly, the lights and television went out. The whole room was dark. The kids screamed.

“Oh, great, just great,” Dave complained. “Okay, everyone remain calm. We need to try to find the flashlights or...”

“I know where the candles are,” Sara was proud to announce.

“Please go and get ‘em, okay sweetie,” Melissa said. “The matches are in the second drawer in the kitchen.”

Sara hurried to the kitchen with caution, as not to trip in the dark. She returned with the candles and matches. She had an alarmed look on her face when she returned. “Dad, I heard some noises coming from outside the kitchen door. They sounded close, like a banging.”

Melissa glanced at Dave with concern. They both

had an uneasy feeling about the noises, but after watching the news, Dave knew he had to investigate.

“I’ll check it out. Please just wait here,” Dave said.

Dave approached the kitchen with his heart pushing through his chest. Sara was right about the noises. They sounded right outside the kitchen door. A fierce scratching penetrated Dave’s ears and accelerated the closer he got to the door.

“Dave, what is it?” Melissa quietly asked from the next room. All three of them waited anxiously to find out from Dave.

“I still don’t know yet. But it’s weird; it sounds like growling sounds, too.”

Dave was at the door now and grabbed the handle slowly. The clawing grew magnificent as Dave rotated the knob. He looked up at the chain to ensure it was fastened, before fully turning the handle. Suddenly, the door blew open, but was halted by the metal links. Dave jolted backward and could hear the children scream from the action.

“Dave, Dave! Are you all right! Answer me!” Melissa cried out.

Snarling filled the room, as the door vibrated uncontrollably. Dave threw his body against the thrusting door. He could feel his blood racing throughout his veins. Melissa and the children were becoming more terrified from each sudden blow from the
unknown.

“Daddy, please stop it!” cried Sara.

“I’m tryin’! I don’t know if I can hold it. Melissa, grab something,” Dave demanded. Dave tried to glimpse through the window on the door, but continued to be bumped from his positioning.

“What?” Melissa searched, but was almost in tears.

The jolting almost forced Dave off the door. He knew if he was shoved back again, the chain lock would definitely give and whatever thing was on the other side had a pathway to his family and him.

“Anything!” he shouted.

Then the disturbance halted. The strange sounds from the opposite side also stopped. It was an eerie silence, but now Dave had an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity by peering through the window on the kitchen door. He was extremely vigilant in his efforts, because he remembered that not only did he need to fear what might still be lurking on the other side of the door, but also he couldn’t view the eclipse.

Slowly, he raised his head enough to look outside. He began to feel a burning in his eyes and he stopped searching the backyard.

“Is it still out there?” Melissa was shaken.

“I didn’t see anything...”

Immediately, an object pressed upon the window of the door. It was a face with a ball cap smashed against the glass. The action startled everyone in the house.

“Pleeeasee...help meeee, pleaseee,” said the stranger.

The face looked familiar to Dave. It was Max Warecore.

“Oh, my God,” Dave said. He unlatched the door and Max practically fell in the kitchen.

“Oh, thank you. Thank you,” Max was almost out of breath. “Dave it’s horrible, just horrible. The town folk...oh, my sweet Lord, the town folk.”

“Max, slow down. Now what’s going on? What about the town folk?”

“They’re losin’ it. Gone nutso. All tearin’ up the streets and stuff. They all crazy. Remember, I complained about not bein’ able to make it to the Mullford Farm.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I went anyway.”

“What?”

“I know, I know. I know it weren’t right, but I just had to stop by for a few. You know to let ‘em know about what I seen on the T.V. and to see if they done heard anything themselves. Well, when I knocked on their door, they weren’t answerin’. So, I knocked for a spell and then took it upon myself to enter their home. Now, again Dave, I known it weren’t right, but my curious instincts took over. I done couldn’t believe what I done saw...” Max noticed Dave’s family listening to his story. “Oh, I’m sorry Ma’am . . . children.”

Dave looked behind him. “Melissa, this is Max Warecore. Max, this is Sara, my daughter and John, my boy.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

Everyone nodded his or her heads from the other room.

“Anyway, Max, please finish. What about the Mullford’s?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. Well, when I entered the home I could see the parlor was empty, so I headed toward the kitchen area. There was a might strong odor brewin’ in the air and I believed it was coming from there. The closer I drew, the might stronger the smell. Finally, I reached the kitchen and that’s when I saw Mrs. Mullford over a pot of stew or what I thought was stew. I tried to get her attention by sayin’ ‘Hello’, but I felt she was far into her cookin’. The smell was somein’ I reckon I ain’t never smelled before. So, I looked and I seen Mr. Mullford’s face done staring at me from the boilin’ pot.”

Melissa and the children cringed.

“She was cooking her husband?” Dave asked.

“Sure enough was. It was the craziest thing I ever did see, but it was weird. You know how all those meals you cooked for us, Dave? How you opened your doors wide for all of us with your hospitality? Whatever you done did was mighty fine in your cookin’. Well, I guess I was wonderin’, or should I say we were wonderin’, Bill Markem, Fred Miller,

and the rest of the community,” and then Max opened the kitchen door to reveal a large portion of D.M. Diner patrons in Dave’s backyard. “What a sweet family like yours would taste like?”

The eyes of the townspeople were glowing bright red, as they salivated at the thought of tearing into such tender hearts. A meal they had dreamed of since watching the luminous lights appearing in their night skies.

Then the town of Willowby feasted on the warm insides of Dave and his family. Dave, again, was successful in fulfilling all of the town folk’s luscious appetites. He remains, as does the rest of the Madisons and Mr. Mullford as the only Willowby folk to never witness the magnificent colored lights above the quaint little town.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Thirteen: Meanwhile

‘The home secretary’s condition is deteriorating,’ the doctor explained, as he led Tarrant up the staircase. ‘She really needs rest. Her involvement with the political situation...’

‘She’s deteriorating as the situation is,’ Tarrant replied. ‘But she’s vital for the country’s survival. You must keep her going.’

‘I must protest,’ the doctor said. ‘This isn’t good for her. She is now unable to use her vocal cords.’

Tarrant halted. ‘Well, there’s a mercy. A silent politician? But what are you doing about it?’

‘We have installed a speech synthesiser,’ the doctor told him. ‘For the moment, that is the home secretary’s only means of communication. I must

urge you, Mr Tarrant, to allow her to recover from the gunshot trauma.'

'When will she be on her feet again?' Tarrant asked as he followed the doctor up the steps.

'Perhaps never, if she doesn't receive the rest she needs,' the doctor replied. 'But you'll find she's already up and about. Contrary to my advice...'

Tarrant followed the doctor into the private ward. He was surprised to see the bed empty. Verlaine was sitting by the window, in a wheelchair. As he entered, she turned it to face him. She looked ghastly, pale and wasted.

Attached to one arm of the wheelchair was a small computer tablet. As Verlaine stared at him, she lifted out one arm, and tapped at it.

'*you idiot tarrant...*' said the voice synthesizer. Tarrant shuddered at that voice, tinny and mechanical – the voice of the machine. '*what is going on london...*'

'My men carried out the mission as requested,' he said. 'Unfortunately, there were... survivors...'

Tap tap tap.

'... *did you not shoot them all....*'

'Some cabinet ministers escaped to the roof,' he explained. 'They managed to find a helicopter and they escaped. They were flying north westwards.'

Tap tap tap.

'... *what of the army units...*'

'Troops have been flooding in to the London area,' Tarrant replied. 'We've put down the insurgency throughout the city. Unfortunately...'

Tap tap tap.

'... what is it...'

'Some regiments in outlying areas have refused to obey,' Tarrant replied.

Tap tap tap tap tap *tap*.

'... they are mutineers... send loyalist army units to deal with them... why have they disobeyed....'

'They say that they have received contrary orders from a higher authority,' Tarrant replied.

'... there is no higher authority than me...' Verlaine said. The voice synthesiser spoke the words in its usual monotone but Verlaine herself was bolt upright with indignation. *'... where are these mutineers...'*

'The first one to refuse the order was Bicester Garrison,' Tarrant replied. 'And this is part of a trend. The mutiny has spread, but it seems to centre on Oxfordshire. And as for the higher authority...'

'... yes...'

'The colonel I spoke with said that he was acting on orders that came directly from the Prime Minister himself.'

Daisy slammed the door of the house behind her and strode off down the quiet suburban street.

She was sick and tired of the pig. Rex was being all the more unreasonable since they had landed their chopper in a field near Marston, bade farewell to their mysterious rescuers, and took Higgy back to their shared house in town. All she'd said was that they should go back for Will. Rex's reaction had been

impossible to understand. Was he jealous? Did he really think that she had the hots for the guy?

Higgy didn't help, either. Oxford had been quiet when they'd got here the other day, but now the place seemed to be filling up with soldiers. After their escape from London, this seemed ominous. She waited to cross the road as several army lorries drove past.

Daisy didn't really know where she was going, but she had to get away from Rex. She loved him, of course. But there were times when she just couldn't stand being near him.

A jeep was following the troop transports. An officer with a loudhailer stood up in the back.

'This is a security alert. Please stay in your homes until manoeuvres cease. Messages will be broadcast on local radio to keep you notified of the situation. It is anticipated that the disturbances in the capital will spill over into the local area. This is a security alert...'

Alarmingly, two soldiers leapt off the back of the jeep and approached Daisy. She looked around her in horror. The street was otherwise deserted.

'Come on, love,' said one of the soldiers awkwardly. 'Go back to your house, please.'

'What's going on?' she asked. 'I've just come from London. I thought Oxford was at peace.'

The soldiers looked at each other.

'We don't really know much,' the first soldier told her. 'But they think the unrest will spread. You know they shot the government?'

'So who's giving the orders?' Daisy wanted to know. 'Not the home secretary.'

The soldier shrugged. ‘Our orders come straight from the prime minister. He’s staying at our barracks.’

‘Come on, love,’ the other soldier said. ‘Go home now.’

Daisy nodded tightly, and hurried back down the street.

‘Back, are you?’ said Higgy as she came back into the front room. He was sitting on the sofa, cutting his toenails. ‘Rex is out in the garden... What’s up with you?’ he added, seeing Daisy’s expression.

‘Soldiers,’ she said briefly. ‘He’s better come in.’

‘Soldiers?’ Higgy said, dropping the scissors and going to the window. ‘What did they do to you?’

‘Nothing,’ Daisy said. ‘But they told me to go back home. Looks like there’s a curfew. They said they’d be broadcasting further information by local radio.’

Higgy turned on the TV and switched it over to digital radio. ‘What’s the local radio station?’ he asked.

She told him the frequency. ‘I’d better go and bring Rex inside,’ she said.

She met Rex, coming back in from the overgrown garden.

‘You’ve come back, have you?’ he said complacently. ‘I thought you would.’

‘There are soldiers out there,’ she said. ‘Don’t go out again. There’s some kind of curfew.’

‘Soldiers? Here?’ he said. ‘No, they won’t have come here...’

‘I tell you they have!’ she said. ‘They were on the main road. They want everyone to stay in their homes.’

‘Verlaine’s only interested in securing the capital, where all the action is,’ Rex said blithely. ‘No reason for her to send soldiers to the dreaming spires.’

‘They’re not answerable to her,’ Daisy replied. ‘They’re directly under the prime minister’s control.’

‘The prime minister?’ Rex said. ‘The news, when we got here. It said...’

‘That the government’s been shot, yes I know,’ Daisy snapped. ‘But it looks like the PM escaped, and he’s come here.’

Rex looked confused. ‘But what about Verlaine?’ he asked.

She heard a blast of music from the radio and then something about an emergency broadcast.

‘Maybe they’ll tell us what’s going on,’ she said. Rex followed her into the front room.

Verlaine sat brooding by the window. Tarrant waited patiently. She had been like this for the last half hour.

Suddenly, she turned the wheelchair to face him, and began tapping on the tablet.

‘... if the prime minister has joined the insurgency then he will have to face up to the

consequences of his actions... but what of the other mission with which i entrusted you...'

'What?' Tarrant asked. 'You mean Youds?'

'... yes ...'

'CCTV last caught him heading in the direction of South Ruislip. He's left Central London.'

'... south ruislip....' Verlaine mused. '... he's heading in the direction of oxford, then... gone to join his paymaster...'

'Paymaster? What do you mean, home secretary?' Tarrant asked. What was the bloody woman getting at?

'... this has all been a plot...' she grated. '... youds and the pm. in it together. i told you, tarrant. i want youds hunted down. seek, locate...'

'And destroy?'

'... no... capture... i want to interrogate him myself.... i want to know the reason for this plot against me... why the pm wanted me dead. set out at once, tarrant. take your best men.'

'hunt youds down and confine him in a secure area. i will speak with him when it is possible. meanwhile it looks like we have a civil war to fight...'

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter Twenty Five

A large sign read “Welcome to Sellafield Nuclear Plant.”

Smith had been bewildered to discover anyone at all standing beneath it, let alone six burly firemen and two firewomen, only one of whom Smith would have described as burly and certainly not to her face. Smith was trying his best to get his head around the events he was witnessing.

“An odd statistical anomaly, I suppose,” said the fireman.

“Everyone in your entire brigade survived the slouch?”

“Well except for a couple, and to tell you the truth they were both scabs.”

“As in strike breakers?”

“Scabs, blacklegs, call them want you want. They’re all arseholes. I mean, it’s very sad that they’re dead but I don’t think any of us will miss them much.”

“Jonesy was OK,” said the burly woman.

“No he fucking wasn’t,” said another fireman.

“No, you’re right, he wasn’t,” she agreed.

“And so you’ve sealed off the whole power station?”

“There’s only one building left, and it should be finished in about two hours. It wasn’t just us, the army was here for a while, and they sealed a lot of the plant with concrete.”

“What happened to them?”

“They got the slouch, thousands of them. It was pretty bleak.”

“I had a dream that the place exploded.”

“Well,” said the fireman with a disarming sincerity, “between you and me, dreams aren’t actually real.”

Smith sighed.

“I can’t believe I came all the way here for nothing.”

“What were you going to do? Flip a switch and make the radiation go away? Don’t be soft; have you seen the size of the bastard place?”

Smith had been quite surprised at the size and complexity of the Sellafield complex. It wasn’t a cooling tower with a few office buildings like he had pictured. It was building after building after building that did who knew what. He was secretly relieved that someone else had taken care of everything; though he wasn’t quite ready to admit it to himself.

“Well, I had to do something in case it did.”

“At least your mind is at ease now.”

“But there’s no more electricity?”

“Not around these parts, but a little south of here in Cheshire they’re getting power from wind farms in some place called New Brighton.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Smith, “that’s right near my house. I knew there was a good reason I never bothered doing anything.”

“Sorry to be the herald of doom.”

“Ah, it’s OK. Can I ask what happened to the soldiers who died here? One of my friends will want to know.”

“We chucked them in one of the storage rooms before we concreted it off. Not very nice I know, but we couldn’t have them lying around rotting.”

Smith went back to the car. Biggy and The Don were still asleep. Probably just the morphine or blood loss, thought Smith.

He wound down the window.

“Nice to meet you all.”

The fire service team all waved at him.

“You too, good luck with staying alive and everything.”

Smith managed to find the reverse gear of the car on his sixth attempt. About ten minutes later, he completed the manoeuvre he was attempting and made the car face in the opposite direction. He didn’t look back at the fire service folks because he knew they would be laughing at him. He drove off with red cheeks and his sloppy driving was not causing them.

It had taken him about an hour to figure out how to drive and he wasn’t really sure he had got the hang of it. He was very glad that there were no other cars on

the road and even more glad that the only two witnesses to his numerous collisions with stationary vehicles were asleep.

When he had been a little boy, Smith's dad had always kept Murray Mints in the glove box of the car. Smith used to love it when he occasionally been allowed to take one. However, he had been disgusted to find that whoever had owned that car before Biggy stole it only kept a satnav in there. It was disappointing, but it had been quite handy in getting him to the power plant. Smith set it so that it would lead him back to the village they had left the two girls in. Smith was in two minds about whether he was going to lie to everyone about what had just happened or not. Upon serious reflection he realised that he probably couldn't be bothered making anything up.

Biggy stirred in the back of the car.

“Are we nearly there yet?”

“Just around a few more corners,” said Smith.

Biggy closed his eyes and fell back to sleep. The Don was still not moving at all.

BABBAGE MUST DIE

by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Twenty Five

‘Perhaps you could be as good as to tell us who you’re looking for,’ said Ada tartly from the cell. ‘Brian Wells?’

‘No! Bertie, of course,’ the plummy-voiced highwayman snapped. ‘Engelbert Addlestrop!’

Brian felt so relieved he almost fell over. ‘He’s in there,’ he said, jerking a thumb at the cell.

The masked man glared at the door. ‘How do we open this, then?’ he barked.

Addlestrop appeared at Ada's side. 'Charlie?' he cried. 'Is that you? Is Herschel with you?'

Another of the masked men stepped forward. Sticking his pistol in his sash, he tried to shake hands with Addlestrop through the barred window. 'Herschel's with the horses,' he explained.

'Who are you guys?' Brian asked.

'We,' said the man Addlestrop had addressed as "Charlie," 'are the Extractors' Club.'

'Oh!' said Ada. 'Of course!'

Brian remembered she had mentioned them. Addlestrop's sister had written to these guys.

Two more masked men entered the corridor, dragging a porter with them. A large ring of keys jingled at the man's belt. 'Someone's called out the Runners,' said one of the men. 'Three Robin Redbreasts riding up to Bedlam.'

Brian wondered if this was some kind of code, but from the ensuing conversation he gathered that Robin Redbreasts were the mounted variety of Bow Street Runners. He watched as Charlie took the key-ring from the struggling porter and tried each one in the lock.

'Which one is it?' Charlie shouted at the porter.

‘I ain’t tellin’ yer!’ the man shrieked.

Finally, Charlie got the right one. The door swung open and Ada and Addlestrop rushed out. Ada flung herself at Brian and hugged him. The rest of the inmates began to lurch from the cell like extras in a low budget zombie flick.

‘Time we were out of here...’ Charlie called. Suddenly men in red uniforms were entering the corridor.

Brian grabbed one of the lunatics, a man with long matted hair and staring eyes. ‘See them, mate?’ he said, pointing at the Robin Redbreasts. ‘They want to lock you up again. Sort ‘em out!’

The Bedlam inmates lurched towards the newcomers. Brian turned to Charlie and the Extractors.

‘Let’s get out the back way,’ he said. He grabbed Ada’s hand and dragged her off down the corridor, stepping round Catesby’s motionless body with some distaste. Charlie and the Extractors hurried after them, as did Humphrey.

In the background, the Robin Redbreasts were struggling against the rising tide of escaped lunatics. One of them picked up the keys from where Charlie

had dropped them and was methodically freeing his fellow inmates from the cells.

Brian and the others burst out of a back door into a small yard at the back. Charlie led them round the building, which now resounded with the bellows and screams of escaped inmates and aggrieved Robin Redbreasts, to a lawn at the side where several horses had been hitched, Wild West style, to a nearby fence. Another masked man was waiting with them.

‘Herschel!’ Charlie called. ‘We ride!’

‘We’re coming with you!’ Ada declared. ‘Isn’t that right, Mr. Addlestrop?’

Addlestrop blinked. ‘Why certainly. Charlie, the lady must come with us, and her friends.’

‘Alright,’ Charlie said, ‘but they’ll have to ride pillion.’

‘Why go with these nutters?’ Brian asked Ada in an undertone as the Extractors unhitched the horses.

‘Because they’re going back to Cambridge,’ Ada said simply. ‘And Cambridge is where we want to be.’

‘Still think we’re going to carry out our mission?’ Brian shrugged. ‘Okay then.’ He turned to Humphrey. ‘But not you.’

Humphrey frowned. ‘Why not me, milord?’ he asked. ‘I’m not staying here! They’ll be sure to link me with what’s happened here. I’ll hang!’

‘Not if you make a quick getaway,’ Brian said. ‘Go back to the Albany. Take the money. It’s all yours. Use it to set up in business. You’ve earned it.’ He slapped the boy on the back.

Ada had got up behind Addlestrop and she was looking down impatiently at Brian. The others were all mounted.

‘Hurry up, Brian,’ she said. ‘If you’re coming.’

‘I won’t forget you,’ Humphrey called, as Brian leapt up behind Charlie.

‘I bet you won’t!’ Brian laughed, as they rode away. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Humphrey watch their departure before slinking off towards the exit.

They rode through the city streets, heading for the suburbs and the Great North Road. With unexpected suddenness, they were out of the smoke and stench of

London and breathing clear country air as they galloped down country lanes and cart-tracks where, in Brian's day, there would be council estates and industrial developments as far as the eye could see.

London had been left in confusion as the Bedlam riots spread to the neighbouring districts, and the getaway had been relatively easy. Somewhere on Finchley Common, they halted to rest the horses, and Charlie and the other Extractors removed their masks.

The leader of their rescuers was a tallish man with penetrating eyes and a somewhat arrogant cast to his broad features. He ended up talking Maths with Ada, who was looking at him with more interest than Brian felt comfortable with. The whole Extractors Club seemed to be made up of hoity-toity rich kids who found Maths utterly fascinating, and Ada was of course in her element with them, though the whole Bedlam chic thing really did nothing for her. Brian was regretting leaving Humphrey behind. At least he would have had someone to talk to. Even Catesby would be preferable to this. He wondered if Catesby had survived being shot by Charlie.

'You don't fancy him, do you?' he asked Ada after Charlie had gone to talk to Addlestrop.

Ada frowned, then laughed. 'No!' she said. 'He's still wet behind the ears. But it's good to talk to someone intelligent for a change.'

‘Huh!’ said Brian huffily.

She looked at him, and her eyes softened. She touched his arm.

‘You do look magnificent in that get-up,’ she whispered, and he felt a lot better.

Charlie called to all of them. ‘As soon as the horses are rested,’ he said in his plummy, ringing tones, ‘we’ll set out north again. Looks like no one’s followed us. Things are busy in Town. We’ll be back at Peterhouse in time for breakfast!’

Addlestrop was still looking dazed by it all. He lifted his arm high and warbled, ‘Hurrah for the jolly old school!’ and they all began to sing *In Good King Charles’s Golden Days*.

Brian and Ada exchanged glances. ‘Bunch of Hooray Henries,’ Brian muttered gloomily.

It was rather later than breakfast time when they finally trailed into Cambridge. Only riding Black Bess would anyone make that good time riding up the Great North Road, considering how late in the day they set out. They had to spend a night at a coaching inn in Baldock before riding into Cambridge the next

morning. Due to an extraordinary meeting of the Extractors Club in the public bar the night before, it was mid-afternoon before they reached the outskirts of the medieval university town. Here the undergraduates dispersed to their various lodgings, leaving Charlie and Addlestrop talking to Ada and Brian.

‘Do you have anywhere to stay in Cambridge?’ Charlie asked them.

Brian shook his head. ‘We’re not staying long, though,’ he said. ‘We’ve just got to find one man, then we’re outa here.’

Ada bustled forward. ‘If you could offer a roof over our heads while we’re looking for him, we’d be grateful,’ she said, giving him her doe eyes in a way that made Brian bristle.

‘Don’t think your landlady will take kindly to you bringing back a young gel,’ Addlestrop haw-hawed.

Charlie bowed over Ada’s hand and kissed it. ‘I could hardly refuse to provide accommodation to a lady,’ he said. ‘Bertie, isn’t it time you were going?’

‘See ya, Bertie,’ said Brian, shaking his hand. ‘Keep out of the madhouse, won’t you?’

They left him, accompanying Charlie back to his lodgings on Trumpington Road near Peterhouse. No one was in, so the undergraduate had no trouble sneaking his visitors into his rooms, which were plush and well appointed, though not a patch on Brian's old gaff in the Albany.

'Drinks?' Charlie offered. He flung down his highwayman gear on a settle, placing his pistols on top.

As he was pouring them sherry, he called over his shoulder, 'So exactly who is it you've come to find in Cambridge? I'm a clubbable fellow, you know. I might have made their acquaintance.'

Brian and Ada exchanged glances.

'Well, he's a student here like yourself,' Ada said. 'Babbage is his name.'

Charlie swung round, holding the sherry bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

'*Charles* Babbage?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Ada. 'Do you know him?'

'You might say so,' Charlie replied. 'Sometimes I wonder.' He laughed at their expressions. 'My dear lady,' he added. '*I* am Charles Babbage. What on earth could you want with me?'

‘*You* are?’ Brian exploded. ‘You? You... You utter bastard!’

He leapt into action, grabbed one of the pistols on the settle, loaded it and primed it in a flash. He’d learnt a few things when he’d been a pirate. Babbage watched in utter confusion.

‘What are you doing, sir?’ he demanded. ‘How dare you address me so! Under my own roof! I’ll have to ask you both to leave! Put that down at once!’

‘Get on your fucking knees!’ Brian snarled, pointing the pistol at their erstwhile friend.

‘Is this some kind of jest, sir?’ Babbage demanded, looking from Brian to Ada and back again.

‘No joke,’ Ada said coldly. ‘Do exactly what Brian says!’

His face pale, Babbage knelt before them, hands raised.

‘But what have I done?’ he asked. ‘I realise that I may have been over-zealous in my rescue of Addlestrop... I shot your friend, didn’t I? Is that why you are angry with me? But why not say so at the time?’

Brian shook his head. ‘Catesby? He was no friend of mine.’

‘We’re going to kill you, Babbage,’ said Ada, her voice shaking with emotion. ‘Not because of what you’ve done, but what you’re going to do. We come from the future.’

Babbage gaped at her. ‘No wonder you were in Bedlam,’ he quavered. ‘You should be back there!’

‘We’re sane,’ Brian replied calmly. ‘But it’s a wonder, considering the world we grew up in.’

‘A world that you created!’ Ada added. ‘A world where computers have achieved a stranglehold on the human race and all its endeavours. A world where machines rule and humans are redundant. A world dominated by your invention!’

Babbage shook his head. ‘You must have me confused with someone else,’ he said. ‘I’ve invented nothing!’

‘But you will,’ Brian said. ‘You will, mate! Unless we stop you.’ He cocked his pistol and placed it dead between Babbage’s eyes. Then he paused. Ada stared at him.

‘What are you waiting for?’ she asked. ‘Don’t draw out the agony. This is necessary, but he doesn’t

know anything of the world he's responsible for. Just shoot him and be quick about it.'

But Brian did nothing. After a moment, he spoke.

'Ada, it's just occurred to me,' he said.

'What?' she asked.

'If I shoot this bastard,' he said, 'won't that change history?'

Ada flung her hands up in despair. 'Of course it will, Brian, you *idiot!*' she cried. 'That's the whole point. We travelled back in time two hundred years with exactly that intention. To change the future. I explained it to you, didn't I?'

'Yeah...' said Brian slowly. 'But if we do that... there won't have been any reason for us to go back in time, will there? What I mean is, we've got to go back to the cellar and wait for Percy to operate the time machine and bring us back to our own time.'

'Yes,' said Ada impatiently, tapping her foot. 'Get on with it!'

'And if I shoot Babbage now, the computer will never be invented, and Percy won't have any reason to send us back in time – or to bring us forward, either! He might never invent time travel! If I shoot Babbage, we'll be marooned in time! Stranded

forever in the nineteenth century! And we've both got the law breathing down our necks. You're an escaped prisoner, and I'm wanted for piracy. If I kill Babbage, we don't go home!

Ada stared at him in sick horror. He stared back. Babbage squirmed between them. Ada sighed heavily and her eyes narrowed.

'Just give me the gun, Brian,' she said at last.

Epilogue

The spring evening was just beginning when Oates answered the door, and looked at them both with a bemused expression. Brian produced a horse pistol and thrust it into the man's ribs.

'In! In! In!' Brian hissed, pushing the man backwards into the house. 'Get in there!'

'Where's everyone else?' Ada demanded, following Brian into the room. Oates' wife and children appeared. Ada menaced them with another pistol. 'Get into the middle of the room! Sit down on the floor! Brian, where's that rope?'

Brian tossed her a length of rope, still keeping his pistol trained on the cowed looking family.

‘Demme, it’s the bluestocking and the dandy!’ Oates gasped. ‘You were in my cellar last year! The constable took you to the lockup but the Luddites freed you!’

‘Shut up,’ Brian snapped. He watched as Ada hurriedly bound the Oates family.

It was April 1813. The last few months had not been kind to the two fugitives. After Ada shot Babbage, they’d had to escape Cambridge pursued by an angry mob of undergraduates. Since then, they had been making their slow way across the country, living by their wits, or by the gun. The East Midlands would long remember their depredations.

A highwayman had held them up in Leicestershire. But he hadn’t reckoned with Captain Brian Wells of the *Black Flag*. They’d overpowered him and taken his gun and his horse, and of course, Ada had insisted on taking his facemask, which she’d worn during every robbery they’d carried out since – some of which had simply been so they could pay their way, others were to finance Brian’s ever-growing laudanum addiction.

Between Cambridge and Derbyshire, they amassed enough to keep them in the money to survive the horrific winter of 1812. While Napoleon’s soldiers were dying in droves as they retreated from Moscow, Brian and Ada – the former now suffering

from periodic bouts of dysentery, which he self-medicated with larger and larger doses of laudanum – holed up in a remote inn in the Peak District and awaited the spring.

When the weather improved, and Brian's bowels settled down, they made their slow journey back to the village. By Ada's calculations, today was exactly a year since they had appeared in the cellar, or it would be later that evening. They'd got here early, knowing that they'd have resistance to deal with. By now, neither had any compunction against violence, inflicted or threatened.

'Why do you persecute us like this?' Mrs. Oates wailed.

'It's nothing personal,' Ada explained. 'We just want to go into your cellar.'

'You only had to ask,' Oates moaned.

'Yeah, right,' said Brian, 'while you sneaked off to tell the constable we were here! We're not taking any chances, mate.' He turned to Ada. 'How long before the wormhole opens up?'

'By my calculations, a quarter of an hour,' she told him.

'We'd better get down there,' he said. Nodding at the frightened family, he added, 'They'll get free

eventually. But by then, we'll be long gone. Assuming I'm wrong.'

'You are wrong, Brian,' Ada said shortly. They left from the room and hurried down the steps into the cellar.

'What time did you say?' Brian complained. Half an hour had passed, and not a hint of a wormhole.

'Give it time,' Ada said, thin-lipped.

'Maybe you got your calculations wrong,' Brian said.

Ada scowled at him. 'I've got a first in Mathematics from Cambridge,' she snapped. 'I didn't leave school aged sixteen to go on the dole for the rest of my life. What grade did you get in GCSE Maths, Brian?'

'I never went back for the certificates,' Brian mumbled. 'Couldn't see the point.'

'Exactly,' Ada flared. 'So don't go criticising *my* calculations.'

Brian leant against the wall. God, he could really do with some laudanum.

‘Face it, Ada,’ he said gloomily. ‘We’re not going home. The computer was never invented and Percy never had any reason to invent time travel. We’re stuck here.’

Ada slumped next to him. ‘It’s looking like you’re right,’ she murmured. ‘Looking like we’re lost in time. Lost in 1812.’

‘It’s 1813 now, Ada,’ Brian said helpfully.

‘Whatever,’ said Ada.

She sighed heavily.

‘Oh well,’ said Brian. ‘It’s been more fun this century than it ever was in the 21st. I really feel like I’ve achieved things. Look what I’ve been: sailor, pirate, nobleman, and highwayman. And you, you’ve been a Luddite, a convict, an escaped lunatic...’

He paused. ‘Did you hear something?’ he said suddenly. ‘From upstairs.’

‘Probably just Oates shouting for help,’ Ada said. ‘We’d better get out of this house before he gets free.’ She led Brian up the cellar steps.

The moment she pushed open the front door, she leapt back and cannoned into Brian. A musketball whined through the air and smashed into the plaster of the wall behind them. Brian grabbed her and pulled

her into cover beside the open door. Nervously, he looked out.

‘We know you’re in there!’ a familiar voice cried. ‘I have a warrant for the arrest of Brian Wells, captain of the pirate ship the *Black Flag*, and his whore. Come out and face justice, or we’ll come in and get you.’

Brian loaded and primed his pistol. ‘Lieutenant Piper,’ he muttered.

‘How did he know we’d be here?’ Ada demanded.

Brian took another look out of the door. He could see a small contingent of militia in the uniform of the Cheshire Volunteers. In the middle of them was a tall, thin man in naval lieutenant’s uniform. At his side was another man, wearing a jacket and striped trousers. Brian recognised him.

‘Of all people, only Will Yates would know that we’d come back here in April.’

Ada cursed. ‘That traitor!’

Then a thought seemed to strike her. ‘Can’t we try the back way?’

‘We can try,’ said Brian.

They hurried through the house and opened the door into the backyard. This time, two musketballs whined past them. Brian slammed the door.

‘Six of them hiding in the shrubbery, by my count.’

Ada folded her arms. ‘Looks like this is it,’ she said. ‘At least we saved future generations from the horrors of information technology.’

‘Not much consolation,’ Brian said, as they returned to the front. ‘This is the bit where we go down in a blaze of glory.’

‘Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid?’

‘I was thinking more along the lines of Bonnie and Clyde.’

‘Which one of us is Bonnie?’

‘Ha bloody ha. You got your pistol loaded?’

‘Yes, Brian.’

‘Come on then. Time we got this over and done with.’

He flung open the door and they charged out into a hail of musketballs.

THE END

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE Ascribed To
Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LI.

*THE ATTACK UPON THE VAMPYRE'S HOUSE.—
THE STORY OF THE ATTACK.—THE FORCING
OF THE DOORS, AND THE STRUGGLE.*

A council of war was now called among the belligerents, who were somewhat taken aback by the steady refusal of the servant to admit them, and their apparent determination to resist all endeavours on the part of the mob to get into and obtain possession of the house. It argued that they were prepared to resist all attempts, and it would cost some few lives to get into the vampyre's house. This passed through the

minds of many as they retired behind the angle of the wall where the council was to be held.

Here they looked in each others' face, as if to gather from that the general tone of the feelings of their companions; but here they saw nothing that intimated the least idea of going back as they came.

"It's all very well, mates, to take care of ourselves, you know," began one tall, brawny fellow; "but, if we bean't to be sucked to death by a vampyre, why we must have the life out of him."

"Ay, so we must."

"Jack Hodge is right; we must kill him, and there's no sin in it, for he has no right to it; he's robbed some poor fellow of his life to prolong his own."

"Ay, ay, that's the way he does; bring him out, I say, then see what we will do with him."

"Yes, catch him first," said one, "and then we can dispose of him afterwards, I say, neighbours, don't you think it would be as well to catch him first?"

"Haven't we come on purpose?"

"Yes, but do it."

"Ain't we trying it?"

“You will presently, when we come to get into the house.”

“Well, what’s to be done?” said one; “here we are in a fix, I think, and I can’t see our way out very clearly.”

“I wish we could get in.”

“But how is a question I don’t very well see,” said a large specimen of humanity.

“The best thing that can be done will be to go round and look over the whole house, and then we may come upon some part where it is far easier to get in at than by the front door.”

“But it won’t do for us all to go round that way,” said one; “a small party only should go, else they will have all their people stationed at one point, and if we can divide them, we shall beat them because they have not enough to defend more than one point at a time; now we are numerous enough to make several attacks.”

“Oh! that’s the way to bother them all round; they’ll give in, and then the place is our own.”

“No, no,” said the big countryman, “I like to make a good rush and drive all afore us; you know what ye have to do then, and you do it, ye know.”

“If you can.”

“Ay, to be sure, if we can, as you say; but can’t we? that’s what I want to know.”

“To be sure we can.”

“Then we’ll do it, mate—that’s my mind; we’ll do it. Come on, and let’s have another look at the street-door.”

The big countryman left the main body, and resolutely walked up to the main avenue, and approached the door, accompanied by about a dozen or less of the mob. When they came to the door, they commenced knocking and kicking most violently, and assailing it with all kinds of things they could lay their hands upon.

They continued at this violent exercise for some time—perhaps for five minutes, when the little square hole in the door was again opened, and a voice was heard to say,—

“You had better cease that kind of annoyance.”

“We want to get in.”

“It will cost you more lives to do so than you can afford to spare. We are well armed, and are prepared to resist any effort you can make.”

“Oh! it’s all very well; but, an you won’t open, why we’ll make you; that’s all about it.”

This was said as the big countryman and his companions were leaving the avenue towards the rest of the body.

“Then, take this, as an earnest of what is to follow,” said the man, and he discharged the contents of a blunderbuss through the small opening, and its report sounded to the rest of the mob like the report of a field-piece.

Fortunately for the party retiring the man couldn't take any aim, else it is questionable how many of the party would have got off unwounded. As it was, several of them found stray slugs were lodged in various parts of their persons, and accelerated their retreat from the house of the vampyre.

“What luck?” inquired one of the mob to the others, as they came back; “I'm afraid you had all the honour.”

“Ay, ay, we have, and all the lead too,” replied a man, as he placed his hand upon a sore part of his person, which bled in consequence of a wound.

“Well, what's to be done?”

“Danged if I know,” said one.

“Give it up,” said another.

“No, no; have him out. I’ll never give in while I can use a stick. They are in earnest, and so are we. Don’t let us be frightened because they have a gun or two—they can’t have many; and besides, if they have, we are too many for them. Besides, we shall all die in our beds.”

“Hurrah! down with the vampyre!”

“So say I, lads. I don’t want to be sucked to death when I’m a-bed. Better die like a man than such a dog’s death as that, and you have no revenge then.”

“No, no; he has the better of us then. We’ll have him out—we’ll burn him—that’s the way we’ll do it.”

“Ay, so we will; only let us get in.”

At that moment a chosen party returned who had been round the house to make a reconnaissance.

“Well, well,” inquired the mob, “what can be done now—where can we get in?”

“In several places.”

“All right; come along then; the place is our own.”

“Stop a minute; they are armed at all points, and we must make an attack on all points, else we may fail. A party must go round to the front-door, and attempt to beat it in; there are plenty of poles and things that could be used for such a purpose.”

“There is, besides, a garden-door, that opens into the house—a kind of parlour; a kitchen-door; a window in the flower-garden, and an entrance into a store-room; this place appears strong, and is therefore unguarded.”

“The very point to make an attack.”

“Not quite.”

“Why not?”

“Because it can easily be defended, and rendered useless to us. We must make an attack upon all places but that, and, while they are being at those points, we can then enter at that place, and then you will find them desert the other places when they see us inside.”

“Hurrah! down with the vampyre!” said the mob, as they listened to this advice, and appreciated the plan.

“Down with the vampyre!”

“Now, then, lads, divide, and make the attack; never mind their guns, they have but very few, and if you rush in upon them, you will soon have the guns yourselves.”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted the mob.

The mob now moved away in different bodies, each strong enough to carry the house. They seized upon a

variety of poles and stones, and then made for the various doors and windows that were pointed out by those who had made the discovery. Each one of those who had formed the party of observation, formed a leader to the others, and at once proceeded to the post assigned him.

The attack was so sudden and so simultaneous that the servants were unprepared; and though they ran to the doors, and fired away, still they did but little good, for the doors were soon forced open by the enraged rioters, who proceeded in a much more systematic operation, using long heavy pieces of timber which were carried on the shoulders of several men, and driven with the force of battering-rams—which, in fact, they were—against the door.

Bang went the battering-ram, crash went the door, and the whole party rushed headlong in, carried forward by their own momentum and fell prostrate, engine and all, into the passage.

“Now, then, we have them,” exclaimed the servants, who began to belabour the whole party with blows, with every weapon they could secure.

Loudly did the fallen men shout for assistance, and but for their fellows who came rushing in behind, they would have had but a sorry time of it.

“Hurrah!” shouted the mob; “the house is our own.”

“Not yet,” shouted the servants.

“We’ll try,” said the mob; and they rushed forward to drive the servants back, but they met with a stout resistance, and as some of them had choppers and swords, there were a few wounds given, and presently bang went the blunderbuss.

Two or three of the mob reeled and fell.

This produced a momentary panic, and the servants then had the whole of the victory to themselves, and were about to charge, and clear the passage of their enemies, when a shout behind attracted their attention.

That shout was caused by an entrance being gained in another quarter, whence the servants were flying, and all was disorder.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted the mob.

The servants retreated to the stairs, and here united, they made a stand, and resolved to resist the whole force of the rioters, and they succeeded in doing so, too, for some minutes. Blows were given and taken of a desperate character.

Somehow, there were no deadly blows received by the servants; they were being forced and beaten, but they lost no life; this may be accounted for by the fact that the mob used no more deadly weapons than sticks.

The servants of Sir Francis Varney, on the contrary, were mostly armed with deadly weapons, which, however, they did not use unnecessarily. They stood upon the hall steps—the grand staircase, with long poles or sticks, about the size of quarter-staves, and with these they belaboured those below most unmercifully.

Certainly, the mob were by no means cowards, for the struggle to close with their enemies was as great as ever, and as firm as could well be. Indeed, they rushed on with a desperation truly characteristic of John Bull, and defied the heaviest blows; for as fast as one was stricken down another occupied his place, and they insensibly pressed their close and compact front upon the servants, who were becoming fatigued and harassed.

“Fire, again,” exclaimed a voice from among the servants.

The mob made no retrograde movement, but still continued to press onwards, and in another moment a loud report rang through the house, and a smoke hung over the heads of the mob.

A long groan or two escaped some of the men who had been wounded, and a still louder from those who had not been wounded, and a cry arose of,—

“Down with the vampyre—pull down—destroy and burn the whole place—down with them all.”

A rush succeeded, and a few more discharges took place, when a shout above attracted the attention of both parties engaged in this fierce struggle. They paused by mutual consent, to look and see what was the cause of that shout.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXV

Not Wilks, but Coniston! His drawling, British voice:

“You, Gregg Haljan! How nice!”

His voice broke off as he jerked his arm from me. My hand with the projector came up, but with a sweeping blow he struck my wrist. The weapon dropped to the rocks.

I fought instinctively, those first moments; my mind was whirling with the shock of surprise. This was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston.

It was an eerie combat. We swayed; shoving, kicking, wrestling. His hold around my middle shut off the Erentz circulation; the warning buzz rang in my ears,

to mingle with the rasp of his curses. I flung him off, and my Erentz motors recovered. He staggered away, but in a great leap came at me again.

I was taller, heavier and far stronger than Coniston. But I found him crafty, and where I was awkward in handling my lightness, he seemed more skillfully agile.

I became aware that we were on the twenty foot square grid of the observatory platform. It had a low metal railing. We surged against it. I caught a dizzying glimpse of the abyss. Then it receded as we bounced the other way. And then we fell to the grid. His helmet bashed against mine, striking as though butting with the side of his head to puncture my visor panel. His gloved fingers were clutching at my throat.

As we regained our feet, I flung him off, and bounded like a diver, head first, into him. He went backward, but skillfully kept his feet under him, gripped me again and shoved me.

I was tottering at the head of the staircase—falling. But I clutched at him. We fell some twenty or thirty feet to be next lower spider landing. The impact must have dazed us both. I recall my vague idea that we must have fallen down the cliff.... My air shut off—then it came again. The roaring in my ears was stilled; my head cleared, and I found that we were on the landing, fighting.

He presently broke away from me, bounded to the summit with me after him. In the close confines of the suit I was bathed in sweat and gasping. I had no thought to increase the oxygen control. I could not find it; or it would not operate.

I realized that I was fighting sluggishly, almost aimlessly. But so was Coniston!

It seemed dreamlike. A phantasmagoria of blows and staggering steps. A nightmare with only the horrible vision of this goggled helmet always before my eyes.

It seemed that we were rolling on the ground, back on the summit. The unshadowed Earthlight was clear and bright. The abyss was beside me. Coniston, rolling, was now on top, now under me, trying to shove me over the brink. It was all like a dream—as though I were asleep, dreaming that I did not have enough air.

I strove to keep my senses. He was struggling to roll me over the brink. God, that would not do! But I was so tired. One cannot fight without oxygen!

I suddenly knew that I had shaken him off and gained my feet. He rose, swaying. He was as tired, confused, as nearly asphyxiated as I.

The brink of the abyss was behind us. I lunged, desperately shoving, avoiding his clutch.

He went over, and fell soundlessly, his body whirling end over end down into the shadows, far below.

I drew back. My senses faded as I sank panting to the rocks. But with inactivity, my heart quieted. My respiration slowed. The Erentz circulation gained on my poisoned air. It purified.

That blessed oxygen! My head cleared. Strength came. I felt better.

Coniston had fallen to his death. I was victor. I went to the brink cautiously, for I was still dizzy. I could see, far down there on the crater floor, a little patch of Earthlight in which a mashed human figure was lying.

I staggered back again. A moment or two must have passed while I stood there on the summit, with my senses clearing and my strength renewed as the blood stream cleared in my veins.

I was victor. Coniston was dead. I saw now, down on the lower staircase below the camp ledge, another goggled figure lying huddled. That was Wilks, no doubt. Coniston had probably caught him there, surprised him, killed him.

My attention, as I stood gazing, went down to the camp buildings. Another figure was outside! It bounded along the ledge, reached the foot of the stairs at the top of which I was standing. With agile leaps, it came mounting at me!

Another brigand! Miko? No, it was not large enough to be Miko. I was still confused. I thought of Hahn.

But that was absurd: Hahn was in the wreck of the Planetara. One of the stewards then....

The figure came up the staircase recklessly, to assail me. I took a step backward, bracing myself to receive this new antagonist. And then I looked further down and saw Miko! Unquestionably he, for there was no mistaking his giant figure. He was down on the camp ledge, running toward the foot of the stairs.

I thought of my revolver. I turned to try and find it. I was aware that the first of my assailants was at the stairhead. I swung back to see what this oncoming brigand was doing. He was on the summit: with a sailing leap he launched for me. I could have bounded away, but with a last look to locate the revolver, I braced myself for the shock.

The figure hit me. It was small and light in my clutching arms. I recall I saw that Miko was halfway up the stairs. I gripped my assailant. The audiphone contact brought a voice.

“Gregg, is it you?”

It was Anita!

PUBLISHING SCHEDULE

Schlock! is published weekly online, with new editions coming out every Sunday

SUBMISSIONS

Schlock! is currently accepting submissions.

Guidelines for Articles and Letters

- Stories / articles / letters / artwork relating to the themes of science fiction, fantasy and horror should be emailed as an attachment (.doc, .rtf .txt and .jpg formats preferred) to editor@schlock.co.uk
- Stories or articles should be no more than 7500 words long. (See table below).
- We are willing to accept serialisations of longer stories, but request that authors contact us beforehand to discuss the proposal. [NB: Currently, we are more likely to accept short stories than serialised novels.]
- Since Schlock! is not currently a profit-making webzine, we cannot offer remuneration. However, writers and artists will retain ALL rights to their work if accepted for publication.

Classification	Word count
Novel	over 40,000 words
Novella	17,500 to 40,000 words
Novelette	7,500 to 17,500 words
Short story	under 7,500 words

Source: SFWA

ABOUT US

Editor – Gavin Chappell

Educated to postgraduate level, Gavin Chappell has been involved in writing and editing for the last decade. He has written and edited short stories, translations, poetry, novels and non-fiction.

Also a qualified teacher of further education, Gavin has taught English and Creative Writing for the past eight years. Gavin has been published by various publishers including Penguin, and is a member of the Society of Authors.

Graphic Designer - C Priest Brumley

C Priest Brumley is a bipedal humanoid with a High School Diploma and an iron (Okay, tin... Screw it, soft butter) will. He has no formal

training and/or education in writing OR graphic design, yet he does both to an obsessive degree and has done so for years.

He currently lives in New Orleans, LA with an awesome woman that he is privileged to call his wife, and two cats he is ashamed to call his children. Oh, and he designs covers. Occasionally he'll pen a jaunty tale as well, but only if you ask nicely.

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JOHN POLIDORI (1795 - 1821) *Of Italian descent, he worked as Byron's physician, and his sister was the mother of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, among others.*

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GAVIN CHAPPELL (1974 - present) *Editor of and contributor to Schlock! Webzine, writer, editor, translator, teacher, learner and frequent benefits recipient.*

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DAVID CHRISTOPHER (1971 - 2012) *is currently in hiding. Anyone with information as to his whereabouts is asked to contact MI5, PO Box 500, London, England, United Kingdom.*

JAMES RHODES (1976 - present) *has an MA in Literature from 1900 Onwards. He also possesses "genuine concern for the status of literature in the world."*

THOMAS PRESKETT PREST (1810 - 1859) *was writing schlock long before it was cool. He was "a prolific producer of penny dreadfuls," and that's why we like him. Probably co-created Sweeney Todd, as well as Varney the Vampire. Also ripped off Charles Dickens something rotten, but hey, someone had to do it.*

RAY CUMMINGS (1887-1957) *was Thomas Edison's personal assistant and technical writer, but is not believed to have accompanied the inventor during his conquest of the Red Planet. He wrote. A lot.*