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Schlock! Publishing

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

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

For details of previous editions, please go to the [Archive](#).

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

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

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This Edition

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

This week's cover illustration is *Richard Ramirez* by Paul Mellino.



Film News - more news on the filming of slasher pic *HOUSE OF DUST*.

State of Emergency - Part Two by David Christopher
- *The Professor falls foul of the security forces...*
SCIENCE FICTION

The Waking of Angantyr by Catriona Green - *In search of her birthright, Hervor brings her father back from the grave...* SWORD AND SORCERY

Super Duper - Part Sixteen by James Rhodes -
Smith resumes his sedentary lifestyle... SCIENCE FICTION

Babbage Must Die - Part Fourteen by Gavin Chappell - *The Prime Minister's assassination lands Ned Ludd and Ada in hot water...* SCIENCE FICTION

The Dark Place: Part Eleven by James Talbot -
Isobel's past is catching up with her... DARK FANTASY

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 14) by Ray Cummings - *...physical violence could get me nothing. I would have to try guile. And I saw now that his face was flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. He had been drinking alcoholite...* SPACE OPERA

Spiral Castle - Part Three by Gavin Chappell - *Nick burgles a vicarage...* Eighth in the Going Underground series. URBAN FANTASY

Schlock! Classic Serial: Carmilla - Part Twelve by J. Sheridan LeFanu - *A Petition...* GOTHIC HORROR

FILM NEWS

CALVO/SLATER FILM KICKS INTO HIGH GEAR WITH THRILLER "HOUSE OF DUST"



PRINCIPLE PHOTOGRAPHY BEGINS WEEK OF JULY 25th

FILM TO BE PRODUCED BY SLATER BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT & GOODNIGHT FILMS IN CONJUNCTION

WITH BUDDERFLY ENTERTAINMENT

Los Angeles, CA -- August 1, 2011 – As part of their recently announced financing and production deal, Principle Photography began Monday July 25th, 2011 on the feature film "House of Dust" it was announced today by Todd Slater, Slater Brothers Entertainment and A.D. Calvo, Goodnight Films. The film is produced by Slater Brothers Entertainment and Goodnight Films in conjunction with Budderfly Entertainment. Also announced today is the principle

cast for “House of Dust.”

“House of Dust” will be filmed on location in Connecticut at The University of Connecticut and other locations within Connecticut. “House of Dust” is a thriller genre film which has attracted an incredible cast of some of today’s brightest young stars, including: Steven Grahyam (“The First Ride of Wyatt Earp”) Stephen Spinella (“Angels In America”) Holland Roden (star of MTV’s hit show “Teen Wolf”) Inbar Levi (MTV’s highly anticipated new series “Underemployed”) Nicole Travolta (“The Middle”) Joy Lauren (“Desperate Housewives”) Eddie Hassell (“The Kids Are All Right”) John Lee Ames (“Days Of Darkness”) and Alesandra Assante (“Looking For An Echo”.)

“House of Dust” will be produced and directed by A.D. Calvo (“The Other Side of the Tracks,” “The Melancholy Fantastic.”) Argentine-born, Calvo worked with Slater and Budderfly Entertainment on “The Other Side of the Tracks.” The film received numerous awards and went on to receive international distribution with FOX Studios and is currently playing on Showtime Networks. Michael Goodin and Monolith Pictures will co-produce.

Slater Brothers Entertainment and Goodnight Films have partnered with Budderfly Entertainment to finance and produce a slate of thriller genre films. Todd Slater stated, “We are really excited to be starting production on ‘House of Dust’ with such a great young & sexy cast. Having A.D. direct this film will be sure to thrill audiences and is the first of many in this genre we plan to produce.”

A.D. Calvo added, “House of Dust is exactly the kind of psychological thriller I would’ve fallen in love with as a teenager. I’m lucky to have found partners who can help ensure we don’t just make a film, but we make a great film. ‘Dust’ is all about the characters, the actors. We have a tremendously talented cast for this.”

Calvo and Slater plan to move into their next film in early 2012 as part of their intended slate.

ABOUT SLATER BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT

Grant, Todd and Wade Slater share over fifty years

in the sport, art, and entertainment industries. The brothers formed Slater Brothers Entertainment (SBE) so that they could combine their strengths and establish a multidimensional entertainment and media company capable of producing and financing major sporting, art and film events. The company places a special emphasis on working with governmental, non-profit and charitable organizations.

The Brothers annual Film Festival in Hamilton, New York has established itself as one of the premier Summer Events in the Northeast United States and has attracted film enthusiasts from Los Angeles, California to Moscow, Russia. To date, SBE has successfully helped a number of directors and producers lock in worldwide distribution for their films. By working directly with the film makers, SBE has been able to open many doors in Hollywood and has made it possible for several independent films to receive theatrical, DVD and international release.

Todd Slater started his entertainment career over fifteen years ago, working for Paramount Pictures and quickly became the head of distribution, marketing and studio relations at Philip Anschutz Film shingle two years later. Slater has been highlighted in The Hollywood Reporter's annual "The Next Generation" Issue - dedicated to the top executives under 35 years of age in Hollywood, and has secured worldwide distribution for many films including Ray, Danny Deckchair, Swimming Upstream, Everybody Wants To Be Italian, Sahara, The Hustle, The Haunting Of Amelia, Chicago Overcoat and Together Again For The First Time.

Before landing at Paramount, Slater made his mark in the world of finance and politics having worked for Paine Webber in the Private Wealth Division as well as the Investment Banking division of Meridian Capital. Before moving to the west coast and taking part in the financial industry, Slater lived and worked in Washington DC and worked for United States Congressman Peter Blute as well as United States Congressman Sherwood Boehlert. During his time spent between consulting on Media deals and producing films, Slater also launched his own shingle, Slater Brother's Entertainment with his two brothers. The Brothers launched their branded entertainment company, Slater Brothers

Entertainment (SBE), as a follow-up to several sports and entertainment events they co-produced in the United States and Europe.

Connecticut production company, Goodnight Films, was founded in 2005 by writer/director/producer A.D. Calvo. The company has produced numerous award-winning shorts, short-subject documentaries and narrative features. Its documentary series on celebrity shock sculptor Daniel Edwards received worldwide media attention and over one million viewings on YouTube.

Goodnight Film's first feature, *The Other Side of the Tracks*, a romantic thriller starring Chad Lindberg (*I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*), Brendan Fehr (*BONES*), and Tania Raymonde (*LOST*) aired on Showtime Networks and was released domestically under the name, *The Haunting of Amelia*. The film was released internationally by Fox Studio Television. A major announcement is imminent regarding the release and distribution of the company's sophomore feature, a dark romantic fantasy called *The Melancholy Fantastic*.

Budderfly Entertainment is a Connecticut based equity investment company that has co-produced two other films with Calvo and Slater including *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS*, as well as *THE MELANCHOLY FANTASTIC*. *HOUSE OF DUST* is the third collaboration between the companies with a fourth project to start production in early 2012.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Two: The Manifesto



They were passing through the streets of Westminister. No one had spoken for some time. Will sat quietly beside the Professor, feelings of trepidation creeping beneath his skin. Why did this Tarrant want to speak to them? What was all this leading him to? Why had he stayed behind with the

Professor and not gone after Daisy?

They approached a large, block-like building beside the river. Will was sure he'd seen it in some TV series. Beside him, the Professor shifted slightly.

'Thames House,' he muttered. 'Central base of the Security Services.'

The car pulled up outside, and security men hustled Quigley and Will outside. Tarrant followed them at a short distance, talking animatedly to another man. Will found himself being marched down a series of imposing corridors until they reached the doors to an office, where two security men stood on guard. They saluted Tarrant and his retinue, and opened the doors for them.

Tarrant strode in and seated himself at a wide-topped mahogany desk. The security men directed Will and Quigley to sit on chairs facing the desk then took up positions along the walls of the spacious room. Tarrant placed his fingers together as if he was about to pray, sniffed loudly, and then said:

'You're a rabble-rouser, Professor.'

The Professor looked back calmly at the man. 'I am a respected academic,' he said levelly. 'I do not lack friends and sympathisers in high places.'

Tarrant opened a dossier, and thumbed through its contents. 'Indeed,' he said, with another loud sniff, still glancing through the pages. 'You're a regular establishment whore. Yet you persist in your efforts to undermine the security of the nation. This talk of liberty is all very well, but it is our work to protect the

people from terrorists and criminals. You are trying to stop us. We can't have that. What is it? A man in your position, siding with the mob? Not content with the respect and influence you already possess? We suspect you hope to use the discontents of the mass to create a power base that you intend to use to challenge the power of the security forces.'

'If the security forces intend to undermine democracy and liberty in this country,' the Professor replied brusquely, 'then yes.'

Tarrant studied the dossier and placed it on the desk in front of him. He looked up, but not at Quigley, at Will. His eyes glittered coldly.

'And where do you come into this, young man?' he asked. 'One of the Professor's students, I assume. One of his hot-headed admirers. Do you truly believe what he claims? That our work will destroy your civil liberties?'

Will felt uncomfortable. He muttered: 'I'm not his student any more. But...'

'What?' Tarrant asked.

Will swallowed, and then burst out: 'If what they say about this new bill is right, then people won't be able to do anything!'

'They won't be able to commit crimes against their fellow citizens.' Tarrant snorted. 'They won't be able to commit acts of terrorism. Your Professor would prefer it if they could do what they liked.'

'The acts you refer to are the work of people discontent with the system,' the Professor said. 'They feel their liberties threatened, and they lash out.'

'And you know these people, don't you?' Tarrant said triumphantly. 'You'll give us their names, their locations, their aliases...'

The Professor shook his head. 'I have no links with such organisations. I only belong to civil liberties groups.'

Tarrant pounded the desk. 'Groups that are fronts for terrorism!' he bellowed. 'Give us the names of the people behind them, and we will make things easier for you. Do we have a deal? Or would you prefer the alternative?'

The Professor looked back blandly. 'And what would that be?' he inquired.

Tarrant smiled coldly, and looked away. 'There might be... an accident.'

For a moment, Will didn't understand. Then he thought he did, but he couldn't believe it. Was this security man really making crude threats, like a gangster from the movies? It was absurd.

But cold sweat had broken out on Will's brow. He felt dizzy with fear. He'd heard rumours that the security forces were a law unto themselves. They had the means and the ability to do as they pleased, and the power to conceal their crimes once committed. Will had thought such rumours the raving of paranoid nutters. But right here, right now, deep inside this

gloomy, sinister building, in this imposing office, with its walls ranked by grim-faced security men, he felt he had glimpsed another world; one that lay beneath the surface of everyday life, inhabited by only a few – and yet those few had power over the ignorant, innocent, imbecile multitude.

The Professor faced Tarrant coolly. 'Is that why you dragged me here?' he asked. 'To give me a warning?'

Tarrant sniffed. 'Renounce your activities. Don't publish your book. Stop encouraging malcontents. Or you may find yourself in an unfortunate position.'

The Professor laughed. 'I'll think about it,' he said dismissively. 'May we go? I have a dinner appointment.'

The limo dropped them off on the corner outside Quigley's hotel. As it drove away at high speed, the Professor turned to Will and said:

'I'm sorry to have got you into all this.'

Will shrugged. He was white-faced, still shocked by what had happened. Things like that didn't happen, not these days, not in Britain.

'Not your fault,' he said. 'It looks like you're right. The security services are getting out of control. You should write to your MP.'

'Perhaps I should include an appendix on Mr Tarrant in my book,' Quigley said with a laugh, leading Will up the steps. 'I have to get the manuscript to my publishers in Oxford by the autumn, that's my deadline. I thought it was ready as it is. But perhaps more material will come my way.'

He led Will up to his rooms, where he produced a laptop computer and opened a file marked "Manifesto.doc." He took a pen drive from his pocket and copied the hard drive file to the pen drive. This he showed to Will.

'In case anything happens to me,' he said calmly, 'I'm going to conceal this copy in here. I'll show you where. If anything happens to me, which it might well, since I have no intention of cooperating with Mr Tarrant, I would like you to do me a favour.'

'What do you want me to do?' Will stammered, wide-eyed.

'Get this to my publishers in Oxford,' Quigley replied. 'Ensure it is published. The security services will destroy the original if they can get their hands on it, but they won't think my back-up copy is concealed in an obscure hotel room in Central London.'

Will nodded dumbly. 'But surely they didn't mean it. They just wanted to scare you,' he said, awkwardly. 'Ignore them!' Beneath his calm, the Professor must be terrified, to be talking like this.

'Oh, I shall,' the Professor replied. 'But my work must survive. I want to entrust its survival to you.' He smiled broadly. 'Let's just say, to make up for that essay you never gave me.'

Will swallowed. It was a momentous responsibility. He had never dreamed, earlier that evening, when he went out to have a morose pint and think bitter thoughts about the girl who had left him, that he would find himself up to his neck in political intrigue. Yet here he was, being entrusted with this. Still - surely it would never happen.

'There's a demo against the Bill scheduled for tomorrow,' the Professor added. 'Perhaps I might see you there. I know Rex will be there,' he added, looking closely at Will. 'And Daisy.'

Daisy! Will thought. Where was she now? He asked the Professor when the demo would be, and where.

'Piccadilly, 8.30 sharp,' Quigley replied. 'Be seeing you, then?' He showed Will out.

The next morning found Will walking through the streets near Piccadilly, heading for the square. At this hour, between the rush of early morning

commuters and the movement of delivery lorries, the streets were comparatively peaceful, although nothing like those in the gated community where he had grown up. He'd taken the morning off to join this demo, and he wasn't sure quite why. Was it to support Quigley? Or was it because he hoped to see Daisy again? What was he thinking of? The girl was really quite something, but he'd just left a three-year relationship. He shouldn't be hoping to get into another one now. Besides, there was Rex to consider. Assuming they were together. They hadn't seemed too happy with each other when last he saw them.

He turned a corner and entered the square. A crowd of activists had gathered near the middle. Will saw banners with slogans like KILL THE BILL and NO CURFEW. They were chanting, too, although Will couldn't make out the words. Also present in the square was a large contingent of riot police. Will was surprised by quite how many were present, their faces hidden behind their visors, shields and batons held ready.

Unobtrusively, he made his way to join the protestors. As he did so, they began to march forward. He raced to keep up with them, keeping his eyes out for any familiar faces. As they marched forwards, the riot police facing them began to form up. Will's heart pounded in his ears. He had never been on a demo before. The atmosphere was electric with tension; it seemed so much more real than it did on the telly, and yet it was unreal, as if he was on TV himself. The police seemed to be taking this seriously. He hoped there wouldn't be a riot.

A hand patted his arm, and he looked round to see her. Daisy smiled up at him.

'You joined us!' she said. Rex was at her side.
'Where's the Professor?'

Will shook his head. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I thought he would be here. Haven't you seen him?' They had to shout over the roar of the crowd.

'There he is!' said Rex, pointing forwards. Will turned to see the Professor and several other people up at the head of the march. The Professor, never one to avoid clichés, was wearing a duffle coat. Riot police were closing in around them. Will found himself surrounded on all sides by a crush of bodies, deafened by a boom of chanting.

A thunder of hooves alerted him. The pressure eased. People were shouting out in fear. He whirled round to see a contingent of mounted riot police charging out of a side road. This couldn't be happening, the protestors had given no provocation. Daisy seized his arm.

'Run!' she screamed.

Will turned and sprinted with the rest of the crowd. Up ahead, they were spilling into the marchers at the front, who were still proceeding forward in a dignified manner. Vans were pouring into the square, screeching to a halt, disgorging faceless riot police who immediately began to bang truncheons on shields like some Dark Age army. The mounted police were laying about them. Will saw a young girl knocked to the ground where other protestors stumbled over her. Blood stained the tarmac. Everything was confusion, people running back and forwards. Hearing a whumph from behind him, he turned, and saw tear gas rolling forwards like a yellow fogbank. He turned again, and saw no more sign of Daisy or Rex.

Eyes stinging horribly, clogged with tears, Will

stumbled forward. Somewhere up ahead, protestors were organising a defence, flinging impromptu missiles at the oncoming police. A half-brick soared past his ear.

He saw the Professor ahead of him, staring around in horror as his peaceful protest descended into chaos. Will struggled to fight his way to the old man's side. Riot police bore down on his old teacher. The Professor turned, speak calmly; saw a truncheon lifted, come down.

Now the Professor was lying motionless on the ground. Still Will struggled to reach his side. Riot police laid into the prone figure.

Another man appeared through the swirling fog of tear gas, a tall, lean man. He bellowed orders at the riot police, pointed to where other police were dragging struggling protestors into the back of riot vans. As Will broke free of the struggle, he stumbled out into an open expanse littered with debris and groaning figures.

He halted, seeing the Professor's semi-conscious figure being dragged into the back of the van. Sirens wailing, it screeched down the road.

Will saw more police heading his way. He was alone. He could do nothing. Was the Professor alive? Bare minutes had passed since the beginning of the demo. The authorities had crushed the protest in seconds.

He turned and ran through the yellow chemical fog, eyes burning, thick with tears.

THE WAKING OF ANGANTYR by Catriona Green



Hervor grew up on her grandfather's steading without a father.

Although her mother spoke little of her late husband, Hervor learned early on that he had been an unpopular man with the peasants and farm workers, and that they expected her to take after him in his wildness and savagery. Perhaps it was because of this that Hervor preferred the company of boys rather than girls around the steading; sewing and gossip and embroidery appealed to her little, when compared with scuffling in the dirt and training with sword and shield and bow. Her grandfather, who was an important earl in the kingdom, showed disapproval of this, and often warned his daughter that she should curb Hervor's ways or she would grow up wild.

'She needs discipline, that girl,' the Earl boomed. 'A firm hand, that's what young madam needs. Teach her a lesson, or she'll grow up like her father.' He glowered at the small girl who had led the local boys to raid his turnip patch.

His daughter Svava spread her arms wide. 'What can I do? She never does as she is told, do you, Hervor?' she snapped, turning on her daughter, who sneered and kicked at the dirt. 'Besides,' she added, 'you liked Angantyr enough to marry me off to him.'

'What he did was fine, for a man!' Bjarmar roared. 'But less fitting for a little girl. Besides, we all know how Angantyr ended up.'

Svava patted her daughter's matted hair. Hervor snarled up at her and tried to bite.

'What happened to my father?' she demanded, clenching her fists. 'All the boys I know have fathers - and the girls. Why don't I? All I have is a wizened old grandfather!'

Bjarmar scowled down at her, a skinny child with pale skin like a fish's belly, accentuated by her long thick black hair and large black eyes. He ran his hand through his grey locks. 'That's enough from you, my lass,' he barked. 'It's about time someone showed you how to act like a little girl. No more fighting, no more training with the boys. This had gone on long enough. I'd have thought your mother could tell you how to behave, but it's time I put my foot down. This has got to stop. From now on, you're with the girls, learning how to sew and how to deport yourself and behave like a little girl should. Or else you'll get such a whipping...!'

'I want to be like my father!' Hervor snarled. She didn't know what her father had been like, but surely he hadn't sat in the hall with all the fine ladies, sewing and gossiping. No one would tell her about her father, not even Mother. Why should she act like some simpering milksop?

'Hervor!' her mother cried. 'Don't talk like that!' She burst into tears while Grandfather stood over both of them, flushed and embarrassed and at a loss.

He shook his finger at them. 'I tell you, Svava,' he bellowed, 'I'll see that girl in the hall tomorrow with the ladies, learning how to sew. Or else I'll have the skin off her back!'

Hervor went to bed early that night, but she didn't go to sleep. She lay in her bed closet muttering to herself. What should she sit with the ladies,

embroidering tapestries with the deeds of the men-folk when she could be out there with a sword achieving feats of her own? She was sure her father had never stayed quietly at home. There were trolls out there, and ferocious Vikings with holds full of loot. A girl could make her name sailing the high seas, seizing what she fancied. All she needed was a sword...

The crescent moon was riding high above the sea of clouds and the fire trenches in the hall were red embers when she rose, dressed herself, and went to the kitchen. Her mother was asleep, snoring lightly as she passed.

In the kitchen she found the knife rack. She took a carving knife from it and tested its sharpness. She grinned evilly. That was all she needed. She might be a little girl, as her grandfather kept telling her, but she could slay men with this blade.

She hurried from the hall out into the muddy garth. It was eerie in the dim moonlight. The palisade loomed over her, blocking out the starlight, and she could hear the sentries boasting to each other in undertones about the deeds they had done last summer when Grandfather had gone on his last Viking raid. It was unfair. Why could Grandfather make a name for himself, and he old and wrinkly, when she - young and full of life - had to stay at home and sew? All she needed was something to keep the rain out, some food, some money... all these could be got without being idle like her mother and depending on others. She could seize them with force.

She ran her thumb along the sharp blade of the kitchen knife. The black sky was bright with stars. The smoke from the hall fires was rank. Never again, she told herself, would she sleep beneath sooty hall timbers. It was the open air for her and a free life.

She squeezed through the palisade at a place she and the boys knew; where no grown man could go but someone as small as herself could easily fit. Beyond it was the ditch. She waded this with her kirtle kilted up about her legs, glad that it was high summer. Her legs black with mud, she scrambled up the far bank and headed for the black forest wall.

Before Svava's grief at her daughter's disappearance had much abated, Earl Bjarmar's steading was buzzing with another story: tales of the robber who murdered men and women alike and stripped their corpses of their valuables. It was always at night in the woods that gave on to the chief highway between Uppsala and Scania where the attacks took place. Travellers who had escaped the attack spoke of some creature that might be a small troll or a killer dwarf. Returning in daylight, survivors had found the corpses of their loved ones or kinsmen lying stabbed to death and bare of all belongings.

'Sir,' said one of Bjarmar's men one evening as they sat drinking in the hall, 'men whisper against you. They say you cannot rid your lands of this creature that stalks at night, slaying travellers and robbing them.'

'It is true,' an old greybeard cried. 'Some say this is a highwayman, others that it is a dwarf come from Svartalfaheim to rob mortal folk, or else a troll. It brings you no honour, letting it rob and kill in your lands.'

Earl Bjarmar looked down from his high seat at his gathered retainers. 'It is easy for you to say that this highwayman must be killed,' he said, 'whatever its origin, canny or not. But where shall we find it? Travellers report that they have seen nothing before they hear a high-pitched scream, seemingly from the ground itself, and then one or more of them is dead.'

'You are Earl of this land,' said the old greybeard. 'It is a position that includes responsibilities. It is yours to go out and find this monster, this troll, this robber; not to wait for some hero to come over the sea and kill it.'

Bjarmar nodded sadly. 'I suppose you counsel me rightly, if not well. But I am an old man now, and only my daughter survived of my progeny. I have no son, nay, no grandson either, to fight the trolls and fiends that trouble my land. I am old and weak.'

'It remains your part to find this beast and slay it,' another warrior urged him. 'For the good of your honour - and that of your folk.'

'Then if it is for my folk's honour,' said Bjarmar craftily, 'then let my folk join me in hunting down this robber or troll.'

At this his retainers looked awkward, and many seemed likely to dream up excuses. But Earl Bjarmar would listen to none of their prevarications, and decreed that the next night they would travel the highway in the guise of travellers or peddlers, and wait for the troll or robber to attack them.

The next evening the retinue of Earl Bjarmar quit the hall and rode off down the highway as the sun was setting. They reached a place deep in the pine forest where many attacks had been carried out in the past and made their camp, waiting in silence for the rumoured troll to attack.

It was blackest midnight and nothing had happened, when Earl Bjarmar decided he had seen enough of the woods. He rose to his feet from beside the

guttering campfire, sheathing the sword he had laid across his legs in readiness.

'Let us return to my hall for tonight,' he told his men. 'It is clear that nothing will happen tonight.'

It was at that moment that a scream rang out across the clearing, coming from the man left to guard the horses. Earl Bjarmar drew his sword grimly, and forced his tired old leg-bones into a run. He and his men rushed towards the horses where they glimpsed the sight of the guard bucking and thrashing as a small figure clung to his chest and thrust a blade again and again into his throat. Even as they watched, and the horses screamed, the guard fell to the moonlit sward, and the small figure sprang off the corpse and bounded towards them.

The Earl's men turned screaming to run. Only Bjarmar himself strode forward. His men halted at the edge of the clearing and watched in awe as he seized the small troll by the scruff of its neck and lifted it kicking and yowling off the ground. He raised it until its face was next to his. It tried to bite him and he held it writhing and thrashing away from his face.

'It seems I know this small savage,' the Earl remarked as the creature lashed at him with its blade. As they made their way back to their lord's side, his retainers saw it was a small kitchen knife. 'I see my daughter's face, and her husband's wildness. Is this not a small runaway?'

Hervor frothed and snarled with wrath as the retainers plucked the knife from her grasp.

They took her back to the hall as the sun was rising over the fields and woods to the west. Hervor walked alongside her grandfather, her face twisted in a

snarl, but showing no sign of struggling. Her escape attempt had failed, but it had been a happy time while it lasted. She had ambushed unwary travellers and killed them for their money and their provisions, dwelling in a small cave at the heart of the rank old forest and subsisting on slow-moving hedgehogs and forest herbs. The money she had hoarded and spent sometimes at fairs in villages outside the forest. No one had suspected a bedraggled little girl as a robber.

But now it was all over and her grandfather did not seem best pleased as he bundled her into the hall and took down his whip from a hall pillar.

But that morning was only a painful memory five years later, when she received unwelcome news.

Hervor had been berating some of the thralls for their laziness, for their slowness to go out to the fields. One of them, a flabby, ill-favoured fellow, took umbrage at her harsh words.

‘Enough, Hervor!’ he growled disrespectfully. ‘You always want to do someone ill, but that’s to be expected. You know why the old Earl has told us not to tell you who your father was? He thinks it would be shameful for you to know that his daughter slept with the swineherd Frodmar, the worst of his slaves, and you were the result.’

Hervor glared at them, her eyes angry. By now she was growing into her young womanhood, although

she was happier shouting at the slaves than sitting in the sooty hall peering at embroidery and pricking her finger with a needle. Her long black hair lay about her slim shoulders and her eyes flashed fire.

Turning disdainfully on her heel, she strode from the cowering thralls and entered her Grandfather's hall. He sat upon his high seat, old and cranky now, as he spoke of steading matters with his steward. He saw her approaching and a look passed between him and the servant.

Hervor stood before him, her hands on her slim hips.

'It seems I need not brag of my blood,' she spat. 'My father was Frodmar the thrall. I liked to think I shared your kindred, Grandfather, which despite your idleness contained warriors of old. Now it seems my father was a swineherd.'

Earl Bjarmar studied the steward, and ushered him away. 'Who told you this lie?' he asked. 'There's nothing in it.' He sighed. 'It seems at last I must tell you the truth.'

'Your father was no thrall but well regarded for his might. You are of the kindred of Arngrim, whose forefathers dwelt sometimes in this world, sometimes in the world of the giants. Your father Angantyr lies under the turf on the isle of Samsey, far to the south.'

Hervor's heart was pounding. The insulting words of the thrall had angered and upset her. To think that she, with her fiery temper and strength of will, could be fathered by a thrall had seemed the worst of insults. But now her grandfather at last was telling her what she had always wanted to know - the name of her father.

'Foster-father,' she began, to show she knew where he stood in her kindred, 'I feel eager to visit my long-lost kin. I'm sure my father has wealth in his dwelling. Unless I die in the attempt I think I shall make it my own.'

Her grandfather made some complaining noise, but she ignored him. 'I shall tie my hair back before I go on this quest. Folk will see me differently if I dress as a man.'

Imperiously Hervor swept from the hall, leaving her elderly grandfather gasping like a landed fish.

She strode into her mother's bower, where Svava rose from her sewing with a look of dread on her face. 'Quickly, mother,' she said. 'Dress me as a boy. I must go out to seek my birthright, and I can't do that in these women's clothes you gave me.'

Svava looked at her clearly, and for once her eyes were free of tears. 'I recall when your father first came to me,' she said. 'I served him with ale, hoped he would notice me. He was on his way back to his father, but soon he returned for me.'

'It was then that I discovered that he was to fight against his brother's foes Arvarodd and Hjalmar on Samsey. On our wedding night his dreams were ominous, and soon he departed into the south, never to return. Though he bore the sword Tyrting, that was forged by the dwarves Dvalin and Durin so that it cut through metal as easily as through silk, he was slain during the fight. But he planted a seed in my womb, and what trouble grew from that sowing.'

'Mother,' Hervor said, 'I will never be a lady, as you

wish me to be. My father's blood is too fierce in my veins for that. Rather shall I be a shieldmaiden and I shall sail with Vikings until I come to my father's tomb. Then shall I find my birthright.'

The tears ran down Svava's cheeks.

Hervor left her grandfather's steading the next morning, wearing a byrnie over a man's tunic and breeches, on her brows a gold-worked helmet that her grandfather had worn in his youth, and a freshly painted linden shield on her arm. From her belt a sword depended.

'Well, Hervor,' her grandfather said gruffly, as the ladies from the hall giggled together behind him and darted vicious looks at Svava, 'I suppose this was inevitable. You were never suited for the life of a maid.'

'I intend to be a maid always,' Hervor said ironically. 'But it is as a shieldmaiden I shall live, not as a seamstress. I shall take the treasure that is my father's and live by that. Before I can get there though I shall find a Viking crew and sail with them.'

The ladies shrieked at her words and the men looked dour. Hervor sneered at them, tightened her chin strap, and strode from the steading alone.

Three years had passed when a longship moored off the shore of Samsey Island. On its deck several

furiously arguing figures were visible. Most distinctive among them was one who despite its helmet and long byrnie was clearly a young woman.

'But Hervard!' one of the other Vikings exclaimed, 'we have followed you through thick and thin since our old skipper died, and you've led us to rich plundering. We have become a hundred times wealthier than we did under old Thorstein. But I'll not join you on this quest.'

'Aye,' said another crewman, 'if you wish to go ashore on Samsey, I'll not join you, though I'd sail with you against the King of the Danes.'

Hervor surveyed her men. "Hervard" was the name she'd taken as a Viking, and they all called her by it, though few could fail to recognise her as a woman. Still, she'd proved herself as a shieldmaiden in raids upon the coasts of lands as far apart as Esthonia and Ireland. They'd followed her willingly anywhere, up to the gates of Hell, but at Samsey her bold crew drew the line.

'I wish to go ashore onto the island,' she told them calmly. 'It matters little to me whether or not you come with me. I know full well there is good chance I shall find treasure in that mound that stands on the skyline by the shore. But I don't expect any of you to join me. It is your loss, men.'

The helmsman looked awkwardly at his fellow crewmen. 'It is known that terrible ghosts dwell in that mound,' he said. 'But very well, Hervard. If you must go ashore, let us not detain you. We shall wait as long as we expect you to return.'

They dropped the anchor stone over the side, and helped Hervor climb into a boat tied to the ship's

stern. She unshipped the oars and looked defiantly up at the warriors gathered along the shield-flanked bow.

'Mark my words, I will return,' she replied, 'with riches that I shall share only with those who aid my venture.' When none moved to join her in the boat, she began to row and the boat was soon separated from the longship by a widening stretch of sun dappled waves.

The sun was setting, glittering redly across the lapping waves, when Hervor's boat scraped against the shingle and she shipped the oars. She straightened her byrnie, settled her shield on her back and tightened the chinstrap of her helmet before stepping over the side into the shallow waters.

She splashed ashore and stopped at a large hummock of sand. It stood between the tideline and the edge of the moor that swept down from the trees to the beach. The shadows of the mound were long, stretching far across the sand.

Hervor strode up the strand towards the higher ground. Cows were cropping the scurvy grass and sea vetch that grew among the dunes. Turning a corner she met a man clad in drab, undyed homespun, clutching a staff. He gazed warily at this armoured intruder.

'What man is that, come to the harbour?' he asked, his voice trembling. 'Go home now; go back to your hall.'

Hervor faced him proudly. 'I won't go back to my home,' she said. 'I know none who live here. But quickly, tell me before you run off. Where is the

burial mound of Angantyr?’

The cowherd laughed. ‘Don’t ask me such a foolish question. You’re a Viking, I can see, so you must be far from home. But it’s dark now. We should leave.’ He indicated the slope where now that the sun had set, hissing phosphorescent green lights were glowing.

Hervor sneered. ‘Let’s not be afraid of this crackling, even if the whole island is ablaze. I wouldn’t let old dead men frighten me. Quickly, let’s talk further.’ She took a golden necklace from her bag. ‘Here’s payment for your words. You won’t convince me to run. You couldn’t scare away a Viking queen with your wealth.’

The cowherd shook his head. He hadn’t meant to stay out so late. ‘Anyone who goes up there on their own must be simple. Look, the fires are burning and the burial mound opens. Run!’

He fled towards the woods, avoiding the burial mound that glowed with such an eerie light. Hervor shook her head and trod the path leading up the moor towards the barrow. The sinister green flame blazed around her but she waded through it, feeling no warmth. Then she stood before the burial mound.

‘Angantyr, awaken,’ she called out. ‘Hervor awakens you, your only daughter by your wife Svava. Now give me your sword, the one the dwarves made for King Svafrlami.’ The phosphorescent fires coruscated and crackled, but no answer came from beneath the turf.

‘Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantyr - from beneath the earth I summon you all, with shield and byrnie, helm and armour, sharp swords and gilded spears.’

Still the mound lay silent. Hervor curled her lip in contempt. Had her father and her uncles been such cowards? 'So much for the sons of Arngrim! Your mean bodies moulder in the earth. Won't my father speak to me tonight?'

Again, the earth was silent. Hervor felt a moment of self doubt. Was she mad to be summoning the dead from their graves like this? Would they ever come? She tried again.

'Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantyr! I hope you all rot! Let your ribcages sink into the soil, unless you hand over Dvalin's sword. It's not for dead men to hoard such a blade.'

The ground rumbled, and a crack in the side of the barrow glowed greenly in the darkness. Then a voice billowed forth, booming yet as insubstantial as a zephyr, as if a great man was shouting far beneath the earth.

'Hervor, my daughter, why do you call me like this? You are a witch, and sorrow will be your destiny. You're mad, witless, to be raising the dead. No father dug my grave, no kindred buried me. The two who slew me took Tyrting.'

Hervor snarled fearlessly as her dead father spoke. 'You lie!' she hissed. 'May the gods only let you sit happy in your barrow if it doesn't lie with you. You're unwilling to share kindred heirlooms with your daughter.'

The barrow split open and green flame flared forth. In the midst of it Hervor could see a skeletal figure clad in armour. It stretched its arms forth. 'The gate of Hell is gaping and graves are opening. Fire blazes on the rim of the island. This is an awful place,

maiden. Hurry back to your ship.'

Hervor scowled at her father. What a welcome was this for a daughter who had travelled so far to see him! 'I curse you, dead warriors. You'll be worm-eaten in the barrow, rotting with the dead. Father! Give me that dwarf-forged sword. Don't hide it from me!'

'Daughter, you are unlike most mortal folk. They never walk here at night amongst burial mounds, even clad in armour and claspings weapons.'

'I thought I was no different from other folk until I came here. Give me the sword that slew Hjalmar.'

Angantyr's voice boomed thinly from the mound. 'Hjalmar's bane lies beneath my shoulders. Flame wraps it. Only one girl on earth would have the courage to take it.'

'I'll take that blade,' she told him, her voice firm. 'Fire doesn't frighten me.'

'Hervor, you're a fool,' her undead father intoned, 'but you don't lack courage. Take my sword. I can't refuse you.'

'Good, father. You'll give me the sword. I'd rather hold it than rule all Norway.'

Angantyr's desiccated face twisted as the green flame burned about him. 'Wicked wench, what do you know? Don't rejoice in this. Tyrping will destroy you, lass, and all your descendants.'

'What do I care how this affects any sons of mine?'

'Long you will own and enjoy this blade. But keep it covered - don't touch the edge. It is deadly. Farewell, daughter. I'd rather have granted you the life of twelve men than this blade.'

'Rest in the grave,' Hervor told him. 'I seem to be standing between the worlds as these fires burn around me,' she murmured to herself as she took the blade and made her way down the slope to the ships. But when she reached the shore she found the dark bay was empty.

Her cowardly crew had abandoned her.

Nevertheless, with the sword she now held, nothing was impossible for her. She would find another.

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter Sixteen

"Here you go, Ellie," Smith declared confidently.

He had found the tool in a drawer in the front desk. It was the place he would have put it and much to his surprise it was actually there. If Corrine had worked for the police, he reasoned, they would have been well and truly screwed; the tool would have been in a

special box, underneath a book or something. Whatever, thought Smith. He felt very pleased with himself for walking so far and for rescuing the little girl from the handcuffs; he was also pleased that she had stopped asking him questions about stuff every ten seconds. All he had said to her was, "I don't think I can talk and remain conscious at the same time, so I'm afraid you'll have to pick one or the other."

With her newly free arms, Ellie gave Smith a hug. He patted the girl gently on the head. Everything felt good. He felt very warm and a little dizzy. His face felt really cosy and snug, just like someone had tucked it into a nice warm quilt. Smith sat down.

"Do you think you can find your way back?" Smith asked Ellie.

"On my own?"

Smith nodded.

"I'm going to sleep," he told her. "I'm not positive I shall wake up today."

Free from captivity and danger for the first time in the day, Ellie noticed that blood was dripping from the shirt Smith had wrapped around his forehead. The cloth was saturated.

Smith's eyes rolled back in his head and turned white. Then they closed and Smith slumped sideways. Ellie panicked. she didn't like the thought of being in a police station on her own. her recent experiences had not given her a great deal of faith in the good nature of the constabulary.

Behind the desk was a green box with a white cross on it. It was just like the one she had on her toy doctor's box. She pulled the chair over to it so that she could reach up and the contents fell on to the ground.

It wasn't the first time that Ellie had dressed a wound; it was just the first time she hadn't done it on a teddy bear. But she knew the principle well enough; put the thick pad on the bit that's hurt and wrap the bandages around and around until it stays on, then tuck them into each other so that they stay on. Once Smith was bandaged tight, she got a wet paper towel and wiped most of the blood off his face. She couldn't find any blankets to tuck him into but she managed to find some coats in a back room. Better still, she found some orange juice and biscuits. She tried feeding some of them to Smith but the crumbs just fell down onto the coats. He did take a sip of orange though. That made Ellie feel a lot better; it meant he wasn't dead. With that in mind, she had a little picnic of biscuits and orange juice and then hid herself under some coats so that if any police came they wouldn't see her. Then she fell asleep.

Corrine was in hot pursuit of Smith. She knew he couldn't be too far away. There were spots of blood about every twenty metres, which she followed like a trail of breadcrumbs. It was like Hansel and Gretel except less gory and BDSM themed. She realised that she had been cycling for nearly a mile and was absolutely astonished not to find Smith asleep on the embankment.

As she rode, she was disturbed by the sound of shouting.

“OI.”

Corrine turned her head. There were two soldiers waving their arms at her. neither of them looked well. The big one looked as though he had been sick on himself and tried to wash his clothes on the windscreen sprayer of an abandoned car. Whereas the smaller one, small was not quite the word Corrine would have used, looked as if he had been in a scratch fight with Wolverine. She hesitated before pressing the brakes of the bicycle.

“Where are you going?” said Biggy.

“Who are you?” said Corrine.

“We’re her majesties bloody armed forces,” said Jon.
“Who the fuck are you?”

“The monarchy are all dead,” said Corrine.

“I’m third in line for the throne now, so fuck off.”

Corrine was being fatuous but by an unbelievable co-incidence, she was absolutely correct. to cut a long story short, the rest of them had all died. Before the outbreak of the slouch, Corrine had been 10,506th in line for royalty but the apocalypse has always been a great leveller.

“You hear that, Biggy? I’ve never had any posh totty, what about you?”

Biggy clipped Jon around the ear.

“Watch your manners; this is a lady you’re talking to.”

Corrine thanked Biggy.

“Can I go now?” she asked. “Or do you have plans for me.”

“No,” said Biggy, “we’re just glad to see someone up and moving. Erm, one more thing.”

“What is it?” asked Corrine.

“You haven’t seen a little girl called Elaine around have you?”

“No, I haven’t. You haven’t seen an idiot who’s bleeding heavily have you?”

Biggy raised his palm at Jon.

“No, a different one.”

Biggy shook his head.

“See you then,” said Corrine and she cycled on her way.

Once she was a little distance away, Jon punched Biggy in the arm.

“What are you being such a dick for? I was in there.”

Biggy patted him on the back.

“Let’s find that service station, shall we?”

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Fourteen

When the news came, Ada and Will were helping Ludlam write threatening letters to leading industrialists. Sadly, a stocking weaver’s education had taught Ned very little about grammar, spelling or punctuation, and his written style was almost as bad as that of Ada’s students.

‘Really, Mr. Ludlam!’ she chided, and read out the draft of a previous missive:

Ned Lud Gives Notic, to the Coperation,

if the Coperation does not take means to Call A Meeting with the Hoseiars about the prices Being—Dropped Ned will asemble 20000 Menn together in a few Days and will Destroy the town in Spite of the Soldiers....

‘Where would you be without Will and me?’

Ludlam looked bashful. ‘Aye, us is reet glad us now ‘as eddicated folk like you and Will to ‘elp the cause, Miss Ada.’

At that moment, Weaver came dashing into the circle of tents. He carried a rolled-up poster under one arm.

‘News!’

‘What’s tha news?’ Ludlam said laconically.

‘Perceval has been shot!’ Weaver exclaimed. ‘They’ve shot Perceval!’

Ada looked at Will. 'Perceval?'

'Spencer Perceval,' Will stuttered, his eyes wide with shock.

'The prime minister?' Ada exclaimed, in amazement.

She stared off into the distance, not hearing Ludlam's discussion with Weaver, who was showing everyone the poster he was carrying. Of course, the only British prime minister ever to be assassinated! 1812 certainly did contain some significant historical moments... So far, she'd met Ned Ludd, Lord Byron, and now she was seeing the reaction of the Luddites to Spencer Perceval's assassination. If she ever got back to the 21st century, she could set up a trans-dimensional travel agency... Come and see significant historical events as they occur...

'But who shot him?' she asked, interrupting the impassioned discussion that had broken out among the men.

Ludlam turned to her, showing her the poster. 'Weren't tha listenin', lass? Look!'

On the poster was printed a ballad. Ada only caught the first two lines:

*Welcome Ned Ludd, your case is good,
Make Perceval your aim...*

'This were posted up in Nottingham last Saturday,' Ludlam said grimly. 'Whoever writ it has got us in reet hot water.'

'You're implicated in Spencer Perceval's assassination?' Ada asked. 'But that can't be right. I'm sure I'd have remembered. The Luddites had nothing to do with it...'

'Tell that to the sheriff of Nottingham who's scouring these woods accompanied by volunteers, specials, Bow Street Runners up from London, dragoons and a regiment of Redcoats,' Weaver said grimly. He turned to Ludlam. 'You've made no secret that your centre of operations is in Sherwood Forest. Now they want you for more than just machine wrecking!'

Ada raised her eyebrows in disbelief. This was surreal. 'Did you say the sheriff of Nottingham?' Except it wasn't – it was terrifyingly real. She gripped Ludlam's arm. 'We've got to get away! They'll slaughter us!'

He looked down at her in confusion. 'Away, lass? Where can us go?'

An idea hit Ada like a musketball between the eyes. 'To Cambridge!' she said. 'Make for Cambridge!'

At last she would be able to carry out her own mission.

'Why Cambridge?' Weaver demanded.

Ada turned to him. 'That's the last place they'll expect us to go,' she said. 'No stocking looms, no manufactories, unless you count Blake's dark satanic mills.' No one knew what she was talking about again.

'Ada's right,' said Will, 'at least that we have to get away. Cambridge is as good a place to go as any.'

Ludlam picked up a musket and began loading it. 'Well, us've got all this weaponry,' he said. 'If us meets the sheriff and 'is men, us'll give 'em somethin' to think about.'

He went to speak with his men.

A quarter of an hour, the Luddite encampment had been dismantled, and all that was left to show that it had ever existed was a few fire pits where they had cooked their food. The canvas tents and the rest of their gear, they had thrust into packs carried by donkeys and a few ponies. Now all Ludlam's men were ready for the off.

'Company, open formation; march!' he commanded, and they began to move off between the trees.

They proceeded cautiously, with scouts ahead and on either flank. The forest was silent except for the cries of birds, the rustling of animals in the undergrowth, and the sound of Ada and her companions making their way through the trees. It was eerie. The Luddites moved in almost complete silence, and unless she looked to either side, Ada could have thought she was alone in the wood.

She moved to Ludlam's side.

'How do we get to Cambridge?' she asked.

He looked at her in surprise. 'Us'd have thought thee'd know that,' he said, 'since thee was so insistent.'

She shrugged. 'I think Cambridge is a good place to go, under the circumstances,' she replied, 'but I don't know how we're going to get there. We can't just take a stagecoach, can we?'

'Would take a few coaches for the whole company,' Ludlam conceded. 'Us'll travel like us did in Cheshire. That's if us gets out of forest...'

Ada shivered. So far they had seen no sign of anyone in the woods, and certainly not any soldiers. But Ludlam was right. Their hopes of reaching their destination depended on them evading their pursuers.

At least they were finally on the road to Cambridge. It seemed like an eternity since she had joined the Luddites, and ever since it had seemed as if she was getting further and further from her goal. Several times she had considered abandoning them and making her own way. What had persuaded her against this was her uncertainty about how she would make her way. Road signs were pretty rudimentary in this century – there were signposts pointing to local destinations, but as for long distance travel... well, she could ask someone, of course, but she wanted to avoid having too much to do with people. This was a dangerous period.

Now she was on her way, and she was surrounded by armed men who would defend her from the trials of the road. Unfortunately, they were all wanted men, and somewhere in those tranquil ranks of trees was a group of hunters searching for them with the intention of killing them.

What was more, she found herself struggling with her conscience. These Luddites had no interest at all in assassinating Babbage. She was manipulating them for her own purposes. All they wanted was to be able to feed their children, to earn an honest wage. Very few of them had genuine revolutionary intentions despite some rhetoric about guillotining King George...

Certainly what she wanted to do was beyond anyone's understanding. Even Will, who was brighter than the rest, had been confused when Ada had explained what she was doing here.

He was walking quietly at her side. She smiled at him. He returned her look, but his smile looked forced.

'Scared?' she whispered.

'Terrified, Miss Ada,' he replied. 'There's troopers looking for us in these woods, you know.' He gripped the musket he was carrying as if for comfort. 'I wish I'd never joined Ned. This isn't my fight. I'm a computer.'

'But you were out of work,' Ada replied. 'And that's because of the way things are.'

'It's all because of the war with the French,' Will replied. 'That's what they say. Everything that's wrong is because of the war.'

'Everything wrong is because of inventors putting you out of work,' Ada countered. 'That's what Mr. Ludlam would say.'

'And now someone's shot Perceval,' Will went on, showing no sign of listening. 'The king's mad, the prime minister's been shot, and we're being hunted. They think we were behind it.' He glanced at Ludlam, and leaned closer to Ada. 'Do you think he was?'

Ada shook her head. 'I know he wasn't,' she replied reassuringly.

Will shook his head. 'And while I'm here, my wife and all my children are starving. I should be back with them, looking after them. Not wandering the woods with rebels.'

Ada saw the way his face twisted as he said the last word, and she felt concerned. She touched his arm and he looked at her.

'I...' he began.

Before he could say any more, a rattle of musketry from up ahead tore through the forest's silence.

'The soldiers...!' Ludlam hissed. He gestured to them to take cover. Ada flung herself down into a hollow at the roots of a great oak, and peered out. Ludlam and Will joined her.

The gunfire cracked out again. Three men who Ludlam identified as the scouts he had sent forward came running out of the trees. As they did so, one cried out and fell, tumbling over and over down the slight slope. Ludlam raised his head.

'Get down, lads!' he shouted. Another rattle of fire came from the trees and another scout fell. The last one flung himself down into the hollow where Ada and her friends were already crouched.

The scout's eyes were wide, his face pale.

'Redcoats!' he hissed. 'They came outa trees at us! They ...'

Before he could finish, Ada saw uniformed soldiers marching out into the clearing, muskets levelled.

'Fire!' Ludlam shouted. He produced a silver-chased pistol from his belt and fired at the soldiers.

A ragged crack of rifle and pistol fire came from the surrounding trees. Immediately, moving like disciplined machine, the redcoats formed a square and began to fire into the undergrowth.

The air stank with the bad eggs stench of sulphur. Ada crouched down by the roots of the oak, deafened by the boom and thunder of the guns. Will pressed a loaded pistol into her hands.

'Fight them!' he shouted. 'We've got no hope but to fight them!'

Her hand shaking, Ada pointed the gun in the direction of the soldiers. Feeling herself scowl, she gingerly pulled the trigger.

The bang seemed to drive her ears deep inside her head. The bad egg smell was stomach churning. And with it came something else, a smell like bacon. Presumably the saltpetre in the gunpowder, she told herself as she reloaded automatically with hands that seemed to be numb.

She lifted the pistol and fired again. A soldier fell. She wasn't sure if it was her shot that had hit him or someone else's in this noise and confusion. Suddenly, the redcoats were retreating from the clearing.

The crack of musket died away, the smoke drifted across the clearing. Several unmoving forms were visible, lying on the ground where the redcoats had stood.

Ada reloaded. Ludlam rose to his feet, brandishing his cutlass in his right hand, his pistol in his left.

'After them!' he shouted.

Ada shared a grimace with Will. Ludlam leapt up out of the hollow. Luddites were bursting from the trees on all sides. The surviving redcoats had vanished into the trees. Had they really defeated them so easily? These men were accustomed to fighting the well-disciplined forces of Napoleon, not badly trained weavers with second-hand flintlocks.

But the rebels marched forward like a real army, despite their rough homespun clothes, their unshaven faces. Ludlam had drilled them into a fine fighting machine, Ada realised as she hurried forward with them, her loaded pistol in her hand. She passed the fallen redcoats. Was one of them dead because of her? She didn't even belong in this century. What were stocking looms to her? The Industrial Revolution had brought much that was good. Only Babbage's invention had brought humanity to its knees.

'The soldiers are retreating!' Ludlam declared jubilantly. 'We'll drive them from Sherwood!' Again he brandished his cutlass. Then he began to run, and his men raced after him, towards the trees where the redcoats had fled.

A deafening boom of musket-fire came from the trees, followed by muzzle flashes and drifting smoke. Eight or nine Luddites fell in that first volley. One was Ludlam.

Ada gasped in shock, dropped her gun and knelt at his side. She tried to lift him up, then stopped.

Will flung himself down beside her. The Luddites were still charging. Another volley filled the woods with stinking smoke. Ada cradled Ludlam in her arms.

Will's eyes widened. They met Ada's, which she realised suddenly were brimful with tears.

Ludlam's blood was staining her gown. His face looked up at her, though his eyes were glazed. A musket ball had lodged itself in his temple.

'We've got to get him away,' Will said. 'Come on.'

He helped her heave the wounded man to his feet, and they led him through the trees in a different direction from the charging Luddites. Soon they were out of the trees entirely.

At first Ada thought she could hear thunder. Then she looked across the meadow into which they had come, and she saw a troop of heavily-armoured dragoons riding towards them. Will turned, and Ada followed him only to see redcoated infantry filing from the trees.

They were surrounded.

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THE DARK PLACE by James Talbot

Chapter 11

Martin left his bag in the hall and followed Isobel into the lounge. The fire was lit and the illuminated table lamps gave the room an air of intimacy with the soft pools of light they created.

'Aren't you staying?' Isobel asked as she turned to face Martin. Martin looked nonplussed.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'You've still got your coat on,' said Isobel smiling. Martin grinned as he unfastened his coat and pulled his arms out of the sleeves. Isobel took the coat and walked out into the hall to hang it up. When she came back into the lounge Martin was sitting on the settee. He was leaning back wards with his eyes closed and his head resting against the back of the settee. Isobel sat next to him and Martin lifted his head and looked at her.

'You look really tired,' she said, 'but I'm glad to see you've had a shave.'

Martin ran his hand across the lower part of his face. 'I thought it would be a good idea. I was starting to look like I was growing a beard, wasn't I?'

Isobel stroked Martin's cheek. 'You look much better but you still look tired,' she said. Isobel let her fingers continue down Martin's cheek until she was caressing the side of his neck. 'How does your throat feel now?' she asked.

'As long as I keep my voice down and don't clear my throat too much it feels a lot better,' Martin replied. He looked into Isobel's green eyes. 'There's something I want to talk to you about,' he said quietly. Isobel immediately felt nervous at the way Martin sounded so serious. 'I wanted to tell you this earlier today but with all the weird stuff that's been going on it was sort of pushed aside.'

Isobel held up her hand and said, 'Stop there Martin. If you want to stop seeing me just say so, don't drag things out.'

Martin looked crestfallen and hurt at what Isobel said and the tone in her voice. 'It's not like that. I did some serious thinking last night after I'd spoken to you on the telephone and again this afternoon after I'd been to the church to see Reverend Carey.'

'Here it comes,' thought Isobel, not even noticing Martin's mention of going to the church. 'This is the bit where he tells me it's been great but he doesn't want to see me anymore.'

Martin took Isobel's hand and said quietly, 'I love you Isobel.' The words didn't register at first. Isobel was locked in an inner battle with her feelings of criticism for herself for thinking that Martin wouldn't hurt her and feeling that she thought she could have finally lower her defences and loved again. Slowly what Martin had said began to make sense to her. She looked at Martin, and clearly saw the love he had for her, and

despair that he was losing her written in equal measure across his face.

'What did you just say?' asked Isobel.

'I said I love you,' replied Martin. Isobel felt her feelings well up inside her, and before she could do anything to stop them, she felt tears trickle down her cheeks.

'Oh Martin,' Isobel said through her tears. 'I thought you were going to say you didn't want to see me anymore.'

Martin looked into Isobel's eyes and took hold of her hands. 'I want you with me all the time,' he said. 'I've been turning myself inside out all week thinking that perhaps you didn't feel the same as I did. I decided yesterday that I needed to tell you how I felt.'

Isobel put her arms around Martin's shoulders and held him close. 'I love you too Martin,' she said quietly as they held each other. Martin felt his heart jump in his chest at Isobel's words and he hugged her even tighter.

'You're going to squash me if you squeeze any tighter,' said Isobel her tears giving way to laughter.

'Sorry,' said Martin sheepishly as he released his grip on her. Isobel stood up and smoothed her skirt down before turning to face Martin and holding out her hands to him. Martin took hold of Isobel's hands as he stood up and they moved into each other's embrace.

Martin felt as though he was floating on air. He had told Isobel how he felt about her and the realisation that she felt the same way about him was almost unbelievable. As Isobel held Martin close and then

passionately kissed his lips she was filled with happiness. The realisation that Martin loved her, and then being able to tell Martin that she loved him had been such a release. She wondered how she could even breathe with the intense feelings of elation coursing through her. Slowly they parted and looked into each other's eyes. Isobel leant forward and rested her head against Martin's shoulder.

'You don't know how happy you've made me, Martin,' she said quietly. 'I thought I'd never find someone I wanted to be with and who wanted to be with me.' Martin didn't say anything he was scared that if he did he would break the spell and all this would be just another dream so he held Isobel close and kissed her hair.

'Hi Tom, I'm home,' Karen shouted as she let herself into the house. There was no answer and Karen was puzzled. Tom's car was outside but there didn't seem to be any sign of him. Karen walked into the lounge and Tom was sprawled on the settee asleep. He had been listening to his iPod and he was still wearing the headphones so hadn't heard Karen when she called. Karen knelt down next to Tom.

'Hey, sleepy head,' she said as she gently shook Tom's shoulder. Tom opened his eyes and smiled.

'Hello,' he said. 'Sorry. I must have dozed off and then didn't hear you come in.'

Karen leant forward and kissed Tom just before he yawned. 'That was close,' said Karen laughing and standing up before walking out into the hall to hang up her coat. Tom stretched and then stood up and followed Karen through the door and leant against the doorframe.

'So how was your day today?' he asked. 'Did Isobel make it in today or not?'

'She came in around lunchtime,' replied Karen. 'There's something strange going on though. Since she met Martin she's been having weird dreams and stuff.'

'Did you ask her about the dead people in Kallaste that had the same surname her parents had?'

'Great grandfather,' corrected Karen. Tom smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'Still family though, isn't it,' he said.

'Let's go and sit down,' Karen replied as she walked past Tom into the lounge 'and I'll tell you what Isobel told me about her weekend.'

'This sounds like it might be good,' said Tom following Karen into the lounge and sitting down next to her. When Karen had finished telling Tom the events Isobel had recounted to her earlier in the day he whistled softly.

'That sounds like it's from a Stephen King book or something doesn't it?' he said. 'Do you believe her?'

'Well, she believes it,' said Karen 'but then I suppose Isobel was there so she saw everything herself.'

'The bit about the weather on Sunday is really weird. Are you sure, you didn't tell her what time we were out walking?' Tom asked.

'No,' Karen replied. 'She described the weather to me and told me the time it happened and it was around the same time we started to walk into the park.'

'So what did the Reverend say when you told him what had been happening?' asked Isobel. Martin told her about the explanation that Michael Carey had suggested and about his offer to speak to her as well. 'I'm not going mad,' said Isobel, 'and I'm certainly not neurotic or disturbed. I may have been a little upset after my nightmare and perhaps I did imagine what I saw in my bedroom but I certainly didn't imagine the cuts and scratches on your back or the damage to your throat did I?'

'No,' said Martin, 'but I think Reverend Carey thinks I did.'

'Do you think I should talk to him?' asked Isobel.

'I don't know,' Martin replied. 'He gave me this vial of holy water and it seemed to help me, or at least I think it did. I don't know what he could do or tell you that would help explain what's been happening though. He had ideas about autosuggestion but it was pretty much the same thing we spoke about with Steve and Jess on Saturday night.'

'Tell me what happened this afternoon, Martin,' said Isobel.

When Martin had finished Isobel didn't know what to say.

'That must have been terrifying,' she said quietly, 'especially after what happened to you last night.'

'It was pretty scary,' admitted Martin. 'The thing I can't understand is what the significance of the holy water is? I'm not religious I don't believe in a divine all powerful God so why does holy water seem to have some kind of effect on whatever is in my dreams? It doesn't make sense. At the end of the day, it's only water that's been blessed, isn't it? I thought holy water only works with vampires, anyway,' Martin added laughing.

'Maybe it has nothing to do with what you believe,' said Isobel thoughtfully. 'Maybe it has more to do with whatever it is that you've been confronting in your dreams believes?'

'I never thought of that,' said Martin.

Tom and Karen were sitting in the small office-cum-bedroom in their house looking at the computer screen. They had decided to check the international news agencies for reports from Kallaste as the story seemed to have dropped from the radar of the local UK news agencies. The Reuters web page appeared to have the most up to date news from around the world as well as a searchable news archive so that was the website they visited first. They both stared in silence at the most recent report from Kallaste.

The local police had reported that far from just the five people with the name Stefanovich being related all twelve victims were in fact part of the same extended family. The official police statement had said that every dead body found at the house, from the youngest child to the oldest adult had been in some way related. What had stunned the local police, apart from the bizarre manner of their deaths, was that there didn't appear to be a solitary family member left alive anywhere. All the sons and daughters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandchildren and grandparents who were in any way related to the Stefanoviches were now dead.

'Has Isobel got any relatives?' asked Tom after they had read the reports.

'I don't think so,' said Karen. 'Her parents are dead and she's an only child. She's never mentioned any other relatives.'

'That would make her the last one related to the Stefanoviches

then, wouldn't it?' said Tom quietly.

Isobel and Martin were in the kitchen. Martin had just opened a bottle of wine and Isobel was making sandwiches.

'I'm sorry there isn't anything in the house to eat,' said Isobel. 'I usually only have myself to worry about and I wanted to be here when you got here tonight so I didn't have time to pick anything up on the way home.'

'Don't worry,' said Martin. 'Didn't you know tuna sandwiches and red wine are the first item on the snack menu at every Michelin starred chefs restaurant? In fact,' he continued, 'Raymond Blanc swears by them.'

Isobel laughed along with Martin as she finished preparing the sandwiches and arranging them on plates. They took the snack and the wine bottle and glasses into the lounge and set them on the coffee table. Martin poured wine into two glasses before handing one to Isobel and sitting down next to her on the settee.

'Cheers,' said Isobel lifting her glass towards Martin. They touched the glasses together before sipping the wine.

'This is very nice wine,' said Martin.

'I'm glad you like it,' replied Isobel. 'It was recommended to me by a friend last year and I bought a couple of cases. I think there's still a case and half in the wine cellar.'

'I didn't know you had a wine cellar,' said Martin, looking puzzled.

'I haven't really,' replied Isobel, 'but it sounds a lot better than saying on the floor in the pantry.' They laughed together and then telephone started ringing. 'I'll just go and see who that is,' said Isobel as she put her glass down and made her way into the hallway to answer it.

Martin sipped his wine and took a bite out of his sandwich. The coarse bread dragged at the back of his throat as he ate but the feeling was nowhere near the pain and trauma his throat had experienced the previous night.

Isobel walked back into the room. Martin could see something was wrong by the worried expression on her face. 'Is something wrong?' he asked.

'That was Karen on the telephone,' said Isobel. 'She wanted to tell me the latest news about something that she first read about on the Reuters web pages last week.'

'Must be important if she had to ring you at home to tell you about it,' said Martin.

'I don't know if it is or not,' said Isobel as she sat down. 'At first Karen thought there may be some kind of link between me and the story because of my great grandfather.'

Isobel proceeded to tell Martin the story of her great grandfather coming to England from Estonia and changing the family name from Stefanovich to Stevens because he thought that an English sounding name would help his business.

'What was your great grandfather's business?' asked Martin.

'He was a butcher,' Isobel replied. 'Apparently there have been a series of murders in the village my great grandfather came from,' she continued. 'The first reports that Karen saw last week said the surname of some of the victims was Stefanovich. Karen thought it might be connected to me in some way. I have no idea why she thought I could be connected to it though. My great grandfather has been dead for years and I've never even been to Estonia.'

'I think I saw a report about that on the news last week,' said Martin. 'Was the village named Kallaste?'

'Yes, that's it,' said Isobel. 'Now Karen thinks I might be in some kind of danger,' she added, sounding puzzled. 'Karen and Tom have been following the story on the Reuters webpage's tonight and now it seems all the people involved in the killings were related in some way. They think that because my great grandfather's surname was originally Stefanovich I may be the last living relative. I told Karen that was ridiculous, how could anything happening that far away be connected to me?'

'I remember what caught my attention about that story now,' said Martin. 'All the bodies were exsanguinated but they couldn't find any blood at all at the scene.'

'Do you think that's possible?' asked Isobel.

'Without seeing the bodies it's hard to say,' said Martin. 'I wouldn't think it was possible to bleed out so many people and not leave a trace of blood. Unless it was done somewhere else and the bodies moved afterwards.'

'That sounds awful,' said Isobel.

'What did she say?' asked Tom as Karen came back into the room.

'Well, she sounded as though she thought I was being silly telephoning her to tell her what we'd just read,' replied Karen.

'So you're being silly when you telephone her and you have real world facts to back up your story?' said Tom exasperatedly. 'It's OK for Isobel to tell you her fantasies about red eyed monsters in her dreams as well as weather that turns nasty against her though and that's not silly?' Tom finished angrily.

'Don't get mad, Tom,' said Karen. 'The whole thing sounds weird whichever way you look at it doesn't it? I mean out of both stories, which do you, think sounds the most believable? Us trying to warn Isobel about something that's happening thousands of miles away that we think might be in some way be connected to her when we don't really know anything about Isobel's family. On the other hand, Isobel having bad dreams and believing she's being tormented by something in her dreams that she thinks she may have seen in reality. They both sound as odd as each other in the cold light of day, don't they?'

'I suppose you're right,' conceded Tom. 'I'm sorry,' he said 'I didn't mean to get angry but if there is some kind of connection between what's happening over in Estonia and the things Isobel thinks are happening here the least we can do is try and warn her isn't it?'

'Yes you're right,' said Karen, 'but if she doesn't want to accept what we think what else can we do?'

'I don't know,' said Tom.

'Do you think you should let Reverend Carey know what happened this afternoon?' Isobel asked Martin.

'I don't know,' Martin replied. 'He might think there's something seriously wrong with me if I start telling him how I think a vial of holy water helped me to scare off a dark shadow with red eyes.'

'He might do,' said Isobel, 'but he may also be interested in what happened and he might be able to give you some more help.'

'I don't know,' said Martin hesitantly. 'I said I'd speak to him in a day or two so I don't want to be telephoning him so soon.'

'Well, I think it would be a good idea not to leave it too long before you speak to him,' said Isobel.

'OK,' said Martin 'I'll give him a call but he's bound to think I'm telephoning him to let him know you'd like to speak to him about what's been happening.'

'I think I would,' said Isobel.

Martin went into the hallway and picked up the telephone.

'It's cold out here,' he thought to himself as he stood in the hall, keying in the telephone number. Martin put his hand on the radiator. It was hot but it didn't seem to be warming up the air around it at all. After a couple of rings, Reverend Carey answered the telephone.

'Hello, Michael Carey,' said the instantly recognisable voice. Martin couldn't help himself and he smiled at the rich sounding voice.

'Hi, Reverend Carey. It's Martin Davies.'

'Hello Martin,' replied the Reverend. 'This is a pleasure. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. How can I help you?'

Martin quickly told Reverend Carey about what had happened that afternoon. There was a long silence at the other end of the telephone.

'Are you sure it was the vial of water that helped you?' said the Reverend.

'I know it sounds bizarre,' Martin replied, 'but I felt a strength coming from it and when it was in my hand it looked as though my hand was filled with light.'

'You aren't religious, are you, Martin?' asked the Reverend.

'No,' Martin replied. 'I don't believe man was born into original sin nor do I believe there's God. I prefer to believe in the innate goodness of mankind.'

'Well, for what it's worth so do I,' replied the Reverend. 'Although I have to say I do believe in God although perhaps not the popular image of a bearded man in white robes,' he said with a wry chuckle. 'I wonder why the water had such an effect though. For someone who doesn't believe in the power of God or the church, the water seems to have had a significant effect on your subconscious, don't you think?'

'Isobel and I were talking about the same thing earlier,' said Martin.

'I think you may have given the water power in your dreams, Martin,' said the Reverend. 'The water itself doesn't have any power. It has been blessed but that's all. Any power it possessed in your dream must have emerged because you wanted it to.'

'So you're still insisting all this is some kind of auto-suggestion?' said Martin.

'I have to,' said Reverend Carey. 'The alternative would be to accept that you and Isobel are being menaced by some kind of evil presence that is trying to harm you.'

Martin had a sudden thought. 'Did you see the story on the news earlier this week about the bodies found in a village in Estonia?' he asked the Reverend.

'Yes, I did,' replied Reverend Carey sounding puzzled. 'I was shocked and sickened when I heard how they died. The bodies had been drained of their blood hadn't they?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Martin. 'The thing is, Isobel's great grandfather came from that village to England. His surname was originally Stefanovich and all the victims were in some way related to the Stefanoviches.'

'So are you suggesting that this is in some way linked to your nightmares and the assaults on you that seem to occur in your dreams?' asked the Reverend, a note of scepticism in his voice.

'I don't know,' said Martin. 'I just don't know. Maybe I'm clutching at straws trying to find something that would provide some kind of an explanation. Two of Isobel's friends believe there may be a connection between what's happening in Estonia and Isobel. They've been

following the story on the internet and they telephoned earlier this evening. They seem to think Isobel may be in some kind of danger because of the killings.'

'How does that relate to what's been happening to you, Martin?' said Reverend Carey. 'You've only known Isobel for just over a week so how could something like that be connected to you?'

'I don't know,' said Martin, 'but perhaps she is in danger and I'm somehow caught up in it?'

'Martin,' said Reverend Carey, gently. 'Listen to what you're saying. As a rational man, a doctor, and someone who has gone through a rigorous training, you understand the idea of establishing factual evidence and disproving a hypothesis with evidence. We have no factual evidence to support what you're suggesting. It's impossible to be physically injured in a dream and equally impossible for something that exists only in your dreams to possess a physical reality.'

'What if you're wrong?' said Martin quietly. Reverend Carey laughed. 'You sound like you're arguing the case for religious faith now, Martin. In the face of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, people still have faith in God and the Church and will often answer sceptics with exactly what you've just said. But to answer your question, I don't know Martin. What if I am wrong?'

Michael Carey closed the heavy leather bound book and stared at the bookcase across the room lost in thought. He had been reading about Estonia and in particular legends associated with the country. He was surprised that he had come across a story about the village of Kallaste, which Martin had said Isobel's great grandfather had come from.

The legend told the story of a young girl that had been devoured by the lake on the eve of Ivan Kupala day, which fell on midsummer's day. Ivan Kupala was the Old Russian name for John the Baptist. Russian

Midsummer Night or Ivan's Day had become known as one of the most expressive Russian folk and pagan holidays and had been accepted into the Orthodox calendar.

Reverend Carey placed the book amongst the others on the crowded table and switched on his computer. He quickly navigated to the Reuters web page and closely read the story about the murders in Estonia. The police pathologists had been able to estimate that while some of the victims had been killed and their bodies placed at the scene relatively recently some of them could have been dead for up to six months.

'That would mean some of them could have been there since some time in June,' thought Reverend Carey to himself. There had been no more developments and other than identifying the victims and the police were no nearer finding out why the victims had died. The local press had been full of speculation about a Jim Jones style cult that had committed mass suicide while conveniently ignoring the fact that the victims had all met their ends on different dates sometimes months apart.

Martin waked back into the lounge. Isobel looked expectantly at Martin but he shrugged his shoulders as he said, 'He still insists it must be some kind of auto suggestion. I suppose he's got a point though it does sound unbelievable when you step back and examine the things we think have happened over the last few days doesn't it?' Martin sat down next to Isobel and she rested her hand on his leg.

'Don't worry, Martin. I'm sure we can find out what's happening somehow.'

Martin placed his hand on top of Isobel's. 'I hope so,' he said. 'I think it's the uncertainty and the wondering if I'm imagining things that make it worse,' he said miserably.

'Well, let's not think about things like that for a little while,' said Isobel passing Martin his glass of wine. 'Would you like to watch the TV

or would you like to listen to some music?’ said Isobel.

‘Some music would be nice,’ said Martin. ‘I’m not in the mood for the TV tonight.’

Isobel walked over to the small hi-fi and switched it on as she looked through her modest CD collection. She selected a CD, placed it in the CD player, and pressed start. An acoustic guitar backed by drums and congas started to play before a wonderfully gruff and emotive voice started to sing. Martin leant back on the settee and closed his eyes as he relaxed and listened to the music.

As he listened to the lyrics Martin once again wondered at how so many songs this past week had all seemed to carry a message for him.

‘I don’t know what happening or what’s real anymore,’ he thought. ‘I do know I want Isobel with me always so perhaps the bit about making things last forever will be true as well,’ he thought and smiled to himself.

Steve and Jess had both arrived home just after six pm. Monday had been another hectic day for both of them and they were both tired. Jess had reached the house five minutes before Steve. She had lit the fire in the lounge and was in the kitchen when he shouted hello from the front door.

‘I’m in the kitchen,’ she shouted in response.

Steve walked into the kitchen and kissed Jess on the cheek before putting his brief case on one of the chairs. He held one hand behind his back and Jess wondered to herself what he was hiding. Steve turned towards Jess and from behind, his back produced a bunch of flowers.

'These are for you,' he said handing the flowers to Jess.

'They're lovely Ste, thank you,' she said and kissed him. Jess quickly removed the wrapping from the flowers and cut the bottom from the stems before adding water and the flower feed to a vase and arranging the flowers in it.

'Have you heard from Martin today?' she asked as she arranged the flowers.

'No,' said Steve, 'but he's back in work today so he's probably had a load to catch up with after having a few days off.'

'Perhaps you could give Martin a ring and see how he is,' suggested Jess.

'I only spoke to him yesterday,' said Steve. 'I told you he said he'd give us a ring during the week and we'd sort something out about getting together. I did tell him it would have to be here though,' said Steve laughing 'and not over at the house on haunted hill.'

Jess couldn't stop the smile spreading across her face and she laughed out loud, as Steve caught her round the waist and pulled her close.

'You're squashing me,' she said laughing and pushing her palms against Steve's chest.

'Struggle, woman,' said Steve pulling her closer and kissing her on the lips. 'You know I love it when you're so vulnerable.'

Jess squealed and escaped from Steve's clutches and laughed as she dodged round the other side of the table. 'Curses,' said Steve. 'Foiled by a table and chairs.'

'Now stop it, you know how ticklish I am,' she said pointing her finger at Steve.

'OK,' said Steve. 'You win, no more tickling you. Even though you know you love it,' he said as he made a grab for her. Jess dodged around the table laughing even harder as she evaded Steve's grasp. 'OK,' said Steve 'I give up I'll try and resist you and keep my hands to myself.'

Steve opened the fridge. 'Do you want a glass of wine,' he said as he looked inside.

Jess thought for a moment. It was only Monday and they'd had loads to drink over the weekend. It had been a long tiring day though and she really felt like a nice cool glass of wine.

'OK, a glass of Chardonnay would be nice,' she said. Steve took the wine and a bottle of beer from the fridge before taking a wine glass from the cupboard and pouring a glass of wine for Jess. He opened the beer and they walked into the lounge and sat down in front of the fire.

'This is nice,' said Jess leaning her head against Steve's shoulder.

'What's nice,' said Steve, 'the wine or sitting here in front of the fire?'

'Both,' said Jess as she moved closer to Steve. 'Are you going to

give Martin a ring?' she asked.

'OK,' said Steve. 'Let me finish this beer and then I'll give him a ring.'

An hour later Steve replaced the telephone handset in its cradle and turned towards Jess. 'There's still no answer,' he said. 'I know Martin hardly ever uses his mobile but I tried it anyway. It just rang once then went to voicemail. I don't know why he even bothers to have a mobile because he never uses it.'

'Do you think we should go over to his house and see if he's OK?' Jess asked a note of concern in her voice.

'I don't know. He could be out somewhere so going over to his house wouldn't achieve anything, would it?' answered Steve.

'I know,' said Jess, 'but something might be wrong.'

'He's probably still at work,' said Steve.

'Maybe you're right,' said Jess thoughtfully, 'but I'm still worried about him.'

At Isobel's house Martin was slumped against the arm of the settee asleep. Isobel was also asleep and resting her head against his hip. An inky black shadow rolled across the floor and collected in the half-light at the corner of the room. Slowly the shadow gathered itself together; it grew and coalesced until a dark shape hung motionless in the corner of the room. Two blood red eyes glowed inside the shadow and as it reached its full height, it began to move towards the couple sleeping on the settee. The air grew colder around the shadow and as it moved

towards the settee, white clouds began to come from Martin's mouth as his breath condensed in the rapidly plummeting temperature.

Isobel stirred as the cold penetrated her dreams and she wrapped her arms around her shoulders. The shadow seemed to readjust its position until the red eyes were looking down at Isobel. A part of the shadow seemed to grow from the inner core of darkness and stretch towards her. Long tendrils of blackness without substance reached for the sleeping figure like the shadows of fingers. Martin opened his eyes and saw the shadow. It seemed to be reaching for Isobel. The faintest wisp of darkness at the end of the shadowy fingers was just about to reach her face. Martin lurched to his feet and Isobel slumped down on the settee as he stood up.

Isobel opened her eyes and tried to sit up. 'What's the matter?' she mumbled as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing through her sleep-fogged eyes.

Martin seemed to be standing like a statue with his right arm extended towards the darkness that loomed in front of him. Isobel screamed and Martin slumped to the floor like a puppet that suddenly has its strings cut.

As he fell to the floor, Martin gasped and dragged huge breaths of air into his lungs. The cold air made him gag and wretch but just to be able to breathe again felt like heaven. As soon as Martin had seen the shadow, he had stood up and as he did so, an icy cold vice like grip had clamped his outstretched wrist as he reached for the shadow.

He had felt the words 'Hello, Martin,' blow like a cold wind through his mind as the cold from his wrist spread like ice through his body paralysing him. For what seemed like an eternity, he couldn't move and neither could he breathe. His lungs cried out for oxygen as his fear caused his brain to dump adrenalin into his system and overload his already tired body.

Suddenly he was free and the power that held him vanished as he fell to the floor. Gasping for air Martin clawed the vial of water from his pocket and as he closed his fingers around the small glass container, he felt the power and warmth from it surge through his body as it dispelled the icy cold in his veins. Holding his hand in front of his body as though he was pushing something away Martin struggled to his feet and advanced on the darkness in front of him.

As soon as she screamed, Isobel had felt a dark malevolence smother her as the shadow turned its full attention toward her. Isobel's eyes darkened as the blackness enveloped her and the icy cold spread through her body causing her to gasp and her breathing become erratic as her body struggled to deal with the mind numbing cold.

Through the darkness, Isobel could see the blood red eyes as she felt more than heard the words 'You are the last one, Isobel Stefanovich.'

The cold intensified and Isobel felt her consciousness start to slip away. Suddenly at the periphery of her vision like a dim light seen in the distance, Isobel saw a glimmer of something bright, which gave her hope, and she felt the dark grip on her mind lessen. The light grew and as it did the force, holding her captive lost some of its power.

Through a dim fog, Isobel could see Martin approaching from what seemed like a huge distance as though she was looking down the wrong end of a telescope. He seemed as though he was holding a powerful searchlight in his hand and she could feel the fear in the shadow as Martin approached. Once again, Isobel felt words like an icy cold in her brain rather than heard them.

'Soon you will be in my world, Isobel Stefanovich, and from there you will not return.' Isobel felt the force holding her disappear and she fell back against the settee.

'Isobel, Isobel,' said Martin frantically as he wrapped his arms

around her in an attempt to warm her freezing body.

Isobel moaned and pushed Martin away as she fought her way back to reality. With a shuddering moan, she opened her eyes wide and gasped as she came back to full consciousness.

'Oh Martin,' she said as her head slumped against his chest and the tears fell from her eyes. Isobel shuddered and trembled and her body was wracked with sobs as she wrestled with her fears and tried to bring her emotions under control. Martin held her close and felt his own tears run unchecked as he tried to comfort her. Slowly Isobel's breathing returned to normal and the trembling stopped. She pulled Martin as close as she could and seemed reluctant to release her hold on him.

'What was that?' she whispered fearfully as though she half expected the dark shadow to return at any moment.

'I don't know for sure,' said Martin, 'but I think it was the same shadow I saw this afternoon when I got back from my visit to Reverend Carey.'

'I'm scared Martin,' said Isobel. 'I felt a voice in my head telling me I was the last one and it called me Isobel Stefanovich. It was horrible and felt like ice-cold knives cutting through my head when it was talking to me. Just before, it disappeared, it told me I would be in its world soon and that I couldn't escape. Oh Martin what's happening I'm so scared,' she said. Once more, she was wracked with uncontrollable sobs and Martin felt his chest grow wet as Isobel's tears soaked into his shirt.

Outside in the cold night air the shadow boiled with unsuppressed anger and malevolence as it screamed its fury soundlessly in the night. It had never met any opposition before and the dark force within it failed to understand why it could not exact its vengeance and finally rest.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MARCHDALE'S OFFER.—THE CONSULTATION AT
BANNERWORTH HALL.—THE MORNING OF THE DUEL.

Mr. Chillingworth was much annoyed to see Jack Pringle in the hall, and Jack was somewhat surprised at seeing Mr. Chillingworth there at that time in the rooming; they had but little time to indulge in their mutual astonishment, for a servant came to announce that Sir Francis Varney would see them both.

Without saying anything to the servant or each other, they ascended the staircase, and were shown into the apartment where Sir Francis Varney received them.

"Gentlemen," said Sir Francis, in his usual bland tone, "you are welcome."

"Sir Francis," said Mr. Chillingworth, "I have come upon matters of some importance; may I crave a separate audience?"

"And I too," said Jack Pringle; "I come as the friend of Admiral Bell, I want a private audience; but, stay, I don't care a rope's end who knows who I am, or what I come about; say you are ready to name time and place, and I'm as dumb as a figure-head; that is saying something, at all events; and now I'm done."

"Why, gentlemen," said Sir Francis, with a quiet smile, "as you have both come upon the same errand, and as there may arise a controversy upon the point of precedence, you had better be both present, as I must arrange this matter myself upon due inquiry."

"I do not exactly understand this," said Mr. Chillingworth; "do you, Mr. Pringle? perhaps you can enlighten me?"

"It," said Jack, "as how you came here upon the same errand as I, and I as you, why we both come about fighting Sir Francis Varney."

"Yes," said Sir Francis; "what Mr. Pringle says, is, I believe correct to a letter. I have a challenge from both your principals, and am ready to give you both the satisfaction you desire, provided the first encounter will permit me the honour of joining in the second. You, Mr. Pringle, are aware of the chances of war?"

"I should say so," said Jack, with a wink and a nod of a familiar

character. "I've seen a few of them."

"Will you proceed to make the necessary agreement between you both, gentlemen? My affection for the one equals fully the good will I bear the other, and I cannot give a preference in so delicate a matter; proceed gentlemen."

Mr. Chillingworth looked at Jack, and Jack Pringle looked at Mr. Chillingworth, and then the former said,—

"Well, the admiral means fighting, and I am come to settle the necessities; pray let me know what are your terms, Mr. What-d'ye-call'em."

"I am agreeable to anything that is at all reasonable—pistols, I presume?"

"Sir Francis Varney," said Mr. Chillingworth, "I cannot consent to carry on this office, unless you can appoint a friend who will settle these matters with us—myself, at least."

"And I too," said Jack Pringle; "we don't want to bear down an enemy. Admiral Bell ain't the man to do that, and if he were, I'm not the man to back him in doing what isn't fair or right; but he won't do it."

"But, gentlemen, this must not be; Mr. Henry Bannerworth must not be disappointed, and Admiral Bell must not be disappointed. Moreover, I have accepted the two cartels, and I am ready and willing to fight;—one at a time, I presume?"

"Sir Francis, after what you have said, I must take upon myself, on the part of Mr. Henry Bannerworth, to decline meeting you, if you cannot name a friend with whom I can arrange this affair."

"Ah!" said Jack Pringle, "that's right enough. I recollect very well when Jack Mizeu fought Tom Foremast, they had their seconds. Admiral Bell can't do anything in the dark. No, no, d——e! all must be above board."

"Gentlemen," said Sir Francis Varney, "you see the dilemma I am in. Your principals have both challenged me. I am ready to fight any one, or both of them, as the case may be. Distinctly understand that; because it is a notion of theirs that I will not do so, or that I shrink from them; but I am a stranger in this neighbourhood, and have no one whom I could call upon to relinquish so much, as they run the risk of doing by attending me to the field."

"Then your acquaintances are no friends, d——e!" said Jack

Pringle, spitting through his teeth into the bars of a beautifully polished grate. "I'd stick to anybody—the devil himself, leave alone a vampyre—if so be as how I had been his friends and drunk grog from the same can. They are a set of lubbers."

"I have not been here long enough to form any such friendships, Mr. Chillingworth; but can confidently rely upon your honour and that of your principal, and will freely and fairly meet him."

"But, Sir Francis, you forget the fact, in transacting, myself for Mr. Bannerworth, and this person or Admiral Bell, we do match, and have our own characters at stake; nay more, our lives and fortunes. These may be small; but they are everything to us. Allow me to say, on my own behalf, that I will not permit my principal to meet you unless you can name a second, as is usual with gentlemen on such occasions."

"I regret, while I declare to you my entire willingness to meet you, that I cannot comply through utter inability to do so, with your request. Let this go forth to the world as I have stated it, and let it be an answer to any aspersions that may be uttered as to my unwillingness to fight."

There was a pause of some moments. Mr. Chillingworth was resolved that, come of it what would, he would not permit Henry to fight, unless Sir Francis Varney himself should appoint a friend, and then they could meet upon equal terms.

Jack Pringle whistled, and spit, and chewed and turned his quid—hitched up his trousers, and looked wistfully from one to the other, as he said,—

"So then it's likely to be no fight at all, Sir Francis what's-o'-name?"

"It seems like it, Mr. Pringle," replied Varney, with a meaning smile; "unless you can be more complaisant towards myself, and kind towards the admiral."

"Why, not exactly that," said Jack; "it's a pity to stop a good play in the beginning, just because some little thing is wrong in the tackling."

"Perhaps your skill and genius may enable us to find some medium course that we may pursue with pleasure and profit. What say you, Mr. Pringle?"

"All I know about genius, as you call it is the Flying Dutchman, or some such odd out of the way fish. But, as I said, I am not one to spoil sport, nor more is the admiral. Oh, no, we is all true men and good."

"I believe it," said Varney, bowing politely.

“You needn’t keep your figure-head on the move; I can see you just as well. Howsoever, as I was saying, I don’t like to spoil sport, and sooner than both parties should be disappointed, my principal shall become your second, Sir Francis.”

“What, Admiral Bell?” exclaimed Varney, lifting his eyebrows with surprise.

“What, Charles Holland’s uncle!” exclaimed Mr. Chillingworth, in accents of amazement.

“And why not?” said Jack, with great gravity. “I will pledge my word—Jack Pringle’s word—that Admiral Bell shall be second to Sir Francis Varney, during his scrimmage with Mr. Henry Bannerworth. That will let the matter go on; there can be no back-out then, eh?” continued Jack Pringle, with a knowing nod at Chillingworth as he spoke.

“That will, I hope, remove your scruples, Mr. Chillingworth,” said Varney, with a courteous smile.

“But will Admiral Bell do this?”

“His second says so, and has, I daresay, influence enough with him to induce that person to act in conformity with his promise.”

“In course he will. Do you think he would be the man to hang back? Oh, no; he would be the last to leave Jack Pringle in the lurch—no. Depend upon it, Sir Francis, he’ll be as sure to do what I say, as I have said it.”

“After that assurance, I cannot doubt it,” said Sir Francis Varney; “this act of kindness will, indeed, lay me under a deep and lasting obligation to Admiral Bell, which I fear I shall never be able to pay.”

“You need not trouble yourself about that,” said Jack Pringle; “the admiral will credit all, and you can pay off old scores when his turn comes in the field.”

“I will not forget,” said Varney; “he deserves every consideration; but now, Mr. Chillingworth, I presume that we may come to some understanding respecting this meeting, which you were so kind as to do me the honour of seeking.”

“I cannot object to its taking place. I shall be most happy to meet your second in the field, and will arrange with him.”

“I imagine that, under the circumstances, that it will be barely

necessary to go to that length of ceremony. Future interviews can be arranged later; name the time and place, and after that we can settle all the rest on the ground."

"Yes," said Jack; "it will be time enough, surely, to see the admiral when we are upon the ground. I'll warrant the old buffer is a true brick as ever was: there's no flinching about him."

"I am satisfied," said Varney.

"And I also," said Chillingworth; "but, understand, Sir Francis, any default for seconds makes the meeting a blank."

"I will not doubt Mr. Pringle's honour so much as to believe it possible."

"I'm d——d," said Jack, "if you ain't a trump-card, and no mistake; it's a great pity as you is a wamphigher."

"The time, Mr. Chillingworth?"

"To-morrow, at seven o'clock," replied that gentleman.

"The place, sir?"

"The best place that I can think of is a level meadow half-way between here and Bannerworth Hall; but that is your privilege, Sir Francis Varney."

"I waive it, and am much obliged to you for the choice of the spot; it seems of the best character imaginable. I will be punctual."

"I think we have nothing further to arrange now," said Mr. Chillingworth. "You will meet with Admiral Bell."

"Certainly. I believe there is nothing more to be done; this affair is very satisfactorily arranged, and much better than I anticipated."

"Good morning, Sir Francis," said Mr. Chillingworth. "Good morning."

"Adieu," said Sir Francis, with a courteous salutation. "Good day, Mr. Pringle, and commend me to the admiral, whose services will be of infinite value to me."

"Don't mention it," said Jack; "the admiral's the man as'd lend any body a helping hand in case of distress like the present; and I'll pledge my word—Jack Pringle's too, as that he'll do what's right, and give up

his turn to Mr. Henry Bannerworth; cause you see he can have his turn arterwards, you know—it's only waiting awhile."

"That's all," said Sir Francis.

Jack Pringle made a sea bow and took his leave, as he followed Mr. Chillingworth, and they both left the house together, to return to Bannerworth Hall.

"Well," said Mr. Chillingworth, "I am glad that Sir Francis Varney has got over the difficulty of having no seconds; for it would not be proper or safe to meet a man without a friend for him."

"It ain't the right thing," said Jack hitching up his trousers; "but I was afeard as how he would back out, and that would be just the wrong thing for the admiral; he'd go raving mad."

They had got but very few paces from Sir Francis Varney's house, when they were joined by Marchdale.

"Ah," he said, as he came up, "I see you have been to Sir Francis Varney's, if I may judge from the direction whence you're coming, and your proximity."

"Yes, we have," said Mr. Chillingworth. "I thought you had left these parts?"

"I had intended to do so," replied Marchdale; "but second thoughts are sometimes best, you know."

"Certainly."

"I have so much friendship for the family at the hall, that notwithstanding I am compelled to be absent from the mansion itself, yet I cannot quit the neighbourhood while there are circumstances of such a character hanging about them. I will remain, and see if there be not something arising, in which I may be useful to them in some matter."

"It is very disinterested of you; you will remain here for some time, I suppose?"

"Yes, undoubtedly; unless, as I do not anticipate, I should see any occasion to quit my present quarters."

"I tell you what it is," said Jack Pringle; "if you had been here half-an-hour earlier you could have seconded the wamphigher."

"Seconded!"

“Yes, we’re here to challenge.”

“A double challenge?”

“Yes; but in confiding this matter to you, Mr. Marchdale, you will make no use of it to the exploding of this affair. By so doing you will seriously damage the honour of Mr. Henry Bannerworth.”

“I will not, you may rely upon it; but Mr. Chillingworth, do I not see you in the character of a second?”

“You do, sir.”

“To Mr. Henry?”

“The same, sir.”

“Have you reflected upon the probable consequences of such an act, should any serious mischief occur?”

“What I have undertaken, Mr. Marchdale, I will go through with; the consequences I have duly considered, and yet you see me in the character of Mr. Henry Bannerworth’s friend.”

“I am happy to see you as such, and I do not think Henry could find a better. But this is beside the question. What induced me to make the remark was this,—had I been at the hall, you will admit that Henry Bannerworth would have chosen myself, without any disparagement to you, Mr. Chillingworth.”

“Well sir, what then?”

“Why I am a single man, I can live, reside and go any where; one country will suit me as well as another. I shall suffer no loss, but as for you, you will be ruined in every particular; for if you go in the character of a second, you will not be excused; for all the penalties incurred your profession of a surgeon will not excuse you.”

“I see all that, sir.”

“What I propose is, that you should accompany the parties to the field, but in your own proper character of surgeon, and permit me to take that of second to Mr. Bannerworth.”

“This cannot be done, unless by Mr. Henry Bannerworth’s consent,” said Mr. Chillingworth.

“Then I will accompany you to Bannerworth Hall, and see Mr. Henry, whom I will request to permit me to do what I have mentioned to you.”

Mr. Chillingworth could not but admit the reasonableness of this proposal, and it was agreed they should return to Bannerworth Hall in company.

Here they arrived in a very short time after, and entered together.

“And now,” said Mr. Chillingworth, “I will go and bring our two principals, who will be as much astonished to find themselves engaged in the same quarrel, as I was to find myself sent on a similar errand to Sir Francis with our friend Mr. John Pringle.”

“Oh, not John—Jack Pringle, you mean,” said that individual.

Chillingworth now went in search of Henry, and sent him to the apartment where Mr. Marchdale was with Jack Pringle, and then he found the admiral waiting the return of Jack with impatience.

“Admiral!” he said, “I perceive you are unwell this morning.”

“Unwell be d——d,” said the admiral, starting up with surprise. “Who ever heard that old admiral Bell looked ill just afore he was going into action? I say it’s a scandalous lie.”

“Admiral, admiral, I didn’t say you were ill; only you looked ill—a—a little nervous, or so. Rather pale, eh? Is it not so?”

“Confound you, do you think I want to be physicked? I tell you, I have not a little but a great inclination to give you a good keelhauling. I don’t want a doctor just yet.”

“But it may not be so long, you know, admiral; but there is Jack Pringle a-waiting you below. Will you go to him? There is a particular reason; he has something to communicate from Sir Francis Varney, I believe.”

The admiral gave a look of some amazement at Mr. Chillingworth, and then he said, muttering to himself,—

“If Jack Pringle should have betrayed me—but, no; he could not do that, he is too true. I’m sure of Jack; and how did that son of a gallipot hint about the odd fish I sent Jack to?”

Filled with a dubious kind of belief which he had about something he had heard of Jack Pringle, he entered the room, where he met

Marchdale, Jack Pringle, and Henry Bannerworth. Immediately afterwards, Mr. Chillingworth entered the apartment.

“I have,” said he, “been to Sir Francis Varney, and there had an interview with him, and with Mr. Pringle; when I found we were both intent upon the same object, namely, an encounter with the knight by our principals.”

“Eh?” said the admiral.

“What!” exclaimed Henry; “had he challenged you, admiral?”

“Challenged me!” exclaimed Admiral Bell, with a round oath. “I—however—since it comes to this, I must admit I challenged him.”

“That’s what I did,” said Henry Bannerworth, after a moment’s thought; “and I perceive we have both fallen into the same line of conduct.”

“That is the fact,” said Mr. Chillingworth. “Both Mr. Pringle and I went there to settle the preliminaries, and we found an insurmountable bar to any meeting taking place at all.”

“He wouldn’t fight, then?” exclaimed Henry. “I see it all now.”

“Not fight!” said Admiral Bell, with a sort of melancholy disappointment. “D—n the cowardly rascal! Tell me, Jack Pringle, what did the long horse-marine-looking slab say to it? He told me he would fight. Why he ought to be made to stand sentry over the wind.”

“You challenged him in person, too, I suppose?” said Henry.

“Yes, confound him! I went there last night.”

“And I too.”

“It seems to me,” said Marchdale, “that this affair has been not indiscreetly conducted; but somewhat unusually and strangely, to say the least of it.”

“You see,” said Chillingworth, “Sir Francis was willing to fight both Henry and the admiral, as he told us.”

“Yes,” said Jack; “he told us he would fight us both, if so be as his light was not doused in the first brush.”

“That was all that was wanted,” said the admiral.

“We could expect no more.”

“But then he desired to meet you without any second; but, of course, I would not accede to this proposal. The responsibility was too great and too unequally borne by the parties engaged in the rencontre.”

“Decidedly,” said Henry; “but it is unfortunate—very unfortunate.”

“Very,” said the admiral—“very. What a rascally thing it is there ain’t another rogue in the country to keep him in countenance.”

“I thought it was a pity to spoil sport,” said Jack Pringle. “It was a pity a good intention should be spoiled, and I promised the wamphigher that if as how he would fight, you should second him, and you’d meet him to do so.”

“Eh! who? !!” exclaimed the admiral in some perplexity.

“Yes; that is the truth,” said Mr. Chillingworth. “Mr Pringle said you would do so, and he then and there pledged his word that you should meet him on the ground and second him.”

“Yes,” said Jack “You must do it. I knew you would not spoil sport, and that there had better be a fight than no fight. I believe you’d sooner see a scrimmage than none, and so it’s all arranged.”

“Very well,” said the admiral, “I only wish Mr. Henry Bannerworth had been his second; I think I was entitled to the first meeting.”

“No,” said Jack, “you warn’t, for Mr. Chillingworth was there first; first come first served, you know.”

“Well, well, I mustn’t grumble at another man’s luck; mine’ll come in turn; but it had better be so than a disappointment altogether; I’ll be second to this Sir Francis Varney; he shall have fair play, as I’m an admiral; but, d——e he shall fight—yes, yes, he shall fight.”

“And to this conclusion I would come,” said Henry, “I wish him to fight; now I will take care that he shall not have any opportunity of putting me on one side quietly.”

“There is one thing,” observed Marchdale, “that I wished to propose. After what has passed, I should not have returned, had I not some presentiment that something was going forward in which I could be useful to my friend.”

“Oh!” said the admiral, with a huge twist of his countenance.

“What I was about to say was this,—Mr. Chillingworth has much to lose as he is situated, and I nothing as I am placed. I am chained down to no spot of earth. I am above following a profession—my means, I mean, place me above the necessity. Now, Henry, allow me to be your second in this affair; allow Mr. Chillingworth to attend in his professional capacity; he may be of service—of great service to one of the principals; whereas, if he go in any other capacity, he will inevitably have his own safety to consult.”

“That is most unquestionably true,” said Henry, “and, to my mind, the best plan that can be proposed. What say you, Admiral Bell, will you act with Mr. Marchdale in this affair?”

“Oh, I!—Yes—certainly—I don’t care. Mr. Marchdale is Mr. Marchdale, I believe, and that’s all I care about. If we quarrel to-day, and have anything to do to-morrow, in course, to-morrow I can put off my quarrel for next day; it will keep,—that’s all I have to say at present.”

“Then this is a final arrangement?” said Mr. Chillingworth.

“It is.”

“But, Mr. Bannerworth, in resigning my character of second to Mr. Marchdale, I only do so because it appears and seems to be the opinion of all present that I can be much better employed in another capacity.”

“Certainly, Mr. Chillingworth; and I cannot but feel that I am under the same obligations to you for the readiness and zeal with which you have acted.”

“I have done what I have done,” said Chillingworth, “because I believed it was my duty to do so.”

“Mr. Chillingworth has undoubtedly acted most friendly and efficiently in this affair,” said Marchdale; “and he does not relinquish the part for the purpose of escaping a friendly deed, but to perform one in which he may act in a capacity that no one else can.”

“That is true,” said the admiral.

“And now,” said Chillingworth, “you are to meet to-morrow morning in the meadow at the bottom of the valley, half way between here and Sir Francis Varney’s house, at seven o’clock in the morning.”

More conversation passed among them, and it was agreed that they should meet early the next morning, and that, of course, the affair should be kept a secret.

Marchdale for that night should remain in the house, and the admiral should appear as if little or nothing was the matter; and he and Jack Pringle retired, to talk over in private all the arrangements.

Henry Bannerworth and Marchdale also retired, and Mr. Chillingworth, after a time, retired, promising to be with them in time for the meeting next morning.

Much of that day was spent by Henry Bannerworth in his own apartment, in writing documents and letters of one kind and another; but at night he had not finished, for he had been compelled to be about, and in Flora's presence, to prevent anything from being suspected.

Marchdale was much with him, and in secret examined the arms, ammunition, and bullets, and saw all was right for the next morning; and when he had done, he said,—

“Now, Henry, you must permit me to insist that you take some hours' repose, else you will scarcely be as you ought to be.”

“Very good,” said Henry. “I have just finished, and can take your advice.”

After many thoughts and reflections, Henry Bannerworth fell into a deep sleep, and slept several hours in calmness and quietude, and at an early hour he awoke, and saw Marchdale sitting by him.

“Is it time, Marchdale? I have not overslept myself, have I?”

“No; time enough—time enough,” said Marchdale. “I should have let you sleep longer, but I should have awakened you in good time.”

It was now the grey light of morning, and Henry arose and began to prepare for the encounter. Marchdale stole to Admiral Bell's chamber, but he and Jack Pringle were ready.

Few words were spoken, and those few were in a whisper, and the whole party left the Hall in as noiseless a manner as possible. It was a mild morning, and yet it was cold at that time of the morning, just as day is beginning to dawn in the east. There was, however, ample time to reach the rendezvous.

It was a curious party that which was now proceeding towards the spot appointed for the duel, the result of which might have so important an effect on the interests of those who were to be engaged in it.

It would be difficult for us to analyse the different and conflicting

emotions that filled the breasts of the various individuals composing that party—the hopes and fears—the doubts and surmises that were given utterance to; though we are compelled to acknowledge that though to Henry, the character of the man he was going to meet in mortal fight was of a most ambiguous and undefined nature, and though no one could imagine the means he might be endowed with for protection against the arms of man—Henry, as we said, strode firmly forward with unflinching resolution. His heart was set on recovering the happiness of his sister, and he would not falter.

So far, then, we may consider that at length proceedings of a hostile character were so far clearly and fairly arranged between Henry Bannerworth and that most mysterious being who certainly, from some cause or another, had betrayed no inclination to meet an opponent in that manner which is sanctioned, bad as it is, by the usages of society.

But whether his motive was one of cowardice or mercy, remained yet to be seen. It might be that he feared himself receiving some mortal injury, which would at once put a stop to that preternatural career of existence which he affected to shudder at, and yet evidently took considerable pains to prolong.

Upon the other hand, it is just possible that some consciousness of invulnerability on his own part, or of great power to injure his antagonist, might be the cause why he had held back so long from fighting the duel, and placed so many obstacles in the way of the usual necessary arrangements incidental to such occasions.

Now, however, there would seem to be no possible means of escape. Sir Francis Varney must fight or fly, for he was surrounded by too many opponents.

To be sure he might have appealed to the civil authorities to protect him, and to sanction him in his refusal to commit what undoubtedly is a legal offence; but then there cannot be a question that the whole of the circumstances would come out, and meet the public eye—the result of which would be, his acquisition of a reputation as unenviable as it would be universal.

It had so happened, that the peculiar position of the Bannerworth family kept their acquaintance within extremely narrow limits, and greatly indisposed them to set themselves up as marks for peculiar observation.

Once holding, as they had, a proud position in the county, and being looked upon quite as magnates of the land, they did not now court the prying eye of curiosity to look upon their poverty; but rather with a gloomy melancholy they lived apart, and repelled the advances of society by a cold reserve, which few could break through.

Had this family suffered in any noble cause, or had the misfortunes which had come over them, and robbed their ancestral house of its lustre, been an unavoidable dispensation of providence, they would have borne the hard position with a different aspect; but it must be remembered, that to the faults, the vices, and the criminality of some of their race, was to be attributed their present depressed state.

It has been seen during the progress of our tale, that its action has been tolerably confined to Bannerworth Hall, its adjacent meadows, and the seat of Sir Francis Varney; the only person at any distance, knowing anything of the circumstances, or feeling any interest in them, being Mr. Chillingworth, the surgeon, who, from personal feeling, as well as from professional habit, was not likely to make a family's affairs a subject of gossip.

A change, however, was at hand—a change of a most startling and alarming character to Varney—one which he might expect, yet not be well prepared for.

This period of serenity was to pass away, and he was to become most alarmingly popular. We will not, however, anticipate, but proceed at once to detail as briefly as may be the hostile meeting.

It would appear that Varney, now that he had once consented to the definitive arrangements of a duel, shrunk not in any way from carrying them out, nor in the slightest attempted to retard arrangements which might be fatal to himself.

The early morning was one of those cloudy ones so frequently occurring in our fickle climate, when the cleverest weather prophet would find it difficult to predict what the next hour might produce.

There was a kind of dim gloominess over all objects; and as there were no bright lights, there were no deep shadows—the consequence of which was a sureness of effect over the landscape, that robbed it of many of its usual beauties.

Such was the state of things when Marchdale accompanied Henry and Admiral Bell from Bannerworth Hall across the garden in the direction of the hilly wood, close to which was the spot intended for the scene of encounter.

Jack Pringle came on at a lazy pace behind with his hands in his pockets, and looking as unconcerned as if he had just come out for a morning's stroll, and scarcely knew whether he saw what was going on or not.

The curious contort on into which he twisted his countenance, and the different odd-looking lumps that appeared in it from time to time, may be accounted for by a quid of unusual size, which he seemed to be masticating with a relish quite horrifying to one unused to so barbarous a luxury.

The admiral had strictly enjoined him not to interfere on pain of being considered a lubber and no seaman for the remainder of his existence—threatened penalties which, of course, had their own weight with Jack, and accordingly he came just, to see the row in as quiet a way as possible, perhaps not without a hope, that something might turn up in the shape of a *causus belli*, that might justify him in adopting a threatening attitude towards somebody.

“Now, Master Henry,” said the admiral, “none of your palaver to me as we go along, recollect I don’t belong to your party, you know. I’ve stood friend to two or three fellows in my time; but if anybody had said to me, ‘Admiral Bell, the next time you go out on a quiet little shooting party, it will be as second to a vampyre,’ I’d have said ‘you’re a liar’ Howsomever, d—me, here you goes, and what I mean to say is this, Mr Henry, that I’d second even a Frenchman rather than he shouldn’t fight when he’s asked”

“That’s liberal of you,” said Henry, “at all event”

“I believe you it is,” said the admiral, “so mind if you don’t hit him, I’m not a-going to tell you how—all you’ve got to do, is to fire low; but that’s no business of mine. Shiver my timbers, I oughtn’t to tell you, but d—n you, hit him if you can.”

“Admiral,” said Henry, “I can hardly think you are even preserving a neutrality in the matter, putting aside my own partisanship as regards your own man.”

“Oh, hang him. I’m not going to let him creep out of the thing on such a shabby pretence. I can tell you. I think I ought to have gone to his house this morning; only, as I said I never would cross his threshold again, I won’t.”

“I wonder if he’ll come,” said Mr Marchdale to Henry. “After all, you know he may take to flight, and shun an encounter which, it is evident, he has entered into but tardily.”

“I hope not,” said Henry, “and yet I must own that your supposition has several times crossed my mind. If, however, he do not meet me, he never can appear at all in the country, and we should, at least, be rid of him, and all his troublesome importunities concerning the Hall. I would not allow that man, on any account, to cross the threshold of my house,

as its tenant or its owner.”

“Why, it ain’t usual,” said the admiral, “to let ones house to two people at once, unless you seem quite to forget that I’ve taken yours. I may as well remind you of it”

“Hurra” said Jack Pringle, at this moment.

“What’s the matter with you? Who told you to hurra?”

“Enemy in the offing,” said Jack, “three or four pints to the southwest.”

“So he is, by Jove! dodging about among the trees. Come, now, this vampyre’s a decenter fellow than I thought him. He means, after all, to let us have a pop at him”

They had now reached so close to the spot, that Sir Francis Varney, who, to all appearance, had been waiting, emerged from among the trees, rolled up in his dismal-looking cloak, and, if possible, looking longer and thinner than ever he had looked before.

His face wore a singular cadaverous looking aspect. His very lips were white and there was a curious, pinkish-looking circle round each of his eyes, that imparted to his whole countenance a most uninviting appearance. He turned his eyes from one to the other of those who were advancing towards him, until he saw the admiral, upon which he gave such a grim and horrible smile, that the old man exclaimed,—

“I say, Jack, you lubber, there’s a face for a figure head.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Did you ever see such a d——d grin as that in your life, in any latitude?”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“You did you swab.”

“I should think so.”

“It’s a lie, and you know it.”

“Very good,” said Jack, “don’t you recollect when that ere iron bullet walked over your head, leaving a nice little nick, all the way off Bergen-ap-Zoom, that was the time—blessed if you didn’t give just such a grin

as that.”

“I didn’t, you rascal.”

“And I say you did.”

“Mutiny, by God!”

“Go to blazes!”

How far this contention might have gone, having now reached its culminating point, had the admiral and Jack been alone, it is hard to say; but as it was, Henry and Marchdale interfered, and so the quarrel was patched up for the moment, in order to give place to more important affairs.

Varney seemed to think, that after the smiling welcome he had given to his second, he had done quite enough; for there he stood, tall, and gaunt, and motionless, if we may except an occasional singular movement of the mouth, and a clap together of his teeth, at times, which was enough to make anybody jump to hear.

“For Heaven’s sake,” said Marchdale, “do not let us trifle at such a moment as this. Mr. Pringle, you really had no business here.”

“Mr. who?” said Jack.

“Pringle, I believe, is your name?” returned Marchdale.

“It were; but blowed if ever I was called mister before.”

The admiral walked up to Sir Francis Varney, and gave him a nod that looked much more like one of defiance than of salutation, to which the vampyre replied by a low, courtly bow.

“Oh, bother!” muttered the old admiral. “If I was to double up my backbone like that, I should never get it down straight again. Well, all’s right; you’ve come; that’s all you could do, I suppose.”

“I am here,” said Varney, “and therefore it becomes a work of supererogation to remark that I’ve come.”

“Oh! does it? I never bolted a dictionary, and, therefore, I don’t know exactly what you mean.”

“Step aside with me a moment, Admiral Bell, and I will tell you what you are to do with me after I am shot, if such should be my fate.”

“Do with you! D——d if I’ll do anything with you.”

“I don’t expect you will regret me; you will eat.”

“Eat!”

“Yes, and drink as usual, no doubt, notwithstanding being witness to the decease of a fellow-creature.”

“Belay there; don’t call yourself a fellow-creature of mine; I ain’t a vampyre.”

“But there’s no knowing what you may be; and now listen to my instructions; for as you’re my second, you cannot very well refuse to me a few friendly offices. Rain is falling. Step beneath this ancient tree, and I will talk to you.”

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BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XIV

The giant Miko stood confronting me. He slid my cubby door closed behind him. He stood with his head towering close against my ceiling. His cloak was discarded. In his leather clothes, and with his clanking sword ornament, his aspect carried the swagger of a brigand of old. He was bare-headed; the light from one of my tubes fell upon his grinning, leering gray face.

“So, Gregg Haljan? You have come to your senses at last. You do not wish me to write my name on your chest? I would not have done that to Dean; he forced me. Sit back.”

I had been on my bunk. I sank back at the gesture of his huge hairy arm. His forearm was bare now; the sear of a burn on it was plain to be seen. He remarked my gaze.

“True. You did that, Haljan, in Greater New York. But I bear you no malice. I want to talk to you now.”

He cast about for a seat, and took the little stool which stood by my desk. His hand held a small cylinder of the Martian paralyzing ray. He rested it beside him on the desk.

“Now we can talk.”

I remained silent. Alert. Yet my thoughts were whirling. Anita was alive. Masquerading as her brother. And, with the joy of it, came a shudder. Above everything, Miko must not know.

“A great adventure we are upon, Haljan.”

My thoughts came back. Miko was talking with an assumption of friendly comradeship. “All is well—and we need you, as I have said before. I am no fool. I have been aware of everything that went on aboard this ship. You, of all the officers, are most clever at the routine mathematics. Is that so?”

“Perhaps.”

“You are modest.” He fumbled at a pocket of his jacket, produced a scroll-sheaf. I recognized it. Blackstone’s figures. The calculation Blackstone made of the asteroid we had passed.

“I am interested in these,” Miko went on. “I want you to verify them. And this.” He held up another scroll. “This is the calculation of our present position and our course. Hahn claims he is a navigator. We have set the ship’s gravity plates—see, like this.”

He handed me the scrolls. He watched me keenly as I glanced over them.

“Well?” I said.

I handed him back the scrolls. I stood up. I was almost within reach of his weapon, but with a sweep of his great arm he knocked me back to my bunk.

“You dare?” Then he smiled. “Let us not come to blows!”

In truth, physical violence could get me nothing. I would have to try guile. And I saw now that his face was flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. He had been drinking alcolite; not enough to befuddle him, but enough to make him triumphantly talkative.

“Hahn may not be much of a mathematician,” I suggested. “But there is your Sir Arthur Coniston.” I managed a sarcastic grin. “Is that his name?”

“Almost. Haljan, will you verify these figures?”

“Yes. But why? Where are we going?”

He laughed. “You are afraid I will not tell you! Why should I? This great adventure of mine is progressing perfectly. A tremendous stake, Haljan. A hundred million dollars in gold leaf. There will be fabulous riches for all of us—”

“But where are we going?”

“To that asteroid,” he said. “I must get rid of these passengers. I am no murderer.”

With a half-dozen killings in the recent fight this was hardly convincing. But he was obviously wholly serious. He seemed to read my thoughts.

“I kill only when necessary. We will land upon the asteroid. A perfect place to maroon the passengers. Is it not so? I will give them the necessities of life. They will be able to signal. And in a month or so, when we are perfectly safe and finished with our adventure, a police ship no doubt will rescue them.”

“And then, from the asteroid,” I suggested, “we are going—”

“To the Moon, Haljan. What a clever guesser you are! Coniston and Hahn are calculating our course. But I have no great confidence in them. And so I want you.”

“You have me.”

“Yes. I have you. I would have killed you long ago—I am an impulsive fellow—but my sister restrained me.”

He gazed at me slyly. “Moa seems strangely to like you, Haljan.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m flattered.”

“She still hopes I may really win you to join us,” he went on. “Gold leaf is a wonderful thing; there would be plenty for you in this affair. And to be rich, and have the love of a woman like Moa....”

He paused. I was trying cautiously to gauge him, to get from him all the information I could. I said, with another smile, “That is premature, to talk of Moa. I will help you chart your course. But this venture, as you call it, is dangerous. A police ship—”

“There are not many,” he declared. “The chances of our

encountering one are very slim.” He grinned at me. “You know that as well as I do. And we now have those code passwords—I forced Dean to tell me where he had hidden them. If we should be challenged, our password answer will relieve suspicion.”

“The Planetara,” I objected, “being overdue at Ferrok-Shahn, will cause alarm. You’ll have a covey of patrol ships after you.”

“That will be two weeks from now,” he smiled. “I have a ship of my own in Ferrok-Shahn. It lies there waiting now, manned and armed. I am hoping that, with Dean’s help, we may be able to flash them a signal. It will join us on the Moon. Fear not for the danger, Haljan. I have great interests allied with me in this thing. Plenty of money. We have planned carefully.”

He was idly fingering his cylinder; he gazed at me as I sat docile on my bunk. “Did you think George Prince was a leader of this? A mere boy. I engaged him a year ago—his knowledge of science is valuable to us.”

My heart was pounding but I strove not to show it. He went on calmly.

“I told you I am impulsive. Half a dozen times I have nearly killed George Prince, and he knows it.” He frowned. “I wish I had killed him instead of his sister. That was an error.”

There was a note of real concern in his voice. He added, “That is done—nothing can change it. George Prince is helpful to me. Your friend Dean, is another. I had trouble with him, but he is docile now.”

I said abruptly, “I don’t know whether your promise means anything or not, Miko. But Prince said you would use no more torture.”

“I won’t. Not if you and Dean obey me.”

“You tell Dean I have agreed to that. You say he gave you the code words he took from Johnson?”

“Yes. There was a fool, for you! That Johnson! You blame me, Haljan, for the death of Carter? You need not. Johnson offered to try and capture you, take you both alive. He killed Carter because he was angry with him. A stupid, vengeful fool! He is dead and I’m glad of it.”

My mind was on Miko’s plans. I ventured, “This treasure on the Moon—did you say it was on the Moon?”

“Don’t play the fool,” he retorted. “I know as much about Grantline

as you do.”

“That’s very little.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps you know more, Miko. The Moon is a big place. Where, for instance, is Grantline located?”

I held my breath. Would he tell me that? A score of questions—vague plans were in my mind. How skilled at mathematics were these brigands? Miko, Coniston, Hahn—could I fool them? If I could learn Grantline’s location on the Moon, and keep the Planetara away from it. A pretended error of charting. Time lost—and perhaps Snap could find an opportunity to signal Earth, get help.

Miko answered my question as bluntly as I asked it. “I don’t know where Grantline is located. But we will find out. He will not suspect the Planetara so when we get close to the Moon, we will signal and ask him. We can trick him into telling us. You think I do not know what is on your mind, Haljan? There is a secret code of signals arranged between Dean and Grantline. I have forced Dean to confess it. Without torture! Prince helped me in that. He persuaded Dean not to defy me. A very persuasive fellow, George Prince. More diplomatic than I am. I give him credit for that.”

I strove to hold my voice calm. “If I should join you, Miko—my word, if I ever gave it, you would find dependable—I would say George Prince is very valuable to us. You should rein your temper. He is half your size—you might some time, without intention, do him injury.”

He laughed. “Moa says so. But have no fear—”

“I was thinking,” I persisted. “I’d like to have a talk with George Prince.”

Ah, my pounding, tumultuous heart! But I was smiling calmly. And I tried to put into my voice a shrewd note of cupidity. “I really know very little about this treasure, Miko. If there were a million or two of gold leaf in it for me—”

“Perhaps there would be.”

“Suppose you let me have a talk with Prince? I have some scientific knowledge myself about the powers of this catalyst. Prince’s knowledge and mine—we might be able to come to a calculation on the value of Grantline’s treasure. You don’t know. You are only assuming.”

I paused after this glib outburst. Whatever may have been in Miko's mind, I cannot say. But abruptly he stood up. I had left my bunk but he waved me back.

"Sit down. I am not like Moa. I would not trust you just because you protested you would be loyal." He picked up his cylinder. "We will talk again." He gestured to the scrolls he had left upon my desk. "Work on those. I will judge you by the results."

He was no fool, this brigand leader.

"Yes," I agreed. "You want a true course to the asteroid?"

"Yes. And by the gods, I warn you, I can check up on you!"

I said meekly, "Very well. But you ask Prince if he wants my calculations on Grantline's possibilities."

I shot Miko a foxy look as he stood by the door. I added, "You think you are clever. There is plenty you don't know. Our first night out from Earth—Grantline's signals—didn't it ever occur to you that I might have some figures on his treasure?"

It startled him. "Where are they?"

I tapped my forehead. "You don't suppose I was foolish enough to record them. You ask Prince if he wants to talk to me. A hundred million, or two hundred million—it would make a big difference, Miko."

"I will think about it." He backed out and sealed the door upon me.

But Anita did not come. I verified Hahn's figures, which were very nearly correct. I charted a course for the asteroid; it was almost the one which had been set.

Coniston came for my results. "I say, we are not so bad as navigators, are we? I think we're jolly good, considering our inexperience. Not bad at all, eh?"

"No."

I did not think it wise to ask him about Prince.

"Are you hungry, Haljan?"

"Yes."

A steward came with a meal. The saturnine Hahn stood at my door

with a weapon upon me while I ate. They were taking no chances and they were wise not to.

The day passed. Day and night, all the same of aspect here in the starry vault of space. But with the ship's routine it was day. And then another time of sleep. I slept fitfully, worrying, trying to plan. Within a few hours we would be nearing the asteroid.

The time of sleep was nearly passed. My chronometer marked five a.m. original Earth starting time. The seal of my cubby door hissed. The door slowly opened.

Anita!

She stood there with her cloak around her. A distance away on the shadowed deck Coniston was loitering.

"Anita!" I whispered it.

"Gregg, dear!"

She turned and gestured to the watching brigand. "I will not be long, Coniston."

She came in and half closed the door upon us, leaving it open enough so that we could make sure that Coniston did not advance.

I stepped back where he could not see us. "Anita!"

She flung herself into my opened arms.

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SPIRAL CASTLE by Gavin Chappell

3

Nick frowned.

'And then I can go?' he asked. 'Back to me mates? But why can't you just send your men round?'

'Do you want your freedom or not?' demanded the inspector. 'Take

him!' he ordered.

'The Sword must be placed in the stone,' Menyw was saying, 'when the full moon shines at midnight. Then the earth will open and the tunnel leading to Annwfn will be revealed. I was with Arthur on his exploit to the spiral castle. I remember the rite well.'

'But it's full moon tonight,' Eloise exclaimed. She frowned, checking herself. 'You had this planned all along, didn't you?'

Menyw smiled enigmatically.

'All we need now is for me to teach you the ritual,' he murmured.

'Something's been troubling me,' said Osborne. 'What if Hamish and me were followed here? I told you I kept seeing a police car after us, on the way back. I think we shook it off by the market, but I'm not sure. What if the police come here? They're after us all, remember?'

Menyw smiled.

'As I said before, we are safe here. I cast a Spell of Warding over the entire house. Now only our friends may approach...'

The police van screeched to a halt half way down the lane. Sergeant Dover leapt out and opened up the back. Nick looked up.

'Out,' said the sergeant tersely. Nick did so, jumping down and looking around him. They were on the outskirts of town. A large house stood among trees to the right and beyond it was the steeple of the church.

'That's enough sightseeing,' the inspector barked, getting out of the van. 'You've got a job to do. Break into that house and find the Sword we described. Bring it back and you can go free.'

'What's to stop me just doing a runner?' asked Nick with a smug smile.

The inspector smiled back.

'We have the place surrounded,' he replied. 'Do as we say, or it will be the worse for you.'

Nick shrugged.

'Whatever, mate,' he said. He glanced casually towards the house. 'Now?' he asked.

'Now,' agreed the inspector.

Menyw turned to Osborne.

'The Sword is upstairs,' he said. 'It's hanging on the wall in my private sanctum, at the back of the house. Would you go and get it for me?'

'Okay,' said Osborne. He left the room.

Menyw turned to the others.

'Osborne shall be the sword-bearer,' he said. 'And Hamish will have the Spear. Eloise and Siân, you will lead the chant...'

Nick scrambled over the fence and dropped down into the dark garden beyond. The house was about a hundred yards away through the shrubbery. A light was on in a downstairs room and as Nick crouched in the lea of the fence another light came on elsewhere in the house. He scowled up at the bright full moon above the treetops. This was not the kind of night he would have chosen to do a burglary. Trust the fuckin' bizzies not know anything, he thought bitterly.

He hurried through the orchard and round the kitchen garden. Reaching the side of the vicarage, he hunted round for a means of gaining access. A drainpipe led up the side of the wall past a small frosted-glass window - it looked like it might be a bathroom. He approached the drainpipe and tested it. Seemed pretty firm.

Without further hesitation, he scrambled up the drainpipe like a lizard.

This was a big old house, Osborne thought. Victorian, if he knew anything about such things - which he didn't, he had to admit. He headed up the wide staircase.

He had just reached the landing when he heard a noise from down the passage. His heart in his mouth, he halted and cocked his head. Quiet, furtive noises coming from the bathroom. It sounded like there was someone in there...

Had the old man's magic failed them? Had the police already gained access? He considered alerting the others - but no, he didn't want to look like he was scared, Hamish would never shut up about it. Were they here after the Sword? They'd get it - through their hearts if need be.

He hurried towards the back of the house.

Nick cursed under his breath as he heaved himself out of the empty bath, then gave the little window he'd climbed through a rueful look. He'd got stuck halfway through and his entrance had not been dignified.

He stumbled over to the door and stopped, his ear cocked. No noise, no sign of anyone ... oh, voices from downstairs. They seemed to be chanting... Had he broken into a house full of devil worshippers or something? Not for the first time, he thought - but the Pigs could at least have warned him. He opened the door to a crack.

The passage beyond was in darkness. Which way should he go, left or right? To the right he could see a landing and a flight of steps. Lights were on downstairs - he didn't want to go that way unless he had to. He headed left.

Menyw's private sanctum might have caused his parishioners some concern, Osborne thought, as he entered the room and flicked on the light. An altar of rough stone stood by the back wall, with a bowl and a sickle gleaming dully on it. Two crudely carved anthropomorphic statues of horned deities flanked the altar and an ancient sword hung on the wall behind. Clearly, Menyw's conversion to Christianity had been superficial. Osborne approved of that.

He heard a creak from the floorboards outside and furtive padding footsteps. Quickly but quietly, he crossed over to the wall and took down the Sword. His face grim, he returned to the door and stood to one side, the Sword raised to come slashing down on whoever entered.

The doorknob began to turn.

Nick pushed open the door. He caught a brief, confused picture of a temple room and a stone altar, when a dark figure leapt out at him.

A sword flashed through the air above his head.

There were some things to be said for being small, he thought vaguely, in that brief, adrenalin heightened moment of freefall. He turned and fled.

Footsteps thundered after him. He took a corner and found himself at the top of the stairs. He'd already gone past the bathroom. Shit! He'd have to find some other way out. What the Pigs were going to say, he didn't know.

He dashed down the stairs towards the hall and the front door. Before he reached the ground floor, figures came rushing out of a room at the back of the house. He spun round to run back upstairs only to see the wild man with the sword halt at the top of the steps.

'Eh, you can stop right there, lad,' said the man, lowering his blade. He checked himself. 'Nick?' he added in surprise.

'Nick!' a shrill voice came from the hall. He glanced round to see Eloise staring up at him. With her was Hamish and some old guy who looked naggingly familiar - and that Welsh girl from the shop.

He looked back upstairs.

'Osborne?' he wished tentatively. The biker advanced down the steps slowly.

'But listen, there's something more important,' Nick burst out, after Eloise had explained everything.

'What Ah want to know,' said Hamish heavily, 'is what the fuck were you doing breaking in? Last time we saw you - the Pigs had you!'

'What are you saying, Hamish?' asked Osborne. 'Nick's no traitor.'

'Fuck off,' Hamish growled. 'What do you know?'

'Let Nick speak,' urged Eloise.

They turned and looked at him, sprawled in one of Menyw's armchairs. He returned their gaze, blinking.

'Well, Nick,' said Osborne sternly. 'Tell us your side of the story.'

'I'm trying!' said Nick. 'If you'll let me get a word out... The bizzies got me, right. But they said they'd let me go if I did a burglary for them...'

'He is a traitor!' snarled Hamish, lunging for the Scouser. Osborne grabbed him and flung him back. Hamish was about to attack the biker, when Eloise stepped in between them.

'That's enough,' she snapped, glaring up at them. 'Like kids, the pair of you.' She turned to Nick. 'So you burgled this house?'

'How was I supposed to know you were here?' he demanded. 'I didn't know what was going on. I still don't. But I know one thing. Tybalt Kohl is involved.'

'We know that,' said Siân from the corner. 'Oh - and you can give me back what you nicked from my shop.'

Nick looked amazed and silently handed over the leaflet.

'How did you know?' he asked.

'I didn't,' she replied with a sweet smile. 'I just guessed. You're a Scouser, aren't you?'

Nick looked affronted. 'How about that for racial prejudice?' he said bitterly.

'Stop bickering, children,' said Menyw authoritatively. 'We have more important concerns. We must be at the castle before midnight.'

'There's something else I haven't mentioned,' said Nick slowly. 'When the bizzies dropped me off to nick that sword, they said they've got the place surrounded...'

He looked around at his companions in silence.

'Where is the little scrote?' said Sergeant Dover irritably. 'Inspector? How long d'you reckon he'll be?'

The inspector shrugged and sank deeper into his long coat. This was all going wrong, he thought despondently. When he'd first met Kohl

through the ultra-secret Masonic organisation known as the *Ordo Templi Typhonis*, he had thought the Neo-Nazi's plan foolproof. Using the mystical secrets of the ancient Celts to revive the Nazi hierarchy and return Europe to the heights of civilisation it hadn't seen since 1945...

Anything that could successfully crush the bourgeois democracy that had opened the floodgates to the deluge of liberalism, drugs, pornography, sexual perversion and crime that constantly threatened the country seemed good to him. But there was always the human factor. These wretched kids had been running rings round them ever since Kohl first encountered them in London. They had defeated the Temple's agent on Abalos, they had destroyed the Temple's sister organisation in Westchester. Now this eccentric old vicar had teamed up with them and apparently they had the Sword as well.

'Why are we wasting time here?' Dover said. 'Why don't we just concentrate on getting our hands on the Cauldron?'

'Idiot,' snapped the inspector. 'We need the Sword. And the Spear, as well, but regaining the Sword is our first priority.'

'But the hippie scum are after the cauldron as well,' said Dover, 'from what we can tell. Why not let them keep the Sword?'

'Have you gone insane, sergeant?' demanded the inspector. 'Or is there some kind of plan floating round in that congealed lump of porridge you call a brain?'

DS Dover grinned.

'Listen to me...'

'How are we going to escape?' said Eloise quietly.

She stood at the window. Outside, everything was in darkness. She turned to the others. 'Surely they can't keep us here against our will?' she asked. 'Legally, I mean?'

'They're not keeping us here - officially, anyway,' said Nick. 'Anyway, the law didn't stop them from chucking me in a cell and kicking seven shades out of me,' he added resentfully.

'These Pigs are out of control,' said Osborne darkly.

'They're the enemy,' said Hamish dramatically. 'What we should do is go out and fight them.'

Eloise sighed. She turned to Menyw.

'I think there's been enough fighting for one day,' she said.

'Too right,' said Nick.

Eloise ignored him. She looked Menyw in the eye.

'Time for the magicians to take over,' she said quietly.

Menyw looked around at them.

'Me?' he said, startled. He gave an annual Scouts' jamboree smile. 'But I'm a simple man of the cloth,' he said. 'I know nothing of the Dark Arts.'

'Bollocks,' said Siân. 'That's utter shit and you know it, vicar. You're a druid, aren't you? The first druid there ever was, if we're to believe you.'

'And I do,' Eloise insisted steadily. 'I met him in another age.'

Menyw shook his head and pursed his lips.

'I'll see what I can do,' he promised. 'Though it'll take some magic to get us out of this spot, I can tell you.' He frowned. 'Now this reminds me of the time when Arthur and I were besieged by the Saxons at Mynnydd Berwyn. Bedwyr was there too and he said...'

'Arthur?' asked Eloise. 'King Arthur?'

Menyw ummed and ahhed. 'Well, rumours of his royalty have been greatly exaggerated. His mother was married to the Duke of Tin Tagel, but there was some doubt about who his father was...'

Hamish snorted. Siân shook her head.

'Next you'll be telling us you're really Merlin!' she crowed. Menyw looked stern.

'Merlin is a myth,' he said firmly. 'Concocted from stories about the prophet Ambrosius and the mad poet of the Wild Wood. Oh and, er, me,' he added.

'You are Merlin?' Eloise breathed.

'Well, as I said, there never was anyone of that name...'

'Look, you mad auld keech,' said Hamish, 'if you really are Merlin, isn't it about time you magicked us the fuck oota here?'

'Hamish!' said Eloise. 'A little respect, please.' She turned to Menyw. The old wizard gazed fondly at her. 'But he's right. We need to get away.'

'Yes, of course,' said Menyw. 'Perhaps you could help me?'

'Me?' Eloise replied. 'Me? Really?'

Menyw looked doubtful. 'You are a witch, aren't you?' he asked.

'Well, yes,' she replied. 'But I've only been one for three years.'

'No matter,' Menyw said. 'You have the power, I can tell. Now you, lad, Hamish, isn't it? Hand me that spear. Oh and may I have the Sword?' Osborne gave it to him, looking doubtful. 'Now stand with me in a circle,' the druid commanded. They huddled around him as he stood there, leaning on the Spear, sword raised. Nick looked nervous. Eloise touched him gently on the shoulder.

'Don't worry,' she murmured.

'What's the daft old bugger doing with those things?' he said back. 'They're dangerous!'

'I think he's casting a spell,' she whispered.

They watched in silence as Menyw traced a circle around them with the Sword, muttering to himself. Eloise caught the words 'Finias... Falias... Gorias... Murias...' but the rest was even more incomprehensible. After a while, the old man turned to face her.

'Visualise with me, a cone of light surrounding us,' he commanded. Eloise closed her eyes and visualised. This was elementary magick, of the kind her grandmother had taught her when she was admitted into the coven.

'Shit,' Nick said fearfully. Eloise opened her eyes and saw to her surprise that they were indeed surrounded by light. She frowned. Never before had the circle manifested itself so clearly on the physical plane. Then again, she told herself, she had never previously performed a ritual with a man who claimed to be the inspiration for Merlin.

Menyw raised his arms and uttered a staccato stream of words. Slowly, the cone of light expanded, growing larger, spreading beyond the walls of the house and out across the sheep-cropped fields. In her mind, Eloise felt it touch the minds of the waiting police officers. In a brief instant, she received a heart-wrenching jumbled flash of entire lives; birth, death, joy and sorrow, love and hate and indifference - the sum of the experiences of everyone who surrounded the house. But above all hung the brooding, implacable spirit of their overlord, the evil Tybalt Kohl. And beyond that, something else, something worse....

Darkness itself.

Then, as the light blazed out through the night, Menyw spread his arms wide and cried:

'Huno!'

and all was silent.

Eloise looked about. The light had gone. Her companions raised their eyes, uncomprehending.

Then Menyw bustled into life. He thrust the Spear into Hamish's hand, the Sword into Osborne's. He grabbed a heavy haversack from the floor nearby and slung it on his back. Then he turned to the others.

'Come on, then,' he shouted irritably. 'We've only got two hours before midnight. Those police won't stay asleep forever. We must get going.' He hurried from the room.

'I think we should follow him,' murmured Eloise.

Hamish shrugged.

'I dinna ken what he's on about,' he said. 'But let's move!'

As they hurried out into the hallway, Eloise said 'I think he put the police to sleep,' by way of explanation. The others looked bewildered.

Menyw was standing at the open front door, glancing over his shoulder impatiently.

'Hurry,' he said. 'It's over a mile to the island. We don't have time to dawdle.'

Uncertain, the others paused. Menyw vanished through the door and soon his receding footsteps could be heard, crunching across the gravel outside.

Siân shook her head. 'I've never seen him like this before. But he's usually right, in my experience.' She glanced at Nick, who was looking round the place with interest. 'And you can get out of here before you run off with the silver, Scouser,' she added.

'What?' said Nick, flushing guiltily. 'I don't know what you're on about! Well, are we going with the mad old bastard or not?'

They hurried out after the elderly druid.

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CARMILLA by J Sheridan Le Fanu

XII

A Petition

"Then we are to lose Madame la Comtesse, but I hope only for a few hours,' I said, with a low bow.

"It may be that only, or it may be a few weeks. It was very unlucky his speaking to me just now as he did. Do you now know me?'

"I assured her I did not.

"You shall know me,' she said, 'but not at present. We are older and better friends than, perhaps, you suspect. I cannot yet declare myself. I shall in three weeks pass your beautiful schloss, about which I have been making enquiries. I shall then look in upon you for an hour or two, and renew a friendship which I never think of without a thousand pleasant recollections. This moment a piece of news has reached me like a thunderbolt. I must set out now, and travel by a devious route, nearly a hundred miles, with all the dispatch I can possibly make. My perplexities multiply. I am only deterred by the compulsory reserve I practice as to my name from making a very singular request of you. My poor child has not quite recovered her strength. Her horse fell with her, at a hunt which she had ridden out to witness, her nerves have not yet recovered the shock, and our physician says that she must on no account exert herself for some time to come. We came here, in consequence, by very easy stages--hardly six leagues a day. I must now travel day and night, on a mission of life and death--a mission the critical and momentous nature of which I shall be able to explain to you when we meet, as I hope we shall, in a few weeks, without the necessity of any concealment.'

“She went on to make her petition, and it was in the tone of a person from whom such a request amounted to conferring, rather than seeking a favour.

This was only in manner, and, as it seemed, quite unconsciously. Than the terms in which it was expressed, nothing could be more deprecatory. It was simply that I would consent to take charge of her daughter during her absence.

“This was, all things considered, a strange, not to say, an audacious request. She in some sort disarmed me, by stating and admitting everything that could be urged against it, and throwing herself entirely upon my chivalry. At the same moment, by a fatality that seems to have predetermined all that happened, my poor child came to my side, and, in an undertone, besought me to invite her new friend, Millarca, to pay us a visit. She had just been sounding her, and thought, if her mamma would allow her, she would like it extremely.

“At another time I should have told her to wait a little, until, at least, we knew who they were. But I had not a moment to think in. The two ladies assailed me together, and I must confess the refined and beautiful face of the young lady, about which there was something extremely engaging, as well as the elegance and fire of high birth, determined me; and, quite overpowered, I submitted, and undertook, too easily, the care of the young lady, whom her mother called Millarca.

“The Countess beckoned to her daughter, who listened with grave attention while she told her, in general terms, how suddenly and peremptorily she had been summoned, and also of the arrangement she had made for her under my care, adding that I was one of her earliest and most valued friends.

“I made, of course, such speeches as the case seemed to call for, and found myself, on reflection, in a position which I did not half like.

“The gentleman in black returned, and very ceremoniously conducted the lady from the room.

“The demeanour of this gentleman was such as to impress me with the conviction that the Countess was a lady of very much more importance than her modest title alone might have led me to assume.

“Her last charge to me was that no attempt was to be made to learn more about her than I might have already guessed, until her return. Our distinguished host, whose guest she was, knew her reasons.

“‘But here,’ she said, ‘neither I nor my daughter could safely remain for more than a day. I removed my mask imprudently for a moment, about

an hour ago, and, too late, I fancied you saw me. So I resolved to seek an opportunity of talking a little to you. Had I found that you had seen me, I would have thrown myself on your high sense of honour to keep my secret some weeks. As it is, I am satisfied that you did not see me; but if you now suspect, or, on reflection, should suspect, who I am, I commit myself, in like manner, entirely to your honour. My daughter will observe the same secrecy, and I well know that you will, from time to time, remind her, lest she should thoughtlessly disclose it.'

"She whispered a few words to her daughter, kissed her hurriedly twice, and went away, accompanied by the pale gentleman in black, and disappeared in the crowd.

"In the next room,' said Millarca, 'there is a window that looks upon the hall door. I should like to see the last of mamma, and to kiss my hand to her.'

"We assented, of course, and accompanied her to the window. We looked out, and saw a handsome old-fashioned carriage, with a troop of couriers and footmen. We saw the slim figure of the pale gentleman in black, as he held a thick velvet cloak, and placed it about her shoulders and threw the hood over her head. She nodded to him, and just touched his hand with hers. He bowed low repeatedly as the door closed, and the carriage began to move.

"She is gone,' said Millarca, with a sigh.

"She is gone,' I repeated to myself, for the first time--in the hurried moments that had elapsed since my consent--reflecting upon the folly of my act.

"She did not look up,' said the young lady, plaintively.

"The Countess had taken off her mask, perhaps, and did not care to show her face,' I said; 'and she could not know that you were in the window.'

"She sighed, and looked in my face. She was so beautiful that I relented. I was sorry I had for a moment repented of my hospitality, and I determined to make her amends for the unavowed churlishness of my reception.

"The young lady, replacing her mask, joined my ward in persuading me to return to the grounds, where the concert was soon to be renewed. We did so, and walked up and down the terrace that lies under the castle windows.

Millarca became very intimate with us, and amused us with lively descriptions and stories of most of the great people whom we saw upon

the terrace. I liked her more and more every minute. Her gossip without being ill-natured, was extremely diverting to me, who had been so long out of the great world. I thought what life she would give to our sometimes lonely evenings at home.

“This ball was not over until the morning sun had almost reached the horizon. It pleased the Grand Duke to dance till then, so loyal people could not go away, or think of bed.

“We had just got through a crowded saloon, when my ward asked me what had become of Millarca. I thought she had been by her side, and she fancied she was by mine. The fact was, we had lost her.

“All my efforts to find her were vain. I feared that she had mistaken, in the confusion of a momentary separation from us, other people for her new friends, and had, possibly, pursued and lost them in the extensive grounds which were thrown open to us.

“Now, in its full force, I recognized a new folly in my having undertaken the charge of a young lady without so much as knowing her name; and fettered as I was by promises, of the reasons for imposing which I knew nothing, I could not even point my inquiries by saying that the missing young lady was the daughter of the Countess who had taken her departure a few hours before.

“Morning broke. It was clear daylight before I gave up my search. It was not till near two o’clock next day that we heard anything of my missing charge.

“At about that time a servant knocked at my niece’s door, to say that he had been earnestly requested by a young lady, who appeared to be in great distress, to make out where she could find the General Baron Spielsdorf and the young lady his daughter, in whose charge she had been left by her mother.

“There could be no doubt, notwithstanding the slight inaccuracy, that our young friend had turned up; and so she had. Would to heaven we had lost her!

“She told my poor child a story to account for her having failed to recover us for so long. Very late, she said, she had got to the housekeeper’s bedroom in despair of finding us, and had then fallen into a deep sleep which, long as it was, had hardly sufficed to recruit her strength after the fatigues of the ball.

“That day Millarca came home with us. I was only too happy, after all, to have secured so charming a companion for my dear girl.”