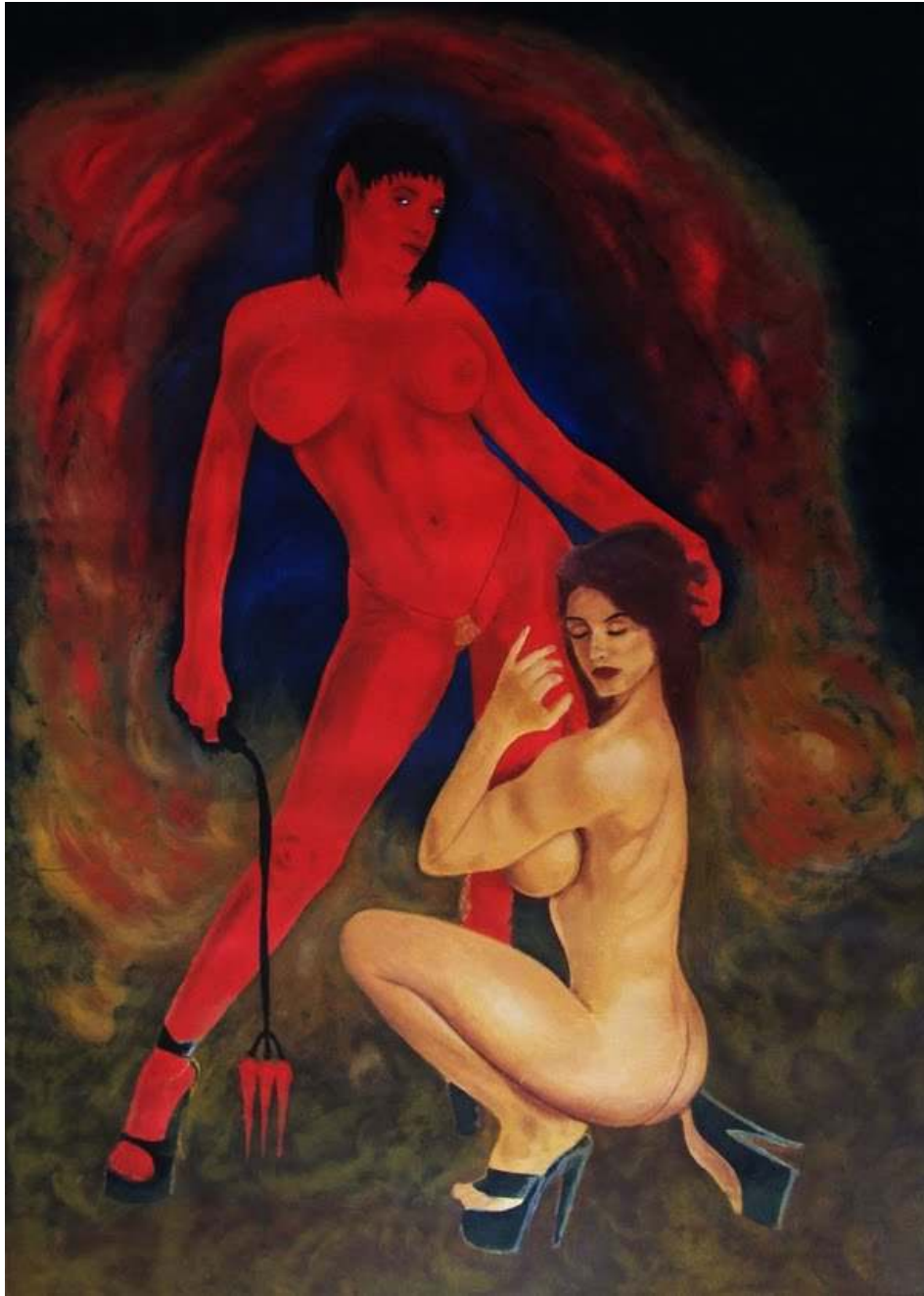


Schlock! webzine

schlock.co.uk



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

Issue 1, Volume 19

14 August 2011

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

To read 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.

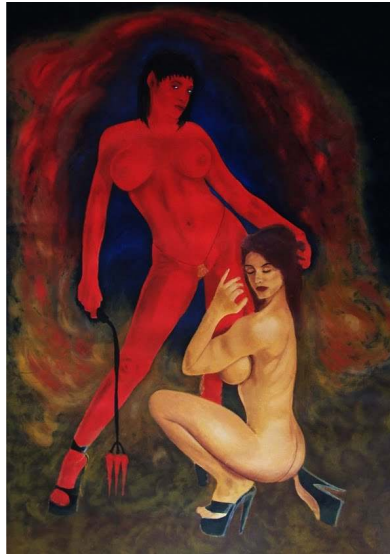
We will also review published and self-published novels, in both print and digital editions. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

The stories, articles and illustrations contained on this website are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.

The logo for Schlock! Publishing features the text "Schlock! Publishing" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is set against a solid red rectangular background. The exclamation mark in "Schlock!" is notably larger than the other characters.

This Edition

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



This week's cover illustration is *Surrendering to Evil* by [Paul Mellino](#).

[State of Emergency - Part One](#) by David Christopher - Britain on the brink of disaster...
SCIENCE FICTION [p3]

[Be Careful What You Wish For](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Neat and tidy and in place... HORROR
[p10]

[Super Duper - Part Fifteen](#) by [award-winning](#) author [James Rhodes](#) - Biggy wakes up drunk...
SCIENCE FICTION [p18]

[Babbage Must Die - Part Thirteen](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Byron stroked his chin musingly. 'Years of war overseas... corrupt, venal, oppressive government... a silly monarch with a sillier son... mass unemployment ... riots and uprisings... *O tempora, o mores!* Surely this age among all ages is unique in England, and like no other.' SCIENCE FICTION [p19]

[The Dark Place: Part Ten](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Martin meets a rational clergyman... DARK
FANTASY [p25]

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Varney the Vampire: Part Nineteen](#) ascribed to [Thomas Preskett Prest](#). Before *Twilight*... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney... GOTHIC
HORROR [p40]

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 13\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - "We see you, Haljan. You must yield!" Their eavesdropping vibrations, with audible projection, were upon me. I retorted loudly, "Come and get me! You cannot take me alive!" SPACE OPERA [p54]

[Spiral Castle - Part Two](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Eloise meets a very old friend... *Eighth in the Going Underground series*. URBAN FANTASY [p60]

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part Eleven](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - The Story... GOTHIC
HORROR [p67]

State of Emergency

Chapter One: Question Time

On a warm summer evening, the end began.

Will had lost all interest in politics. He had seen something on the news about the National Security Bill and the protests against it, heard the home secretary explain the need for tough new measures in the face of increasing disturbances and soaring rates of criminality. But this held no interest for him as he sat in his local, nursing a pint of bitter and nursing bitter thoughts.

She'd found another man. Been seeing him for weeks, according to the brief text she'd sent him. The only reason he'd moved down to live here in the Big Smoke, the only thing that made it all seem worthwhile, working in a dead-end job and living in a squalid flat in a squalid neighbourhood. Now, after three years, she had left him for someone else. She'd wanted him to meet the bastard. He'd refused. He didn't trust himself.

What had he done wrong? She hadn't explained that. Maybe he should go round and see her. But then he might meet *him*. He had a horrible feeling the guy would turn out to be cool. Either that or he would be a wanker, and Will would start to wonder if that meant she always dated wankers. What would it say about him? He sighed, and sipped his pint moodily.

The pub door opened, and a man and a woman walked in, arguing as they reached the bar. They both had the look of students, but they were too old to be undergraduates. Will saw a tall, flamboyant man in his mid twenties, wearing a long black trenchcoat, and a slim, petite girl with long chestnut hair and a face that was lovely despite her sullen expression. She was really quite something, Will thought, as he covertly studied her across the crowded bar. Nothing like his girlfriend... his *ex*. This girl was willowy and elegant, though at her showy boyfriend's elbow she seemed shadowed, subdued. They were still arguing while they waited at the bar. Then the boyfriend stormed out without a backwards glance.

Opportunity was knocking, Will told himself. He quickly emptied his glass, partly to give him an excuse to cross to the bar, partly Dutch courage. He felt a twinge of guilt, as he thought of his *ex* again, but the beer softened the pain. Then he crossed the crowded room and leant against the bar.

'Same again, Andy,' he told the barman. He leaned over to the girl, who had got a shot glass of sambuca while he was crossing the room. Damn. This made it harder, but he'd persevere. 'Same again for you, when you've finished?'

She looked up, and her pale blue eyes focused briefly on him.

'If I want anyone to buy me a drink, I'll get my boyfriend to do it,' she snapped, and looked away.

Not a good start. Still...

'Looks like your boyfriend's taken himself off somewhere,' Will pointed out. The barman handed him his pint. 'Thanks. And another sambuca for the lady.'

'Rex has just gone to talk to the Professor,' the girl said with a shrug, but she accepted the drink when the barman brought it over.

'The Professor, eh?' said Will. 'So, you're what, one of his students? What are you studying? Are you at London Uni? Or the LSE?'

'I'm at Oxford,' she replied, with a toss of her head that seemed to indicate derision. 'Studying politics. The Professor invited Rex and I down to watch him on the programme.'

That was a coincidence. 'I started a politics degree myself,' he replied. 'I couldn't afford the fees in the end. And there were other things that got in the way. I dropped out, moved down here to be with....' He checked himself. Best not to dwell on it, not now. 'I'm Will Youds, by the way,' he added. 'And you'd be?'

'Daisy Rae,' she told him grudgingly, as if the admission would give him power over her. 'I'm one of Professor Quigley's post-grads. You've heard of Professor Quigley, surely?'

Will laughed incredulously. 'Professor Quigley! We've got something in common already. He was one of my tutors at Leeds, where I started that degree. Is he at Oxford now?'

Daisy's face softened, her eyes shone. 'You know the Professor?' she asked. 'Oh, isn't he marvellous!'

'I only attended a couple of his lectures,' Will replied. 'But I got on well with him in tutorials. He's pretty cool for an old guy. But I've not really taken much interest in politics since then. I've had other things on my mind.' He glanced down at his untouched pint suddenly, and sighed.

'You *should* take more of an interest,' the girl told him fiercely. 'It affects everyone! If they get this National Security Bill through, it'll mean an end to civil liberties as we know them!'

She sounded like some of the students he had known at Leeds. They'd bored him rigid, but none of them had had such trim figures, or such deep, melting blue eyes. Insincerely, he nodded.

'You're right,' he told her. 'I've been too wrapped up in my own little life. There's a world out there that lots of people never consider. But it affects us all.'

She nodded in return. Now she was copying his body language. That could only be a good sign. 'People are alienated from politics. But it's not surprising, when you consider the crooks who get into power. Left, right, or centre, they look the same, sound the same, have the same expense accounts -- at the taxpayer's expense. People need to take more of an interest for their own self-preservation. Did you know that they intend to introduce curfews in residential areas? Our civil liberties are being eroded one by one, by politicians who abuse their power for financial gain.'

He nodded again. 'Power's always been in the hands of the privileged,' he said. 'It should be in the interests of everyone to want a more equitable share.' He smiled inwardly as she leaned across, eyes bright, and put her hand on his arm. He could keep up this drivel all night. If politics was what got her going, then he'd talk politics until they no longer needed words.

'You're so right,' she said. 'You really ought to come with us. The programme is on in a quarter of an hour. Look, here's Rex.'

He looked up, disappointed, as her boyfriend strode back into the pub. She took her hand from his arm and turned to greet Rex.

'You took your time,' she told him frostily.

'But I see you found someone to talk to,' he said in a booming voice. He seized Will's hand and pumped it vigorously, much to Will's consternation. 'I'm Rex,' he announced. 'Rex Mundy.'

'I'd gathered,' Will muttered.

Rex turned to Daisy. 'Quigley's ready, the home sec. has just turned up, and they're due to go on air in ten minutes. We'd better get a move on.'

Will looked at Daisy, and she said quickly, 'Can we bring Will along? He's one of the Professor's old students.'

Rex spread his arms wide and beamed. 'Of course. Any friend of Professor

Quigley is a friend of mine. Come on, we'd better make tracks.'

Will followed the couple from the pub into the hot summer night, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Daisy had seemed to be taking an interest until Rex turned up. Now, as they put their arms round each other and waited to cross the road, he felt slightly out of place. He hated being a gooseberry. And what was he doing, chasing another girl so soon after his ex had dumped him?

A few minutes later, they were at Television Centre, being ushered into the live studio from which *Question Time* was broadcasted. Rows of seats sloped down on one side, filled with people old and young; students, professionals, and professional dropouts, all facing the centre of the studio, where the cameras surrounded the set. The presenter was already sitting in the central chair, but the two seats on either side were empty. Will followed Daisy and Rex as they sat down on the front row. Will mopped his brow. The studio was hot, even after the heat outside! He glanced at Daisy, who was looking keenly towards the set. It wasn't just the studio that was hot, he thought with a smile.

A white-haired figure dressed in tweed appeared from the direction of the dressing rooms, followed by a coterie of studio staff. Will grinned again as he recognised Quigley; that hawkish face and the waddling walk he remembered from Leeds. Brushing off the last attentions of the make-up girl, the Professor took a seat. The presenter leaned across to him and spoke in an undertone. Quigley rose grumpily, and went to sit in the other seat. He scanned the audience, and waved in the direction of Will's companions. Will heard Daisy sigh with pleasure, and saw her wave back vigorously. Maybe he should have finished that politics degree, and taken it a few steps further. He'd never realised that the job got groupies.

'Where's that cow Verlaine?' Will heard Rex boom. A group of people sitting nearby tittered at his words. The current home secretary, Susan Verlaine, was no more popular than her predecessors.

'Here she comes,' Daisy murmured, and Will craned his neck to see a tall, imperious woman with short-cropped hair – a retro New Romantic look, in fact. Very dated. She was approaching from the other end of the studio, surrounded by security guards and hangers-on. Will was reminded of a showdown in a Western. She took her place on set, across from Quigley

'The cow,' Rex repeated. Unnecessarily, to Will's mind. It was as if the guy held a personal grudge.

Floor managers and other TV people rushed about the studio. Will had a suspicion there was a best boy somewhere, and a key grip, not to mention a gaffer – whatever that was. The presenter sat quietly in his chair, leafing through his notes, ignoring the Professor and the home secretary. The makeup girl had finally seized her chance to finish her work on the Professor, despite his irritable fidgeting. At last, she finished and scurried away. The home secretary surveyed the crowd with a supercilious expression.

Finally, everything was ready. The AFM counted them in, the music played, then the cameras were rolling and they were going out live.

'... here in the studio tonight we have two experts in the field to discuss this burning issue,' the presenter was saying moments later. 'On my right I have Susan Verlaine, the new home secretary, said to be the main driving force behind the proposed Bill. Meanwhile on my left we have Professor Quigley, who lectures in politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Oxford, and who is working on a book that he claims will prove the National Security Bill to be' – the presenter ostentatiously consulted his notes – '“a farrago of draconian claptrap, the

product of paranoid, diseased minds...” The interviewer darted him a look. ‘Strong words, Professor.’

Quigley shook his head vigorously. He was about to speak when the interviewer turned to Susan Verlaine. ‘What would you say to that, home secretary?’

Verlaine spoke in warm, modulated tones. Her voice was as deep as a man’s, and had a feline quality. ‘The Professor is highly respected in his field, and I have a warm personal regard for his opinions. However, he is failing to take into account many very real issues. The security of UK citizens is of paramount importance...’

‘What about their liberty, madam?’ the Professor demanded. ‘What about the civil liberties of every *citizen*... or should I say subject? Of course, this country is not a republic, but a monarchy. Yet despite this, it has a long tradition of personal liberty, which has been steadily whittled away by successive governments, and which your proposed National Security Bill will destroy entirely.’

‘Thank you, Professor Quigley,’ the presenter said cuttingly, ‘but we’ll come to you in a moment. Home secretary, what do you say? Which is more important, security or liberty?’

‘Without security there can be no liberty,’ Verlaine said smoothly, smiling at the presenter. ‘Unless each and every citizen can live without fear of crime and terrorism, both of which have risen exponentially in recent years, there can be no freedom, no liberty.’

‘But the Professor would say that the measures you intend to bring into effect will deny everyone their liberty. Isn’t that right, Professor?’

‘Absolutely!’ the Professor exclaimed. ‘This country is sleep-walking into tyranny. Ms Verlaine will turn this place into a police state before she’s done! Already we have twenty-four hour surveillance, draconian powers for the police, detention without trial, imprisonment for anti-social – yet not illegal – behaviour. What next? The National Security Bill will exacerbate all this. It will fan the flames of popular resentment and drive the people to extreme measures...’

‘And that’s exactly what you want, isn’t it?’ Verlaine said sweetly. ‘We know what you hope to get out of the existing turmoil. Demagogues always appear in uncertain times. But the government’s proposals, and I am by no means the driving force behind them all, the government’s proposals will take away the ability of radical fringe elements to cause the widespread panic you describe...’

‘*They* will cause it!’

‘... and in future we can look forward to a secure society free from crime or political agitation, in which people can find the true meaning of liberty.’

‘Freedom is slavery!’ the Professor said triumphantly. ‘This Orwellian nightmare you propose...’

‘Oh, Professor,’ the home secretary said with a throaty laugh, ‘the last refuge of the civil libertarian – hackneyed rhetoric. Eric Blair must be spinning in his grave to hear his name taken in vain by people with so little originality.’

‘Let me just break in there,’ the presenter said cuttingly, ‘and remind you that neither of you is here to air any personal vendettas. You’ve been asked to discuss the proposed National Security Bill, not indulge in a slanging match.’

Will watched with amusement as the presenter struggled – or pretended to struggle – to keep the discussion from descending to the level of a brawl, while the two enemies tore each other’s arguments to shreds. Statistics were bandied, facts were misrepresented, grammar was violated, and the presenter humiliated both combatants on several occasions. But as he listened to the questions asked by audience members, including a few pertinent inquiries from Rex, it came home to Will precisely what the

proposed Bill would mean. Curfews in residential areas? How could he go for a night out if there was a curfew? Identity cards, that old threat – but for real, this time. DNA databases for all citizens, even those without convictions. Criminal records checks for all employees. ID chips in credit cards and store cards to monitor all financial transactions... The list was endless.

Politics had failed to interest him for three years, and at degree level all the theories had only made his head hurt. But this was real, this meant something; this wasn't theory, this was politics in the raw – ugly and oppressive. It was time something was done.

As the programme came to an end and the lights brightened over the audience, Will stretched, and looked around. Rex was sitting with his arms folded across his chest and a self-satisfied smirk on his face. Daisy's eyes were wide with concern. She looked at him grimly. He shook his head, feeling inadequate.

'They can't do all that,' he said feebly. 'People won't stand for it.'

'We've got to talk to the Professor,' Daisy said determinedly. 'This is worse than I was expecting.' She looked up, and her eyes narrowed. Will followed her gaze and saw Susan Verlaine sweep past with two security guards in tow. The home secretary glanced over at them casually, and smiled coldly, mockingly. Will thought she was looking directly at him. Close up, she had a startling, mature beauty. Unaccountably, he felt cold sweat spring out on his brow.

Daisy sprang up and seized Rex's hand. 'Come on!' she urged. 'You too, Will.'

Dumbly, Will followed them across the crowded studio. This was turning into a night to remember.

A moment later, and they had barged their way into the Professor's dressing room. He looked up at the three youngsters with a surprised expression that softened into a broad smile as he saw Daisy, followed by a brief frown for Rex. He seemed not to notice Will, who was at the back, trying to look unobtrusive. Will still owed Quigley several essays. The fact played on his conscience strangely.

'What can we do about it?' Daisy demanded at once, her voice shaking with emotion. 'What can we do, Professor?'

'My dear, please!' Quigley exclaimed. 'Take a seat. And you too, gentlemen!'

Impatiently, Daisy grabbed a chair and sat down on it. Rex remained standing, seeming to dominate the room. Will slunk across to another chair and sat nervously. Daisy leaned over urgently to the Professor.

'On the way down you told us that you had a solution to all this,' she said. 'What is it?'

'I've completed the manuscript of my latest book, Daisy,' he replied. 'My manifesto. It contains all the information the public requires, the blueprints for a truly liberal, free society. Once that is published, it will give our cause a focus, a rallying call. We will be able to face people like Ms Verlaine with ...'

'It's easy to see what we need to do,' Rex said, breaking in rudely. 'With respect, Professor, direct action is the only solution.'

The Professor shook his head regretfully. 'Once I was as much of a hothead as you, young man. But learn from older and wiser heads. When fighting monsters, avoid becoming a monster. My manifesto...'

'We should take to the streets, rise up against them – before we're so fettered by their laws we can no longer move,' Rex shouted. Daisy looked at him in irritation. 'Fight them at their own game. Verlaine has to go, to start with....'

'Rex!' Daisy snapped. 'Don't you speak to the Professor like that! You're

talking rubbish. Let him tell you what he proposes.'

'I can see we're all living in cloud-cuckoo-land here,' Rex said. 'I'm leaving. You can come with me if you want, Daisy, or you can stay with Quigley if you prefer.'

He swept out. Will looked hopefully at Daisy, expecting her to remain behind. But with an angry expression on her face, she rose, looked back in regret at Quigley, and left without a glance at Will.

Will shifted in embarrassment. Witnessing a domestic was always embarrassing, doubly so if it was about politics. He looked nervously at Quigley, and started to get up.

'No, don't go,' the Professor said. 'Better let them sort it out themselves.' Will sat down again. 'Now tell me,' the Professor said, 'what is young William Youds, who only ever handed in one essay when he was at Leeds, doing with two of my most promising students?'

Will gaped stupidly. The old boy remembered him!

After some reminiscences, and Will's account of life as a university dropout, they emerged from the dressing room.

'There should be a car waiting for you at the front,' the AFM told the Professor, with a curious look at Will. 'It will take you to your hotel.'

'Did you see anything of the two other young people who came to see me?' the Professor asked. Will had been looking all around him. There was no sign of the quarrelling couple.

'I think they left half an hour ago.' The AFM walked away. The Professor grunted, and Will felt disappointed.

'Perhaps you'd like to come back to my hotel with me,' the Professor suggested. 'I could show you my manifesto.'

Will looked askance at him, but he was interested in this manifesto. If anything was going to save the country from the National Security Bill, he wanted to know about it.

'Okay.' He followed the Professor from the building.

A black limousine with tinted windows had pulled up outside the studio. A door opened, and a large man in a dark suit climbed out.

'Car for Professor Quigley?' the man asked. He had a face like a boxer, but a surprisingly genteel accent. The Professor nodded happily.

'My, we are getting the VIP treatment,' he said. 'Do you mind if I bring a friend?'

The man ushered them into the spacious interior and got in behind them. Will sat down beside Quigley, and stared uncertainly at another suit-wearing figure. As the first man closed the door behind them with a decisive clunk, this man leaned forward. Will saw that he was lean, with a cold, harsh face and chilly blue eyes.

The man sniffed loudly. Ignoring Will, he concentrated on Quigley.

'You may recognise me, Professor. My name is Tarrant. I work for the security services. We're going on a little journey.'

Will felt a thrill of apprehension as the unseen driver gunned the engine, and the limo screeched off at top speed through the London streets.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Miles finished the dregs of his beer and looked bleary eyed at the bottle as he held it up to the light. 'I suppose I'd better get myself off to bed,' his alcohol dulled thoughts suggested. He stumbled into the kitchen and carefully placed the empty bottle on the worktop next to the others. The nine empty bottles were all perfectly spaced out, arranged with precision in a straight line, and stood testament to his latest attempt to drink himself into oblivion.

As Miles looked at the bottles, a smile slowly spread across his face. 'At least they're all in a neat straight line; Liz would have been pleased with that.' At the thought of his wife's name, the smile vanished from Miles' face and his features fell in on themselves as he started to cry.

Staggering out of the kitchen with tears streaming down his face, Miles collided with the doorframe. He cursed as a sharp pain shot through his upper arm. Rubbing his bicep with his other hand Miles managed to negotiate the stairs and make it into the bathroom. As he leant forward and lifted the toilet seat, his head reeled. He stumbled heavily to his knees and vomited into the open toilet bowl.

After a while, the retching began to lessen and when there was nothing more left to come up Miles climbed wearily to his feet. The smell in the tiny bathroom was appalling and he quickly flushed the toilet before opening the window as wide as he could. The cold night air flooded into the room and the rain, which had been battering against the glass, immediately covered the windowsill with heavy drops.

Miles leant out of the window and heedless of the rain coursing over his head breathed in great lungfuls of the damp chilly air. For a second his head began to spin again but this quickly ceased as the cold refreshed him and cleared his head. Easing his upper body back into the bathroom Miles took a towel from the rail and dried his head and neck. The room smelt better although he thought he could still faintly smell the harsh acidic tang of vomit.

'Probably from inside my mouth,' Miles mumbled to himself as he made his way into the bedroom where he stripped off his clothes and fell into bed. The room began to spin and he opened one eye in the darkness. He hoped that the old tale would prove true and the dizziness would pass. Almost without realising it, Miles fell into a fretful troubled sleep.

*

Liz slipped her hand into Miles' and pulled him forward into the surf. The warm Caribbean Sea splashed across their legs and Liz turned towards Miles then threw her arms around his shoulders.

'It's so lovely here, Miles. Thank you so much for booking this holiday and for picking such a glorious place.'

Liz was wearing only her bikini bottoms and her warm flesh was pressed against Miles. Her breasts were against his chest and he could feel her nipples pushing against him. He felt himself stiffen as he held Liz close and returned her passionate kisses.

‘Someone’s getting excited, aren’t they?’ Liz murmured into his ear as she pushed herself against his erection. ‘We’d better get you into some deeper water,’ she said, laughing as she moved backwards through the surf until the water was above their waists.

Liz reached down and undid the cord at the front of Miles’ shorts then slowly pulled them down until she had freed his erection. She ran her hand down the shaft of his penis then slowly started to masturbate him. Miles leant against Liz and groaned as she brought him to a climax and he ejaculated into the warm aquamarine water.

*

Miles awoke from the dream and felt the warm dampness in his crotch. He desperately wanted to return to the dream and be with Liz again but the incessant pounding in his head refused to release him. He dragged himself from the bedroom and into the bathroom where he dry retched over the sink as his body once more tried to get rid of the alcohol that was slowly poisoning it.

Miles raised his head and looked at himself in the mirror. He hardly recognised the gaunt, partly-bearded face that looked back at him from the glass. The whites of his eyes were tinged with yellow and he had deep dark circles under his eyes.

‘Not looking too good there, chief,’ Miles said as he winked at his reflection.

‘Miles?’

The voice came from the direction of the bedroom. Miles looked over his shoulder towards the sound and leant his head to one side as he listened.

‘Miles?’

The voice came again and he rushed out of the bathroom and across the landing into the bedroom. Miles looked around the room but it was empty. He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and held his head in his hands. Miles had been sure he’d heard Liz’s voice calling his name and he wished with all his heart she was here with him now. He could feel the familiar darkness and despair descending on him.

‘I need a drink,’ he said out loud, but no one answered and he made his way downstairs to the kitchen. The house was cold and he thought maybe he should put the heating on. There was only one cold beer left in the fridge and the case of beer in the bottom of the cupboard was empty.

Miles opened the cold bottle of beer and took a long drink from it. ‘Looks like I’ll have to go and get some supplies,’ he thought absently as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. What was left of the beer was finished in a single mouthful and Miles placed the bottle with precision at the end of the line with the others on the worktop. He looked along the line of bottle necks and was pleased with their neat orderly placing.

‘Neat and tidy and in place,’ Miles said to himself, repeating a phrase Liz had often used when she was cleaning up.

As he stood looking at the bottles Miles allowed his mind to wander and inevitably his thoughts turned to the holiday he had taken with Liz to the Caribbean and the exotic island of Haiti. The first week there had been glorious, soft sandy beaches, hot sunshine during the day and lots of alcohol and hot sex in the evening.

The warm weather seemed to bring out the devil in Liz. She was always wanting to have sex in places where they might be seen. They had even managed it in the lift on the way to their room after dinner one evening. They had barely managed to rearrange their clothes as the lift arrived at their floor and the doors opened. They casually walked out of the lift then collapsed into laughter leaving the smartly dressed businessman who boarded the lift wondering just what they were laughing at.

It was during the second week that something had happened to blight their holiday.

Miles and Liz had been lying on sun beds on the beach when one of the many beach fruit sellers had stopped in front of them, even though they had not asked for any fruit. Miles screwed his eyes up against the bright sunshine and tried to shield his eyes with his hand as he looked up at the muscular man standing in front of them.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘No, mon,’ the fruit seller replied but he made no attempt to move away.

Miles sat up on the sun bed and looked at the fruit seller. ‘We don’t want any fruit, thanks,’ he said cheerfully, not at all liking the way the man’s eyes were hungrily exploring Liz’s body.

‘No worries, mon,’ he replied slowly looking away from Liz and staring straight at Miles with eyes that were covered with a milky opaque film.

Miles had never seen a worse case of cataracts before and he wondered if the man could see anything at all.

‘Ya been here long, mon?’ the fruit seller asked as once more he turned his eyes towards Liz, who slept on oblivious to the conversation.

‘A week,’ Miles replied, wishing the man would continue on his way along the beach and leave them alone. They had heard tales of the pressure other guests had felt from some of the beach sellers but this was the first time it had happened to them.

‘Look we don’t want any fruit thanks,’ Miles said more forcefully this time.

‘Ya told me already, mon,’ the fruit seller replied. He turned towards Miles and extended his hand. ‘Enjoy da island, mon.’

Miles took the proffered hand and suddenly found himself standing on an empty wind lashed beach. Dark clouds boiled overhead and it was freezing. As if in slow motion, he looked down towards the sun bed where Liz was laying. She was naked and her legs were spread wide. She thrust her hips upward rhythmically as if she was meeting the opposing thrusts of someone lying on top of her and making love to her. Miles

tried to call out her name but no sound came from his mouth. He tried to move but it was as though his feet were set fast in the sand. Liz arched her back higher and her face was filled with pleasure as she reached orgasm then slowly her body relaxed.

The fruit seller released Miles' hand and he was suddenly back on the sun drenched beach with Liz lying on the sun bed next to him.

'Ave a good day, mon,' said the fruit seller as he smiled at Miles and walked away.

Miles didn't know what had just happened. His head was throbbing as though his blood pressure was raised but he hadn't moved from the sun bed. Liz stirred next to him and yawned as she stretched. She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

'Hi, sexy. I've just had the most amazing dream and you were in it.'

Miles was still struggling with what he had seen, or thought he'd seen he corrected himself.

The fruit seller turned and waved as he walked away from them.

'Who was that?' Liz asked.

'Just a fruit seller,' Miles replied.

'Let's go back to the room,' Liz said, standing up. 'I'm feeling so horny and I need you to make love to me.'

Liz took Miles by the hand, dragged him to his feet and they walked away hand in hand across the hot sand towards the hotel.

From the beach, the fruit seller watched them go. His lips moved as he continued the incantation but no sound came from his mouth.

That was the start of things going bad, Miles thought to himself, as his eyes once more focussed on the line of empty bottles.

'Miles?'

There was the voice again, only this time it came from the lounge.

'Miles!' More insistent this time.

Miles turned away from the bottles and slowly walked from the kitchen and through into the lounge. There was nobody there but as he stood in the centre of the room and slowly looked around, he caught an almost imperceptible aroma. Screwing up his eyes and twitching his nose as he sampled the air, Miles tried to identify the smell. Suddenly he realised it was suntan lotion, he could smell coconuts and he knew it was the same lotion Liz had liked to use.

Miles sank to his knees and rested his forehead on the floor. He couldn't understand

what was happening and he wished Liz was there to help him. Suddenly he lurched to his feet and walked quickly into the kitchen. He'd remembered he had a half full bottle of rum in the cupboard and he quickly poured himself a tumbler full. Some of the rum splashed onto the worktop as he poured but he didn't care. As Miles gulped the alcohol down, he started to feel better and he placed the empty glass back on the worktop with a contented sigh.

'Miles?'

'Fuck off!!' Miles shouted towards the lounge 'Leave me alone, will you!!'

He poured another tumbler full of rum and quickly drank it needing to feel the harsh burning as the alcohol seared its way down his throat.

'Miles?'

Taking a large carving knife with him Miles walked into the lounge. Nothing had changed, though, and the room was still empty. As he turned to leave the room, Miles looked down at the floor. The carpet was wet and his bare feet were standing in a small pool of water. He couldn't understand where the water had come from and he looked at the ceiling, expecting there to be a leak from an upstairs pipe. There was nothing there and the ceiling was plain white without a mark.

'I must be going mad,' Miles thought absently to himself as he walked back into the kitchen and poured the last of the rum into the glass. Miles still held the carving knife in his hand. He held it up and looked at it with a puzzled expression on his face.

'What was I going to do with that?' he asked himself as he put the knife down on the worktop.

Taking the glass Miles walked over to the small table and chairs in the corner of the kitchen and sat down. Liz had bought the table and chairs as she said they made the kitchen more homely and it meant they could sit and eat in there. Miles sat at the table and stared vacantly into space.

*

Not long after they had arrived home from Haiti, Miles had begun to think something was wrong with Liz. She seemed distant and their sex life was suddenly nonexistent; except for when Liz was sleeping. He was often kept awake by Liz as she had sex with her imaginary lover while Miles lay in the bed next to her. He had tried to talk to her about it but she just laughed and told him not to worry and it was nothing.

Over the weeks since they returned Liz became more and more withdrawn and often went hours without saying a word. Miles found he was drinking progressively more and thought he might be getting depressed, and maybe he should see a doctor.

Then one night Liz had dropped the bombshell when she told him she was leaving.

'I can't take this anymore,' she said to Miles as he poured himself a glass of rum to go with his bottle of beer. 'You're always drunk, you hardly ever talk to me, and I'm wasting my life with you so I'm leaving.' Miles looked at Liz as he finished pouring

rum into the glass.

‘I hardly ever talk to you?’ he retorted hotly. ‘You never talk to me you, mean. I may as well be drunk as sitting here wondering what’s going on with you. We never have sex anymore, well I don’t, but you seem to have a great time in your dreams.’

‘Why would I even dream of having sex with you?’ Liz said scornfully. ‘You stink of booze all the time and I’ll bet you can’t even get it hard, can you? At least in my dreams I get what I’ve always wished for and wanted from someone who knows how to please a woman!’

The glass Miles held in his hand suddenly broke and blood mixed with rum spilled onto the floor. Miles looked at his bleeding hand but curiously felt no pain.

‘What do you think that proves?’ Liz taunted him.

Something inside Miles snapped and he backhanded Liz across the face with his injured hand. Liz fell against the worktop and gasped as the edge of the top dug into her ribs. Blood from the gash in Miles’ hand sprayed across her face and against the wall. As she stood up, Liz grabbed hold of the empty beer bottle Miles had left standing on the worktop and swung it at his head. Somehow Miles managed to avoid the swinging bottle and push his hands against Liz who fell backwards and crashed her head against the corner of the worktop. She gave a small moan and fell to the floor.

Miles looked down at Liz on the floor then stepped over her as he went to the sink to wash his hand. The cold water stung and he gasped as the pain hit him. Miles took a clean towel and wound it around his hand to staunch the bleeding then went into the lounge and sat down heavily on the sofa. He leant backwards, rested his head against the back of the sofa, and closed his eyes. Minutes later, he was asleep.

When Miles woke up hours later, the room was cold and he felt sick. He stumbled into the kitchen and almost fell over the body of Liz who hadn’t moved from where she had fallen. Miles grabbed the bottle of rum and took a long swallow straight from the bottle then knelt down beside Liz’s head. He put his fingers to her throat. Even through his stupor, he knew there was no pulse to be felt there.

‘Shit,’ Miles said as he sat back on the floor. ‘What the fuck am I going to do now?’

An hour later, Miles was still sitting on the floor the empty rum bottle at his side. ‘I’ll have to get rid of the body,’ he thought to himself, ‘but where can I put it?’ He looked around the kitchen as he wracked his brains for what to do and his eyes fell on the chest freezer. ‘I’d never get her in there,’ he thought absently. ‘Not in one piece,’ his troubled mind answered. ‘No, not in one piece but maybe in a few pieces,’ Miles said out loud to the empty room.

‘You can’t cut her up,’ his conscience argued with him.

‘Why not?’ he countered. ‘What can I do to her now that’s worse or even comes close to killing her?’

‘It wasn’t murder, it was an accident, at worst manslaughter,’ the rational part of his mind argued. ‘They’d never believe me!’ he argued back as he continued his inner debate.

After what seemed like hours, Miles finally made up his mind. He spread a large, thick plastic sheet across the floor of the kitchen and rolled the body of his wife into the centre. As he looked at the corpse, he wondered again if he could go through with his plan.

‘I’ll need a drink to get through this,’ he thought as he took a full bottle of rum from where he had hidden it from Liz at the back of the cupboard used to store the bottles of cleaning fluid. Opening the bottle, Miles took a long swallow. He didn’t have many tools but in the garden shed was a bow saw, a tenon saw and a longer hard point saw. As he laid them out on the floor, Miles wondered just what the best way to cut up a body was.

Once he had stripped Liz of her clothes, he decided to start with the legs. After another swallow from the rum, he made a diagonal cut through the upper part of the thigh with a carving knife. As the blood spilled out onto the plastic Miles had to resist the urge to vomit and he tried to breathe through his mouth and avoid using his nose.

It was messier than he thought it was going to be but eventually he had six neatly wrapped plastic parcels arranged on the floor. The biggest, containing the torso was much heavier than he anticipated and he struggled to lift it into the freezer. The other packages, one each for the legs, arms and head were much easier and soon Liz was stacked in the freezer.

‘Neat and tidy and in place,’ Miles thought to himself and grinned despite the enormity of what he had just done.

Miles took the plastic sheet and put it into the garden incinerator bin they had bought to burn garden waste. He cleaned the floors and walls with bleach and anti-bacterial cleanser and threw the soiled cleaning cloths into the bin with the plastic before covering it all with leaves and grass cuttings from the compost bin.

*

That had been two days ago and as Miles sat at the kitchen table drinking the last of the rum he wondered if he could walk to the shops and buy another bottle.

‘Miles?’

He looked towards the kitchen door and into the darkened hallway.

‘Miles!’

Miles slowly walked from the kitchen towards the lounge. It was incredibly cold and his breath made white clouds in front of his face as he stood in the doorway.

‘Hello, Miles,’ said a familiar voice from the darkness.

‘You’re not real, you’re dead!’ Miles answered.

‘You brought me back, Miles,’ said the voice. ‘You wished I was back with you and now I am.’

An impossibly strong hand clutched Miles by the front of his shirt and dragged him into the centre of the room. He looked up in horror as the grey face of his wife lowered itself towards him and she smiled then kissed him. The smell of rotten putrefying flesh made his head spin and as Liz ended the kiss, he screamed.

‘What’s wrong, Miles?’ Liz asked. ‘I thought you wanted me to be sexy for you?’

Miles screamed again as Liz bent her head towards his neck and fastened her teeth on his throat.

There was a tearing sound as Miles’ throat was ripped out, silencing his screams.

*

The first police officer to arrive on the scene an hour later barely managed to avoid covering his companion with vomit as he lurched from the lounge and back into the hallway. They’d been alerted by neighbours who had heard screams coming from the house.

‘We haven’t seen the couple who live there for a few weeks,’ they’d told police, ‘but the screams were terrible. It sounded as though someone was in real pain.’

The police investigation revealed the dismembered body in the freezer and the pathologist pinpointed the cause of death as a blow to the head prior to dismemberment. He could do nothing with the remains of the male in the lounge though. He had been torn to pieces as though a pack of hungry lions had attacked him.

*

‘Est-ce que je peux vous aider?’ asked the man lying on the sun bed as the fruit seller stopped in front of him.

‘Vous avez été ici pendant longtemps mon?’ asked the fruit seller.

‘Le `appréciant l’île, mon,’ the fruit seller, extending his hand.

Super Duper

Chapter Fifteen

Biggy was depressed. He had the worst tequila hangover in the history of mankind, at least that's what he assumed. Jon was snoring loudly. His face had been quite badly cut by the glass. It was a miracle of substance abuse that either of them had made it to sleep at all. The front window of the monster truck had been pierced by the ladder of a fire engine. Biggy wasn't quite sure how they'd accomplished that.

Jon's head was rested on the ladder that passed through the front of the windscreen and extended all the way to the boot of the truck. There was glass everywhere. Biggy didn't much fancy the job of cleaning it up. He reached for the door but couldn't quite find the handle.

"Fucking shite," said Biggy.

A moment later, the terrible thought occurred to him that he was now covered in both glass and vomit.

With a tremendous effort, Biggy manipulated his body to fall against the door. After much fumbling, he unleashed the handle and fell out to the side. The drop was a lot further than he expected. The high wheels of the monster truck were rested on top of an old Rover and a much newer BMW. When he finally hit the ground Biggy was delighted to discover that he was still alive, he wasn't even bleeding. He looked around and decided that in all possibility he felt the worst he had ever felt. Now that he had decided on that, he was quite content to fall asleep.

As he slept Biggy began to dream. He saw the faces of the people he had set on fire in Northampton, the shocked expressions of the happy clappers he and Jon had thought were terrorists. He saw all of the people he had hurt gathering around him, he tried to sit up and fight them off but they were singing Kumbaya and it was just too relaxing. In his dream, he fell back to sleep. When he woke up, he saw his daughter being led away in handcuffs by a man wearing a shirt on his head.

"Fucking dreams," he thought and fell back to sleep.

An hour later, Jon climbed out of the truck and shook Biggy awake.

"You're covered in glass and puke," he said. "The sign says there's a service station a mile that way."

He pointed his finger towards the opposite direction they had been travelling in.

Babbage Must Die

Chapter Thirteen

Ada burst into the dark, dank, bare room. Its bare floorboards creaked beneath her as she stood looking for somewhere to hide. She saw a door in the wall and opened it to see that it led into a small closet of some kind. Breathing heavily, she stepped inside, and closed the door behind her.

Someone entered the room.

‘Demme,’ she heard Byron mutter. ‘I was sure she’d come in here, that teasing little hussy. Must have doubled back in the passage.’

The door closed, and Ada gave a sigh of relief.

Lord Byron had taken a fancy to her. On the rebound from Lady Caroline Lamb, she supposed. But ever since his first appearance, when Ada had stood up to him and told him to stop messing around with his pistols and get this meeting sorted, he had been pursuing her at any opportunity. Her demands had been counterproductive. Only today had they got round to discussing the Luddites, and before they had got down to it, Byron had made a pass at her. She had left at once.

She leant back against the cold, rough, stone wall and sighed. This wasn’t helping. She felt in her purse and counted her money. Did she have enough here for a coach to Oxford? Maybe she should just leave the Luddites to their own devices and get on with her own mission. It would be lonely and dangerous, crossing the country in such a time of violence and uprisings. She would be safer here with Ludlam – if it wasn’t for Byron.

She heard the door to the passage open again. Then Ludlam’s slow, gentle voice:

‘Miss Ada? Miss Ada, are you there?’

She threw open the door to the little closet and went out to find Ludlam standing in the entrance.

‘Where’s that lecherous bastard?’ she demanded.

‘Reckon ‘e’s gone outside to look for you, lass,’ Ludlam said. He looked at her worriedly. ‘Dost tha reckon ‘e’s going to ‘elp us?’

Ada shook her head. ‘I don’t think he’s got any interest in anything except his own oversized ego,’ she said, ‘except getting into my knickers.’ She saw that although Ludlam had some trouble following her, he was embarrassed by what she said.

‘If us’d known ‘e were so ungentlemanlike us wouldn’t ‘ave brought thee,’ he said, and broke off suddenly.

Ada saw a figure advancing down the gloomy passageway. Everywhere in this house

was gloomy apart from a couple of rooms where Byron lived. The rest of the building was deserted and empty. It was like a mansion in a Gothic novel, and here came the hero-villain himself.

‘Ah, there you are, Ludd, Miss Ada,’ Byron said, as if nothing had happened. He held a newspaper under his arm. Tapping it, he said, ‘I have something here that might interest you. Shall we?’

He led them back to his opulently furnished study and flung himself down on a divan. Ada and Ludlam took seats and watched as he unfurled the newspaper. Ada wondered what it contained. At least he was no longer pursuing her. For the moment.

‘Dashed this off a couple of months ago, after my speech in the Lords,’ he drawled. ‘You know of my speech?’

‘Aye, milord,’ said Ludlam. ‘Tha spoke out against Frame Breaking Bill.’

‘Indeed I did, Ludd,’ Byron replied. He winked roguishly at Ada, and she looked away in fury. ‘I spoke very violent sentences with a sort of modest impudence, but I think I came across as a bit theatrical. The Lords’ reaction inspired me to pen the following, which I had published in the *Morning Chronicle*...

Oh well done Lord E-----n! and better done R----r !

‘I couldn’t name the blackguards openly in a newspaper, d’you see? I’m sure you can guess to whom I’m referring. They passed the Act shortly after.

*Oh well done Lord E-----n ! and better done R----r !
Britannia must prosper with councils like yours;
Hawkesbury, Harrowby, help you to guide her,
Whose remedy only must kill ere it cures:
Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory,
Asking some succour for Charity's sake ---
So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory,
That will at once put an end to mistake...*

Ada broke in, impatiently.

‘Thank you, your lordship,’ she said. ‘Very pointed, very inflammatory. But I think we need to decide exactly what you have to contribute to the cause, apart from poetry. Isn’t that right, Mr. Ludlam?’

Ludlam nodded, looking apologetically at Byron.

‘Us is glad that thee supports the cause,’ he said respectfully, ‘and thy poesy is reet inspirin’. What us needs, though, is money.’

Byron sighed, and his alabaster face grew paler than usual. He gestured vaguely at their surroundings.

‘When I inherited my title,’ he said, ‘I inherited little else. My predecessor was a debtor, and sold off much of the family goods and chattels. That’s why this house is so empty. What remains is all that’s left.’

‘You mean you don’t have anything?’ Ada demanded.

Byron smiled dreamily at her.

‘Very little, my mendicant bluestocking,’ he said. ‘Perhaps I should abandon what little I have, renounce my title, and join you in roving the greenwood.’

‘We’ll go no more a-roving, your lordship, if you don’t mind,’ Ada said biting, and was puzzled to see that Byron didn’t seem to get the reference. He picked up a quill from the nearby table and made a note in the margin of his newspaper.

‘Dost tha hope to join us, then?’ Ludlam asked doubtfully.

Byron put down the paper and grinned.

‘Aye, that would be fine,’ he said enthusiastically. ‘I can shoot, I can fence. I have my guns and swords and no lack of practice with both, plenty of powder and ball... O! My fancy quickly apprehends it; a peer of the realm dwelling in the greenwood, dressed like a buccaneer on the Spanish Main; to die fighting or to live free. A modern day Robin Hood, with Miss Ada as my own Maid Marian...’

Ada shook her head. They’d made a mistake trying to enlist a Romantic poet. As Byron’s flight of fancy continued to ascend, a thought struck her.

‘Powder and ball?’ she interrupted him. ‘Guns and swords?’ She turned to Ludlam. ‘Maybe milord can make a contribution to the cause.’

And after they had made the attack Ludlam was planning, they could go to Oxford and kill Babbage...

Ludlam nodded slowly. ‘Us ‘ave a powerful want of more powder and ball. Canst tha ‘elp us there, milord?’

‘Certainly, my good fellow. It would be easier to supply than hard cash.’ Byron stroked his chin musingly. ‘Years of war overseas... corrupt, venal, oppressive government... a silly monarch with a sillier son... mass unemployment ... riots and uprisings... *O tempora, o mores!* Surely this age among all ages is unique in England, and like no other.’

He rose and took down a large goblet from a shelf and filled it with port from a decanter. The thing had a pale yellowing bowl, which looked almost like bone. Byron nodded, when Ada commented on this. ‘My gardener found it while digging in the grounds,’ he said. ‘This was an abbey in the Middle Ages, of course, and they must have had a graveyard here. The skull he unearthed was huge, and I could see nothing for it but to have a jeweller in Nottingham fashioned it into a cup.’

He lifted it high.

‘Down with all kings but King Ludd!’ he cried. Then he took a swig before passing it to Ada.

Receiving the grisly relic gingerly – really, it was getting more like a Gothic romance every minute - Ada took a sip from the skull goblet, and passed it over to Ludlam.

Ludlam drained it quickly, then said, ‘Milord, us must ask thee to swear the oath that all men swear when they joins the Army of Redressers. Repeat after us:

‘I of my own free will and accord declare and solemnly swear that I will never reveal to any person or persons anything that may lead to discovery of the same either in or by word, sign or action as may lead to any discovery under the penalty of being sent out of this world by the first Brother that may meet me.

‘Furthermore I do swear that I will punish by death any traitor or traitors. Should there any arise up amongst us I will pursue with unceasing vengeance, should he fly to the verge of nature. I will be just, true, sober and faithful in all my dealings with all my Brothers. So help God to keep this my oath inviolate. Amen.’

With a solemn expression, Byron repeated Ludlam’s words.

‘So now I’m a Luddite,’ he said with a sardonic grin. ‘And you have full access to my armoury.’

He said farewell to them the next morning, as they left the servants’ door with a handcart loaded down with pistols, swords, powder and shot.

‘I wish I could come with you,’ he told them, his eyes lingering mournfully on Ada, much to her discomfort. ‘Would that I was able to lay down my life in the name of Liberty.’

‘Perhaps you will one day,’ said Ada with a smile.

Byron brightened. He took her hand and gazed into her eyes.

‘Never have I met a woman such as you,’ he told her. ‘In these few days I have been very happy – and yet riven with heartache. But that’s as it should be.’

‘How do you think Lady Caroline Lamb feels, then?’ Ada demanded.

‘Such spirit...’ Byron murmured. ‘Such impetuosity. Won’t you stay with me?’

Ada shook her head. ‘I can’t,’ she said. ‘I have a mission to carry out.’

‘So dedicated to the cause of Liberty,’ Byron replied. ‘Bearing the torch of freedom

for millions. I will always remember you.'

'I'm sure you'll find someone else,' Ada said uncomfortably.

'I'll never forget you, Ada,' Byron said.

'I doubt I'll forget you in a hurry either,' said Ada with heavy sarcasm. 'But we really must be going.'

As she helped Ludlam with the handcart and they crossed Byron's estate in the direction of the woods from which they'd come, Ada pondered the way Byron had said her name. Ada. He'd never forget her. He'd never forget her name.

Oh God.

She halted, shuddering at a feeling like cold water being poured down her back.

'What is it?' Ludlam asked worriedly.

'He won't forget me...' she whispered.

'Tha could stay with 'im,' he pointed out. 'e might set thee up as a mistress. Don't approve of such arrangements, but would be a safer life than us can give thee.'

'No, that's not it,' she said, looking back at the grim old house through the trees. 'I've just realised. He really won't forget me! In a few years time, he'll have a daughter, and he'll name her after me. And seven or eight generations after that, my parents will name me... after *her*. Ada Lovelace. Ada Byron. The first computer programmer...'

She saw Ludlam's bewildered expression. He didn't understand anything she was saying.

'Well, come on, Mr. Ludlam,' she said decisively, wheeling the handcart towards the forest. 'We've got a revolution to fight!'

They returned to the camp in the depths of Sherwood Forest around midday.

'How did your meeting go with this mysterious ally?' Weaver looked up from the fire as Ludlam and Ada entered the circle of bivouacs.

'Well enough, Weaver,' Ludlam replied, flinging back the cover of the handcart to reveal a motley collection of pistols and swords. Weaver picked up a flintlock and looked at it in interest.

'Well made,' he said, 'and silver-chased if I'm not wrong. Who provided these, then, Ned?'

Ludlam tapped his nose. 'E'll 'ave to remain nameless for the moment, Weaver,' he

said as Ada made her way to sit by the fire. Will Yates smiled at her in greeting.

‘I thought you said you could get us money,’ Weaver said scathingly. ‘Powder and shot is all very well, but we need food and supplies as well.’

‘The more weapons us ’as,’ Ludlam replied, ‘the better off we are to requisition such things. And now we have all this powder, we can put it to good use.’

‘What do you have planned, Ned?’ Will asked.

‘Us’ll send out more letters to owners of manufactories,’ Ludlam said, ‘but us’ll give ’em till end of the week to destroy the frames. Them as don’t, us’ll descend on their manufactories and smash the machines ourselves.’

He picked up a silver-chased flintlock from the handcart. ‘Any as gets in us’s way will pay the price,’ he told them. ‘It’s liberty or death, lads. Liberty or death.’

The Dark Place

Chapter 10

Martin looked in his rear view mirror and waved to Isobel as her car followed his as they drove away from Isobel's house. They had spent the morning talking. 'Or whispering, in my case,' Martin thought grimly to himself. They couldn't come to any rational explanation about what was happening and both of them were beginning to tire of continually going over the same things.

'I need to get to the shop and make sure everything's all right,' Isobel finally said. 'I'll need to go home and get changed.'

'OK,' said Martin. 'I'll take you home.'

He had driven back to Isobel's house and waited while she went upstairs and changed her clothes. Martin felt strangely drawn to the hallway and found himself standing in front of the sideboard lost in thought. Isobel came down the stairs and saw Martin standing in the hallway with a blank look on his face. He continued to stare at the sideboard as Isobel walked towards him.

'Martin, are you OK?' Isobel asked, a note of concern in her voice. Martin seemed to snap out of his trance as she spoke.

'What? Oh, yes, sorry, I must have been daydreaming. Yes, I'm fine,' he said, his voice still a low whisper.

'Do you want to stay here for the rest of the day?' Isobel asked.

'No, I think I'd rather be at home,' Martin replied.

Together they walked towards the front door but before they got there, Isobel took hold of Martin's forearm and turned towards him. They stood facing each other then Isobel put her arms around Martin's shoulders and pulled him close. Martin slipped his arms round Isobel's waist as they gently kissed. They reluctantly broke their embrace and Martin asked Isobel if she was going to return to his house later that day.

'I think it would be better if you came over here, don't you?' Isobel replied. 'I'll give you a ring when I'm leaving the shop.'

They left the house and in the cold garden kissed goodbye. Isobel walked over the garden to her car and left Martin standing alone as he watched her. They slowly drove away from Isobel's house in their short convoy before they each took different routes.

Martin parked his car outside his garage, walked across the garden to his front door, and let himself into the house. Once he had hung up his coat, he walked into the lounge and sat down heavily. His throat hurt and he was tired and lonely. Martin rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes as he tried to relax. His mind was working overtime and he couldn't seem to switch off. Cursing he went into the kitchen and made himself a coffee. Spook opened one eye and looked at him

from the chair.

‘It’s all right for you,’ Martin said. ‘You never have any trouble sleeping do you?’

Spook just curled up and went back to sleep. Martin took his coffee and made his way back to the lounge. The first sip of coffee felt like liquid fire as it scalded its way down his throat and Martin winced at the pain.

‘Maybe a coffee wasn’t such a good idea,’ he thought to himself. Martin looked at the black bulk of the large flat screen TV and wondered if he could face the mind-numbing, spirit-sapping boredom of afternoon TV.

‘No, I can’t,’ he thought to himself as he made his way over to the CD rack to try to choose something to listen to. Martin selected a CD that he’d loved a few years ago. He slipped it into the player and turned up the volume as the hypnotic drum beat and the crashing guitars started.

Martin sat back in the chair and let the music surround him as he tried to make some sense of what had been happening over the last few days. He realised that it was it only a week ago that he had the first dream.

The music demanded Martin’s attention; the lyrics resonated with him and seemed to describe how he was feeling about everything.

The shrill ringing of the telephone jolted Martin out of his trance and he turned the volume down on the CD player with the remote control as he walked into the hall and picked up the handset from its stand.

‘Hello,’ he croaked.

‘Hello, this is Reverend Michael Carey. You rang me last night and I’ve only just picked up your message. How can I help you?’

Martin found the deep tones of Michael Carey’s voice soothing and almost hypnotic. Their rich fluidity had a calming effect and Martin found himself smiling as he haltingly began to talk.

‘I’m sorry about my voice,’ he began, ‘and for telephoning you so late last night.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the reverend. ‘I try to be available as much as I can but you must have called last night, as I was busy outside. I always walk round the church and make sure the doors are all closed and locked before I retire for the night.’

The dated use of the word retire made Martin smile. ‘Not many people say retire for the night now,’ he thought to himself.

‘I was wondering if I could come over to the church to see you,’ asked Martin quietly.

‘I don’t usually see people here,’ answered the reverend.

‘It’s important that I speak to you,’ said Martin. ‘My name’s Dr Martin Davies. I work at Alder Hey Children’s Hospital and I live just outside the village in Haymans Green.’

‘Can you give me some kind of idea what it is you need to speak to me about?’ asked the reverend.

‘I don’t really know how to begin,’ said Martin, ‘and to any rational mind what’s been happening to me over the last week sounds impossible.’

Reverend Carey was silent for a moment. ‘I’m free for the next hour or so can you come to the rectory now?’ he asked.

‘I’ll be there in about five minutes,’ said Martin.

‘Very well,’ said Reverend Carey in his rich mellifluous voice. ‘The rectory is in Mere Lane at the side of the church. I’ll see you shortly.’

‘Thank you,’ said Martin as he pressed the end call button.

Martin stood outside the rectory and wondered if he was doing the right thing. The more he thought about what had been happening over the last week the stranger it all sounded. Martin rang the bell and a few seconds later the door was opened by a tall grey haired man.

‘Dr Davies?’ the man asked enquiringly, as he extended his right hand. The rich sonorous voice sounded even more pleasant in reality than it did on the telephone.

‘Please call me Martin,’ said Martin also extending his right hand. Reverend Carey’s grip was strong and firm as he shook Martin’s hand. ‘Please come in,’ he said standing back to allow Martin to walk into the hallway. Martin walked into the warm, wood panelled hallway and Reverend Carey closed the front door. ‘Please just go straight through,’ he said indicating an open door at the end of the hallway.

Martin walked down the hall and into a large well-lit room with bookcases on three walls. The fourth wall had a large window set in it beneath which was a long leather sofa. A heavy looking wooden coffee table in the middle of the room was stacked with books and an open book rested on the seat of a large armchair facing the sofa.

‘I was just relaxing and doing some reading,’ said Reverend Carey as he followed Martin into the room. ‘Please sit down,’ he said, pointing towards the sofa as he picked the book up from the seat of the armchair before sitting down. The two men sat facing each other across the coffee table. ‘So how can I help you Martin?’ he asked as he placed the book on the table along with the other books.

Martin glanced down at the front of the book that was now on the top of the pile. The book was titled *Lord Foul’s Bane*. Above the title was the legend *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever: Book One*.

‘Good book?’ inquired Martin.

‘Very,’ said the Reverend. ‘It’s the first book in a fantasy trilogy about an author with leprosy who finds himself in a place called The Land after being knocked unconscious when he is involved in a collision with a car.’

‘Sounds wonderful,’ said Martin smiling.

‘It is an excellent book,’ continued Reverend Carey. ‘The heart of the story is really a question of ethics and whether one’s actions in dreams have any real and lasting significance?’

Martin stared at Reverend Carey a look of complete disbelief on his face. ‘That’s an impossible coincidence,’ he said.

‘What is?’ inquired Reverend Carey.

Martin stood up and walked to the other side of the room. The bookcase against the wall was full of a bewildering selection of books with titles as diverse as *Abnormal Psychology. An Integrative Approach* and *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* sandwiched between *The Well at the World’s End* and *I Will Fear No Evil*.

He turned to face the Reverend and said, ‘I’ve been having these dreams for the last week, and when I wake up whatever happens to me in my dreams has actually happened to my body.’

Reverend Carey steepled his fingers together and looked over them towards Martin. ‘You realise that what you’re saying is impossible don’t you?’ he said.

‘I know it sounds ridiculous,’ Martin replied, ‘but it’s the truth.’ He returned to his seat and faced the Reverend. Slowly Martin told him about his dreams and what he first had assumed was an unconnected email.

‘Maybe you did scrape your knees when you knelt at the girl’s side?’ said Reverend Carey.

‘I know that’s possible,’ said Martin, ‘but I couldn’t have scratched my back the way it was after my second dream and I certainly couldn’t have strangled myself. I had witnesses who saw the scratches on my back but what the girl from the accident is doing in my dreams I don’t know. I’d never seen her before I tried to help her after the accident.’

Martin ran his fingers through his hair before leaning backwards on the sofa and looking at the ceiling.

Reverend Carey carefully regarded the young man sitting in front of him. He obviously believed what he was saying; there was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. However, what he was describing was impossible. Things that happen in dreams can’t have any substance in the real world. He looked at the book on the coffee table and thought about the dilemma of the main protagonist in the novel, Thomas Covenant.

His leprosy had robbed him of sensation in his extremities due to nerve damage, yet all these sensations were returned to him in The Land, something that could never happen in reality. Faced with the return of sensation and revelling in his newfound freedom Covenant had raped a young girl who befriended him. The consequences of his actions follow Covenant on his journey through The Land and became a constant attempt to test the significance of his actions in his dream.

‘You said the woman you’ve met, Isobel,’ said the Reverend. ‘Is also having strange dreams and that they have something of a common thread running through them with this red eyed thing that attacks you both?’

Martin lowered his head. ‘I know it sounds ridiculous,’ he said, ‘but we’ve both had dreams about being attacked by the same thing and we both think we’ve seen it, whatever it is, while we were awake.’

‘But you’ve also spoken to it, whatever it is, in this world you visit in your dreams said Reverend Carey. ‘Don’t you think there may be some kind of symmetry between your real life and whatever is happening to you in your dreams?’

‘I don’t understand what you mean,’ said Martin.

‘You lost the girl at the road accident even though you did your best to help her and you’re also worried about losing this new woman from your life,’ said Reverend Carey. ‘It’s a classic struggle between your conscious desire to make this new relationship work and your subconscious fear of failure.’

‘So how does the girl from the accident relate to what’s been happening in my dreams?’ asked Martin.

‘She’s a metaphor,’ said Reverend Carey. ‘A metaphor for your past failures, or more accurately what you see as your past failures. Other people may not see your life in the same way you do Martin. They may see what you perceive as failures as triumphs. Now whether those triumphs are the result of good fortune, your own actions or just plain chance is open to question.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Martin. ‘If all this is just some kind of displaced metaphysical energy caused by a figment of my subconscious how could my back be scratched to bits and how did I nearly get choked to death?’

‘As a doctor I’m sure you realise that we understand very little about the power of our subconscious minds,’ said Reverend Carey. ‘One of the enduring mystical phenomenon associated with the church is the stigmata,’ he continued. ‘What we’ve come to realise is that people who exhibit the supposed wounds of Christ are highly religious and in many cases are suffering from extreme starvation, often self-imposed. More importantly, their wounds are very much confined to followers of the Catholic Church.’

‘Even more bizarrely, it is only in the last hundred years or so that more women than men have begun to exhibit stigmata, before this, it was mostly men. You would also

expect priests to be more likely to succumb to stigmata but again it is only in the last hundred years or so that ordained priests have exhibited stigmata. Prior to this, it's almost as though those who were not ordained have been able to come to God through the stigmata. The appearance of stigmata also frequently coincided with times when issues of authority have loomed large in the church and this has led many doctors and psychologists to speculate that stigmata are a result of extreme auto suggestion.'

'But neither myself nor Isobel have suddenly started bleeding from our hands or our feet!' protested Martin.

'I understand that,' said Reverend Carey, 'but you have shown signs of physical trauma with the cuts and scratches on your back and the damage to your throat haven't you.'

'So what you're saying is that because I think I was injured in my dreams my mind has somehow managed to reproduce those injuries in reality without my body being subjected to any kind of physical trauma?' said Martin incredulously.

'Do you have an alternative explanation?' asked the Reverend. 'Or is it that in fact you are being haunted or pursued by some malevolent ghost or spirit that can only physically hurt you in your dreams?'

Martin stood up once more and began to pace the floor. He wanted to believe what the Reverend was suggesting but he knew inside he was not experiencing any kind of delusion and that his body was reacting to a real physical injury. The fact that it was happening when he was asleep and in some 'other world' did not matter to Martin. He knew that the injuries to his throat and his back had been caused by something real, or at least real in the strange world he seemed to be visiting in his dreams.

'Think about what you've told me, Martin,' said Reverend Carey. 'As a rational man, can you honestly believe that you and Isobel are being pursued by something inhuman? It is a difficult concept to accept.'

Martin had no answer he knew that what had been happening, or what he thought had been happening sounded preposterous.

'Look, if I've wasted your time I'm sorry,' said Martin standing up and walking towards the door. 'I just thought you might be able to help explain just what it is that's been going on the last week.'

'Please wait, Martin,' said the Reverend. He walked over to a small leather case on the bookshelf and opened it. Inside were a number of small glass vials. The Reverend took one from its holder and turned back to face Martin. 'I'd like to take this,' he said as he walked towards Martin. 'It's holy water. I can't give you much else but this may give you some comfort when all other things in which you have trusted till now forsake you.'

Martin took the small vial and thanked the Reverend before retracing his steps along the hall and opening the front door. Before he left the rectory, Martin turned to face Reverend Carey. He extended his right hand.

‘It’s been nice to meet you, Reverend,’ he said. ‘Perhaps in the future we might be able to sit down and really discuss the concept of stigmata and auto suggestion?’

‘I’d like that, Martin,’ said the Reverend, liking the man, before shaking hands with him. As Martin turned to walk away from the rectory, the Reverend said, ‘Martin if you need anything just telephone me and I’ll do me best to help you.’

‘I will,’ said Martin. ‘Thanks.’

Martin turned his back on the rectory and started the short walk down the path towards the sandstone wall that bordered the rectory and the road. When he reached the end of the path, Martin turned to wave to the Reverend but he was no longer there and the front door was once more closed.

Martin walked back towards his house with no clear idea of what to do next. He had hoped that speaking to the Reverend Carey might have shed some light on what was happening but he was no nearer an explanation. Martin fingered the small glass vial in his pocket and somehow he felt comforted by it. It was still bitterly cold and the sky was a threatening dark grey colour.

‘I wonder if we’re going to get any more snow,’ Martin thought as he walked along the road towards his house.

At the shop, Isobel was looking out of the window at the darkening sky.

‘It looks like we might be getting some more snow soon,’ she said to Karen.

‘I think you’re right,’ said Karen as she walked over to where Isobel was standing. ‘How are you feeling now?’ Karen asked.

‘I certainly feel better than I did earlier,’ Isobel replied. ‘I wouldn’t say I feel good or confident but I don’t feel as upset as I did when I got here so I suppose that’s an improvement.’ Isobel smiled at Karen. ‘Thanks for being concerned, Karen,’ she said. ‘It’s nice to know I’ve got you to rely on.’

From behind the curtained window of the rectory, Michael Carey watched Martin walk away. Once he was out of sight, the reverend went back into his study and sat down. He glanced over at the coffee table and the copy of *Lord Foul’s Bane* that rested on top of the other books.

‘How can things that happen in dreams manifest themselves in reality?’ he thought. ‘Also it doesn’t seem possible that two people can have similar dreams unless they’ve both experienced the same stimuli.’ As he thought about what Martin had told him, something suddenly occurred to him. ‘If whatever it is Martin thinks is pursuing him in his dreams only wants Isobel why does it keep attacking him and not her?’

Reverend Carey sat back and looked out of the window across the garden and towards the country park lost in thought. The pale grey shadow of the church lay across the snow-covered garden as the weak sunlight found a gap in the clouds and briefly

illuminated the building. In *Lord Foul's Bane*, Thomas Covenant had tried to alter his appearance so that when he left the Land he would know that what he experienced in his supposed dream did not translate back to reality. He had tried growing a beard but had shaved it off before he left the Land and reappeared back in his reality looking the same as when he left.

'I wonder if the injuries Martin has supposedly suffered in his dreams were already there before he dreamt them. Perhaps I should have asked to speak to Isobel as well. If they're suffering from some kind of delusional psychoses, I may be able to point them in the direction of some help.'

Reverend Carey picked up the telephone and dialled Martin's number.

Arriving back at his house Martin had taken off his coat and shoes and making his way into the lounge. He sat down heavily before leaning forward and putting his head in his hands. He was tired, his throat hurt and as hard as tried, he couldn't seem to find a way out of the maze in which he was lost. Martin wanted the nightmare to end and wondered if it was as simple as just ending his relationship with Isobel? He stood up quickly and walked across the room to the window. Martin rested his hands on the windowsill before clenching his fists as he promised himself that no matter what he would fight to keep Isobel and would do anything to be with her. As he stood at the window wrestling with his demons the telephone rang bringing him back to reality with a jolt.

'Hello,' he said picking up the receiver, hoping it was Isobel.

'Hello Martin,' said Reverend Carey. 'I hope you don't mind me bothering you but after you left I thought perhaps you'd like me to speak to Isobel to try and allay her fears as well?'

Martin was quiet for a few seconds before he answered. 'I'm not sure you could tell her anything I couldn't,' he replied.

'I realise that, Martin,' said Reverend Carey, 'but an outsider's view may provide some help and allow you to overcome whatever it is that is troubling you both.'

'I'm hoping to see Isobel tonight, so I'll suggest that to her,' said Martin.

'I'll leave it up to you then, Martin,' said the Reverend. 'Hopefully I'll hear from you in the next few days. Goodbye Martin, and good luck.'

'Goodbye,' said Martin, pressing the end call button and replacing the phone in its stand. Martin sat back down in the armchair and leant his head backwards against the back of the chair. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, his eyelids felt heavy and his arms and legs felt like lead. Slowly Martin's breathing became heavier and more even as he slipped into a deep sleep.

The shrill insistent ringing of the telephone dragged Martin out of his sleep and he groaned as he rubbed his eyes with his fingers. His head was pounding and his eyes felt sore as he massaged them. The phone continued to ring forcing its way into

Martin's thoughts and insisting he answer it. Martin walked into the hallway and lifted the telephone from its holder.

'Hello,' he said. Silence answered him. Martin closed his eyes. Not another marketing call, he thought, and sighed as he waited for the metallic click and the enthusiastic voice of the person who was going to try to sell him insurance or something.

Martin's eyes snapped open as a voice hissed viciously at him. 'Martin, what are you going to do?'

'Who is this?' answered Martin, 'and what do mean what am I going to do?'

The voice seemed to drop from its sibilant hiss to a deep bass.

'You know who this is, don't you, Martin?' it enquired.

'Is that you, Reverend Carey?' Martin asked, confused by the switch to the deep bass sounding voice.

'Reverend Carey,' said the voice rising in cadence to a shrill, ear-splitting scream as it reached the final part of the reverend's name.

'Who is this?' demanded Martin.

A long maniacal laugh was the only answer and Martin quickly pressed the end call button. The telephone went silent and Martin threw it down on the table. Martin looked at his watch it was 5.45 pm and Isobel hadn't called yet, he wondered if she was still at the shop or had already started her journey home.

Deciding he needed a drink, Martin made his way into the kitchen. Spook was nowhere to be seen but Martin emptied a packet of food into his dish anyway.

'He's bound to be hungry when he shows up so that should keep him happy if I'm not here when he gets back,' he thought.

Martin filled a glass with water and walked back towards the lounge. As he made his way across the hall, he did not see the dark shadow that hugged the corners of the rooms and followed him. Martin sat down in the armchair and sipped his water. The cold water felt good on his sore throat and he took another mouthful.

Martin relaxed and leant back in the chair as silently the dark shadow pooled on the floor behind him and slowly started to grow until it loomed over the chair in which he was sitting. Martin began to feel uneasy, a primordial feeling of dread started to form in the pit of his stomach that he could not explain or rationalise. Martin's uneasiness continued to increase until he stood up quickly and turned around.

The dark shadow was hanging motionless behind the chair and Martin felt his fingers involuntarily relax and the glass tumbler fell from his nerveless fingers to smash loudly as it landed on the edge of the coffee table.

A pair of blood red reptilian eyes stared at Martin from the depths of the shadow and he felt his will to resist the sudden insistent whispering in his head lessen. The voice was whispering to Martin commanding him to walk towards the shadow. The red eyes burned brighter as the voice clamoured with his thoughts and grew louder and more insistent.

‘Come closer, Martin,’ it whispered in his head.

The image of the red eyes was burning itself into Martin’s consciousness and he felt himself take a step forward. As he moved forward, Martin felt the small vial of water in his pocket press against his thigh. The vial felt warm against his leg and just remembering it was there seemed to lessen the hold the shadow had on him. In what seemed like slow motion Martin reached into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the small glass container. His hand felt warmed by the glass and he seemed to draw strength from it. He grasped the glass tightly and slowly pulled the small container from his pocket.

Martin looked down at his hand and it seemed as though he had a torch that was switched on or an illuminated light bulb clasped in his hand. His fingers and hand were lit from inside and his whole hand seemed to be bathed in a glowing light. Taking strength from the light Martin lifted his hand upwards and held it above his head. The dark shadow seemed to shrink and the blood red eyes appeared to fade.

Martin advanced on the shadow and it retreated before the light held in his fist. As he walked forward, the shadow grew smaller and the voice in his head grew less insistent. It no longer urged him to approach but became quieter as he moved closer. Martin sensed fear in the shadow and moved towards it with his fist outstretched. The shadow appeared to sense what Martin was going to do and it vanished like smoke on the wind.

Martin tried to see where the shadow had disappeared to but it was useless, it had vanished as though it had never been there. Martin walked back into the lounge, sat down in the armchair he was drained, and he felt as though he wouldn’t be able to stay on his feet much longer. Martin relaxed as he sat back and looked down at his palm. The light from the glass vial had all but disappeared and was now only a faint glow. Martin felt a great weariness and his head slumped back against the chair as he succumbed to the welcoming embrace of sleep.

Once again, the shrill insistent ringing of the telephone dragged Martin out of his sleep and he groaned as he rubbed his eyes and looked down at his watch. The fingers on his watch showed 5.45 pm and Martin struggled to assemble the events he had experienced before he fell asleep into a coherent sequence that fit with the time displayed on his watch. It didn’t make sense and he couldn’t match the time on his watch to the events. He looked at his hand. The glass vial was still there and the broken glass tumbler was still on the floor. Martin lurched out of the chair, expecting to see the dark shadow once more looming over him but there was nothing there.

Martin walked into the hall, picked the telephone from the table, and held it to his ear. ‘Hello,’ he said half expecting to hear the malevolent vicious voice again.

‘Hi, Martin. It’s me,’ said Isobel.

‘Hello,’ said Martin trying to keep the relief out of his voice.

‘Martin, are you OK?’ asked Isobel, her voice full of concern.

‘Yes, I’m fine, I think,’ Martin replied. ‘I just had another of those “am I awake am I dreaming” things happen to me.’

‘What happened?’ asked Isobel.

‘I don’t think I want to talk about it on the telephone,’ Martin replied.

‘I’m leaving the shop in five minutes,’ said Isobel. ‘I’m going to give Karen a lift home but I’ll be back at the house in about half an hour. Why don’t you put some clothes in a bag and come over to my house? I don’t think you should stay there on your own tonight.’

Martin smiled at the obvious concern in Isobel’s voice.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘I’ll put a few things in a bag and I’ll meet you there later.’

‘OK, see you later,’ said Isobel. ‘Martin,’ she said quickly.

‘What?’ said Martin surprised by the sudden intensity in her voice.

‘Please be careful driving over.’

‘I will,’ said Martin. ‘See you later.’

‘Bye, Martin,’ said Isobel, as she hung up the telephone in the shop.

‘Is everything OK?’ asked Karen as Isobel placed the telephone back on its cradle.

‘I don’t know,’ said Isobel thoughtfully. ‘Martin had another dream this afternoon but he didn’t want to talk about it. He sounded so relieved to hear me on the telephone, I hope everything is alright.’

Karen put her hand on Isobel’s arm. ‘I’ll get the bus home you get home and see Martin,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Isobel. ‘Martin is going to get some clothes together and meet me at my house later. I’ll drop you off and then go straight home.’

‘OK,’ said Karen, ‘let’s tidy up and then we can leave.’

Isobel and Karen quickly counted the money in the till and checked the total against the receipts and they matched. Isobel put the cash in moneybags and she and Karen set the alarm and locked the shop before walking the short distance to the bank where they deposited the takings in the night safe. It was dark now and the wind had a bitter

edge to it as they walked to Isobel's car.

'Do you think everything will be OK, tonight?' Karen asked Isobel.

'I wish I knew,' Isobel replied. 'If I hadn't had some odd dreams myself I'd be inclined to think Martin had an overactive imagination or something but I honestly don't know what's happening.'

Karen decided to ask Isobel if she knew anything at all about the news that she and Tom had discovered on the internet that weekend about the village in Estonia where her great grandfather had come from. 'You remember you told me that your great grandfather was from a village in Estonia called Kallaste,' she began.

'Yes,' said Isobel turning towards Karen, 'but I'm surprised you've remembered that. My great grandfather left there a long time ago and I'm not sure he ever went back there before he died.'

They reached Isobel's car and both women were glad to be able to get in the car and close the car doors on the icy cold air and the biting wind.

'Tom and I were looking on the internet at the weekend. You remember I told you about the murders in Estonia that were reported on the news?'

'I think so,' replied Isobel, 'didn't you think they may have been somewhere near Kallaste?'

'They were in a house just outside Kallaste,' said Karen, 'and we saw on the Reuters page on Saturday that five of the bodies they found were named Stefanovich.'

Isobel's face had a puzzled expression as she looked across the car at Karen.

'Stefanovich is a pretty common name, you know. Just in case you think the killings are somehow connected to my family.'

'But didn't you say that's where your family are from?' asked Karen.

'Yes I did,' answered Isobel, 'but my great grandfather left there over a hundred years ago. I have no idea if I still have any distant relations living there.'

'Don't you think there might be some connection though?' continued Karen. 'It just seems odd that so many of the victims had the same surname that your family originally had.'

'I suppose there may be some connection,' conceded Isobel, 'but I've no idea what it could be.'

The journey back to Karen's house passed without incident and both women seemed absorbed in their own thoughts so said little to each other.

'Have you and Tom got anything planned for tonight?' Isobel asked as she stopped

the car outside Karen's house.

'I think we'll probably just have something to eat and then watch a bit of TV,' replied Karen as she opened the passenger door. Just before getting out of the car, Karen turned to face Isobel. 'If you need anything tonight, you know if anything goes wrong, you can ring us you know and we'll come straight over,' she said earnestly.

'I know,' replied Isobel, 'but I'm sure everything will be OK.'

Isobel reached over the car and clasped Karen's hand. 'Thank you for everything,' she said, meaning it. 'Sometimes I don't know what I'd do without you.'

Karen blushed but smiled at Isobel. 'I can't help worrying about you,' she said, 'what with all these weird dreams and things going bump in the night.'

Isobel couldn't help but smile and she pressed Karen's hand tightly again before the other woman got out of the car. Karen watched from the pavement as Isobel drove slowly away from her.

'I hope Isobel's OK tonight,' she thought to herself as she turned away from the road and walked up the path towards her house.

Martin walked upstairs, his legs felt heavy and his whole body seemed to be aching. He got to the top of the stairs, his head felt light and he had to grasp the top of the banister to stop himself from falling backwards down the stairs.

'That's not right,' Martin thought to himself as he made his way into his bedroom.

Martin walked into the en suite and ran some cold water into the basin before swilling his face. Martin looked at his reflection in the mirror. His face seemed gaunt. He needed a shave badly, his eyes were red and bloodshot, and there large were dark circles beneath them.

'Well, you look a picture of health,' he said to his reflection before turning away and walking into his bedroom.

Martin quickly packed an overnight bag with clothes and his toiletries and then returned to the en suite, filled the basin with piping hot water and shaved. Once he had showered and dressed in some clean clothes, he felt much better and even thought he looked healthier when he checked his reflection. Martin picked up his bag and walked back downstairs to the kitchen. Spook was waiting inside the kitchen door and as soon as Martin pushed the door open, he darted out between Martin legs and into the hall. 'You'll miss out on your food if you don't come back,' Martin said as Spook started to walk towards the stairs. Martin walked into the kitchen, took a pouch of cat food from the cupboard, and turned towards Spook's bowl. As he tore the top off the packet of food, Spook appeared at his side and started to rub himself round Martin's ankles.

'I knew you wouldn't be able to resist the food,' said Martin smiling as he emptied the food into the bowl. Martin stroked Spook's head as the cat purred contentedly and

ate its food. Martin crinkled his nose at the smell of the cat food.

‘I don’t know how you can eat that stuff,’ he said to Spook as the cat continued to eat. Martin waited until Spook had finished and curled up on his favourite chair before he emptied another pouch of food in the bowl. ‘That’s in case you get hungry tonight,’ he said scratching Spook between the ears. Spook lifted his head and began purring but didn’t move from where he was curled up.

Martin walked out of the kitchen turning off the lights as he left the room. The back door was locked but Spook had the cat flap if he needed to go outside so Martin wasn’t worried about the cat.

‘Unless he brings another blackbird home,’ Martin thought smiling to himself.

Taking his bag and his coat and keys Martin locked the front door and walked across the snow-covered garden to the garage. Throwing his overnight bag on the back seat Martin slipped behind the wheel and turned the ignition key. The reliable Mercedes purred into life straight away and Martin again congratulated himself on investing in such a well-engineered car. Martin eased the car out of the garage and onto the snow-covered drive before leaving the car running as he closed and locked the garage doors. Once back in the warm comfortable interior of the car Martin pushed the on button of the car radio, slipped the gearbox into first, and drove carefully out of his driveway. An old blues record from the early seventies was on the radio but the lyrics had a peculiar meaning for Martin and he wondered why so many songs this past week had meant so much to him.

Isobel was looking out of the window and saw Martin’s car slowly approaching as he carefully negotiated the snow-covered road. Isobel pressed the remote and opened the gates as Martin slowed to a crawl outside the driveway. Once the gates opened, he proceeded up the drive towards the house.

As Martin stopped outside the front door, it opened and Isobel stood framed in the illuminated entrance. Her whole body seemed to be encircled by light and Martin was struck by the way the luminescence seemed to encircle her body. Isobel moved away from the doorway and the effect disappeared though Martin imagined he could still see a trace of latent light following Isobel as she walked towards the car.

‘It must be like looking at a moving light in the darkness that leaves a pattern on your eyes,’ thought Martin, as he turned off the car’s ignition.

Martin reached into the back of the car and picked up his overnight bag and then opened the car door and stepped out as Isobel reached him. She put her arms around his shoulders and held him close.

‘I was so worried about you,’ she said. Tears were trickling down Isobel’s face and Martin wiped them away with his fingers.

‘I’m sorry I upset you this afternoon,’ said Martin. ‘I just couldn’t get my head straight with the time when you telephoned and time on my watch in the dream, it just didn’t add up.’

‘It’s OK, Martin,’ Isobel said softly. ‘You’re here now and that’s all that matters. Let’s get inside out of this cold.’

Isobel took Martin’s hand and together they walked into the bright light of the hallway and closed the front door against the cold and the icy wind.

At the edge of the light from the doorway, a dark shadow waited. As soon as the front door was closed, it moved towards the house and once the lights in the hall were extinguished, it slipped through the cracks between the door and the frame and disappeared inside.

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S SEPARATE OPPONENTS.—THE INTERPOSITION OF FLORA.

The old admiral so completely overcame the family of the Bannerworths by his generosity and evident single-mindedness of his behaviour, that although not one, except Flora, approved of his conduct towards Mr. Marchdale, yet they could not help liking him; and had they been placed in a position to choose which of the two they would have had remain with them, the admiral or Marchdale, there can be no question they would have made choice of the former.

Still, however, it was not pleasant to find a man like Marchdale virtually driven from the house, because he presumed to differ in opinion upon a very doubtful matter with another of its inmates. But as it was the nature of the Bannerworth family always to incline to the most generous view of subjects, the frank, hearty confidence of the old admiral in Charles Holland pleased them better than the calm and serious doubting of Marchdale.

His ruse of hiring the house of them, and paying the rent in advance, for the purpose of placing ample funds in their hands for any contingency, was not the less amiable because it was so easily seen through; and they could not make up their minds to hurt the feelings of the old man by the rejection of his generous offer.

When he had left, this subject was canvassed among them, and it was agreed that he should have his own way in the matter for the present, although they hoped to hear something from Marchdale, which should make his departure appear less abrupt and uncomfortable to the whole of the family.

During the course of this conversation, it was made known to Flora with more distinctness than under any other circumstances it would have been, that George Holland had been on the eve of fighting a duel with Sir Francis Varney, previous to his mysterious disappearance.

When she became fully aware of this fact, to her mind it seemed materially to add to the suspicions previously to then entertained, that foul means had been used in order to put Charles out of the way.

"Who knows," she said, "that this Varney may not shrink with the greatest terror from a conflict with any human being, and feeling one was inevitable with Charles Holland, unless interrupted by some vigorous act of his own, he or some myrmidons of his may have taken Charles's life!"

"I do not think, Flora," said Henry, "that he would have ventured upon so desperate an act; I cannot well believe such a thing possible. But fear not; he will find, if he have really committed any such atrocity, that it will not save him."

These words of Henry, though it made no impression at the time upon Flora, beyond what they carried upon their surface, they really, however, as concerned Henry

himself, implied a settled resolution, which he immediately set about reducing to practice.

When the conference broke up, night, as it still was, he, without saying anything to any one, took his hat and cloak, and left the Hall, proceeding by the nearest practicable route to the residence of Sir Francis Varney, where he arrived without any interruption of any character.

Varney was at first denied to him, but before he could leave the house, a servant came down the great staircase, to say it was a mistake; and that Sir Francis was at home, and would be happy to see him.

He was ushered into the same apartment where Sir Francis Varney had before received his visitors; and there sat the now declared vampyre, looking pale and ghastly by the dim light which burned in the apartment, and, indeed, more like some spectre of the tomb, than one of the great family of man.

"Be seated, sir," said Varney; "although my eyes have seldom the pleasure of beholding you within these walls, be assured you are a honoured guest."

"Sir Francis Varney," said Henry, "I came not here to bandy compliments with you; I have none to pay to you, nor do I wish to hear any of them from your lips."

"An excellent sentiment, young man," said Varney, "and well delivered. May I presume, then, without infringing too far upon your extreme courtesy, to inquire, to what circumstances I am indebted for your visit?"

"To one, Sir Francis, that I believe you are better acquainted with than you will have the candour to admit."

"Indeed, sir," said Varney, coldly; "you measure my candour, probably, by a standard of your own; in which case I fear, I may be no gainer; and yet that may be of itself a circumstance that should afford little food for surprise, but proceed, sir—since we have so few compliments to stand between us and our purpose, we shall in all due time arrive at it."

"Yes, in due time, Sir Francis Varney, and that due time has arrived. Know you anything of my friend, Mr. Charles Holland?" said Henry, in marked accents; and he gazed on Sir Francis Varney with earnestness, that seemed to say not even a look should escape his observation.

Varney, however, returned the gaze as steadily, but coldly, as he replied in his measured accents,—

"I have heard of the young gentleman."

"And seen him?"

"And seen him too, as you, Mr. Bannerworth, must be well aware. Surely you have not come all this way, merely to make such an inquiry; but, sir, you are welcome to

the answer."

Henry had something of a struggle to keep down the rising anger, at these cool taunts of Varney; but he succeeded—and then he said,—

"I suspect Charles Holland, Sir Francis Varney, has met with unfair treatment, and that he has been unfairly dealt with, for an unworthy purpose."

"Undoubtedly," said Varney, "if the gentleman you allude to, has been unfairly dealt with, it was for a foul purpose; for no good or generous object, my young sir, could be so obtained—you acknowledge so much, I doubt not?"

"I do, Sir Francis Varney; and hence the purpose of my visit here—for this reason I apply to you—"

"A singular object, supported by a singular reason. I cannot see the connection, young sir; pray proceed to enlighten me upon this matter, and when you have done that, may I presume upon your consideration, to inquire in what way I can be of any service to you?"

"Sir Francis," said Henry, his anger raising his tones—"this will not serve you—I have come to exact an account of how you have disposed of my friend; and I will have it."

"Gently, my good sir; you are aware I know nothing of your friend; his motions are his own; and as to what I have done with him; my only answer is, that he would permit me to do nothing with him, had I been so inclined to have taken the liberty."

"You are suspected, Sir Francis Varney, of having made an attempt upon the life or liberty of Charles Holland; you, in fact, are suspected of being his murderer—and, so help me Heaven! if I have not justice, I will have vengeance!"

"Young sir, your words are of grave import, and ought to be coolly considered before they are uttered. With regard to justice and vengeance, Mr. Bannerworth, you may have both; but I tell you, of Charles Holland, or what has become of him, I know nothing. But wherefore do you come to so unlikely a quarter to learn something of an individual of whom I know nothing?"

"Because Charles Holland was to have fought a duel with you: but before that had time to take place, he has suddenly become missing. I suspect that you are the author of his disappearance, because you fear an encounter with a mortal man."

"Mr. Bannerworth, permit me to say, in my own defence, that I do not fear any man, however foolish he may be; and wisdom is not an attribute I find, from experience in all men, of your friend. However, you must be dreaming, sir—a kind of vivid insanity has taken possession of your mind, which distorts—"

"Sir Francis Varney!" exclaimed Henry, now perfectly uncontrollable.

"Sir," said Varney, as he filled up the pause, "proceed; I am all attention. You do me

honour."

"If," resumed Henry, "such was your object in putting Mr. Holland aside, by becoming personally or by proxy an assassin, you are mistaken in supposing you have accomplished your object."

"Go on, sir," said Sir Francis Varney, in a bland and sweet tone; "I am all attention; pray proceed."

"You have failed; for I now here, on this spot, defy you to mortal combat. Coward, assassin as you are, I challenge you to fight."

"You don't mean on the carpet here?" said Varney, deliberately.

"No, sir; but beneath the canopy of heaven, in the light of the day. And then, Sir Francis, we shall see who will shrink from the conflict."

"It is remarkably good, Mr. Bannerworth, and, begging your pardon, for I do not wish to give any offence, my honoured sir, it would rehearse before an audience; in short, sir, it is highly dramatic."

"You shrink from the combat, do you? Now, indeed, I know you."

"Young man—young man," said Sir Francis, calmly, and shaking his head very deliberately, and the shadows passed across his pale face, "you know me not, if you think Sir Francis Varney shrinks from any man, much less one like yourself."

"You are a coward, and worse, if you refuse my challenge."

"I do not refuse it; I accept it," said Varney, calmly, and in a dignified manner; and then, with a sneer, he added,—"You are well acquainted with the mode in which gentlemen generally manage these matters, Mr. Bannerworth, and perhaps I am somewhat confined in my knowledge in the ways of the world, because you are your own principal and second. In all my experience, I never met with a similar case."

"The circumstances under which it is given are as unexampled, and will excuse the mode of the challenge," said Henry, with much warmth.

"Singular coincidence—the challenge and mode of it is most singular! They are well matched in that respect. Singular, did I say? The more I think of it, Mr. Bannerworth, the more I am inclined to think this positively odd."

"Early to-morrow, Sir Francis, you shall hear from me."

"In that case, you will not arrange preliminaries now? Well, well; it is very unusual for the principals themselves to do so; and yet, excuse my freedom, I presumed, as you had so far deserted the beaten track, that I had no idea how far you might be disposed to lead the same route."

"I have said all I intended to say, Sir Francis Varney; we shall see each other again."

"I may not detain you, I presume, to taste aught in the way of refreshment?"

Henry made no reply, but turned towards the door, without even making an attempt to return the grave and formal bow that Sir Francis Varney made as he saw him about to quit the apartment; for Henry saw that his pale features were lighted up with a sarcastic smile, most disagreeable to look upon as well as irritating to Henry Bannerworth.

He now quitted Sir Francis Varney's abode, being let out by a servant who had been rung for for that purpose by his master.

Henry walked homeward, satisfied that he had now done all that he could under the circumstances.

"I will send Chillingworth to him in the morning, and then I shall see what all this will end in. He must meet me, and then Charles Holland, if not discovered, shall be, at least, revenged."

There was another person in Bannerworth Hall who had formed a similar resolution. That person was a very different sort of person to Henry Bannerworth, though quite as estimable in his way.

This was no other than the old admiral. It was singular that two such very different persons should deem the same steps necessary, and both keep the secret from each other; but so it was, and, after some internal swearing, he determined upon challenging Varney in person.

"I'd send Jack Pringle, but the swab would settle the matter as shortly as if a youngster was making an entry in a log, and heard the boatswain's whistle summoning the hands to a mess, and feared he would lose his grog.

"D—n my quarters! but Sir Francis Varney, as he styles himself, sha'n't make any way against old Admiral Bell. He's as tough as a hawser, and just the sort of blade for a vampyre to come athwart. I'll pitch him end-long, and make a plank of him afore long. Cus my windpipe! what a long, lanky swab he is, with teeth fit to unpick a splice; but let me alone, I'll see if I can't make a hull of his carcass, vampyre or no vampyre.

"My nevy, Charles Holland, can't be allowed to cut away without nobody's leave or licence. No, no; I'll not stand that anyhow. 'Never desert a messmate in the time of need,' is the first maxim of a seaman, and I ain't the one as 'll do so."

Thus self-communing, the old admiral marched along until he came to Sir Francis Varney's house, at the gate of which he gave the bell what he called a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether, that set it ringing with a fury, the like of which had never certainly been heard by the household.

A minute or two scarcely elapsed before the domestics hurried to answer so urgent a

summons; and when the gate was opened, the servant who answered it inquired his business.

"What's that to you, snob? Is your master, Sir Francis Varney, in? because, if he be, let him know old Admiral Bell wants to speak to him. D'ye hear?"

"Yes, sir," replied the servant, who had paused a few moments to examine the individual who gave this odd kind of address.

In another minute word was brought to him that Sir Francis Varney would be very happy to see Admiral Bell.

"Ay, ay," he muttered; "just as the devil likes to meet with holy water, or as I like any water save salt water."

He was speedily introduced to Sir Francis Varney, who was seated in the same posture as he had been left by Henry Bannerworth not many minutes before.

"Admiral Bell," said Sir Francis, rising, and bowing to that individual in the most polite, calm, and dignified manner imaginable, "permit me to express the honour I feel at this unexpected visit."

"None of your gammon."

"Will you be seated. Allow me to offer you such refreshments as this poor house affords."

"D—n all this! You know, Sir Francis, I don't want none o' this palaver. It's for all the world like a Frenchman, when you are going to give him a broadside; he makes grimaces, throws dust in your eyes, and tries to stab you in the back. Oh, no! none of that for me."

"I should say not, Admiral Bell. I should not like it myself, and I dare say you are a man of too much experience not to perceive when you are or are not imposed upon."

"Well, what is that to you? D—n me, I didn't come here to talk to you about myself."

"Then may I presume upon your courtesy so far as to beg that you will enlighten me upon the object of your visit!"

"Yes; in pretty quick time. Just tell me where you have stowed away my nephew, Charles Holland?"

"Really, I—"

"Hold your slack, will you, and hear me out; if he's living, let him out, and I'll say no more about it; that's liberal, you know; it ain't terms everybody would offer you."

"I must, in truth, admit they are not; and, moreover, they quite surprise even me, and I

have learned not to be surprised at almost anything."

"Well, will you give him up alive? but, hark ye, you mustn't have made very queer fish of him, do ye see?"

"I hear you," said Sir Francis, with a bland smile, passing one hand gently over the other, and showing his front teeth in a peculiar manner; "but I really cannot comprehend all this; but I may say, generally, that Mr. Holland is no acquaintance of mine, and I have no sort of knowledge where he may be."

"That won't do for me," said the admiral, positively, shaking his head.

"I am particularly sorry, Admiral Bell, that it will not, seeing that I have nothing else to say."

"I see how it is; you've put him out of the way, and I'm d——d if you shan't bring him to life, whole and sound, or I'll know the reason why."

"With that I have already furnished you, Admiral Bell," quietly rejoined Varney; "anything more on that head is out of my power, though my willingness to oblige a person of such consideration as yourself, is very great; but, permit me to add, this is a very strange and odd communication from one gentleman to another. You have lost a relative, who has, very probably, taken some offence, or some notion into his head, of which nobody but himself knows anything, and you come to one yet more unlikely to know anything of him, than even yourself."

"Gammon again, now, Sir Francis Varney, or Blarney."

"Varney, if you please, Admiral Bell; I was christened Varney."

"Christened, eh?"

"Yes, christened—were you not christened? If not, I dare say you understand the ceremony well enough."

"I should think I did; but, as for christening, a—"

"Go on, sir."

"A vampyre! why I should as soon think of reading the burial service of a pig."

"Very possible; but what has all this to do with your visit to me?"

"This much, you lubber. Now, d—n my carcass from head to stern, if I don't call you out."

"Well, Admiral Bell," slid Varney, mildly, "in that case, I suppose I must come out; but why do you insist that I have any knowledge of your nephew, Mr. Charles

Holland?"

"You were to have fought a duel with him, and now he's gone."

"I am here," said Varney.

"Ay," said the admiral, "that's as plain as a purser's shirt upon a handspike; but that's the very reason why my nevey ain't here, and that's all about it."

"And that's marvellous little, so far as the sense is concerned," said Varney, without the movement of a muscle.

"It is said that people of your class don't like fighting mortal men; now you have disposed of him, lest he should dispose of you."

"That is explicit, but it is to no purpose, since the gentleman in question hasn't placed himself at my disposal."

"Then, d——e, I will; fish, flesh, or fowl, I don't care; all's one to Admiral Bell. Come fair or fowl, I'm a tar for all men; a seaman ever ready to face a foe, so here goes, you lubberly moon manufactured calf."

"I hear, admiral, but it is scarcely civil, to say the least of it; however, as you are somewhat eccentric, and do not, I dare say, mean all your words imply, I am quite willing to make every allowance."

"I don't want any allowance; d—n you and your allowance, too; nothing but allowance of grog, and a pretty good allowance, too, will do for me, and tell you, Sir Francis Varney," said the admiral, with much wrath, "that you are a d——d lubberly hound, and I'll fight you; yes, I'm ready to hammer away, or with anything from a pop-gun to a ship's gun; you don't come over me with your gammon, I tell you. You've murdered Charles Holland because you couldn't face him—that's the truth of it."

"With the other part of your speech, Admiral Bell, allow me to say, you have mixed up a serious accusation—one I cannot permit to pass lightly."

"Will you or not fight?"

"Oh, yes; I shall be happy to serve you any way that I can. I hope this will be an answer to your accusation, also."

"That's settled, then."

"Why, I am not captious, Admiral Bell, but it is not generally usual for the principals to settle the preliminaries themselves; doubtless you, in your career of fame and glory, know something of the manner in which gentlemen demean themselves on these occasions."

"Oh, d—n you! Yes, I'll send some one to do all this. Yes, yes, Jack Pringle will be

the man, though Jack ain't a holiday, shore-going, smooth-spoken swab, but as good a seaman as ever trod deck or handled a boarding-pike."

"Any friend of yours," said Varney, blandly, "will be received and treated as such upon an errand of such consequence; and now our conference has, I presume, concluded."

"Yes, yes, I've done—d——e, no—yes—no. I will keel-haul you but I'll know something of my neavy, Charles Holland."

"Good day, Admiral Bell." As Varney spoke, he placed his hand upon the bell which he had near him, to summon an attendant to conduct the admiral out. The latter, who had said a vast deal more than he ever intended, left the room in a great rage, protesting to himself that he would amply avenge his nephew, Charles Holland.

He proceeded homeward, considerably vexed and annoyed that he had been treated with so much calmness, and all knowledge of his nephew denied.

When he got back, he quarrelled heartily with Jack Pringle—made it up—drank grog—quarrelled—made it up, and finished with grog again—until he went to bed swearing he should like to fire a broadside at the whole of the French army, and annihilate it at once.

With this wish, he fell asleep.

Early next morning, Henry Bannerworth sought Mr. Chillingworth, and having found him, he said in a serious tone,—

"Mr. Chillingworth, I have rather a serious favour to ask you, and one which you may hesitate in granting."

"It must be very serious indeed," said Mr. Chillingworth, "that I should hesitate to grant it to you; but pray inform me what it is that you deem so serious?"

"Sir Francis Varney and I must have a meeting," said Henry.

"Have you really determined upon such a course?" said Mr. Chillingworth; "you know the character of your adversary?"

"That is all settled,—I have given a challenge, and he has accepted it; so all other considerations verge themselves into one—and that is the when, where, and how."

"I see," said Mr. Chillingworth. "Well, since it cannot be helped on your part, I will do what is requisite for you—do you wish anything to be done or insisted on in particular in this affair."

"Nothing with regard to Sir Francis Varney that I may not leave to your discretion. I feel convinced that he is the assassin of Charles Holland, whom he feared to fight in duel."

"Then there remains but little else to do, but to arrange preliminaries, I believe. Are you prepared on every other point?"

"I am—you will see that I am the challenger, and that he must now fight. What accident may turn up to save him, I fear not, but sure I am, that he will endeavour to take every advantage that may arise, and so escape the encounter."

"And what do you imagine he will do now he has accepted your challenge?" said Mr. Chillingworth; "one would imagine he could not very well escape."

"No—but he accepted the challenge which Charles Holland sent him—a duel was inevitable, and it seems to me to be a necessary consequence that he disappeared from amongst us, for Mr. Holland would never have shrunk from the encounter."

"There can be no sort of suspicion about that," remarked Chillingworth; "but allow me to advise you that you take care of yourself, and keep a watchful eye upon every one—do not be seen out alone."

"I fear not."

"Nay, the gentleman who has disappeared was, I am sure, fearless enough; but yet that has not saved him. I would not advise you to be fearful, only watchful; you have now an event awaiting upon you, which it is well you should go through with, unless circumstances should so turn out, that it is needless; therefore I say, when you have the suspicions you do entertain of this man's conduct, beware, be cautious, and vigilant."

"I will do so—in the mean time, I trust myself confidently in your hands—you know all that is necessary."

"This affair is quite a secret from all of the family?"

"Most certainly so, and will remain so—I shall be at the Hall."

"And there I will see you—but be careful not to be drawn into any adventure of any kind—it is best to be on the safe side under all circumstances."

"I will be especially careful, be assured, but farewell; see Sir Francis Varney as early as you can, and let the meeting be as early as you can, and thus diminish the chance of accident."

"That I will attend to. Farewell for the present."

Mr. Chillingworth immediately set about the conducting of the affair thus confided to him; and that no time might be lost, he determined to set out at once for Sir Francis Varney's residence.

"Things with regard to this family seem to have gone on wild of late," thought Mr. Chillingworth; "this may bring affairs to a conclusion, though I had much rather they had come to some other. My life for it, there is a juggle or a mystery somewhere; I

will do this, and then we shall see what will come of it; if this Sir Francis Varney meets him—and at this moment I can see no reason why he should not do so—it will tend much to deprive him of the mystery about him; but if, on the other hand, he refuse—but then that's all improbable, because he has agreed to do so. I fear, however, that such a man as Varney is a dreadful enemy to encounter—he is cool and unruffled—and that gives him all the advantage in such affairs; but Henry's nerves are not bad, though shaken by these untowards events; but time will show—I would it were all over."

With these thoughts and feelings strangely intermixed, Mr. Chillingworth set forward for Sir Francis Varney's house.

Admiral Bell slept soundly enough though, towards morning, he fell into a strange dream, and thought he was yard arm and yard arm with a strange fish—something of the mermaid species.

"Well," exclaimed the admiral, after a customary benediction of his eyes and limbs, "what's to come next? may I be spliced to a shark if I understand what this is all about. I had some grog last night, but then grog, d'y'see, is—is—a seaman's native element, as the newspapers say, though I never read 'em now, it's such a plague."

He lay quiet for a short time, considering in his own mind what was best to be done, and what was the proper course to pursue, and why he should dream.

"Hilloa, hilloa, hil—loa! Jack a-hoy! a-hoy!" shouted the admiral, as a sudden recollection of his challenge came across his memory; "Jack Pringle a-hoy? d—n you, where are you?—you're never at hand when you are wanted. Oh, you lubber,—a-hoy!"

"A-hoy!" shouted a voice, as the door opened, and Jack thrust his head in; "what cheer, messmate? what ship is this?"

"Oh, you lubberly—"

The door was shut in a minute, and Jack Pringle disappeared.

"Hilloa, Jack Pringle, you don't mean to say you'll desert your colours, do you, you dumb dog?"

"Who says I'll desert the ship as she's sea-worthy!"

"Then why do you go away?"

"Because I won't be called lubberly. I'm as good a man as ever swabbed a deck, and don't care who says to the contrary. I'll stick to the ship as long as she's seaworthy," said Jack.

"Well, come here, and just listen to the log, and be d——d to you."

"What's the orders now, admiral?" said Jack, "though, as we are paid off—"

"There, take that, will you?" said Admiral Bell, as he flung a pillow at Jack, being the only thing in the shape of a missile within reach.

Jack ducked, and the pillow produced a clatter in the washhand-stand among the crockery, as Jack said,—

"There's a mutiny in the ship, and hark how the cargo clatters; will you have it back again?"

"Come, will you? I've been dreaming, Jack."

"Dreaming! what's that?"

"Thinking of something when you are asleep, you swab."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jack; "never did such a thing in my life—ha, ha, ha! what's the matter now?"

"I'll tell you what's the matter. Jack Pringle, you are becoming mutinous, and I won't have it; if you don't hold your jaw and draw in your slacks, I'll have another second."

"Another second! what's in the wind, now?" said Jack. "Is this the dream?"

"If ever I dream when I'm alongside a strange craft, then it is a dream; but old Admiral Bell ain't the man to sleep when there's any work to be done."

"That's uncommon true," said Jack, turning a quid.

"Well, then, I'm going to fight."

"Fight!" exclaimed Jack. "Avast, there, I don't see where's the enemy—none o' that gammon; Jack Pringle can fight, too, and will lay alongside his admiral, but he don't see the enemy anywhere."

"You don't understand these things, so I'll tell you. I have had a bit of talk with Sir Francis Varney, and I am going to fight him."

"What the wamphigher?" remarked Jack, parenthetically.

"Yes."

"Well, then," resumed Jack, "then we shall see another blaze, at least afore we die; but he's an odd fish—one of Davy Jones's sort."

"I don't care about that; he may be anything he likes; but Admiral Bell ain't a-going to have his nephew burned and eaten, and sucked like I don't know what, by a vampyre,

or by any other confounded land-shark."

"In course," said Jack, "we ain't a-going to put up with nothing of that sort, and if so be as how he has put him out of the way, why it's our duty to send him after him, and square the board."

"That's the thing, Jack; now you know you must go to Sir Francis Varney and tell him you come from me."

"I don't care if I goes on my own account," said Jack.

"That won't do; I've challenged him and I must fight him."

"In course you will," returned Jack, "and, if he blows you away, why I'll take your place, and have a blaze myself."

The admiral gave a look at Jack of great admiration, and then said,—

"You are a d——d good seaman, Jack, but he's a knight, and might say no to that, but do you go to him, and tell him that you come from me to settle the when and the where this duel is to be fought."

"Single fight?" said Jack.

"Yes; consent to any thing that is fair," said the admiral, "but let it be as soon as you can. Now, do you understand what I have said?"

"Yes, to be sure; I ain't lived all these years without knowing your lingo."

"Then go at once; and don't let the honour of Admiral Bell and old England suffer, Jack. I'm his man, you know, at any price."

"Never fear," said Jack; "you shall fight him, at any rate. I'll go and see he don't back out, the warmint."

"Then go along, Jack; and mind don't you go blazing away like a fire ship, and letting everybody know what's going on, or it'll be stopped."

"I'll not spoil sport," said Jack, as he left the room, to go at once to Sir Francis Varney, charged with the conducting of the important cartel of the admiral. Jack made the best of his way with becoming gravity and expedition until he reached the gate of the admiral's enemy.

Jack rang loudly at the gate; there seemed, if one might judge by his countenance, a something on his mind, that Jack was almost another man. The gate was opened by the servant, who inquired what he wanted there.

"The wamphigher."

"Who?"

"The wamphigher."

The servant frowned, and was about to say something uncivil to Jack, who winked at him very hard, and then said,—

"Oh, may be you don't know him, or won't know him by that name: I wants to see Sir Francis Varney."

"He's at home," said the servant; "who are you?"

"Show me up, then. I'm Jack Pringle, and I'm come from Admiral Bell; I'm the Admiral's friend, you see, so none of your black looks."

The servant seemed amazed, as well as rather daunted, at Jack's address; he showed him, however, into the hall, where Mr. Chillingworth had just that moment arrived, and was waiting for an interview with Varney.

Brigands of the Moon

XIII

"Haljan! Yield or I'll fire! Moa, give me the smaller one."

He had in his hand too large a projector. Its ray would kill me. If he wanted to take me alive, he would not fire. I chanced it.

"No!" I tried to draw myself beneath the window. An automatic projector was on the floor where Carter had dropped it. I pulled myself down. Miko did not fire. I reached the weapon. The bodies of the Captain and Johnson had drifted together on the floor in the center of the room.

I hitched myself back to the window. With upraised weapon I gazed cautiously out. Miko had disappeared. The deck within my line of vision, was empty.

But was it? Something told me to beware. I clung to the casement, ready upon the instant to shove myself down. There was a movement in a shadow along the deck. Then a figure rose up.

"Don't fire, Haljan!"

The sharp command, half appeal, stopped the pressure of my finger. It was the tall, lanky Englishman. Sir Arthur Coniston, he as called himself. So he too, was one of Miko's band! The light through a dome window fell full on him.

"If you fire, Haljan, and kill me—Miko will kill you then, surely."

From where he had been crouching he could not command my window. But now, upon the heels of his placating words, he abruptly shot. The low-powered ray, had it struck, would have felled me without killing me. But it went over my head as I dropped. Its aura made my senses reel.

Coniston shouted, "Haljan!"

I did not answer. I wonder if he would dare approach to see if I had been hit. A minute passed. Then another. I thought I heard Miko's voice on the deck outside. But it was an aerial, microscopic whisper close beside me.

"We see you, Haljan. You must yield!"

Their eavesdropping vibrations, with audible projection, were upon me. I retorted loudly, "Come and get me! You cannot take me alive!"

I do protest if this action of mine in the chart room may seem bravado. I had no wish to die. There was within me a very healthy desire for life. But I felt, by holding out, that some chance might come wherewith I might turn events against these brigands. Yet reason told me it was hopeless. Our loyal members of the crew were killed, no doubt. Captain Carter and Balch were dead. The lookouts and course masters, also.

And Blackstone.

There remained only Dr. Frank and Snap. Their fate I did not yet know. And there was George Prince. He, perhaps, would help me if he could. But, at best, he was a dubious ally.

"You are very foolish, Haljan," murmured Miko's voice. And then I heard Coniston:

"See here, why would not a hundred pounds of gold leaf tempt you? The code words which were taken from Johnson—I mean to say, why not tell us where they are?"

So that was one of the brigands' new difficulties! Snap had taken the code word sheet that time we sealed the purser in the cage.

I said, "You'll never find them. And when a police ship sights us, what will you do then?"

The chances of a police ship were slight indeed, but the brigands evidently did not know that. I wondered again what had become of Snap. Was he captured or still holding them off?

I was watching my windows; for at any moment, under the cover of talk, I might be assailed.

Gravity came suddenly to the room. Miko's voice said: "We mean well by you, Haljan. There is your normality. Join us. We need you to chart our course."

"And a hundred pounds of gold leaf," urged Coniston. "Or more. Why, this treasure—"

I could hear an oath from Miko. And then his ironic voice. "We will not bother you, Haljan. There is no hurry. You will be hungry in good time. And sleepy. Then we will come and get you. And a little acid will help you to think differently about us...."

His vibrations died away. The pull of gravity in the room was normal. I was alone in the dim silence, with the bodies of Carter and Johnson huddled on the grid. I bent to examine them. Both were dead.

My isolation was not ruse this time. The outlaws made no further attack. Half an hour passed. The deck outside, what I could see of it, was vacant. Balch lay dead close outside the chart room door. The bodies of Blackstone and the course master had been removed from the turret window. As a forward lookout, one of Miko's men was on duty in the nearby tower. Hahn was at the turret's controls. The ship was under orderly handling, heading back upon a new course. For the Earth? The Moon? It did not seem so.

I found, in the chart room, a Benson curve light projector which poor Captain Carter had nearly assembled. I worked on it, trained it through my rear window along the empty deck; bent it into the lounge archway. Upon my grid the image of the lounge interior presently focused. The passengers in the lounge were huddled in a group.

Disheveled, frightened, with Moa standing watching them. Stewards were serving them with a meal.

Upon a bench, bodies were lying. Some were dead. I saw Rance Rankin. Others were evidently only injured. Dr. Frank was moving among them, attending them. Venza was there, unharmed. And I saw the gamblers, Shac and Dud, sitting white-faced, whispering together. And Glutz's little beribboned, becurled figure on a stool.

George Prince was there, standing against the wall, shrouded in his mourning cloak, watching the scene with alert, roving eyes. And by the opposite doorway, the huge towering figure of Miko stood on guard. But Snap was missing.

A brief glimpse. Miko saw my Benson light. I could have equipped a heat ray and fired along the curved Benson light into that lounge. But Miko gave me no time.

He slid the lounge door closed, and Moa leaped to close the one on my side. My grid showed only the blank deck and door.

Another interval. I had made plans. Futile plans! I could get into the turret perhaps, and kill Hahn. I had the invisible cloak which Johnson was wearing. I took it from his body. Its mechanism could be repaired. Why, with it I could creep about the ship, kill these brigands one by one, perhaps. George Prince would be with me. The brigands who had been posing as the stewards and crew members were unable to navigate; they would obey my orders. There were only Miko, Coniston and Hahn to kill.

From my window I could gaze up to the radio room. And now, abruptly, I heard Snap's voice: "No! I tell you—no!"

And Miko, "Very well, then. We'll try this."

So Snap was captured but not killed. Relief swept me. He was in the radio room and Miko was with him. But my relief was short-lived. After a brief interval, there came a moan from Snap. It floated down the silence overhead and made me shudder.

My Benson beam shot into the radio room. It showed me Snap lying there on the floor. He was bound with wire. His torso had been stripped. His livid face was ghastly plain in my light.

Miko was bending over him. Miko with a heat cylinder no longer than a finger. Its needle beam played upon Snap's naked chest. I could see the gruesome little trail of smoke rising; and as Snap twisted and jerked, there on his flesh was the red and blistered trail of the violet ray.

"Now will you tell?"

"No!"

Miko laughed. "No? Then I shall write my name a little deeper..."

A black sear now—a trail etched in the quivering flesh.

"Oh!" Snap's face went white as chalk as he pressed his lips together.

"Or a little acid? This fire-writing does not really hurt? Tell me what you did with those code words!"

"No!"

In his absorption Miko did not notice my light. Nor did I have the wit to try and fire along it. I was trembling. Snap under torture!

As the beam went deeper. Snap suddenly screamed. But he ended, "No! I will send no message for you—"

It had been only a moment. In the chart room window beside me again a figure appeared! No image. A solid, living person, undisguised by any cloak of invisibility. George Prince had chanced my fire and crept upon me.

"Haljan! Don't attack me."

I dropped my light connections. As impulsively I stood up, I saw through the window the figure of Coniston on the deck watching the result of Prince's venture.

"Haljan—yield."

Prince no more than whispered it. He stood outside on the deck; the low window casement touched his waist. He leaned over it.

"He's torturing Snap! Call out that you will yield."

The thought had already been in my mind. Another scream from Snap filled me with horror. I shouted, "Miko! Stop!"

I rushed to the window and Prince gripped me. "Louder!"

I called louder: "Miko! Stop!" My upflung voice mingled with Snap's agony of protest. Then Miko heard me. His head and shoulders showed up there at the radio room oval.

"You—Haljan?"

Prince shouted, "I have made him yield. He will obey you if you stop that torture."

I think that poor Snap must have fainted. He was silent. I called, "Stop! I will do what you command."

Miko jeered, "That is good. A bargain, if you and Dean obey me. Disarm him, Prince, and bring him out."

Miko moved back into the radio room. On the deck, Coniston was advancing, but cautiously mistrustful of me.

"Gregg."

George Prince flung a leg over the casement and leaped lightly into the dim chart room. His small slender figure stood beside me, clung to me.

A moment, while we stood there together. No ray was upon us. Coniston could not see us, nor could he hear our whispers.

"Gregg."

A different voice; its throaty, husky quality gone. A soft pleading. "Gregg—Gregg, don't you know me? Gregg, dear...."

Why, what was this? Not George Prince? A masquerader, yet so like George Prince.

"Gregg don't you know me?"

Clinging to me. A soft touch upon my arm. Fingers, clinging. A surge of warm, tingling current was flowing between us.

My sweep of instant thoughts. A speck of human Earth dust falling free. That was George Prince who had been killed. George Prince's body, disguised by the scheming Carter and Dr. Frank, buried in the guise of his sister. And this black-robed figure who was trying to help me....

"Anita! Anita darling—"

"Gregg, dear one!"

"Anita!" My arms went around her, my lips pressed hers, and felt her tremulous eager answer.

The form of Coniston showed at our window. She cast me off. She said, with her throaty swagger of amused, masculinity:

"I have him, Sir Arthur. He will obey us."

I sensed her warning glance. She shoved me toward the window. She said ironically, "Have no fear, Haljan. You will not be tortured, you and Dean, if you obey our commands."

Coniston gripped me. "You fool! You caused us a lot of trouble. Move along there!"

He jerked me roughly through the window. Marched me the length of the deck, out to the stern space, opened the door of my cubby, flung me in and sealed the door upon me.

"Miko will come presently."

I stood in the darkness of my tiny room, listening to his retreating footsteps. But my mind was not upon him.

All the universe, in that instant, had changed for me. Anita was alive!

Spiral Castle

2

‘Okay, okay!’ Nick mumbled. ‘I’ll tell you! Hamish left it in his tent, up in the forest!’

‘Set the dogs on him anyway,’ sniffed the Welsh constable. ‘Scouse bastard.’

‘But how do we know we can trust you?’ Eloise repeated.

‘Good point,’ agreed Hamish. ‘Ah’m no’ telling her where ma spear is until she’s told us a bit more about herself.’ He glowered at Siân. ‘Who are you and who is this Reverend Menyw bauchle?’

‘Never trust a Christian,’ said Eloise.

‘Menyw and I are friends,’ said Siân. ‘He’s the only real friend I’ve got in this dump - unless you count me mam, the slag. He’s my guru, if you like. He taught me the martial arts of the Celts. And we have other things in common, too.’

‘There was this archaeological dig recently, down in Caer Nudd. Menyw discovered that it was being part-financed by a Masonic lodge who act as a front for various dodgy individuals, including Tybalt Kohl...’

‘Kohl?’ said Eloise. She frowned. ‘What did you say this vicar is called? Menyw?’ She looked vaguely puzzled, then shrugged dismissively. ‘Go on, anyway.’

‘We realised that they must have some ulterior motive, like,’ Siân explained, ‘something other than innocent archaeology. Menyw asked me to go and have a look around. He had suspicions... Well, they proved true. The archaeologists had found a sword buried beneath the castle, an ancient sword, far older than the castle itself. They knew nothing about its origin. But Menyw did. He knew that it was the Sword of Nodons.’

‘The Sword of Nodons?’ asked Eloise, with a start.

‘What are Nodons?’ asked Hamish.

‘Nodons is the name of a Celtic god,’ replied Eloise. ‘He was king of the gods until he lost a hand in battle against the giants. Then Lugus replaced him.’

‘Lugus?’ Hamish frowned. ‘Ma spear is the Spear of Lugus.’ He looked at Siân. ‘So what happened to the Sword?’

Siân shrugged.

‘I nicked it,’ she replied casually. ‘There was no chance I was letting an artefact so powerful get into the hands of Tybalt Kohl.’

‘Were those meatheads at t’ shop after it, then?’ asked Osborne. Siân nodded.

‘But I’d already taken it to the vicarage. Menyw has it. He knew you were coming and he told me to keep an eye out. We need that spear.’

‘Sit down,’ said the German, ushering Nick towards the chair. Behind him stood the three skinheads who had just returned from the local hospital. Nick had been disappointed to see that they had little more to show for tangling with his friends than a few cuts and bruises.

Wheezing painfully, holding his ribs, the boy obeyed.

‘You may leave us,’ the man rapped out, turning to the policeman.

'But, Führer...' said the inspector.

'Now,' added Kohl softly, but with menace. 'I have my bodyguard,' he added impatiently, nodding towards the skinhead who had just joined them. The policemen left the cell hurriedly.

Kohl turned to Nick.

'Now, perhaps we can talk in a civilised manner,' he said smoothly. Nick grunted and winced again. 'My thanks, incidentally, for the information you have given my associates,' Kohl added. 'The Spear will be in my possession very soon. But I want you to do just one more thing for us.'

Nick raised his face wearily.

'Fuck off,' he said feebly. 'I'm doing nothing.'

Kohl raised an eyebrow.

'Perhaps you would prefer the less subtle persuasions of my companion?'

The skinhead cracked his knuckles ostentatiously. Nick's face fell. 'I thought not,' Kohl added.

Nick pushed his hair out of his eyes.

'What d'you want me to do?' he mumbled. He didn't fancy spending any time with a six foot skinhead. Hamish was bad enough.

'I want you to steal something,' said Kohl. 'Would you do that for me?'

Nick looked incredulous.

'Steal something?' he asked. 'Fuckin' hell, is that all? You only had to ask, like.'

'I am asking,' Kohl replied. 'So, it is agreed, ja?'

'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' said Nick. 'I've agreed nothing. What am I stealing and where is it? And what's in it for me?'

'What is in it for you?' asked Kohl. 'If you do as you are told, I will do my best to convince my police associates that they should let you go, all charges against you dropped. There is no other way you will avoid a long term in prison.'

'Fuck off,' Nick said. 'I've done nothing.'

'That is a lie,' said Kohl, with a trace of impatience. 'I am the only person who can help you. I am your lifeline. But you must do as I say.'

Nick shrugged. It wasn't as if the bloke was asking much, he thought to himself.

'So what do you want me to steal?' he repeated.

'A sword,' Kohl replied.

'Who's coming with me?' Hamish asked. 'There's no point the lot of us gaun to the forest. The scoobies will be bound to get us if we awe go.'

'I'm going to the vicarage,' said Siân. 'Anyone coming with me?'

Eloise stirred. 'I'll come,' she said. 'Osborne, you go with Hamish. Meet us at the vicarage when you've got the Spear.'

Osborne nodded. 'Okay.' He turned to Hamish. 'Coming?' They hurried from the milk bar.

Eloise turned to Siân and the Welsh girl returned her gaze. Something about the way Siân was looking at her unnerved Eloise. Something reptilian...

'We know so little about you,' Eloise murmured. 'We're taking so much on trust....'

Siân smiled.

'Sooner or later, you have to trust someone in this world.' She rose. 'I'll introduce you to Menyw. Though he says he thinks he met you a long time ago.'

With that enigmatic statement, the girl disappeared through the door. Eloise

frowned to herself. She really didn't like this situation. The police were not their friends, that was for certain, but how did they know they could trust Siân and her vicar friend?

Eloise was a Pagan and her distrust of Christianity was more than just a pose. Despite its bland facade of peace and goodwill, the Christian church had been responsible for more suffering than any other belief system in history. Could they trust a vicar any more than a Nazi? Despite his naggingly familiar name...

Where had she heard it before?

'What are you doing?' asked Siân, popping her head back round the door. 'Stop dreaming, girl. The coast's clear. Let's get moving.'

Banishing her misgivings, Eloise rose and followed Siân outside.

'It's a fair way to t' forest,' said Osborne, turning up the collar of his leather jacket. He glanced up at the dark clouds. 'I don't like the look of that sky.'

'Och, ya big pussy,' said Hamish, striding ahead down the side street. 'Bit 'o rain's not gonna hurt ya.'

By a series of side roads and alleyways, they reached the edge of Caer Pedryfan, where the main road joined the A55. Between here and the mountains lay rolling farmland. The forest they were headed for lay amongst the foothills of Mynydd Bannawg. As they left the road and headed down a farm track, it began to rain.

In the cellar beneath the police station, Kohl sat at the centre of a chalked pentagram, staring into the depths of a glowing crystal. The Inspector and Sergeant Dover watched from the stairs.

'Well?' asked the inspector. 'Have your men found the Spear?'

Kohl looked up, his eyes glazed.

'No,' he said thickly. 'They are on the outskirts of the forest. But they tell me that two of our enemies have been seen, approaching through the trees.'

'Then they must hurry,' said the inspector. 'If our enemies take the Spear to the vicarage, it will be impossible for us to retrieve it. Unless we send the boy again.'

'But didn't we come here for the Sword?' asked the sergeant. 'Why this change in our priorities?'

Kohl sighed.

'We need the Sword to pass through the gate,' he replied. 'But the Spear is vital. We will need that when we find the cauldron. Besides, our young friend in the cell above will get us the Sword.'

'Does he know who he will be stealing it from?' asked the inspector.

Kohl shook his head and smiled.

The vicarage was a large, gloomy Victorian building on the edge of town. Siân led Eloise up the path as rain lashed down. They reached the porch and Siân rang the doorbell.

'Oh, I'm soaked,' Eloise complained.

'What about your friends?' asked Siân. 'They're out in this.'

Eloise shrugged. 'They weren't complaining,' she replied.

'You've got them very well-trained,' said Siân with a sudden smile.

Eloise smiled back. She was starting to like her.

The door opened. She turned, feeling a little nervous. It wasn't every day she went

to a vicarage...

She froze, staring in amazement at the old man in the doorway. He returned her gaze, frowning with effort, as if trying to remember something that had happened long ago.

‘Mr. Menyw?’ said Siân. ‘I found the people you said would be coming. The others will be here later - they’re getting the Spear. But this is...’

‘Eloise!’ said the old man suddenly. ‘That’s her name. Well, it has been a long time, hasn’t it? Maybe not so long for you.’ He grinned at Eloise’s expression. ‘I did say I would be waiting for you, didn’t I?’

Siân looked from the vicar to Eloise.

‘You know each other?’ she asked.

‘Menyw?’ said Eloise faintly. ‘Meniuos?’

‘We met on the isle of Abalos,’ said the old man tranquilly. ‘One hundred generations ago last Tuesday. Won’t you come in? The kettle’s boiling.’

‘Not far now,’ said Osborne encouragingly, as they hurried through the forest.

‘Ah don’t know what you’re worrying about,’ said Hamish, resentfully. Since Osborne was a few years older than the others, he frequently treated them like they were kids. Hamish hated it.

‘Just round the next corner,’ said Osborne, brushing his wet hair out of his eyes. ‘We’ll grab the Spear and get...’ He halted abruptly, in the middle of the path.

‘What is it?’ demanded Hamish, glaring ahead through the driving rain.

Ahead of them was their camp, a large bender, or shelter of wood and tarpaulins. But in front of it, beside the cold ashes of last night’s fire, stood two shaven-headed men wearing suits, both of them looking the worse for the wear. A third was crawling into the bender.

‘It’s those skinheads we met before,’ Osborne whispered. ‘They’re looking for something...’

‘They’re after ma spear!’ shouted Hamish, enraged. The skinheads looked up. ‘They won’t get it!’ He whipped out his combat knife and charged.

‘Wait!’ Osborne cried, then he shook his head. Too late now. He was still aching from the previous fight, but the Scot was still ready for battle. He was getting old, he reflected and he took out his bike-chain and ran to Hamish’s assistance.

Eloise sat in a cosy old armchair, nursing a cup of tea and staring in wonder at Menyw. Siân sat on the sofa, still occasionally looking from one to the other.

‘You haven’t changed a bit,’ said Eloise. ‘Not one bit.’

Menyw was staring out of the window at the vicarage lawn where the rain still lashed down. He took another sip of tea.

‘Oh, older and wiser,’ he said. ‘So I hope, at least.’

‘When did you two meet?’ Siân asked, looking annoyed. ‘Don’t give me that shit about one hundred generations ago. How long have you known this girl, Mr. Menyw?’

‘We were only together for a day or so,’ said Eloise. ‘It must have been... last January? February? I’ve lost track of time since I’ve been on the road.’

‘Last January, Mr. Menyw was here all the time,’ said Siân obstinately. ‘And I don’t remember seeing you round here back then.’

‘No,’ Eloise replied, giving Siân her most eerie smile. ‘I was on the Isle of

Abalos, in the North Sea.’ She nodded towards the silent old man. ‘He was a druid back then.’ She looked at him. ‘What are you doing, being a vicar?’

Menyw looked a little self-conscious.

‘Times changed,’ he replied. ‘After the Romans, it wasn’t so easy being a druid anymore. And once they’d taken up with Christianity, it was impossible. Until the eighteenth century and by then the druids were a pale shadow.’

‘You became a Christian?’ Eloise demanded angrily. ‘But Christians burnt witches!’

Menyw looked uncomfortable.

‘So did druids, at times,’ he replied. ‘I tried to restrain them, but few religious people are true to their convictions.’

Siân curled up on the sofa.

‘This is so much shit,’ she said to herself. ‘So when were you born, then?’

Menyw looked uncertain.

‘I’m not sure I was born, as such,’ he replied. ‘I was formed. Esus the Mighty told me that he created me from the three primal cries, the first three letters of the holy Boibel-Loth alphabet - the holy Word.’

‘I am the father of all druids,’ he added blandly. ‘I was the first druid in the world.’

Eloise and Siân exchanged unbelieving glances.

The skinheads were silent, but they fought their attackers with preternatural strength. Osborne was grappling with one, while Hamish struggled with the other two.

‘Who sent you?’ Osborne panted. ‘What are you after?’ But the man made no reply, dodging his flailing attacking and stabbing at him with a flick-knife.

Hamish had wounded one of his opponents, but both of them still fought undeterred. They were like zombies, he thought to himself, not like real skinheads at all.

They attacked simultaneously and Hamish ducked and rolled forward, coming to a halt beside the bender. The two youths turned towards him and he thrust his hand inside.

Osborne tripped his attacker and sent him crashing into a tree stump, where he lay, out cold. The biker turned towards the rest of the fight.

As he did so, Hamish leapt up, the Spear in his hand. The two skinheads halted, eyeing it warily.

‘Aye, Ah’ve got it!’ Hamish sneered. ‘Ye bawbags are a waste of space. Who put ye up to this? Ye need more training.’ He menaced them with his spear. ‘Who sent ye?’

The skinheads were silent. Osborne stepped up behind one and whipped his chain around the youth’s neck, dragging him backwards, half garrotted.

‘Answer the question,’ he said. ‘Or die!’

The other skinhead made a sudden move. Hamish lunged at him with the Spear and the youth dropped to the ground, groaning and clutching his bleeding belly. Hamish whirled round to threaten the one Osborne was slowly throttling.

‘Answer!’ he snarled. The skinhead gurgled something. ‘Osborne - loosen that chain,’ Hamish added.

Osborne slackened his grip.

‘Tybalt Kohl!’ the skinhead stuttered. ‘He wants that spear! He brought us all the

way from headquarters to get it! And he's gonna get it.'

He grabbed Osborne's chain and wrenched it from the biker's grasp, then lunged for the Spear. Hamish leapt back, reversed the Spear and clubbed him to the ground.

Osborne and Hamish looked down at the unconscious form. The biker glanced at his companion.

'Tybalt Kohl?' he said, troubled.

'Tybalt Kohl,' Hamish replied savagely.

In the cellar beneath the police station, the glowing crystal winked out. Kohl cursed and glared up at the two policemen.

'Tybalt Kohl?' asked Eloise, a quarter of an hour later. She glanced at Hamish.

'Don't stare,' she added waspishly.

'Isn't he...?' Hamish said, tearing his eyes away from Menyw. He'd been staring at the old man since he'd let them in.

'Yeah, yeah,' said Siân scornfully. 'The vicar here has been around for more than two and a half thousand years. We believe him.'

'And my mission in life,' said Menyw, ignoring Siân's sarcasm, 'is to ensure that my descendants avoid destroying themselves utterly. The last time I came this close to failure was in the nineteen-forties, when the Nazis plunged the world into chaos. Only the druids could save us then.'

'Druids?' asked Siân impatiently. She looked round at the others. 'Look, Mr. Menyw, you've told me some pretty whacked-out things in the past, but I didn't mind before - you're a lovely old guy and you've taught me a few good tricks. And you're one of the few people in this town who'll talk to me, not like the rest who won't speak to me. But you're wrong if you think the druids won World War Two.'

'Churchill was initiated into a druidic order in the twenties,' said Eloise quietly, looking up. Siân scowled at her. Eloise smiled. 'Fact. Sorry!'

'But what about Kohl?' asked Osborne. 'He's that Neo-Nazi you've mentioned, isn't he?'

'He's after the Cauldron of Annwfyn,' said Menyw darkly. 'He intends to use it to revive the Nazi party and bring destruction to the world. For the moment we are safe in this house. But soon we will have to leave.'

Siân spoke in the silence that followed.

'So,' she murmured, 'assuming that something is going on - what are we going to do?'

'Before we make any decisions,' Eloise said urgently, 'there's something everyone's forgotten - they've got Nick.'

'There's nothing we can do about him,' said Osborne, glancing at her in concern.

'No, but there's plenty they can do to him,' replied Eloise. 'And they could use him against us.' She shook her head. 'I hope he's alright,' she murmured.

Menyw rose.

'We have the Spear,' he stated, 'and we have the Sword. Two other artefacts await us - the Stone of Pretanos and finally the Cauldron of Annwfyn.'

'Where is the Stone?' asked Eloise. 'And where does it come in?'

'The Stone is in the castle on the island,' said Siân knowledgeably. 'Llech Prydain, it's called. It's in all the guidebooks. This monk guy called Richard of Cirencester reckoned that it was where the ancient kings of the Britons were crowned.'

'It is also the keystone to the gate,' said Menyw. 'Open that and the road to the

cauldron will be open. And the key is the Sword.'

The others exchanged glances.

'Alrighty...' said Eloise slowly.

'Where are you taking me?' demanded Nick. The two constables hustled him from the cell where he had been sitting for the last mind-numbing hour.

'You have a job to do, remember?' said the inspector, as they brought him out into the corridor. Kohl stood beside him.

'That is correct,' he said. 'Break into the vicarage, find the Sword and bring it back to us.'

Carmilla

XI

The Story

"With all my heart," said the General, with an effort; and after a short pause in which to arrange his subject, he commenced one of the strangest narratives I ever heard.

"My dear child was looking forward with great pleasure to the visit you had been so good as to arrange for her to your charming daughter." Here he made me a gallant but melancholy bow. "In the meantime we had an invitation to my old friend the Count Carlsfeld, whose schloss is about six leagues to the other side of Karnstein. It was to attend the series of fetes which, you remember, were given by him in honor of his illustrious visitor, the Grand Duke Charles."

"Yes; and very splendid, I believe, they were," said my father.

"Princely! But then his hospitalities are quite regal. He has Aladdin's lamp. The night from which my sorrow dates was devoted to a magnificent masquerade. The grounds were thrown open, the trees hung with colored lamps. There was such a display of fireworks as Paris itself had never witnessed. And such music--music, you know, is my weakness--such ravishing music! The finest instrumental band, perhaps, in the world, and the finest singers who could be collected from all the great operas in Europe. As you wandered through these fantastically illuminated grounds, the moon-lighted chateau throwing a rosy light from its long rows of windows, you would suddenly hear these ravishing voices stealing from the silence of some grove, or rising from boats upon the lake. I felt myself, as I looked and listened, carried back into the romance and poetry of my early youth.

"When the fireworks were ended, and the ball beginning, we returned to the noble suite of rooms that were thrown open to the dancers. A masked ball, you know, is a beautiful sight; but so brilliant a spectacle of the kind I never saw before.

"It was a very aristocratic assembly. I was myself almost the only 'nobody' present.

"My dear child was looking quite beautiful. She wore no mask. Her excitement and delight added an unspeakable charm to her features, always lovely. I remarked a young lady, dressed magnificently, but wearing a mask, who appeared to me to be observing my ward with extraordinary interest. I had seen her, earlier in the evening, in the great hall, and again, for a few minutes, walking near us, on the terrace under the castle windows, similarly employed. A lady, also masked, richly and gravely dressed, and with a stately air, like a person of rank, accompanied her as a chaperon.

"Had the young lady not worn a mask, I could, of course, have been much more certain upon the question whether she was really watching my poor darling.

"I am now well assured that she was.

"We were now in one of the salons. My poor dear child had been dancing, and was resting a little in one of the chairs near the door; I was standing near. The two ladies I have mentioned had approached and the younger took the chair next my ward; while her companion stood beside me, and for a little time addressed herself, in a low tone, to her charge.

"Availing herself of the privilege of her mask, she turned to me, and in the tone of an old friend, and calling me by my name, opened a conversation with me, which piqued my curiosity a good deal. She referred to many scenes where she had met me--at Court, and at distinguished houses. She alluded to little incidents which I had long ceased to think of, but which, I found, had only lain in abeyance in my memory, for they instantly started into life at her touch.

"I became more and more curious to ascertain who she was, every moment. She parried my attempts to discover very adroitly and pleasantly. The knowledge she showed of many passages in my life seemed to me all but unaccountable; and she appeared to take a not unnatural pleasure in foiling my curiosity, and in seeing me flounder in my eager perplexity, from one conjecture to another.

"In the meantime the young lady, whom her mother called by the odd name of Millarca, when she once or twice addressed her, had, with the same ease and grace, got into conversation with my ward.

"She introduced herself by saying that her mother was a very old acquaintance of mine. She spoke of the agreeable audacity which a mask rendered practicable; she talked like a friend; she admired her dress, and insinuated very prettily her admiration of her beauty. She amused her with laughing criticisms upon the people who crowded the ballroom, and laughed at my poor child's fun. She was very witty and lively when she pleased, and after a time they had grown very good friends, and the young stranger lowered her mask, displaying a remarkably beautiful face. I had never seen it before, neither had my dear child. But though it was new to us, the features were so engaging, as well as lovely, that it was impossible not to feel the attraction powerfully. My poor girl did so. I never saw anyone more taken with another at first sight, unless, indeed, it was the stranger herself, who seemed quite to have lost her heart to her.

"In the meantime, availing myself of the license of a masquerade, I put not a few questions to the elder lady.

"'You have puzzled me utterly,' I said, laughing. 'Is that not enough? Won't you, now, consent to stand on equal terms, and do me the kindness to remove your mask?'

"'Can any request be more unreasonable?' she replied. 'Ask a lady to yield an advantage! Beside, how do you know you should recognize me? Years make changes.'

"'As you see,' I said, with a bow, and, I suppose, a rather melancholy little laugh.

"'As philosophers tell us,' she said; 'and how do you know that a sight of my face

would help you?'

"'I should take chance for that,' I answered. 'It is vain trying to make yourself out an old woman; your figure betrays you.'

"'Years, nevertheless, have passed since I saw you, rather since you saw me, for that is what I am considering. Millarca, there, is my daughter; I cannot then be young, even in the opinion of people whom time has taught to be indulgent, and I may not like to be compared with what you remember me.

You have no mask to remove. You can offer me nothing in exchange.'

"'My petition is to your pity, to remove it.'

"'And mine to yours, to let it stay where it is,' she replied.

"'Well, then, at least you will tell me whether you are French or German; you speak both languages so perfectly.'

"'I don't think I shall tell you that, General; you intend a surprise, and are meditating the particular point of attack.'

"'At all events, you won't deny this,' I said, 'that being honored by your permission to converse, I ought to know how to address you. Shall I say Madame la Comtesse?'

"She laughed, and she would, no doubt, have met me with another evasion--if, indeed, I can treat any occurrence in an interview every circumstance of which was prearranged, as I now believe, with the profoundest cunning, as liable to be modified by accident.

"'As to that,' she began; but she was interrupted, almost as she opened her lips, by a gentleman, dressed in black, who looked particularly elegant and distinguished, with this drawback, that his face was the most deadly pale I ever saw, except in death. He was in no masquerade--in the plain evening dress of a gentleman; and he said, without a smile, but with a courtly and unusually low bow:--

"'Will Madame la Comtesse permit me to say a very few words which may interest her?'

"The lady turned quickly to him, and touched her lip in token of silence; she then said to me, 'Keep my place for me, General; I shall return when I have said a few words.'

"And with this injunction, playfully given, she walked a little aside with the gentleman in black, and talked for some minutes, apparently very earnestly. They then walked away slowly together in the crowd, and I lost them for some minutes.

"I spent the interval in cudgeling my brains for a conjecture as to the identity of the lady who seemed to remember me so kindly, and I was thinking of turning about and joining in the conversation between my pretty ward and the Countess's daughter, and trying whether, by the time she returned, I might not have a surprise in store for her,

by having her name, title, chateau, and estates at my fingers' ends. But at this moment she returned, accompanied by the pale man in black, who said:

"I shall return and inform Madame la Comtesse when her carriage is at the door."