



This Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Ugly Holy Bird" by Gonzalo Canedo. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

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## EDITORIAL

This week, we're offering a free eBook to all readers. My fantasy novel *Forger of the Runeblade*, a story of desperate adventure amongst the Nine Worlds of Norse myth (reviewed [here](#)), is being sent free of charge to all Facebook friends of Schlock! Webzine. It's also available for download from [here](#), or on request from [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk).

If you like the book, please feel free to give free copies to anyone you think would also enjoy it.

In this week's edition we see a continuation of C Priest Brumley's latest Slicer Chronicle, *The Stolen Other*, plus the second part of John L. Campbell's *A Night With Angeline*, the continuation of Thomas C Hewitt's epic poem *Ayame's Love* and my own African fantasy *The House of Skulls*.

In *Days of High Adventure* we meet Robert E Howard's first fiction sale (sold at the aged of fifteen!), a story of prehistoric violence and feud entitled *Spear and Fang*. Todd Nelsen has contributed *The Cosmic Kid*, a sci-fi boxing story that would have warmed the cockles of Howard's heart. I've included another retelling from Norse legend, the story of *Hagbard and Haki*, a Viking Romeo and Juliet with shades of Macbeth, featuring the original Viking funeral. Forget Kirk Douglas and Hollywood; this is the real thing!

Since *Brigands of the Moon* came to a close last week, we are featuring another vintage sci-fi classic. This one's a biggie: Richard Jefferies' seminal post apocalyptic tale *After London*, which describes the collapse of that great metropolis and its inhabitants' descent into a medieval way of life. Sadly forgotten, it predates HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds* and the whole post apocalyptic sci-fi subgenre; it inspired William Morris, whose medieval fantasies inspired Lord Dunsany, Tolkien, and directly or indirectly, every heroic fantasy writer ever. It may also have inspired Chesterton's [The Napoleon of Notting Hill](#), a comic science fiction adventure I heartily recommend.

And of course, there's old faithful, *Varney the Vampyre*.

- Gavin Chappell

C Priest Brumley's THE SLICER CHRONICLES - The Stolen Other Part 2 by C Priest Brumley

Part 2:

Kyra's sitting room was massive. I was never good with distances, but it could have been ten meters across, easy. The decorating was amazing in its hominess, with shelves covered in knick-knacks of every variety, stuffed animals, and picture frames filled with beaming faces and landmarks I'd never see. The two more-comfortable-than-they-had-any-right-to-be couches were filled, with Hector and Kyra on one, staring me down on the other. Hector was a tall, thin man with a full beard and an even fuller attitude. And at this moment, that prodigious attitude was directed at me.

"Got any enemies, Hadley?"

"Enemies? What the fuck do you mean, 'enemies,' Hector?"

"Enemies. As in, people you have arrested or executed or any relatives thereof. People you've crossed. Someone you pissed off any given day, myself excluded. *Enemies*, Hadley."

My voice jumped an octave without realizing it. "I've never arrested *or* executed anyone before, and *you fucking know that*, man! Where would *I* make enemies?" I was fuming. Fuck him and his big, black beard.

"Easy there, David. Just trying to pinpoint a culprit here, okay? Don't have to get all defensive on me, dude."

I tried to pull a deep breath and let my emotions cool off a bit. "Sorry, just-- this is a lot to take in. You still don't know why I'm fucking blocked?"

"I know you aren't my biggest fan, Hadley, but at least try to treat me with some respect, huh?"

"Sorry, *sir*."

"Asshole."

"I'm sorry, man. So pass this by me again, if you could, sir. I'm just-- it's not making any sense, you know?"

"Understandable." Hector leaned back and stretched his legs, a look of boredom mixed with superiority spread beneath the beard. "You're blocked off. No one can access you, nor can you access anyone else. NeuNet blocked, Cellular network blocked, even your mail's cut off."

We know you didn't do this, due to the trace file fingerprinting not belonging to you or anyone associated with you. Fingerprint and origin traces go back to the Federal Department of Social Identity. I called, and they won't talk to me. Probably won't talk to you, either, but we won't know until you try. However, we have two problems with you trying."

Hector leaned forward and put his hand in front of him to tick off the points as they came up. "One, if you call and they reject you for whatever reason, nine out of ten says they'll call the police on you, which is the last thing we want. The other is the fact that more than likely, it's an inside job, and there wouldn't be a file on hand, so you'd still be down and out in that regard. And if you get rejected for that, again they'll think you're dishonest and probably send out police to capture. So, here's a conundrum."

"So I'm fucked regardless."

"Looks like it. Hence asking you about enemies."

"Now wait just a damned minute, Hector," Kyra drawled from his side. She looked bright, as though she had an idea. "Is there any way we can access the files to check for ourselves without 'knockin' on their door', so to speak?"

Hector withdrew his legs and leaned forward to grab his glass of sweet tea from the table. His brow was furrowed in concentration, and when he set the glass back down again, he spoke. "Could be. We could access the files via the 'Net. Problem is, Government has Social Ident files locked under firewall to prevent potential identity theft. So, in essence, we'd have to hack the Federal files, probably using an external monitor and peripherals connected via Bit2 to a conduit." He scratched his beard, looking back and forth between us, then settled on me. "Hadley, since you're blocked, I don't think it wise for you to do conduit duty. Could alert people we'd rather stay unalerted. Marston," he added, turning in her direction, "You're up, slugger."

The doomed look that rolled over Kyra's face was pitiful in its sincerity. "Well, ain't that just wonderful?" Kyra stood up automatically, shedding her jacket in the process and tossing it on the couch next to Hector. "You got the tools, sir?"

"In my car. Brought 'em on a hunch." He stood up as well, and placed his hand on Kyra's shoulder. "You do know what this entails, right?"

Her breathing was measured as she looked up at Hector's bearded visage. "Yeah. Don't like it, but yeah." Turning to me now, a look of fear spreading across her being. "David, you better be damn happy I love you." For the second time in as many hours Kyra reached for my head, pulling me down to her level. This kiss wasn't like the one in the bank, this time it was deep and passionate, a powerful kiss that brought forth a lover's moan in the back of Kyra's throat. I hesitated at first, not having been kissed or anything more since before the

surgeries. I opened up pretty quick, warming to her idiosyncrasies with amazing celerity and moving my head in tune with hers as we coiled in to each other, my hands wrapped in her thick black curls, urging her closer, her hips grinding mine, my left hand exploring while my right urged her closer, her tears welling up and wetting my nose and lips, the salty taste reaching me moments later--

"If you happen to be done, we're on a pretty fucking tight timeline, guys. Knock it off until after shit's done, ok?" It ended as abruptly as it began at Hector's intrusion. Kyra unfurled herself from me, gaze dropping to the ground in a mixture of shame and embarrassment. And as she started to walk away to the back of her house, details hit home, slow as always.

"So, 'conduit', huh?" My confusion was overwhelming. "Can someone explain what the hell is going on?" My voice rose with concern and emotion. Kyra stopped dead in her tracks, just as Hector looked up at me from his navel-gazing. Both wore questioning looks, as though wondering why I would ask such an idiotic question.

"Yes, conduit, Hadley. It's quite the delicate procedure--" Kyra flinched at this. "--but one I've done before, which is more than what can be said of most Slicers, ranked or non. Trust me, Kyra, you're in great hands."

"What the-- Seriously, you guys are acting like she's fixing to have sur--" Kyra's eyes dropped, glittering tears sparkling at the corners of her eyes. Puzzle pieces fell in to place in my conscious mind. My anger and concern turned first to embarrassment, then sympathy. I turned to Hector to avoid seeing Kyra cry again. "So, uh, need me to be ready with the fearsome brow mop?"

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Kyra's kitchen had the surreal look of a makeshift surgery room, with every available lamp in her house plugged in and lighting her from every conceivable angle. Kyra herself was laying on her kitchen table with several towels placed under her head to absorb any blood that escaped. She had changed her clothes, too, to an old black tank top so as not to ruin a good shirt. The look on her face was that of pure fear, and as I stood by her side holding her hand, minute tremors raced down her arm and vibrated mine.

Hector stepped in to the room, wearing one of Kyra's kitchen aprons and holding a satchel in his hand. His mask was grim, but the face underneath expressed fear more than any other discernable emotion. He set the satchel down on the table near Kyra's feet and opened it, withdrawing a small suctioning machine, a small piece of plastic with exposed cords on one end, a spool of thick thread with a curved needle protruding from the top, a silver spray bottle, and, perhaps most alarming of all, a silver scalpel with black plastic thumb grips on either side, protected by a clear plastic case. He set each side by side, then looked up abruptly and indicated for me to join him. I gave Kyra's hand a slight squeeze and waited for her to let go, then walked around Kyra's feet and stopped by Hector's elbow.

“Okay Hadley, here’s your education. Hacker one-oh-one. In order to bypass the Feds’ firewalls, we’re going to need an external monitor to take control of someone in the Net. What we’re going to do is cut open Kyra’s head, strip the wires that lead to her V.I. activator from her implant, slice in the loose wires from this dongle, and recoat the wires after. If we’ve done our job properly, it will sit fairly far back in her hairline and be almost invisible.”

I was impressed. “So how are we going to be able to hack the ‘Net?’”

“Well, after the dongle has been successfully integrated, it’ll allow us to connect a monitor, keyboard, and mouse so we can see what Kyra sees while plugged in and control her actions.”

“Um, I hate to be the idiot with the questions, but what the fuck is a mouse?”

The shocked look on Hector’s face belonged in a movie. I had a fit trying to hold myself from laughing while Hector responded. “Are you-- You’re serious? Did you even pay attention in the history courses from your training? We used to use these things prolifically to control computer systems pre-’Net!” He ran his hands through the bush of black hair on his head. “How the fuck did I get stuck with the idiot? Really?”

The slight stung deep. “Well, fuck you, too, *sir*. I paid attention, Hector. And I’m sorry if details escape me, okay?”

“David, remember those small things, ‘bout the size of the palm of your hand I showed you in class?” Kyra’s voice sounded strained, as though she were suffering from a bad head cold. “Got the two buttons and the little wheel between ‘em?”

A flash of insight brought back the images she asked for, memories of picking it up, playing with the small red light underneath, and replacing it on the pedestal before moving on to the next display. “Oh, yeah!”

“Whatever, Hadley.” Hector interrupted, looking as though his near heart attack was finished. “Let’s-- Let’s just get started. Grab the scalpel and the vac, would you?”

“I hate to be the whiny chick, but am I gonna be numbed up for this or anything?” Kyra propped herself up on her elbows to look down the table at Hector and I.

I looked sideways at Hector. “How about it, sir? You got some sort of super-secret archaic painkiller in there, too?”

“No, just a time-honored one.” Hector reached in to the front pocket of the apron he wore and produced a small bottle of Jim Beam, rattled it to show it was full, and reached for Kyra. “I got two reasons for this, Marston. First, it’ll numb your pain. Make you bleed more, but

we'll cauterize and control that. Second is the fact that while we have control of your presence on the 'Net, you will fight back against us, even if it is subconsciously. Drink that up, you're less likely, which is what we need."

"So what he's saying is," I decided to interject, "Free shots on Hector tonight, yeah?"

"Free for *Kyra*, Hadley. You still have to pay."

"Well that's not very nice, sir."

"Not here to be nice, David. I'm here to save your ass, a task you're rendering more and more difficult by the minute."

"Can I drink now?" *Kyra's* voice floated down her body to us.

Hector turned to *Kyra*, determined to finish what he started and showing it. "You may begin, Marston. Faster the better." Eyes locked on me like I'm the enemy.

*Kyra* shredded the cellophane surrounding the cap in seconds, removed the cap in less, and had the bottle held upside down over her mouth before we could do so much as blink. She was a pro at downing her whiskey, I could tell. The bottle was drained in less than a single minute.

She was also, it seems, an awesome drunk.

"I always thought you were cute." Her voice slurred, words blurring in to one another as they progressed, hand groping in my general direction. I fought to suppress a laugh and concentrate on listening to Hector.

"Okay. You see her Interface button? Trace a straight line directly back, parallel with the ground." He did so, running the scalpel lightly on top of her skin, parting *Kyra's* luscious hair as he went, a scarlet line intruding on the black surrounding it. The wound bled at first, but Hector turned the scalpel around and pressed the side buttons on the handle, turning the back end a glowing ember red. The built-in cauterizer retraced the blade's steps, sealing the end of the wound and preventing blood loss.

He turned to me. "Now that we're sealed, we can begin." Turning to *Kyra* briefly. "You doing okay, Marston?"

"A-Okay, Cap'm Blackbeard!" A wobbly thumbs up completed the gesture of assurance. I couldn't quite suppress my laugh this time, bringing a scalding look from Hector and a wide, toothy grin from *Kyra*. Hector shook his head in dismay, and went back to work.

"Okay, Hadley, fun time starts now. Where is tha-- Here we go. Watch carefully, now." His



hands were as steady as a boulder as he slid his fingers in the wound and pulled out the taut wire covered in red that connected Kyra's implant to the Virtual Interface. He slid a small piece of plastic that I hadn't noticed before under the wire to keep it elevated, then took his ever-steady hand and lightly traced the scalpel down the length, opening the casing. Kyra fidgeted momentarily, causing Hector to pause and regain his held breath, and then continue when she stopped.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wake up, Marston. You're done."

## SPEAR AND FANG by Robert E Howard

A-aea crouched close to the cave mouth, watching Ga-nor with wondering eyes. Ga-nor's occupation interested her, as well as Ga-nor himself. As for Ga-nor, he was too occupied with his work to notice her. A torch stuck in a niche in the cave wall dimly illuminated the roomy cavern, and by its light Ga-nor was laboriously tracing figures on the wall. With a piece of flint he scratched the outline and then with a twig dipped in ocher paint completed the figure. The result was crude, but gave evidence of real artistic genius, struggling for expression.

It was a mammoth that he sought to depict, and little A-aea's eyes widened with wonder and admiration. Wonderful! What though the beast lacked a leg and had no tail? It was tribesmen, just struggling out of utter barbarism, who were the critics, and to them Ga-nor was a past master.

However, it was not to watch the reproduction of a mammoth that A-aea hid among the scanty bushes by Ga-nor's cave. The admiration for the painting paled beside the look of positive adoration with which she favored the artist. Indeed, Ga-nor was not unpleasing to the eye. Tall he was, towering well over six feet, leanly built, with mighty shoulders and narrow hips, the build of a fighting man. Both his hands and his feet were long and slim; and his features, thrown into bold profile by the flickering torch-light, were intelligent, with a high, broad forehead, topped by a mane of sandy hair.

A-aea herself was very easy to look upon. Her hair, as well as her eyes, was black and fell about her slim shoulders in a rippling wave. No ocher tattooing tinted her cheek, for she was still unmated.

Both the girl and the youth were perfect specimens of the great Cro-Magnon race which came from no man knows where and announced and enforced their supremacy over beast and beast-man.

A-aea glanced about nervously. All ideas to the contrary, customs and taboos are much more narrow and vigorously enforced among savage peoples.

The more primitive a race, the more intolerant their customs. Vice and licentiousness may be the rule, but the appearance of vice is shunned and condemned. So if A-aea had been discovered, hiding near the cave of an unattached young man, denunciation as a shameless woman would have been her lot, and doubtless a public whipping.

To be proper, A-aea should have played the modest, demure maiden, perhaps skillfully arousing the young artist's interest without seeming to do so. Then, if the youth was pleased, would have followed public wooing by means of crude love-songs and music from reed pipes. Then barter with her parents and then--marriage. Or no wooing at all, if the lover was wealthy.

But little A-aea was herself a mark of progress. Covert glances had failed to attract the attention of the young man who seemed engrossed with his artistry, so she had taken to the unconventional way of spying upon him, in hopes of finding some way to win him.

Ga-nor turned from his completed work, stretched and glanced toward the cave mouth. Like a frightened rabbit, little A-aea ducked and darted away.

When Ga-nor emerged from the cave, he was puzzled by the sight of a small, slender footprint in the soft loam outside the cave.

A-aea walked primly toward her own cave, which was, with most of the others, at some distance from Ga-nor's cave. As she did so, she noticed a group of warriors talking excitedly in front of the chief's cave.

A mere girl might not intrude upon the councils of men, but such was A-aea's curiosity, that she dared a scolding by slipping nearer. She heard the words "footprint" and "gur-na" (man-ape).

The footprints of a gur-na had been found in the forest, not far from the caves.

"Gur-na" was a word of hatred and horror to the people of the caves, for creatures whom the tribesmen called "gur-na", or man-apes, were the hairy monsters of another age, the brutish men of the Neandertal. More feared than mammoth or tiger, they had ruled the forests until the Cro-Magnon men had come and waged savage warfare against them. Of mighty power and little mind, savage, bestial and cannibalistic, they inspired the tribesmen with loathing and horror--a horror transmitted through the ages in tales of ogres and goblins, of werewolves and beast-men.

They were fewer and more cunning, now. No longer they rushed roaring to battle, but cunning and frightful, they slunk about the forests, the terror of all beasts, brooding in their brutish minds with hatred for the men who had driven them from the best hunting grounds.

And ever the Cro-Magnon men trailed them down and slaughtered them, until sullenly they had withdrawn far into the deep forests. But the fear of them remained with the tribesmen, and no woman went into the jungle alone.

Sometimes children went, and sometimes they returned not; and searchers found but signs of a ghastly feast, with tracks that were not the tracks of beasts, nor yet the tracks of men.

And so a hunting party would go forth and hunt the monster down. Sometimes it gave battle and was slain, and sometimes it fled before them and escaped into the depths of the forest, where they dared not follow. Once a hunting party, reckless with the chase, had pursued a fleeing gur-na into the deep forest and there, in a deep ravine, where overhanging limbs shut out the sunlight, numbers of the Neandertalers had come upon them.

So no more entered the forests.

A-aea turned away, with a glance at the forest. Somewhere in its depths lurked the beast-man, piggish eyes glinting crafty hate, malevolent, frightful.

Someone stepped across her path. It was Ka-nanu, the son of a councilor of the chief.

She drew away with a shrug of her shoulders. She did not like Ka-nanu and she was afraid of him. He wooed her with a mocking air, as if he did it merely for amusement and would take her whenever he wished, anyway. He seized her by the wrist.

“Turn not away, fair maiden,” said he. “It is your slave, Ka-nanu.”

“Let me go,” she answered. “I must go to the spring for water.”

“Then I will go with you, moon of delight, so that no beast may harm you.”

And accompany her he did, in spite of her protests.

“There is a gur-na abroad,” he told her sternly. “It is lawful for a man to accompany even an unmated maiden, for protection. And I am Ka-nanu,” he added, in a different tone; “do not resist me too far, or I will teach you obedience.”

A-aea knew somewhat of the man’s ruthless nature. Many of the tribal girls looked with favor on Ka-nanu, for he was bigger and taller even than Ga-nor, and more handsome in a reckless, cruel way. But A-aea loved Ga-nor and she was afraid of Ka-nanu. Her very fear of him kept her from resisting his approaches too much. Ga-nor was known to be gentle with women, if careless of them, while Ka-nanu, thereby showing himself to be another mark of progress, was proud of his success with women and used his power over them in no gentle fashion.

A-aea found Ka-nanu was to be feared more than a beast, for at the spring just out of sight of the caves, he seized her in his arms.

“A-aea,” he whispered, “my little antelope, I have you at last. You shall not escape me.”

In vain she struggled and pleaded with him. Lifting her in his mighty arms he strode away into the forest.

Frantically she strove to escape, to dissuade him.

“I am not powerful enough to resist you,” she said, “but I will accuse you before the tribe.”

“You will never accuse me, little antelope,” he said, and she read another, even more sinister intention in his cruel countenance.

On and on into the forest he carried her, and in the midst of a glade he paused, his hunter’s instinct alert.

From the trees in front of them dropped a hideous monster, a hairy, misshapen, frightful thing.

A-aea’s scream re-echoed through the forest, as the thing approached. Ka-nanu, white-lipped and horrified, dropped A-aea to the ground and told her to run. Then, drawing knife and ax, he advanced.

The Neandertal man plunged forward on short, gnarled legs. He was covered with hair and his features were more hideous than an ape’s because of the grotesque quality of the man in them. Flat, flaring nostrils, retreating chin, fangs, no forehead whatever, great, immensely long arms dangling from sloping, incredible shoulders, the monster seemed like the devil himself to

the terrified girl. His apelike head came scarcely to Ka-nanu's shoulders, yet he must have outweighed the warrior by nearly a hundred pounds.

On he came like a charging buffalo, and Ka-nanu met him squarely and boldly. With flint ax and obsidian dagger he thrust and smote, but the ax was brushed aside like a toy and the arm that held the knife snapped like a stick in the misshapen hand of the Neandertaler. The girl saw the councilor's son wrenched from the ground and swung into the air, saw him hurled clear across the glade, saw the monster leap after him and rend him limb from limb.

Then the Neandertaler turned his attention to her. A new expression came into his hideous eyes as he lumbered toward her, his great hairy hands horridly smeared with blood, reaching toward her.

Unable to flee, she lay dizzy with horror and fear. And the monster dragged her to him, leering into her eyes. He swung her over his shoulder and waddled away through the trees; and the girl, half-fainting, knew that he was taking her to his lair, where no man would dare come to rescue her.

Ga-nor came down to the spring to drink. Idly he noticed the faint footprints of a couple who had come before him. Idly he noticed that they had not returned.

Each footprint had its individual characteristic. That of the man he knew to be Ka-nanu. The other track was the same as that in front of his cave. He wondered, idly as Ga-nor was wont to do all things except the painting of pictures.

Then, at the spring, he noticed that the footprints of the girl ceased, but that the man's turned toward the jungle and were more deeply imprinted than before. Therefore Ka-nanu was carrying the girl.

Ga-nor was no fool. He knew that a man carries a girl into the forest for no good purpose. If she had been willing to go, she would not have been carried.

Now Ga-nor (another mark of progress) was inclined to meddle in things not pertaining to him. Perhaps another man would have shrugged his shoulders and gone his way, reflecting that it would not be well to interfere with a son of a councilor. But Ga-nor had few interests, and once his interest was roused he was inclined to see a thing through. Moreover, though not renowned as a fighter, he feared no man.

Therefore, he loosened ax and dagger in his belt, shifted his grip on his spear, and took up the trail.

On and on, deeper and deeper into the forest, the Neandertaler carried little A-aea.

The forest was silent and evil, no birds, no insects broke the stillness. Through the overhanging trees no sunlight filtered. On padded feet that made no noise the Neandertaler hurried on.

Beasts slunk out of his path. Once a great python came slithering through the jungle and the Neandertaler took to the trees with surprising speed for one of his gigantic bulk. He was not at home in the trees, however, not even as much as A-aea would have been.

Once or twice the girl glimpsed another such monster as her captor. Evidently they had gone far beyond the vaguely defined boundaries of her race. The other Neandertal men avoided them. It was evident that they lived as do beasts, uniting only against some common enemy and not often then. Therein had lain the reason for the success of the Cro-Magnons' warfare against them.

Into a ravine he carried the girl, and into a cave, small and vaguely illumined by the light from without. He threw her roughly to the floor of the cave, where she lay, too terrified to rise.

The monster watched her, like some demon of the forest. He did not even jabber at her, as an ape would have done. The Neandertalers had no form of speech whatever.

He offered her meat of some kind--uncooked, of course. Her mind reeling with horror, she saw that it was the arm of a Cro-Magnon child. When he saw she would not eat, he devoured it himself, tearing the flesh with great fangs.

He took her between his great hands, bruising her soft flesh. He ran rough fingers through her hair, and when he saw that he hurt her he seemed filled with a fiendish glee. He tore out handfuls of her hair, seeming to enjoy devilishly the torturing of his fair captive. A-aea set her teeth and would not scream as she had done at first, and presently he desisted.

The leopard-skin garment she wore seemed to enrage him. The leopard was his hereditary foe. He plucked it from her and tore it to pieces.

And meanwhile Ga-nor was hurrying through the forest. He was racing now, and his face was a devil's mask, for he had come upon the bloody glade and found the monster's tracks, leading away from it.

And in the cave in the ravine the Neandertaler reached for A-aea.

She sprang back and he plunged toward her. He had her in a corner but she slipped under his arm and sprang away. He was still between her and the outside of the cave.

Unless she could get past him, he would corner her and seize her. So she pretended to spring to one side. The Neandertaler lumbered in that direction, and quick as a cat she sprang the other way and darted past him, out into the ravine.

With a bellow he charged after her. A stone rolled beneath her foot, flinging her headlong; before she could rise his hand seized her shoulder. As he dragged her into the cave, she screamed, wildly, frenziedly, with no hope of rescue, just the scream of a woman in the grasp of a beast.

Ga-nor heard that scream as he bounded down into the ravine. He approached the cave swiftly but cautiously. As he looked in, he saw red rage. In the vague light of the cave, the great Neandertaler stood, his piggish eyes on his foe, hideous, hairy, blood-smearred, while at his feet, her soft white body contrasting with the shaggy monster, her long hair gripped in his blood-stained hand, lay A-aea.

The Neandertaler bellowed, dropped his captive and charged. And Ga-nor met him, not matching brute strength with his lesser might, but leaping back and out of the cave. His spear leaped and the monster bellowed as it tore through his arm. Leaping back again, the warrior jerked his spear and crouched. Again the Neandertaler rushed, and again the warrior leaped away and thrust, this time for the great hairy chest. And so they battled, speed and intelligence against brute strength and savagery.

Once the great, lashing arm of the monster caught Ga-nor upon the shoulder and hurled him a dozen feet away, rendering that arm nearly useless for a time. The Neandertaler bounded after him, but Ga-nor flung himself to one side and leaped to his feet. Again and again his spear drew blood, but apparently it seemed only to enrage the monster.

Then before the warrior knew it, the wall of the ravine was at his back and he heard A-aea shriek as the monster rushed in. The spear was torn from his hand and he was in the grasp of his foe. The great arms encircled his neck and shoulders, the great fangs sought his throat. He thrust his elbow under the retreating chin of his antagonist, and with his free hand struck the hideous face again and again; blows that would have felled an ordinary man but which the Neandertal beast did not even notice.

Ga-nor felt consciousness going from him. The terrific arms were crushing him, threatening to break his neck. Over the shoulder of his foe he saw the girl approaching with a great stone, and he tried to motion her back.

With a great effort he reached down over the monster's arm and found his ax. But so close were they clinched together that he could not draw it. The Neandertal man set himself to break his foe to pieces as one breaks a stick. But Ga-nor's elbow was thrust under his chin, and the more the Neandertal man tugged, the deeper drove the elbow into this hairy throat. Presently he realized that fact and flung Ga-nor away from him. As he did so, the warrior drew his ax, and striking with the fury of desperation, clove the monster's head.

For a minute Ga-nor stood reeling above his foe, then he felt a soft form within his arms and saw a pretty face, close to his.

"Ga-nor!" A-aea whispered, and Ga-nor gathered the girl in his arms.

"What I have fought for I will keep," said he.

And so it was that the girl who went forth into the forest in the arms of an abductor came back in the arms of a lover and a mate.

THE END

AYAME'S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

3.

Ranzo the tumbler seemed always to smile  
and Anton felt him rubbing him like salt  
chaffing his skin as they walked but a short while  
he would often flip, roll or somersault  
in mid step and he would vault every stile  
so far there hadn't been any language taught  
as his company brought up Anton's bile  
and in those early days the air was fraught  
as Ranzo's smile was returned with a scowl  
and Ranzo's elation brought Anton down

They headed North West as the legend said  
or so Ranzo said was placed the village  
the only thing that could raise Anton's cheeks  
was thinking of Ranzo's naivety

Ranzo had blinded himself with his hopes  
and with blindness he called those hopes noble  
his talking of them was almost a gloat  
yet on shifting sands stood his hopefulness  
so frail that they might wash away with soap  
though Anton would take the gold he possessed  
even when his pride and dreaming had choked  
Anton was aware enough to perceive  
that the less aware had similar greed



despite all lofty and romantic claims  
wealth and emotion are both to mans gain  
and his quest for a perfect love was just  
a veiled and self-righteous form of lust

So the two of them spoke little until  
a hard night when shelter could not be found  
when desolate with weariness, wear and ill  
they lay down to rest upon open ground

Sun broke the next day and bore like a drill  
And Ranzo it seemed was not to be found  
the sound of birdsong was rather too shrill  
a bleak view showed naught of the miles surround  
for miles around just heather and bracken  
Anton felt greed and fatigue attack him  
he was hungry enough to eat the soil  
forwards and backwards were equal in toil  
he waited for two hours for Ranzo's return  
and set out forwards hopeless but firm

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

## A NIGHT WITH ANGELINE by John L Campbell

### Part Two

Dressed in a tuxedo and freshly shaved, Nathan left his rooms and made his way down the upstairs hallway, an exquisite Persian runner beneath his polished shoes, past oil paintings depicting scenes of a noble and privileged country life. He turned at the balcony, and through archways on his right he could see down into the great hall, where half a dozen servants were making final preparations, Douglas directing last minute tasks. A fire roared in the large hearth at the far end, flanked by a pair of twelfth century suits of armor, and over which hung the Madison family coat of arms.

Instead of descending the wide staircase into the hall, Nathan turned down another corridor, where the warmth of an oil lamp glowed at the far end. Seated in a comfortable armchair just outside the last door in the hall was Mr. Voorhees, a newspaper in his lap, a brandy on the small table beside him, next to the oil lamp. He was smoking his pipe, the scent of hickory tobacco drifting down the hall.

“Good evening, Sergeant Major,” Nathan said.

Voorhees nodded, clenching his pipe in his teeth. “Sir.”

Nathan saw the wide black muzzle of a revolver peeking out from under the newspaper, and in the shadows behind the small table was the outline of a medieval battleaxe standing on its broad head. It was the sergeant major’s favorite, taken from the armory wall in the library, and kept sharpened to a razor’s edge by the man personally. Nathan knew there would be a double barrel shotgun placed discretely nearby as well.

The sergeant major was the son of a British soldier and a Boer farm girl, brought up in a string of different garrisons as his father moved around with his regiment. Outcast from his Dutch roots, he had been raised a loyalist, and it had been a natural progression for him to enter military service. In 1899 he found himself assigned to a very young colonel as the senior regimental enlisted man. He and Nathan had been together ever since, in uniform and out.

For the last three years, since the autumn of 1908, someone had sat outside this door every night. Sometimes it was Corporals Andrews or Stark from the garage, one-time raw recruits of his former unit who had managed to survive, and now served him in different but no less loyal capacities. Most often, however, it was the sergeant major. This watch had been kept ever since a vile and unholy creature had entered the house and carried five-year-old Geoffrey away, leaving his bloodless and lifeless body in the forest. The creature he had finally put down today.

“I think you can stand down now, Sergeant Major,” he said.

The older man puffed at his pipe. “Habit, sir. I’m accustomed to it, and it’s a fine place to do some quiet reading.” The man did little reading here, remaining watchful through long nights, and protecting the one thing of value still remaining to the Earl.

Nathan nodded and entered the room, and was immediately attacked by a five-year-old with pigtails and a white nightshirt who shrieked, “Daddyyyy!” as she flung herself into his arms. Nathan swept Amelia up and spun her in a fast, high circle, making her giggle. The room was a catastrophe of toys and dolls, brightly lit, and a heavysset woman stood near one of two doorways, dressed in a simple yellow dress and head wrap. She smiled with impossibly white teeth, made more so by her bluish-black skin.

“Nannybird says you’re having a party tonight, Daddy! May I come?”

“I told you, child,” the black woman said, “it only for full grown ladies and gentlemen.” Her Swazi accent was strong, despite the near decade she had been in England after Madison had arranged for her new home and new life.

Nathan held his daughter in the crook of an arm, and pressed his forehead to hers. “A stuffy party for stuffy grownups.” He scowled and stuck out his tongue. “What say I just hide up here with you all night and play?”

The little girl clapped her hands. “Oh, Daddy, that would be delightful!” Then she thought for a moment, her forehead furrowing the same way her mother’s had when she was thinking of something serious. “But that wouldn’t be polite, would it?”

He smiled. “No, love, it wouldn’t be.”

“We must take care of our guests,” she said, nodding, and he laughed.

Nathan carried her from the playroom into her bedroom. Nannybird slept in the adjacent room and rarely left the girl’s side, day or – especially – night. He plopped her onto a frilly canopy bed and tickled her until she squirmed and begged him to stop, then she scrambled under her covers.

“What shall it be tonight?” Nathan asked.

“Peter Rabbit!” she said, pointing to her nightstand.

Nathan picked up the beautifully illustrated book and climbed onto the bed beside her, stretching his legs out and leaning back against the headboard, as Amelia snuggled in close to him. This particular copy was autographed by Beatrix Potter herself, after Nathan had run into her in London in June. *Run into* wasn’t exactly right. He had made a point of locating her through her publisher, and had set an appointment, inviting her to join him for tea. She had accepted, and they had spent a pleasant afternoon chatting about children, ending with her autograph and an agreement that at Christmas, she would visit the Madison house as a most welcome guest, meet her greatest admirer and read personally from Amelia’s favorite. Of course Nathan said nothing of it to Amelia.

They read together for fifteen minutes, the five-year-old turning the pages, practicing her own reading skills, and often speaking the lines of pages not yet reached, before her eyes grew heavy and she began to sink into the pillows. Nathan eased off the bed and brushed a stray wisp of dark hair from her face, kissing her gently on the forehead before turning off the lights and closing the door behind him. Nannybird wished him a good night, and he rejoined Voorhees in the hallway.

“Really, Sergeant Major, you can take your leave.”

The older man crossed his legs and settled deeper into the chair, puffing his pipe. “Right away, sir.”

Nathan understood, and went to see to his guests.

The party was not Nathan's idea. His sister Pauline, now married to a duke and living in Wales, had pushed him into it with her co-conspirators Linus and Caroline Edgemont. Pauline said it was time for Nathan to return to the world and start putting his sorrows behind him, and Linus, a friend from Oxford who had never worked a single day and lived off a vast family trust, advised that it was a wise business move to socialize with people who might become or recommend future clients. Linus's wife Caroline wanted to play matchmaker, and arrange something between him and any number of well-bred young ladies from proper families. After months of refusal, Nathan had relented for no reason other than to end their perpetual nagging, well-intentioned though it may be.

He had little desire to "rejoin the world," and his business needed little assistance. Madison Iron was quickly growing into an empire as the international need quickly outpaced the supply. Among its many contracts, Madison was the primary supplier for the liners being built by White Star. As for any liaison with ladies, well-bred or otherwise, the mere thought upset Nathan so that his hands trembled. There would be *no* more relationships for him.

The guests began arriving at a quarter past eight, and Nathan was there to greet each one, allowing their coats and umbrellas to be collected by a pair of male servants, then approaching them as they stepped into the entry hall to begin the expected ritual. A firm handshake for the men, a gracious bow for the ladies, a kiss on the cheek for the wives of closer acquaintances. Welcomes and appreciation for their long trip to the country, insinuations that they spend the night in one of the manor's many rooms, and the offers declined with equal graciousness, with only two exceptions – the Edgemonts and an older couple from several miles away, who didn't like to travel after dark, the chill hurting their old bones. This was a task for which his upbringing had trained him well, and was a process he found intensely tedious.

His sister Pauline sent a messenger with a hand-written note, expressing her apologies for her last-minute cancellation, and begging his forgiveness. The Duke had been called to France on urgent business, and she was required to accompany him. Nathan took several minutes at Douglas's desk, tucked discretely into an alcove, and penned a reply, telling her it was no trouble whatsoever, wishing her well on her trip across the channel, and insisting she visit him upon her return. He meant it, too. Pauline's pestering that he rejoin society was genuine and good-hearted, and he loved her. Other than an aunt in London and a few cousins he barely knew, Pauline and Amelia were his only surviving family.

The Edgemonts were the last to arrive, Caroline admonishing a servant to take special care of her full length sable coat, and Linus spinning his cloak off dramatically, tossing his leather gloves into his bowler and casually tossing it to one of the young men. Caroline's gown was from Paris, the very latest fashion, and Linus's tuxedo was elegant in the extreme, with diamond cufflinks and diamond stickpin in the black tie.

"Nathan!" Linus cried, hurrying forward past his wife. "You must meet my new love." He tried to grab his host's elbow, but Nathan sidestepped him in order to take Caroline's hand and give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You look stunning as always," he told her.

It was clearly what she wanted to hear, and she smiled demurely before setting off to collect and spread the latest society gossip.

Linus managed to catch Nathan's arm, and pulled him back towards the front door. "Come on, you must see this."

Nathan allowed himself to be led out to the broad stone steps in front of the manor, where a brick drive curved in a wide circle before the house. An assortment of luxury automobiles, most of them chauffeured, were lined up around the drive. Half a dozen or so polished black carriages were there as well, an affectation of elegance preferred by some of the country nobility, mostly the older gentlemen who refused to put their faith in the combustion engine. The liveried drivers tended to their horses, grooming and feeding and, of course, quickly cleaning up behind them.

"You're in love with a horse, Linus?" Nathan asked.

"Clever, quite clever." He pointed at one of the cars. "That, my friend, is my new romance." It was a gleaming black 1911 Rolls Limousine, its chrome like mirrors, its deep black shine reflecting the gaslights around the circle.

"Lovely," said Nathan.

"Isn't she?" Linus beamed. "Powerful, fast...first class luxury from front to back."

Nathan gave the appreciative nod expected of him and guided his guest back inside. Shortly, he found himself in a knot of tuxedos, pompous and whiskered men grumbling about commodities and business and politics, drinking his wine and trying to one-up each other with not-so-subtle references to their wealth. Nathan was bored in minutes.

“Here, now,” said a portly man in his fifties, gesturing with his wine glass, his white mustache drooping but curling upwards at the tips. Nathan had known Randolph Kensington for years, a man who enjoyed fortunes equally divided between gold and railroads. The Dark Continent was the source of one and destination of the other.

“Madison’s an authority on Africa, let’s hear his word on this. What say you, Madison? Those damned savages in Swaziland, a threat to Her Majesty’s empire or no?”

Nathan held up a hand. “Gentlemen, I’m really not qualified to...”

“Nonsense,” said Sizemore, a man nearly Kensington’s twin in age, girth, and investments in Africa. It was diamonds for him. “You commanded troops during the Boer War, what was it, for two years?”

“Three,” said Kensington. “Showed those bloody Dutchmen a thing or two!”

“Yes,” said Sizemore. “And your unit was...”

“Queen’s 11<sup>th</sup> Rifles,” Nathan said quietly.

“A colonel, no less!” cried Kensington. His cheeks were getting flushed with the wine. “Youngest man in the regiment to ever hold that rank, I’m told. Sorted out that business at Tugela Heights.”

Nathan stiffened. For a moment he could *hear* the impact of a 37mm shell.

“Of course,” said Sizemore, “the papers went on about that for some time. Nasty business. My compliments to you, Colonel.” The man tipped his glass. Nathan had no wine glass of his own, and wouldn’t have raised it if he had. Oh, he had ‘sorted out that nasty business,’ alright, and lost a thousand men in the process, as well as the full use of his leg. Over the soft tones of the string quartet playing in a corner of the great hall, Nathan again heard the whine of a shell, the blast, and the screaming of boys who hadn’t yet begun to shave.

The Boers had been dug in on the Heights, their gun emplacements well positioned and pre-sighted, their shooters protected in sandbagged bunkers and trenches, with plenty of ammunition for their Mauser rifles. For three days, Nathan had sent the regiment against them, up and down the slopes, taking ground and losing it just as fast, while the casualties climbed. On the third day, with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion’s commanding officer killed, Nathan had taken charge and personally led an assault which would prove to be the final, victorious push that sent the enemy into retreat. But the cost had been staggering, and it was Sergeant Major Voorhees who found Nathan on the hillside, his leg torn apart by shrapnel, bleeding badly and still barking encouragement to his young troops. Voorhees had carried him on his back to a medical field unit, saving his life and his leg.

Six months in hospital and he was back in it. The battle for Tugela Heights had been a major catalyst in the Boer War, for it had broken the enemy’s ability to mount large scale, military-style operations. Instead, they switched tactics and began a brutal guerilla war of small unit ambushes and murder. This was met by the Crown’s implementation of a scorched earth policy, and along with it, another policy as inhumane and brutal as the new tactics of their adversaries.

“Decorated by the Queen, personally,” offered Linus. Neither he, the queen, or any of these men knew that in earning that decoration, Nathan Madison had also earned a nickname from his troops; Bloody Maddie.

“Indeed,” said Sizemore, nodding. “So you are in fact a man experienced in the ways of the indigenous population. What do you say to Kensington’s claim, that the savages threaten Her Majesty’s interests down there?” And of course by that, he meant his interests.

Nathan breathed deeply and tried to keep his voice even. “Forgive me, gentlemen,” Nathan said, “but without the Swazis, there’d be no one to dig your gold,” a look at Kensington, “your diamonds, a look at Sizemore, “or lay the track for your railroad,” a look back at Kensington.



“Bah,” said Sizemore, waving a hand, “those beggars are controlled, docile. We’re talking about the real threat, the tribal groups.”

“They actually want the Crown to recognize them as a sovereign nation!” bellowed Kensington. “Can you imagine?”

Nathan looked at Linus, but his friend simply sipped his wine and said nothing. As long as his family money flowed, the man had little concern for the plight or exploitation of others, and understood it even less.

“I tell you how we solve this,” Kensington said, increasingly drunk, his face red as he leaned in and lowered his voice, wagging a finger. “We send in the troops and round up those bloody troublemakers in the night. Put them in camps like the Boer.” He gave Nathan a friendly nudge. “Eh, Madison?”

Nathan’s eyes turned cold, and he excused himself, his voice tight. He moved through his guests, evading offered pleasantries, leaning hard on his cane as his leg flared. He reached the safety and isolation of his study, closed the door behind him and leaned against it, letting out a shaky breath, his eyes closed.

Ignorant, pompous bastards. The same sort who had sent troops into the Boer Republic in South Africa in 1899, and kept them there for three years, enforcing British rule on Dutch colonists who only wanted to farm and raise their cattle and their families and be left alone. Tens of thousands dead. An entire way of life destroyed. All to serve the arrogance and greed of an empire’s elite. And of course there had been the camps.

Nathan opened his eyes and walked to a leather armchair, easing himself into it and straightening his leg, massaging the thigh. There was still metal in there, plenty of it, dangerous little pieces of twisted steel that worked their way slowly through the tissue, sometimes surfacing as sores and needing to be plucked out of the flesh, sometimes burrowing and grating against bone and nerve. The surgeons were amazed they had saved the leg, even more so that the young colonel had been able to walk again.

He looked about the dark study, then glanced at the window. Through the sheer curtains he could see a figure just outside, looking in. The features were in silhouette, and a moment later they were gone, a curious guest taking the evening air on a stroll around the manor.

The scorched earth policy had been terrible indeed, crops and houses burned, livestock slaughtered, wells poisoned. Not the kind of warfare gentlemen were trained to wage, or, presumably, to permit. And yet he had ordered it done, and put more than one homestead to the torch himself while Boer women and children watched. And as for them? The Crown decreed that the civilian population be collected and placed in concentration camps, ostensibly to deny the guerillas a support network of friends and family, but in reality as punishment for their savage and often effective tactics. The camps had been horrid, places of rampant disease and malnourishment, foul water, little or no medical care, and no place to bury the dead. So they burned them, and the African sky was lit each night with their pyres, the reek of charred flesh carried across the landscape for miles.

“And I helped put them there,” Nathan whispered to the darkness, staring not at the room, but at scenes which played only for him, and were never far from his thoughts.

A woman’s laughter came from outside the window, and he levered himself to his feet with the use of his cane. Dear God how he wanted these people gone from his house, from his estate, so that he could at least be alone with his failed life and not have it speculated upon by people who were never troubled by such things as loss and regret. He paused at the study door to compose himself, straightened his back, and went to face the rest of the evening.

Dinner was an exercise in restraint and a test of his upper-class upbringing, as he forced himself through the rites of playing host, pretending to show interest in people, smiling at their charming little stories, and looking appropriately concerned over the minor inconveniences in their privileged lives. At one point he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Smyth standing unobtrusively near the door to the butler’s pantry, and she gave him a tight smile and a wink, as if to say, “You’re doing fine, son. They’ll be gone soon.”

Dinner began winding down, and his guests started to drift from the dining room, most of the men heading for the library or the billiards room for brandy and cigars. A few, however, were intercepted by their wives and steered towards the gallery, where the quartet had relocated itself for after-dinner dancing. Nathan circulated as much as was required, and was counting himself lucky that he had thus far evaded Caroline Edgemont, when the woman appeared before him, a cluster of her female accomplices quickly surrounding him, a lovely and well-dressed young woman in her twenties on Caroline’s arm, looking shy. It

was an ambush worthy of his former adversaries, carefully planned and executed with precision, cutting him off from male reinforcements, who were at the moment helping themselves to his liquor and fine tobacco.

Caroline put on her sweetest face and looked at the girl. "My dear, allow me to introduce Lord Nathan Madison III, our most gracious host."

The girl smiled and gave a slight curtsy.

"Nathan, may I present Miss Deidre Winters, of Devonshire. Her father is Sir Charles Winter, who..."

He didn't really hear the rest, as Caroline proceeded to detail the importance and lucrative businesses of the young woman's father, the high placement of the Winter family, and the fine schools which young Deidre had attended. He smiled and nodded in the right places, but he felt the knot of his tie constricting his throat, making it difficult to breathe, and he fought the urge to simply bolt past them and find a place to hide. Deidre eyed him with interest and curiosity as Caroline extolled Nathan's many virtues as a gentleman, war hero and successful businessman.

"In fact, he's building our ship," said Caroline.

Nathan returned to the present. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well," said Caroline to her entourage, "I suppose he's not actually building it, but Madison Iron is the primary supplier in its construction." When Nathan just blinked at her, she patted his arm playfully. "The Titanic, silly." She looked at her lady friends. "It sails to New York next April, and Linus has booked us passage on its maiden voyage, first class accommodations, of course. Perhaps you'll join us, Nathan? The sea air would do you good."

He shook his head. "I don't care much for the sea, Caroline. But I'm certain you'll enjoy your voyage." He suddenly realized that while Caroline had been talking, the entourage had steadily been moving them from the dining room into the gallery, where already several couples were moving gracefully across the dance floor.

Caroline, still smiling, placed Deidre's hand on Nathan's, and the touch made him tense. "Now be a good host and ask our young lady to dance."

Nathan resisted pulling his hand away, and touched his cane lightly to his leg. "I'm afraid I simply can't..."

Deidre pouted just the slightest, and Caroline tapped his cheek twice in a mock slap. "Posh! You mind your manners, Lord Madison, and entertain your guest." Then she floated away with her accomplices to sip punch and speculate about the possibilities of the arranged pair.

A servant appeared and took his cane as Nathan drew a sharp breath, wishing, and not for the last time, that the evening would end. He asked, she accepted, and they were waltzing. His leg was starting to burn, and little pricks of pain shot into him, especially near the knee, where the surgeons said there was a large cluster of shrapnel. He soldiered on, years of lessons and practice remembered as he executed a precise, if somewhat stiff waltz, holding the young lady properly before him. She danced equally well, and though quiet at first, quickly began to speak about horses and riding and wouldn't it be delightful to ride Nathan's estate one day and oh, what a lovely home Nathan had and had he ever been to Paris and America. Nathan decided she was quite chatty and forward for a society girl during her first meeting, and immediately saw that Caroline's hands were deep in this intrigue.

The musicians led from one piece immediately to the next, and Miss Winters pleaded for another dance as the floor became increasingly crowded, a turning sea of tuxedos and gowns. Nathan relented, despite the protests from his leg.

"Isn't she adorable," a woman said behind Nathan. He turned his partner to see who had spoken, but there were only other spinning couples.

A few moments later, the woman's voice came from behind him again, close and soft, dusky. "Not your type at all, darling."

Nathan went cold, recognizing the voice, knowing it was impossible. A quick turn of his head revealed only elegant ladies and gentlemen, all focused on their partners and the dance, none paying him any attention. Miss Winters urged him to keep up. More gliding as the group turned across the floor as a single mass, and then the voice again, a whisper this time.

“You won’t be able to keep her from me, you know.”

Nathan released Deidre and stopped, spinning around with fists clenched. He caught a glimpse of long blond hair, unfettered by pins or jewels, flowing free, and then it was lost in the crowd. The dancers gave him odd looks as they moved around and past him, and Miss Winters, flushed and embarrassed, fled to Caroline and her ladies. Nathan stood fast, searching the crowd.

“I don’t mean that little twit,” said the voice, and this time when he turned around she was there before him, dancing with Linus Edgemont, who wore a glassy-eyed look with a simpleton’s smile. She was in her early twenties, slender, wearing a tight white peasant blouse with a low, revealing neckline, and a floor-length red skirt that hugged her curves, the hem hinting at bare feet. Her simple clothing made her stand out among the gowns and tuxedos as one who did not belong. The woman’s long blond hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her pale skin was smooth and flawless. Red lipstick stood in contrast to her complexion, and her eyes were blue as and similar to the North Atlantic; dark, cold and utterly without mercy.

“I mean Amelia,” she said, and twirled away in Linus’s arms, throwing her head back and laughing, drawing looks of disapproval from the other guests.

Nathan could only watch her, paralyzed as a barrage of emotions assaulted him; anger, lust, bitterness, fear, self loathing. Most of all horror. Angeline had come back into his life.

But Angeline was dead.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

## HAGBARD AND HAKI by Gavin Chappell

### 1. Hagbard and Signy

Hagbard was one of the sons of King Hagmund. One of his brothers was the sea-king Haki and they sailed widely as Vikings, plundering wherever they went. Sometimes they went raiding together, sometimes separately.

One summer Hagbard went raiding with his other brothers Helvin and Hagmund and they met Alf and Alfgeir, sons of Sigar, the king of the Siklings (nephew of Siggeir who married Signy, sister of Sigmund the Volsung). The ensuing battle was ended only by nightfall, where they kept truce according to a vow they had made. The next day they began to fight again, and the losses on both sides were so great that they were forced to make peace.

At the court of King Sigar, near Sigtuna in what is now Sweden, Princess Signy had been approached by a man called Hildegis, who was handsome and of high rank. Yet she spurned him because she loved Hagbard's brother Haki because of his fame as a warrior. When Hagbard accompanied Sigar's brothers to the king's hall, he managed to speak with her without her brothers' knowledge and she agreed to become his mistress.

Afterwards, the serving-women were comparing noblemen, she said that she preferred Haki to Hildegis, and recited a verse praising the sea-king in such a way that people thought she praised Hagbard under Haki's name.

There were two men who were advisers at King Sigar's court, one named Bolvis, the other Bilvis, the latter who delighted in bringing peace, the other who fomented strife between people. Hildegis went to Bolvis and persuaded him to make trouble between the sons of Sigar and the sons of Hagmund. This he did, and one day while Hagbard was elsewhere, Alf and Alfgeir, in concert with Hildegis, attacked Helvin and Hagmund and slew them at a place now called Hagmund's Bay. Learning of this, Hagbard returned and drove off the sons of Sigar and forced Hildegis from the battle with a spear through his buttocks.

Now Hagbard disguised himself as a woman, and went to Signy, claiming to be one of Haki's shieldmaidens with a message from him to Sigar. When he was taken to bed with the handmaidens, and a serving woman washed his legs, they asked him why his legs were so hairy and his hands so hard, but he told them that such was the lot of a shieldmaiden. Signy, who had learnt the truth, backed him up.

That night they slept together, and declared undying love; Signy said that she could never outlive Hagbard, that she would die when he did.

But in the morning, the serving-women betrayed them and Sigar's warriors tried to rush into the bower. Hagbard fought them off, standing in the bower doorway and killing many of them before he was finally overpowered and taken before the people for judgment.

Many people thought he should be punished, but Bilvis said that it would be better to invite such a great warrior to join Sigar's warband. Bolvis stepped forward now and said that this was no time to show mercy for the man who had slain Sigar's sons and deflowered his daughter. This swayed the people and a gallows was erected to deal with Hagbard.

Sigar's queen handed Hagbard a horn of mead, taunting him. He took it with the hand that had killed her sons, and flung it in her face.

Meanwhile Signy, weeping, asked her women if they could bear to join in the deed she intended to undertake. They said they would do anything she wished, and she told them that she had no wish to outlive her lover, and that they must set fire to the bower and hang themselves. Trembling, they agreed, and she gave them all mead to ease their terror.

Now Hagbard was taken to his gallows. He wanted to test Signy's love, so he asked his executioners to hang his mantle from the noose, so he could see what would happen to him. They agreed, and a message was brought to Signy from a man looking from the hall that he had seen Hagbard hanged. At once, Signy and her maidens set alight their bower and hanged themselves.

On seeing the flames licking the bower far away, knowing the full extent of Signy's love, Hagbard joyfully allowed the hangman to tighten the noose and soon he was swinging from the gallows.

## 2. Haki

Meanwhile Hagbard's brother Haki had won fame and fortune when he and his warriors, who included Starkad the Old, sailed to Sweden and fought King Hugleik. Two brothers

came to Hagleik's aid, Svipdag and Geigad. They met on the Fyris Wolds and after a long battle, defeated King Hagleik's army.

Despite this, Svipdag and Geigad charged forward, but Haki's twelve champions, led by Starkad, went against them, six on one, and they were taken captive. Now Haki forced through the shield-ring surrounding Hagleik, and he killed the king and two of his sons. The Swedes fled, and King Haki became king of Sweden.

Now Haki heard of Hagbard's death, and he collected a fleet in the bay called Hervig, although he was deserted by Starkad. Dividing his fleet into three, he sent two-thirds forwards, while a few men rowed up the river Susa to give aid to the foot-troops. Haki went with the remaining third overland, travelling through the forests to avoid being spotted. When they left the cover of the trees, they cut down boughs from the trees and carried them before them, carrying naked swords.

Sigar received a report of a forest advancing on him. The king thought this was an omen of his own death. Sigar retreated from the town to find a more level and open battlefield. He fought Haki at a spring named Valbrunna, where he was slain. Haki returned to his kingdom.

Now he found himself challenged for his throne by Jorund and Eirik, King Hagleik's cousins, who had been living as Vikings all this time. They had heard that Starkad had abandoned the king and now they sailed towards Sweden, after gathering a large fleet. When they landed in Sweden, the people flocked to join them. The brothers reached Lake Malaren and advanced towards Uppsala, meeting King Haki with his smaller force on the Fyris Wolds. In the battle that followed, King Haki went valiantly forward, cutting down everyone around him until he reached King Eirik and slew him too, and cut down the bannerman. King Jorund and his men fled the field and returned to their ships.

But Haki had been so badly wounded in the battle that he knew his death was close. He ordered that a longship be loaded with his slain warriors and their weapons, and taken to sea with the sails hoisted. Then he had the ship fired and he went to lie down among his slain comrades while the wind drove the ship far out into the sea.



## The Cosmic Kid by Todd Nelsen

My real name is not important. Names are like stars and only shine as brightly as the man behind them. What *is* important, is I'm a fighter. And not only that, but I'm the fighter that went the distance, five rounds, toe-to-toe, with Zoltan Green, some say, the greatest, boxing champion the universe has ever seen. Not bad for an earthman from New Jersey, I'd say.

They called me, and still call me, the Cosmic Kid...

We're moving into round three. None of them thought I'd take it this far, but I'd proven them wrong. The Champ had pounded me, knocked me down (I'd beat the count of 10 twice already), busted me up (my face was swollen and bruised; my nose was broken; I had a cut above my left eye; it felt like my brain was rattling in my head, and my vision was starting to blur)... but I was still standing; I'd taken two rounds of abuse and was still on my feet.

At the moment, I was in my corner, getting the juice from my trainer, RPX-32:

"He'll try to KO ya now, Kid," the robot was saying, his voice sounding metallic, as it always did, "just like he's been doin'. The Champ's a real slugger, ain't no way around it. But ya got to stay away from his hands, Kid. Don't try to take him head on. Stick n' move. Stick n' move." He shuffled his feet, showing me how to do it. "Ya got that?"

I spit and pushed my mouth guard into place, with the tip of my glove, and bit down hard, probably a little harder than I should have. My teeth felt like they'd moved a few inches.

Stick and move.

Stick and move.

Got it. Right.

“G-o-o-o-o-d,” my trainer said, looking me over. “G-o-o-o-o-d. See that? We have a fighter here, Joe. The Kid’s got heart.”

Joe agreed. “The Kid’s got heart, all right.”

I looked back over my shoulder to my cutman, Joe, a six hundred pound Eridani who was fisting mouthfuls of larva into his face. He smiled, a white and squishy grin, and continued to massage my neck with one of his many arms.

“Listen to the robot, Kid,” he said to me. “RPX is the best.”

I swallowed hard. I’d trained with the best, and fought the best, to get where I was. This was my shot, my chance.

“So whatcha waitin’ for?” RPX asked. “An invitation? Get back in there! Show ‘em what you’re made of!”

\* \* \*

Round 3.

I bobbed left...

I bobbed right...

Then the Champ stepped in close and sent me a short straight-punch to the gut that sent me whirling back to the ropes. As I tried to catch my footing, the Champ came at me, his arms swinging, with a series of jabs, crosses, and right hooks.

It felt like I’d been caught in a tornado.

“Get outta there, Kid!” RPX-32 cried. “He’s killin’ ya!”

The robot turned to Joe. “He’s killin’ him, ain’t he, Joe?”

Joe agreed, “Yeah, he’s killin’ him, all right.”

But I couldn’t get around him; the Champ controlled the ring; it was his fight now. He

bounced from side-to-side, keeping me boxed in. So I did the only thing I could do. I covered up. I kept my hands tight to my head, and my elbows close to my body, just as I'd been taught, keeping my head safe and cushioning the body shots. But this didn't stop him from hitting me. Every punch he sent me, clobbered me like a meteor strike. If the Champ would have been more wild, and less experienced, I could have circled out of the pinch and brought the fight back to him, back to the center of the ring. But the Champ knew his stuff; he was an experienced fighter. He was the best, and the best kept their cool.

When I leaned back, he leaned in.

When I leaned forward, he leaned out.

He backed the fight into the ropes and kept it there the rest of round. When the bell finally rang, and I stumbled back to my corner, I was seeing triple.

The Champ hit hard.

\* \* \*

“Okay, so that didn't go so good,” the robot said.

Joe agreed. “Not so good.”

“You've got to stay off 'em ropes, Kid. He's pulverizin' ya.”

“Pul-ver-izin',” Joe agreed.

I was breathing hard. The robot was right; Joe was right, too. My body felt like meat. If it weren't for the chair beneath me, I was sure I'd topple over. I could feel Joe's steady hand on my shoulder, his lips smacking another mouthful of mush.

The robot leaned down to me. “Let me ask ya a question, Kid. Ya givin' up? Ya ready for the towel?”

I didn't answer. I felt like I was a million miles away from the ring... and drifting.

RPX leaned in closer, close enough that if he would have had bad breath, I would have got a whiff of it.

“Kid, I’ve trained a lot of fighters in my day --” he said.

“A lot of fighters,” Joe agreed. “The best.”

“And I ain’t never seen one like ya.”

“Never.”

“So listen up, Kid,” the robot said; his voice was the sound of an unrelenting machine.

“Ya better get busy winnin,’ man. Because the Champ didn’t come here to lose.”

Though my vision was blurred, I looked across the ring, at Zoltan Green. And what I saw there, in the opposite corner, wasn’t a man, wasn’t a man at all, but a fighter. A fighter that wouldn’t quit, a fighter that wouldn’t stop until I was on my back and counting stars. Our names didn’t matter here. It didn’t matter that I was the underdog, and he was on top. He knew it, too. Here, was only blood, brawn, footwork, a well-placed jab. My vision cleared a little, then. I saw what I needed to do. If I wanted it, if I wanted to win, I’d have to turn this around and take the fight beyond the name and back to the man.

I’d have to take the fight to *him*.

“That’s right, Kid,” the robot said. “That’s right. Now ya show him what ya came here for --”

\* \* \*

Round 4.

I was covered up, again. The Champ was hitting me hard. It felt like meteors dropping down from above, from below; he was pounding me and backing me to the ropes, as he had done before. I couldn’t get around it.

Punch drunk, I could barely hear the robot's pleas:

"Get outta there, Kid! Get outta there!"

But then the Champ made a mistake; he swung his signature punch, a punch so incredible a planet had been named after it. I guess the Champ figured the fight had done gone on too long, and he'd end it right there:

He called it OL' KRONOS, just like one of the twelve titans, and it was a whopping left cross.

Normally, it would've knocked me right off my feet, sent me back a century, back into the next solar system in fact, and then some, but I dodged it, and it sent the Champ into a cold spin.

"Now, Kid. Now!"

And seeing the opening, I socked him with a rising half uppercut.

"Again, Kid!" the robot said. "Again!"

And immediately followed it with a right hook. The Champ stepped off me, then, and I circled out from under him.

But the Champ was strong, and as I backed to the center of the ring, he followed me, a second time.

And a third.

And a fourth and a fifth.

So I jabbed with my right --

"That's how ya do it!"

And I jabbed with my left, the Champ's next cross-counter missing me by inches --

"Look at the kid go, Joe! Stick n' move! Stick n' move!"

And when the bell rang, this time, I wasn't the one feeling unsure on my feet; it was the Champ who stumbled.

\* \* \*

“Now we’re talkin’!”

“Yep,” Joe said. “Now we are talkin’!”

The robot raised a hand to one of his ears and cupped it, like he was listening to a far off distance. “Ya hearin’ a fat lady sing, Joe?” the robot asked.

“No, no fat lady singin’ in my ears,” Joe replied. “If that fat lady’s singin’, she’s singin’ it someplace else.” He shoved another mouthful of squishy larva in and smiled.

Both of them were pleased.

“Okay, Kid, this is your round. Your time to shine. Ya ready?”

I gave the robot my best fighter, a bit of Martian Marciano with a touch of Bionic Balboa, and nodded. I was ready, ready to win this fight.

Like I said, some never get their shot.

The next round was mine.

\* \* \*

Round 5.

The Champ had better reach and was stronger, but I was quicker on my feet. More alert. My footwork was like a miracle, many said, and I danced around him. I toyed with him, played with him. I let him think he had me, then hit the Champ with a hook that sent him reeling back to the Big Bang.

When he fell back into the ropes, I pummeled his body with a series of close range hits --

ZWAP. ZWAP. ZWAP.

When his hands dropped, I leaned forward and hit him with an overhand right --

POW.

And with an overhand left --

KA-BOOM.

And before I could come again --

He socked me with a humdinger that lifted me off my feet, knocking me out cold.

\* \* \*

As they picked me up and wheeled me out of the ring, RPX said...

“Ya got heart, Kid.”

Joe agreed, “HEART.”

“Never seen one like ya. Never will.”

“Never,” Joe said, slopping his lips.

But I was light years away; all I was seeing were stars.

## The House of Skulls - Part Two by Gavin Chappell

### 2 Treachery

Down a long, booming well of darkness, Yeduza heard someone calling her name. She struggled up through black, viscous tar that clung to her, threatening to drag her back down into the roaring deeps.

Her eyes cracked open, and sunlight stabbed into her mind. Her mouth was dry. She felt a throbbing pain from her leg. Looming over her was Ngiri.

Yeduza rose on her elbow. She caught a glimpse of hunched figures around her, before it all began to spin and she slumped back.

‘Lie back, Yeduza,’ Ngiri said quietly. ‘You are weak. Do nothing, and all will be well.’

Yeduza looked up at her. ‘The Kikwenzi? Chinja?’

Ngiri snorted scornfully. ‘They sent us into retreat.’ She studied the blood-crusting bandages that adorned her sleek limbs. ‘After you fell, they charged us. It was a difficult matter to drag you away.’

‘Chinja?’ Yeduza asked again. ‘Did you kill him?’ She looked down at her thigh, to see it wrapped with healing pergularia leaves. When Ngiri said nothing, she looked up again, trying to quell the waves of nausea that rushed through her body.

Ngiri shook her head curtly. ‘All who faced him were slain. You were lucky. He only crippled you.’ She indicated Yeduza’s leg. ‘The bone is shattered.’

Yeduza shook her head. ‘Help me up,’ she said thickly. ‘Help me up now, damn you! Where is my horse?’



A little unwillingly, Ngiri helped her general to her feet. Yeduza looked around the camp. They must have ridden far from the battlefield before halting here. She was shocked to see the army had been thinned by at least half. It was close to evening.

'My horse!' Yeduza snapped. Ngiri led the animal forward, and Yeduza struggled painfully to climb into the saddle. Ngiri stood by, looking on in silence.

'You should rest,' she said distantly. 'You will not heal without rest. You will be weak for some time.'

Yeduza glared down at her. 'Don't speak about weakness,' she hissed painfully. 'I must address my troops. We go after Chinja.'

Ngiri shook her head. 'Do you not understand?' she taunted Yeduza. 'The raiders defeated you. You were lucky to survive. Tomorrow, we must return to Mnara, where Mtogo will hear all that has occurred, and pass judgement.'

Yeduza stared coldly down at Ngiri. Did the woman seek to supplant her? Did she think that this defeat, this wound, would finish her? She was captain of Mtogo's bodyguard, general of the armies of Nago! She...

A wave of giddiness washed over her, and she slumped down over the horse's neck.

She needed rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, the defeated, diminished army of Nago hurried back across the burnt and looted land that the Kikwenzi had raided. The news of the defeat spread across the grasslands like wildfire, and those villages through which they had ridden were deserted. Yeduza assumed the villagers had fled into the bush.

She rode on in silence at the head of the command group, her face showing the bleakness of the vanquished. She had failed, and now she was crippled. Perhaps Mtogo's physicians

would be able to set her shattered bone so it grew straight again, but it seemed doubtful. As a cavalry-woman, she was not as badly affected by the wound as would a foot soldier be, yet it meant more than that. It reminded her of her failure to defeat Chinja, of the knowledge that the battle had been lost.

It was a sign of weakness, and she knew that Ngiri, who rode close behind her wearing a jackal's grin, saw it as a sign that Yeduza's glory days were over; that the day had come when Ngiri would rise into the ascendant. And what would that mean for Yeduza?

On the third day, they crested a rise and saw the Nago River snaking away across the savannah below. Directly before them, built in a looping curve of the river, stood the walled city of Mnara, capital of Mtogo's empire. They rode towards the great eastern gate, built of ebony from the southern jungles that stood in the thick adobe wall like the portal of some titan. The guards at the gate had flung them open at the approach of the great army, and already the streets beyond were lined with grim-faced townsfolk as Yeduza trotted in at the head of the column. Horsemen rode behind her, and behind them the spearmen marched, their weapons at slant. The street wound up through the solid, foursquare, flat-roofed buildings -- houses, shops, and temples, of smooth, sculpted adobe -- towards the great palace of Mtogo. Yeduza remembered that day, many years ago, when Mnara had opened its gates at the end of a long siege to Mtogo and his rebels; when she had ridden at Mtogo's side as he went to his final encounter with Mungu-Ovu, in his House of Skulls that had stood where now the palace reared its adobe walls. He had slain that tyrant in his house of the dead, and all had greeted him as a hero.

It was with sadness that Yeduza looked upon her lord, the Emperor, where he lolled on his golden throne, beneath an awning of lion-skin, surrounded by the officials of his court and the ladies of his harem. Age and the cares of state dulled the eyes that once had shone with ardour to bring down the tyrant. His body, once supple and lithe, was running to seed, and a paunch oozed over his leopard-skin loincloth. He thrust his hand into a brass bowl of mealies and stuffed them into his mouth, barely acknowledging his returning general.

'Hail, king of kings,' Yeduza said formally, after climbing painfully down from her horse and going to kneel before him. 'I return with news of defeat. The Kikwenzi crushed us, sent us into flight. We need reinforcements if we are to defeat them.'

Silence reigned. Mtogo cocked his gold-crowned head. His eyes fell upon Yeduza's leaf-banded leg. 'You are weak,' he remarked.

That word again! Yeduza drew herself up, painfully, and returned the emperor's gaze. 'I was wounded in my fight with Chinja, chief of the Kikwenzi. No doubt your physicians will set it right, and I will be able to take to the field again.'

Mtogo snorted. 'No doubt,' he said contemptuously. Yeduza was hurt by his unwelcoming attitude. This was not the reception of an old and trusted retainer. The king of kings stirred his corpulent rump.

'And word comes to me that this defeat came whilst you slept,' Mtogo added, thrusting his hand into the bowl of mealies. He devoured them while watching her face closely.

Yeduza's skin went cold, as if a cloud had drifted across the blazing sun. Her mouth dry, she said, 'never, my lord, I...'

'I sent you to fight the raiders. You slept when you should be fighting ...' He shook his head sadly then grinned. 'You are no longer my general.'

Yeduza stared at him in anger. This was unjust! She had fought; she had been wounded in his service... Who had told him these lies? Word had come to him... She looked suspiciously up at Ngiri and saw to her shock that the woman was hefting her assegai.

She looked back at Mtogo. The man's eyes glittered like those of a snake. He nodded.

'Kill her,' he hissed. Ngiri raised her assegai.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LIII.

THE DESTRUCTION OF SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S HOUSE BY FIRE.—THE ARRIVAL OF THE MILITARY, AND A SECOND MOB.

Thus many moments had not elapsed ere the feelings of the rioters became directed into a different channel from that in which it had so lately flowed. When urged about the house and grounds for the vampyre, they became impatient and angry at not finding him. Many believed that he was yet about the house, while many were of opinion that he had flown away by some mysterious means only possessed by vampyres and such like people.

"Fire the house, and burn him out," said one.

"Fire the house!"

"Burn the den!" now arose in shouts from all present, and then the mob were again animated by the love of mischief that seemed to be the strongest feelings that animated them.

"Burn him out—burn him out!" were the only words that could be heard from any of the mob. The words ran through the house like wildfire, nobody thought of anything else, and all were seen running about in confusion.

There was no want of good will on the part of the mob to the undertaking; far from it, and they proceeded in the work *con amore*. They worked together with right good will, and the result was soon seen by the heaps of combustible materials that were collected in a short time from all parts of the house.

All the old dry wood furniture that could be found was piled up in a heap, and to these were added a number of faggots, and also some shavings that were found in the cellar.

"All right!" exclaimed one man, in exultation.

"Yes," replied a second; "all right—all right! Set light to it, and he will be smoked out if not burned."

"Let us be sure that all are out of the house," suggested one of the bystanders.

"Ay, ay," shouted several; "give them all a chance. Search through the house and give them a warning."

"Very well; give me the light, and then when I come back I will set light to the fire at once, and then I shall know all is empty, and so will you too."

This was at once agreed to by all, with acclamations, and the light being handed to the man, he ascended the stairs, crying out in a loud voice,—

"Come out—come out! the house is on fire!"

"Fire! fire! fire!" shouted the mob as a chorus, every now and then at intervals.

In about ten minutes more, there came a cry of "all right; the house is empty," from up the stairs, and the man descended in haste to the hall.

"Make haste, lads, and fire away, for I see the red coats are leaving the town."

"Hurra! hurra!" shouted the infuriated mob. "Fire—fire—fire the house! Burn out the vampyre! Burn down the house—burn him out, and see if he can stand fire."

Amidst all this tumult there came a sudden blaze upon all around, for the pile had been fired.

"Hurra!" shouted the mob—"hurra!" and they danced like maniacs round the fire; looking, in fact, like so many wild Indians, dancing round their roasting victims, or some demons at an infernal feast.

The torch had been put to twenty different places, and the flames united into one, and suddenly shot up with a velocity, and roared with a sound that caused many who were present to make a precipitate retreat from the hall.

This soon became a necessary measure of self-preservation, and it required no urging to induce them to quit a place that was burning rapidly and even furiously.

"Get the poles and firewood—get faggots," shouted some of the mob, and, lo, it was done almost by magic. They brought the faggots and wood piled up for winter use, and laid them near all the doors, and especially the main entrance. Nay, every gate or door belonging to the outhouses was brought forward and placed upon the fire, which now began to reach the upper stories.

"Hurra—fire! Hurra—fire!"

And a loud shout of triumph came from the mob as they viewed the progress of the flames, as they came roaring and tearing through the house doors and the windows.

Each new victory of the element was a signal to the mob for a cheer; and a hearty cheer, too, came from them.

"Where is the vampyre now?" exclaimed one.

"Ha! where is he?" said another.

"If he be there," said the man, pointing to the flames, "I reckon he's got a warm berth of it, and, at the same time, very little water to boil in his kettle."

"Ha, ha! what a funny old man is Bob Mason; he's always poking fun; he'd joke if his wife were dying."

"There is many a true word spoken in jest," suggested another; "and, to my mind, Bob Mason wouldn't be very much grieved if his wife were to die."

"Die?" said Bob; "she and I have lived and quarrelled daily a matter of five-and-thirty years, and, if that ain't enough to make a man sick of being married, and of his wife, hand me, that's all. I say I am tired."

This was said with much apparent sincerity, and several laughed at the old man's heartiness.

"It's all very well," said the old man; "it's all very well to laugh about matters you don't understand, but I know it isn't a joke—not a bit on it. I tells you what it is, neighbour, I never made but one grand mistake in all my life."

"And what was that?"

"To tie myself to a woman."

"Why, you'd get married to-morrow if your wife were to die to-day," said one.

"If I did, I hope I may marry a vampyre. I should have something then to think about. I should know what's o'clock. But, as for my old woman, lord, lord, I wish Sir Francis Varney had had her for life. I'll warrant when the next natural term of his existence came round again, he wouldn't be in no hurry to renew it; if he did, I should say that vampyres had the happy lot of managing women, which I haven't got."

"No, nor anybody else."

A loud shout now attracted their attention, and, upon looking in the quarter whence it came, they descried a large body of people coming towards them; from one end of the mob could be seen along string of red coats.

"The red coats!" shouted one.

"The military!" shouted another.

It was plain the military who had been placed in the town to quell disturbances, had been made acquainted with the proceedings at Sir Francis Varney's house, and were now marching to relieve the place, and to save the property.

They were, as we have stated, accompanied by a vast concourse of people, who came out to see what they were going to see, and seeing the flames at Sir Francis Varney's house, they determined to come all the way, and be present.

The military, seeing the disturbance in the distance, and the flames issuing from the windows, made the best of their way towards the scene of tumult with what speed they could make.

"Here they come," said one.

"Yes, just in time to see what is done."

"Yes, they can go back and say we have burned the vampyre's house down—hurra!"

"Hurra!" shouted the mob, in prolonged accents, and it reached the ears of the military.

The officer urged the men onwards, and they responded to his words, by exerting themselves to step out a little faster.

"Oh, they should have been here before this; it's no use, now, they are too late."

"Yes, they are too late."

"I wonder if the vampyre can breathe through the smoke, and live in fire," said one.

"I should think he must be able to do so, if he can stand shooting, as we know he can—you can't kill a vampyre; but yet he must be consumed, if the fire actually touches him, but not unless he can bear almost anything."

"So he can."

"Hurra!" shouted the mob, as a tall flame shot through the top windows of the house.



The fire had got the ascendant now, and no hopes could be entertained, however extravagant, of saving the smallest article that had been left in the mansion.

"Hurra!" shouted the mob with the military, who came up with them.

"Hurra!" shouted the others in reply.

"Quick march!" said the officer; and then, in a loud, commanding tone, he shouted, "Clear the way, there! clear the way."

"Ay, there's room enough for you," said old Mason; "what are you making so much noise about?"

There was a general laugh at the officer, who took no notice of the words, but ordered his men up before the burning pile, which was now an immense mass of flame.

The mob who had accompanied the military now mingled with the mob that had set the house of Sir Francis Varney on fire ere the military had come up with them.

"Halt!" cried out the officer; and the men, obedient to the word of command, halted, and drew up in a double line before the house.

There were then some words of command issued, and some more given to some of the subalterns, and a party of men, under the command of a sergeant, was sent off from the main body, to make a circuit of the house and grounds.

The officer gazed for some moments upon the burning pile without speaking; and then, turning to the next in command, he said in low tones, as he looked upon the mob,—

"We have come too late."

"Yes, much."

"The house is now nearly gutted."

"It is."

"And those who came crowding along with us are inextricably mingled with the others who have been the cause of all this mischief: there's no distinguishing them one from another."

"And if you did, you could not say who had done it, and who had not; you could prove nothing."

"Exactly."

"I shall not attempt to take prisoners, unless any act is perpetrated beyond what has been done."

"It is a singular affair."

"Very."

"This Sir Francis Varney is represented to be a courteous, gentlemanly man," said the officer.

"No doubt about it, but he's beset by a parcel of people who do not mind cutting a throat if they can get an opportunity of doing so."

"And I expect they will."

"Yes, when there is a popular excitement against any man, he had better leave this part at once and altogether. It is dangerous to tamper with popular prejudices; no man who has any value for his life ought to do so. It is a sheer act of suicide."

AFTER LONDON or, Wild England, by Richard Jefferies

Part I: The Relapse into Barbarism

CHAPTER I: THE GREAT FOREST

The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible. It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike.

The meadows were green, and so was the rising wheat which had been sown, but which neither had nor would receive any further care. Such arable fields as had not been sown, but where the last stubble had been ploughed up, were overrun with couch-grass, and where the short stubble had not been ploughed, the weeds hid it. So that there was no place which was not more or less green; the footpaths were the greenest of all, for such is the nature of grass where it has once been trodden on, and by-and-by, as the summer came on, the former roads were thinly covered with the grass that had spread out from the margin.

In the autumn, as the meadows were not mown, the grass withered as it stood, falling this way and that, as the wind had blown it; the seeds dropped, and the bennets became a greyish-white, or, where the docks and sorrel were thick, a brownish-red. The wheat, after it had ripened, there being no one to reap it, also remained standing, and was eaten by clouds of sparrows, rooks, and pigeons, which flocked to it and were undisturbed, feasting at their pleasure. As the winter came on, the crops were beaten down by the storms, soaked with rain, and trodden upon by herds of animals.

Next summer the prostrate straw of the preceding year was concealed by the young green wheat and barley that sprang up from the grain sown by dropping from the ears, and by quantities of docks, thistles, oxeye daisies, and similar plants. This matted mass grew up through the bleached straw. Charlock, too, hid the rotting roots in the fields under a blaze of yellow flower. The young spring meadow-grass could scarcely push its way up through the long dead grass and bennets of the year previous, but docks and thistles, sorrel, wild carrots, and nettles, found no such difficulty.

Footpaths were concealed by the second year, but roads could be traced, though as green as the sward, and were still the best for walking, because the tangled wheat and weeds, and, in

the meadows, the long grass, caught the feet of those who tried to pass through. Year by year the original crops of wheat, barley, oats, and beans asserted their presence by shooting up, but in gradually diminished force, as nettles and coarser plants, such as the wild parsnips, spread out into the fields from the ditches and choked them.

Aquatic grasses from the furrows and water-carriers extended in the meadows, and, with the rushes, helped to destroy or take the place of the former sweet herbage. Meanwhile, the brambles, which grew very fast, had pushed forward their prickly runners farther and farther from the hedges till they had now reached ten or fifteen yards. The briars had followed, and the hedges had widened to three or four times their first breadth, the fields being equally contracted. Starting from all sides at once, these brambles and briars in the course of about twenty years met in the centre of the largest fields.

Hawthorn bushes sprang up among them, and, protected by the briars and thorns from grazing animals, the suckers of elm-trees rose and flourished. Sapling ashes, oaks, sycamores, and horse-chestnuts, lifted their heads. Of old time the cattle would have eaten off the seed leaves with the grass so soon as they were out of the ground, but now most of the acorns that were dropped by birds, and the keys that were wafted by the wind, twirling as they floated, took root and grew into trees. By this time the brambles and briars had choked up and blocked the former roads, which were as impassable as the fields.

No fields, indeed, remained, for where the ground was dry, the thorns, briars, brambles, and saplings already mentioned filled the space, and these thickets and the young trees had converted most part of the country into an immense forest. Where the ground was naturally moist, and the drains had become choked with willow roots, which, when confined in tubes, grow into a mass like the brush of a fox, sedges and flags and rushes covered it. Thorn bushes were there, too, but not so tall; they were hung with lichen. Besides the flags and reeds, vast quantities of the tallest cow-parsnips or "gicks" rose five or six feet high, and the willow herb with its stout stem, almost as woody as a shrub, filled every approach.

By the thirtieth year there was not one single open place, the hills only excepted, where a man could walk, unless he followed the tracks of wild creatures or cut himself a path. The ditches, of course, had long since become full of leaves and dead branches, so that the water which should have run off down them stagnated, and presently spread out into the hollow places and by the corner of what had once been fields, forming marshes where the horsetails, flags, and sedges hid the water.

As no care was taken with the brooks, the hatches upon them gradually rotted, and the force of the winter rains carried away the weak timbers, flooding the lower grounds, which became swamps of larger size. The dams, too, were drilled by water-rats, and the streams percolating

through, slowly increased the size of these tunnels till the structure burst, and the current swept on and added to the floods below. Mill-dams stood longer, but, as the ponds silted up, the current flowed round and even through the mill-houses, which, going by degrees to ruin, were in some cases undermined till they fell.

Everywhere the lower lands adjacent to the streams had become marshes, some of them extending for miles in a winding line, and occasionally spreading out to a mile in breadth. This was particularly the case where brooks and streams of some volume joined the rivers, which were also blocked and obstructed in their turn, and the two, overflowing, covered the country around; for the rivers brought down trees and branches, timbers floated from the shore, and all kinds of similar materials, which grounded in the shallows or caught against snags, and formed huge piles where there had been weirs.

Sometimes, after great rains, these piles swept away the timbers of the weir, driven by the irresistible power of the water, and then in its course the flood, carrying the balks before it like battering rams, cracked and split the bridges of solid stone which the ancients had built. These and the iron bridges likewise were overthrown, and presently quite disappeared, for the very foundations were covered with the sand and gravel silted up.

Thus, too, the sites of many villages and towns that anciently existed along the rivers, or on the lower lands adjoining, were concealed by the water and the mud it brought with it. The sedges and reeds that arose completed the work and left nothing visible, so that the mighty buildings of olden days were by these means utterly buried. And, as has been proved by those who have dug for treasures, in our time the very foundations are deep beneath the earth, and not to be got at for the water that oozes into the shafts that they have tried to sink through the sand and mud banks.

From an elevation, therefore, there was nothing visible but endless forest and marsh. On the level ground and plains the view was limited to a short distance, because of the thickets and the saplings which had now become young trees. The downs only were still partially open, yet it was not convenient to walk upon them except in the tracks of animals, because of the long grass which, being no more regularly grazed upon by sheep, as was once the case, grew thick and tangled. Furze, too, and heath covered the slopes, and in places vast quantities of fern. There had always been copses of fir and beech and nut-tree covers, and these increased and spread, while bramble, briar, and hawthorn extended around them.

By degrees the trees of the vale seemed as it were to invade and march up the hills, and, as we see in our time, in many places the downs are hidden altogether with a stunted kind of forest. But all the above happened in the time of the first generation. Besides these things a

great physical change took place; but before I speak of that, it will be best to relate what effects were produced upon animals and men.

In the first years after the fields were left to themselves, the fallen and over-ripe corn crops became the resort of innumerable mice. They swarmed to an incredible degree, not only devouring the grain upon the straw that had never been cut, but clearing out every single ear in the wheat-ricks that were standing about the country. Nothing remained in these ricks but straw, pierced with tunnels and runs, the home and breeding-place of mice, which thence poured forth into the fields. Such grain as had been left in barns and granaries, in mills, and in warehouses of the deserted towns, disappeared in the same manner.

When men tried to raise crops in small gardens and enclosures for their sustenance, these legions of mice rushed in and destroyed the produce of their labour. Nothing could keep them out, and if a score were killed, a hundred more supplied their place. These mice were preyed upon by kestrel hawks, owls, and weasels; but at first they made little or no appreciable difference. In a few years, however, the weasels, having such a superabundance of food, trebled in numbers, and in the same way the hawks, owls, and foxes increased. There was then some relief, but even now at intervals districts are invaded, and the granaries and the standing corn suffer from these depredations.

This does not happen every year, but only at intervals, for it is noticed that mice abound very much more in some seasons than others. The extraordinary multiplication of these creatures was the means of providing food for the cats that had been abandoned in the towns, and came forth into the country in droves. Feeding on the mice, they became, in a very short time, quite wild, and their descendants now roam the forest.

In our houses we still have several varieties of the domestic cat, such as the tortoise-shell, which is the most prized, but when the above-mentioned cats became wild, after a while the several varieties disappeared, and left but one wild kind. Those which are now so often seen in the forest, and which do so much mischief about houses and enclosures, are almost all greyish, some being striped, and they are also much longer in the body than the tame. A few are jet black; their skins are then preferred by hunters.

Though the forest cat retires from the sight of man as much as possible, yet it is extremely fierce in defence of its young, and instances have been known where travellers in the woods have been attacked upon unwittingly approaching their dens. Dropping from the boughs of a tree upon the shoulders, the creature flies at the face, inflicting deep scratches and bites, exceedingly painful, and sometimes dangerous, from the tendency to fester. But such cases are rare, and the reason the forest cat is so detested is because it preys upon fowls and poultry, mounting with ease the trees or places where they roost.

Almost worse than the mice were the rats, which came out of the old cities in such vast numbers that the people who survived and saw them are related to have fled in fear. This terror, however, did not last so long as the evil of the mice, for the rats, probably not finding sufficient food when together, scattered abroad, and were destroyed singly by the cats and dogs, who slew them by thousands, far more than they could afterwards eat, so that the carcasses were left to decay. It is said that, overcome with hunger, these armies of rats in some cases fell upon each other, and fed on their own kindred. They are still numerous, but do not appear to do the same amount of damage as is occasionally caused by the mice, when the latter invade the cultivated lands.

The dogs, of course, like the cats, were forced by starvation into the fields, where they perished in incredible numbers. Of many species of dogs which are stated to have been plentiful among the ancients, we have now nothing but the name. The poodle is extinct, the Maltese terrier, the Pomeranian, the Italian greyhound, and, it is believed, great numbers of crosses and mongrels have utterly disappeared. There was none to feed them, and they could not find food for themselves, nor could they stand the rigour of the winter when exposed to the frost in the open air.

Some kinds, more hardy and fitted by nature for the chase, became wild, and their descendants are now found in the woods. Of these, there are three sorts which keep apart from each other, and are thought not to interbreed. The most numerous are the black. The black wood-dog is short and stoutly made, with shaggy hair, sometimes marked with white patches.

There can be no doubt that it is the descendant of the ancient sheep-dog, for it is known that the sheep-dog was of that character, and it is said that those who used to keep sheep soon found their dogs abandon the fold, and join the wild troops that fell upon the sheep. The black wood-dogs hunt in packs of ten or more (as many as forty have been counted), and are the pest of the farmer, for, unless his flocks are protected at night within stockades or enclosures, they are certain to be attacked. Not satisfied with killing enough to satisfy hunger, these dogs tear and mangle for sheer delight of blood, and will destroy twenty times as many as they can eat, leaving the miserably torn carcasses on the field. Nor are the sheep always safe by day if the wood-dogs happen to be hungry. The shepherd is, therefore, usually accompanied by two or three mastiffs, of whose great size and strength the others stand in awe. At night, and when in large packs, starving in the snow, not even the mastiffs can check them.

No wood-dog, of any kind, has ever been known to attack man, and the hunter in the forest hears their bark in every direction without fear. It is, nevertheless, best to retire out of their way when charging sheep in packs, for they then seem seized with a blind fury, and some who have endeavoured to fight them have been thrown down and seriously mauled. But this

has been in the blindness of their rush; no instance has ever been known of their purposely attacking man.

These black wood-dogs will also chase and finally pull down cattle, if they can get within the enclosures, and even horses have fallen victims to their untiring thirst for blood. Not even the wild cattle can always escape, despite their strength, and they have been known to run down stags, though not their usual quarry.

The next kind of wild wood-dog is the yellow, a smaller animal, with smooth hair inclining to a yellow colour, which lives principally upon game, chasing all, from the hare to the stag. It is as swift, or nearly as swift, as the greyhound, and possesses greater endurance. In coursing the hare, it not uncommonly happens that these dogs start from the brake and take the hare, when nearly exhausted, from the hunter's hounds. They will in the same way follow a stag, which has been almost run down by the hunters, and bring him to bay, though in this case they lose their booty, dispersing through fear of man, when the hunters come up in a body.

But such is their love of the chase, that they are known to assemble from their lairs at the distant sound of the horn, and, as the hunters ride through the woods, they often see the yellow dogs flitting along side by side with them through bush and fern. These animals sometimes hunt singly, sometimes in couples, and as the season advances, and winter approaches, in packs of eight or twelve. They never attack sheep or cattle, and avoid man, except when they perceive he is engaged in the chase. There is little doubt that they are the descendants of the dogs which the ancients called lurchers, crossed, perhaps, with the greyhound, and possibly other breeds. When the various species of dogs were thrown on their own resources, those only withstood the exposure and hardships which were naturally hardy, and possessed natural aptitude for the chase.

The third species of wood-dog is the white. They are low on the legs, of a dingy white colour, and much smaller than the other two. They neither attack cattle nor game, though fond of hunting rabbits. This dog is, in fact, a scavenger, living upon the carcasses of dead sheep and animals, which are found picked clean in the night. For this purpose it haunts the neighbourhood of habitations, and prowls in the evening over heaps of refuse, scampering away at the least alarm, for it is extremely timid.

It is perfectly harmless, for even the poultry do not dread it, and it will not face a tame cat, if by chance the two meet. It is rarely met with far from habitations, though it will accompany an army on the march. It may be said to remain in one district. The black and yellow dogs, on the contrary, roam about the forest without apparent home. One day the hunter sees signs of their presence, and perhaps may, for a month afterwards, not so much as hear a bark.



This uncertainty in the case of the black dog is the bane of the shepherds; for, not seeing or hearing anything of the enemy for months altogether, in spite of former experience their vigilance relaxes, and suddenly, while they sleep, their flocks are scattered. We still have, among tame dogs, the mastiff, terrier, spaniel, deerhound, and greyhound, all of which are as faithful to man as ever.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK