

Schlock! webzine

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

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

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

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

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This Edition

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



This week's cover illustration is Female Specimen by [Paul Mellino](#).

[Kitchen Craving](#) by [Alana Schwartz](#) - Sophie meets a man who likes chicken parmesan - and metal! Excellent!!!

[Ashen](#) by Pete Clark - a vampire who needs more than simply blood...

[Super Duper: Part Twelve](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - Cop and copulation. Also featuring another interactive game; [Corrine Politely Attempts to Evade a Conversation](#)...

[Babbage Must Die - Part Nine](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Ada meets Ned Ludd...

[The Dark Place: Part Six](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Isobel has a delivery from Eastern Europe.

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Chapter Eight](#) by Rex Mundy - the battle for Carohaise...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 9\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *The shock of my encounter short-circuited his robe; he materialized in the starlight. A brief, savage encounter. He struck the weapon from my hand. ..."So it's you!"...."Quiet, Gregg Haljan! I only want to talk."*

[The Hollow Hills - Part One](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - escaping the police, Eloise and her friends take shelter in a disused Welsh slate mine. Or *is it* disused? *Seventh in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part Seven](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - The turning point from which began the descent of Avernus...

Kitchen Craving

The day was uneventful, and Sophie sighed as she kicked her frayed sneaker along the gray sidewalk, scattering the unwashed piles of leftover Colorado snow that were slowly melting in the early spring sunlight. Her hair was dirty blonde and pulled back behind a dark headband, her clothes were ratted and sported meditated rips and skull designs that were so unpopular in her school. Sophie knew she stood out in her sixth grade class; they were still listening to nineties boy bands or American Idol where she favored the dulcet tones of Iron Maiden or even the recent Avenged Sevenfold. Driven to rebellion from the utter silence brought on from a house consisting of a librarian as a father and a researcher for a mother, Sophie loved the deep pulse of reality that beat through her heavy metal music.

Her mother scorned her indulgences but let them rest, adding, “As long as you don’t start worshipping the devil, young lady,” to allow her daughter’s self-expression but to not let it get out of hand.

”I don’t want to go home,” Sophie thought. *“My mom’s probably going to make me do homework right away...”*

Behind her, the shadow of a figure melted over the cracks of the sidewalk. Sophie, paying no attention, did not spare a glance behind her. Had she turned around, she would have seen an overpoweringly tall figure with seemingly endless legs and wrists, its neck crossed by leather bands with odd charms hanging from them like Christmas tree ornaments. His thick black hair was mussed by accident, but it gave him an effortlessly *cool* look that only teenagers with a lot of hair gel can pull off. She would not have been able to guess his age; he could be a teenager, but he could easily be middle aged.

Sophie approached her neighbor Scott’s fence, a few blocks away from her own home. Her pace, albeit deliberately slow due to her aversion to go home, now shortened until her steps echoed the weighted footsteps of a tortoise. Sophie couldn’t help smiling as she contemplated the thought of her size-four shoes morphing into heavy, upright, rectangled feet of a tortoise.

She looked up eagerly into Scott’s front door, heart pounding, hoping to see Scott’s mother inviting her in for an after-school snack. Ever since Scott’s mother saw Sophie and Scott bicker during a group project their grouchy teacher Mr. C assigned them, Scott’s mom insisted that Sophie come over after school and “enjoy some healthy playtime” with her son. Whether this was a desperate attempt for Scott to gain a girlfriend at an early age, or an attempt to normalize the children and assist them with their social skills, Sophie never knew, but never objected to the baked goods that accompanied this somewhat forced friendship.

Not that she didn’t mind it. Scott was funny, and secretly admitted to liking Slipknot, although Sophie knew this had something to do with his new hobby of paper mache-ing everything in sight. But she didn’t complain. She thought he had some potential, at least.

Sophie was passing by the front door when she heard quick footsteps approaching, their beat urgent and rapid. Looking around, attempting to find the source of the footsteps, Sophie was distracted by Scott’s front door opening.

Scott's mother, knowing somehow she was there, flew to the door to invite Sophie in.

"Just really quickly, I only want you to try my chicken parmesan," she said sweetly, her hands beckoning her to the threshold. Sophie smiled and walked closer to the house, as Scott's mother's hands slid protectively onto Sophie's shoulder.

Sophie shrugged off her hand and entered the comfortable but shabby home. Notably ignoring Scott's mother's touch, as Sophie assumed that all mothers hugged their children when they got home, she secretly welcomed it, remembering how her mom always ensured she thoroughly washed her hands before touching any object in the house because of her work in her home laboratory.

Before, when she was younger, Sophie constantly craved a hug from her mother, but was always turned away, or had to wait ten minutes until the hand-washing and sterilizing process was complete. Now, in middle school, where it was uncool to love your parents, Sophie saw any form of affection a burden.

Sophie entered the kitchen, heavy with the lingering smell of just-baked chicken and melted cheese, and realized that Scott hadn't said anything yet. Usually within thirty seconds of her entrance, Scott, with his awkwardly proportioned limbs and puffy red hair, would be running into the room.

"Where's Scott?" Sophie asked, looking through the kitchen doorway to the hall that led to the family room, where Scott was usually watching some kind of loud hockey game on TV.

"Don't worry about it, Soph," Scott's mother said.

Sophie hated when people called her Soph.

"He's just out for a bit, he'll be back soon. I just want you to try this before I serve it for dinner."

Sophie shrugged and deposited her too-heavy backpack on the floor, pulling her sweatshirt over her head.

"Let me help you with that," Scott's mother said, her hands encircling Sophie's wrists, grasping the heavy knitted thread of her sweatshirt. Her hands lingered just a second too long on the girl's wrists, making Sophie awkwardly smile and settle into her usual seat.

Bustling around the kitchen, setting up a fork, plate, knife, napkin, and placemat, Scott's mother gossiped about the neighbors and Scott's drama at school about his new hatred for Mr. C. (Sophie quickly agreed to those statements) and other trivial matters. Every time Scott's mom would pass by her, she found an excuse to pamper Sophie; she re-did her the girl's windswept hair, lightly pushing back her blonde hair with her headband, adjusted her shirt, or touched her hand when she was trying to emphasize a point she was elaborating. Finally, she served a small portion of chicken parmesan to Sophie, who eagerly dug in.

Eating as fast as possible, Sophie was beginning to feel uncomfortable due to the lack of Scott's presence. His mother had never been so interested in Sophie

before, or really paid much attention to her besides for the occasional question or two. Now that Scott wasn't here, Sophie felt herself being analyzed by Scott's mother's dedicated gaze and ceaseless questioning about school.

Sophie shifted in her chair, forcing a smile. *"I should enjoy the attention while I can, I guess,"* she thought to herself. *"Even though she's kind of annoying me..."*

Someone was forcefully pounding on the door and Sophie breathed a sigh of relief as Scott's mother went to it. Hearing unclear words of a deep man's voice and Scott's mother's fluttering laugh, Sophie craned her neck in curiosity to see who was at the door.

"Come this way, have something to eat," Scott's mother was saying.

She led a tall, well-built man into the kitchen. His dark hair was somewhat long, in need of a quick trim, his jeans frayed around his knees and cuffs of his pants, just falling over black boots.

"Hello," he said, offering his large hand to Sophie. "I'm just visiting, if you don't mind. I happen to love chicken parm."

His voice was warm, convincing, almost calming against Scott's mother's endless chatter.

"Hello," Sophie breathed. There was something charismatic in his personality that drew her to him, but she still was wary of strangers.

He was handed a plate and knife, with a steaming portion larger than Sophie's own.

"This is my son's friend from school, Soph," Scott's mom said.

The man sat down directly across from Sophie, his presence filling the room, as if it were half a size smaller.

"Hello Sophie," he said. "I can see you're a metalhead."

"Yeah," she said. *How did he know my name is Sophie?*

"I love metal too. I found it...soothing." His smile was almost menacing, his words sending a thrill up Sophie's spine.

"Really? No one I know likes my music," she said.

"They don't know what they're missing," the man said, appreciatively.

"So, what do you do?" Scott's mother asked, sitting in between the strange man and Sophie. Her hand trailed across the table, caressing Sophie's lovingly.

Sophie's pulse jumped. *Is this a friend of hers? Why does it seem like she just invited a stranger off the street?*

Sophie pulled her hand out of her grip and dug into the last bites of the

chicken.

"Oh, just clean-up, here and there," he said vaguely. "I was more interested to hear what you do."

Scott's mother positively glowed. "Well, just data entry really, and I answer the phones at work," she started explaining, shifting in her chair so Sophie could not join the conversation.

The man dug his fork into the chicken, devouring the meal as if he had not eaten in days.

The conversation dragged on. Sophie was contemplating on her escape route; she had never stayed this long at Scott's house, and his mother seemed entirely occupied now with the new guest.

The man rose from the table, Sophie imagining his head almost grazing the ceiling, and served himself more chicken.

"This is delicious," he admitted, sitting back down. "I've always had a weakness for chicken parmesan."

"Thank you," Scott's mother cooed, and Sophie quickly stammered her agreement, to remind them both that she was still there. He took quick bites of the food, masticating slowly, as if savoring the flavor, reveling each bite with a swallow that made his large Adam's apple bob up and down noticeably.

"Well, I better get going," Sophie said, sliding out of the chair.

"Mmm," said Scott's mother, turning to look at her. "Have a good day," she said, distractedly. Her hand reached out, patting Sophie's hand. Frowning, Sophie noticed her hand, soft and comforting a few seconds ago, was paper-dry and wrinkled to the touch.

Scott's mom turned back to the man. "Where was I?"

"Your boss," the man reminded her.

"Oh yes," she said. "You wouldn't believe what he told me to do today..."

Sophie rolled her eyes and made her way to the exit, shrugging on her sweater and quickly as she could without making it obvious she was running. Whatever was going on, she didn't like it. She was hoping she'd forget about the incident and be safe at home in a few minutes. She was a block away from home when she realized she had forgotten her backpack.

Sighing and feeling an immense weight drop into her stomach, Sophie turned around and headed back to Scott's house, a dreaded weight building in her throat.

The front door was open when she arrived, which was extremely unusual. *I did close it when I left, didn't I?* she wondered. Entering the hallway, she heard the moist sounds of tearing and chewing, smacking lips and the clink of a metal fork on eager teeth.

“Hello?” she said, realizing she couldn’t hear Scott’s mother’s usual babble.

The chewing sounds continued and she edged slowly into the room.

Scott’s mother’s face was on the table, her eyes open and widely surprised. Her body was rigid, already showing the after-effects of rigor-mortis, slumped on the table as if she was taking a quick nap. Sophie looked at the man, who was voraciously eating. There was nothing on his plate, but he still ate with relish. Sophie noticed a glowing stream of light emanating from Scott’s mother to the man’s mouth.

Sophie blinked, hoping she was just imagining what she was seeing.

She realized she never looked into his eyes, and when she met them, she wished she hadn’t. They were discolored, a mixture of black and reddening anger that made her want to scream in panic just by focusing on them.

”You’re next, Sophie,” Death said.

She ran.

[Return to top](#)

Ashen

I have no memory of what woke me, save for the fact I know it was no sound or motion. A fragment of dream billowed across my fragile mind, and as so often happens on the edge of waking, I clung to it like a drowning man to a raft. I fought to gain some sense of the images behind my tired eyes, but I could hold on no longer. I fell awake.

The room was dark, and although the clock by my bedside showed midnight approaching, I had the strangest sensation of time having slowed or even stopped. From my bed, I could see out of the window and across the rooftops that made up my city, for I never drew my curtains during summer months. Clouds hung still in the air, smoke rising from chimneys seemed frozen, and yet I told myself that this was normal. There was no wind, the air was as still as a frozen river, and I could expect to see no movement from where I lay. Bravely, I told myself this. The feeling hung about me however, like a shroud, that all was not as it should have been.

The curtains, bunched at the frames of the windows, twitched as if a small bird had flown into them. My throat grew strangely dry as I watched them settle. An odour pervaded the room then (*or had it been present all along? Indeed, was it this that had woken me?*), like the sweet summer smell of an apple orchard, corrupted by time and rot and despair. I slept with the windows open, but knew of no orchard nearby that could have perfumed the air. I breathed deep of it, as if to better judge my situation, and immediately my head swam as if drugged. I became aware of a red cloudiness fogging my sight, and indeed my hearing, that became so pervasive and cloying that I believed I knew how it was to drown. I struggled and clutched uselessly at the bedclothes, pooled around me in damp twists, and tried to shout. Whether I was shouting for help, for courage or from a sense of dread I had no idea. The point became irrelevant, as what escaped my throat was nothing more than a ragged whine.

That whine dried up and I gasped aloud at the sight of the figure at the foot of

my bed. Where he had come from I had no idea, nor did I recognise the sloping stance, or stick thin limbs. He reminded me nothing so much as a tree in full winter starkness. That the pervading odour came from him I had no doubt, for no sooner than I thought of it, I was hit anew by the stench, no longer reminding me of sweet summer apple, but rather now an abattoir smell filled my lungs, all meat and sweet raw blood and fear.

He gazed at me with eyes I could not see; such was the gloom that hung around him. I felt watched however, the way a rabbit must feel before the ravaging jaws of a wolf, and I admit that I let out an involuntary murmur that was more a result of instinctive terror than of anything else. As my eyes became used to the way darkness clung to him, I made out the shape of his head, the severe but beautiful slope of his forehead, the sharpness of his nose. His mouth swam into view, more a cursory nod to that feature than an organ of speech, of emotion. A small dark tongue flicked out to wet the thin lips, and left there a trail of thick glistening saliva. It looked black in the darkness.

I pushed with my feet, and felt the headboard of my bed scraping down past my neck, then my shoulders, resting under my shoulder blades. The sound was like nails across sandpaper, for my senses seemed to have exponentially heightened with the figure's presence. My arms hung limp by my sides and I felt nothing below my chest. If I could have cared about such things, I would have checked beneath the bedclothes for my legs, even felt for their lumping shapes on the bed. I didn't care about such things.

I felt I had kept my silence for long enough, for the figure seemed as a statue. Apart from the searching tongue, he hadn't moved.

Who are you?

It seemed I only mouthed the words, for no sound broke the stillness of the room. I *knew* I had not spoken, and yet the man (for that is how I *had to* think of him) cocked his head and smiled. It was quite the most fearful sight I had ever seen. Sparkling white teeth broke the gloom of his face and his lips peeled back into almost paper thinness. There seemed an abnormal expanse of dark red gum above the teeth, and it seemed alive, as though worms or maggots squirmed and writhed beneath the surface, the flesh rising and falling in impossibly small peaks as if something were trying to break free. It gave the teeth a false impression of length, because the lips rode so high on the gums. They were sharp too, narrowing to needlepoints it seemed, and although he was still the full length of the bed away, I saw how the very tips of the teeth were translucent, like fine bone china.

The air seemed to reverberate around him, and the blackness that had at first seemed to pervade the whole room but had then resolved around the figure alone, swirled and eddied like ink in a bathtub. The smile left his face. There was no transition from one state to the other. There was at once the pained, wretched, writhing grin, and then the face was as serene as a sleeping baby. I must have gasped because the head lifted and his eyes met mine fully for the first time, their bloodshot and somehow lifeless gaze corrupting me, staining me with redness.

I pushed myself further up the bed, my bare shoulders chilled on the wall above, my spine knocking painfully against the headboard.

Abruptly, a wash of calm enveloped me, although I wasn't yet sufficiently under its spell to realise that it was just that. This creature, this man, was hypnotising me with his glare. I fought as bravely as I could against the feeling, peripherally aware of brazen, bloody images flitting in my mind, as if I was looking at a series of photographs and forgetting them almost instantly. I felt chilled by their content, red

torn flesh and ruptured viscera. I felt pain in the images, violation and ultimately loss, and yet I cannot place one single image firmly enough in my memory to describe it in any detail. Was he planting these images in my mind? Was he preparing me for some as yet unimaginable onslaught of experience? In the fraction of a second it took for this to pass through my mind, I knew.

These were his memories. This was *him*.

My life felt, if it hadn't all through this encounter, as if it was on the edge of existence. I knew I had minutes left. This creature was not of this world, and nor would I be. Strangely, all worry dropped from my shoulders, and I found myself spending what I knew would be my last minutes trying to understand the images, to make some sense of them so that I might recall these experiences in whatever passed for the afterlife.

Perhaps I fell asleep then, for the speed at which he approached my bed was like time-lapse photography, like the first and last picture in a child's flip-book. I felt the feather-light touch of a breeze on my chilled skin, blinked my eyes against the motion of air, and yet he showed no signs of having moved. His hair was still, his clothes the same. His eyes stared down at me from their roost like two black ravens set deep into the white alabaster of a castle wall. He moved his head then, cocked it to one side, and I had the strangest feeling that he was exhibiting great control over his movement, as if he could, and should, have moved so much faster. All this lent weight to my notion of him being inhuman, un-human.

He spoke suddenly. I say suddenly because I saw nothing of movement in his lips. Only his eyes sparkled, and I heard his words deep in my brain, like the hint of memory.

Are you scared?

How did I answer this creature? Did he expect my answer? Surely he could sense my fear in the smell of my body, like sour sweat oozing from my very soul. Surely he could sense my fear in the set of my body, rigid, ready for flight. Surely the loud thump I recognised as my heartbeat answered his question as convincingly as I could ever have done with mere words.

'Yes.'

He smiled. It was a toothless smile, as if his lips were glued together, and it gave his look that of sympathy, of inevitability. I swallowed and heard the click in my throat as if it was a snapping twig. He reached a hand to me, fingers open, palm upwards, as if he were inviting me to take his hand in mine. Suddenly his fingers clenched into a fist and as if he had reached inside of me, my heart seemed to slow, and then stop. My breath caught in my throat and I stared at him, wide eyes. Then he released his fist, and released my heart and breath and I gasped air like a floundered fish. He laughed a low, easy laugh.

'Come,' he said. He turned from my bed and I squeezed my eyes shut against the vision of him outlined against the window. I heard the swing of the window as it opened, felt the light, warm breeze of the night. When I opened my eyes, he was gone.

'Come,' I heard again, as if the creature was still in my room. Without thinking, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, and hurriedly dressed in crumpled clothes that I had thrown off the previous night. I walked to the window and looked out on the glorious night.

It was one of those nights seldom experienced in England. Warm, clear, and smelling faintly of fresh cut grass and lovers' perfume. I stepped out onto the balcony and held the iron rail tightly with both hands. I saw the creature standing a short

distance away on the rooftops. My room was such that only a short jump could take you from the balcony onto the first of the roofs, and then away across the top of the city. I followed him. He turned and grinned at me, beckoned me to follow with one slender arm. His teeth gleamed white in the dark.

I followed him then, racing across the rooftops, my heart pounding to keep up with his swift strides. I stumbled and tripped countless times, and always he was yards ahead, his soft, confident laugh guiding me and mocking me. The stars shone brightly, and soft billowing clouds floated by on almost imperceptible breezes. It seemed for hours that we ran, until we reached a part of the city that I was not familiar with. Sweat slicked my torso and ran painfully into my eyes. The creature stood perfectly still on a roof slightly lower than the surrounding houses. He looked my way, and I could see a slight sheen to his white skin, as if the moonlight was liquefying on him. His hair hung as it always had throughout our race, lank, long and black, swaying slightly. He seemed to breathe not at all; as if the thousands of steps we had taken were mere memory to him, as if only I had exerted any energy. I stopped a few feet from him.

‘Good, good,’ he murmured. He nodded and held his hand to me, urging me to join him. I did.

‘Where are we?’ I asked.

‘We are precisely.....here.’ he answered, a gleam in his eye. ‘Why did you follow me?’

‘I...I thought you wanted me to,’ I stammered.

‘Oh, I did,’ he answered slowly, looking me up and down. ‘We must go inside now. Dawn is approaching.’

I looked to the horizon and saw no sign of approaching sun. I turned to tell him this, and he vanished. I saw him, standing at the edge of the rooftop, clinging to a ladder, looking at me. Always looking.

‘Come.’

So it began.

The room in which I stood was austere and gothic, all sober tapestries and heavy curtains hanging over thick stone walls where windows should have been. It was a wonder I didn’t know this building from the outside, for it must have been formidable to see. I remember nothing of the journey into its grand cocooning darkness, for the creature had helped me onto the ladder and then...nothing. I felt drugged by the same clouding redness that had assaulted me in my room, and when the fog cleared, here we were.

I looked around me slowly, not wishing to appear scared, but knowing I was, feeling it to my very marrow. The creature was busying himself at the great fireplace, stacking thick logs over shredded paper and sticks. It seemed he had no matches, but soon a flicker of flame bit into the kindling. I watched the flames, as if to ground myself in whatever normality I could, until the fire was blazing, concentrating on the familiar and comforting sound of crackling sap and exploding knots. The creature stood.

‘I am a vampire,’ he said, without turning. ‘My name is Ashen. You need not fear me.’

I would have laughed had the situation not been so utterly dreamlike and alien to me. Somehow I knew he did not lie. Ridiculously, I began to reply with my own name. He swiftly held up a long fingered hand and drew it slowly into a fist like a closing flower. The sentence never left my lips.

‘It matters not what you are called, my friend,’ he began, ‘only what you believe. Do you believe in vampires?’

‘I ...’ I could go no further. It was a question I would never have imagined having to answer, and yet here I was, with the words rattling about my mind. He waved his hand, as if to dismiss the thought as a troublesome fly.

‘No matter.’ He turned to me.

The firelight lit his features so that his face appeared to burn; such was the luminescence of his flesh. Shadows stood out like tattoos across his sharp, angular bones and his hair became a deep toffee red where it had been black. My breath caught again in my throat for he had quite the most striking appearance. It was as if he was not of this world, or even of this time, and this idea grew in my mind until all my doubt and aversion to it was shed like the cracked and broken cocoon around an emerging butterfly. And strange as it may have been to me, that butterfly was *this* thought; that if I was to die this night, if it transpired that my life had reached its end and my lifeline cut with destiny’s blade, then so be it. I have seen what it is to be godly, (for at this time, that is truly what I believed this thing to be) and I have known mortal fear and broken through it to utter understanding. There was nothing to hold me to life now, or rather, no experience that could ever match this. Oh, had I but known.

I had taken in my surroundings the way one will when thrust into a situation against one’s will. I had noticed everything and yet seen nothing. I looked again now, and saw meagre light from several sputtering candles dripping fat gobbets of dark ochre wax onto the heavily carpeted floor. I saw a table and chair against one wall, no cup or plate on the table, only a thick book and several pens, expensive silver nibs and turned bone handles looking incongruous in the severity of their setting. There were no windows and I could see no door through which we must have come. I saw no other furniture and in my mind I marked this place as not so much lodgings as prison cell. Only the warmth from the fire (for despite the summer night, this room was as chill as a mausoleum) dispelled the prison image from my mind. I grew brave as the fire crackled its comforting dialogue.

‘Where are we?’

The creature started as if he had forgotten I was there and turned to face me.

‘Ah...’ He smiled and it was a return to the awful shifting rictus from my room. I held back a shudder. ‘We are in my house. I live here.’

‘But...’ I started.

‘Underground, about eight miles from your room.’

Eight miles! Had we really travelled so far?

‘Why are we here, underground?’ I asked with no small tremor in my voice.

He looked at me as if genuinely surprised.

‘Because you followed me from your room, and because this is my house.’

I opened my mouth but found nothing there with which to counter this statement.

‘Please sit,’ he said and motioned to the one chair in the room. I did as he bid, and found even the bare wooden structure offered not only immeasurable physical comfort (I never felt such relief at taking the weight off my feet), but also comfort of an emotional kind. As I ran my still shaking hands over the chair-back, I recognised their design from my grandmother’s house many years ago. I smiled.

He looked for a moment confused at my smile, and I stored that knowledge deep in my mind. I had no idea whether it would furnish me with a way of escape, but it seemed important.

‘Thank you,’ I replied after some minutes. He inclined his head softly and came to sit on the table next to me.

‘Would you care for anything to drink?’

The moment was so familiar, so understandable, and so *normal*, that I stuttered my answer, and he rose and walked to the far end of the room. Tucked into a corner, hidden from my view as a result of the darkness there, was a small chest. He lifted the lid and took out a small bottle swishing with dark amber liquid. He brought it, along with two exquisitely cut crystal glasses to the table. The sound of the liquor pouring filled my senses and the smell, a particularly fine brandy, wafted to me and set my head reeling from its strength and warmth. I gulped without thinking and coughed violently. He chuckled. The sound was not pleasant, a forced laugh sounding almost as if he had had to learn the trick of it. I sipped slowly the rest of the drink and set the glass carefully down on the table. It was perhaps the finest thing I had ever drunk and I told him so.

He shrugged his thin shoulders and poured me a second glass. I held out my hand in a gesture that I hoped would stop him from pouring further, but I only appeared to be thanking him.

‘It is time,’ he said, and with those three words, words that I had heard thousands of times in my life, my heart went cold, and my stomach knotted.

‘Time,’ I said, managing to keep my dry mouth from swallowing the words before they were uttered.

‘Let me explain,’ he continued.

He moved slowly to where I was sitting, unmoving, and rested a hand on my shoulder. It seemed to have no weight, that limb, rather like a bird’s wing. There was a faint smell about him. I am reluctant to liken his aroma to that of the grave, but there was undoubtedly a tang of stale earth, of must and minerals. I looked at my feet, and forced my eyes to remain there.

‘I am a vampire,’ he said.

He emphasised this last word with undisguised venom, as if the mere word revolted him. ‘There are not so many of us left as popular gossip would have you believe, perhaps half a hundred. I am by no means the oldest, but there are more vampires younger than me than there are those older. I do not recall the means of my creation clearly, nor the year of it, and of my time as a human I have no recollection whatsoever. That time is mere folklore to me now, and for all I know, it may never have happened.’

He stood slowly and stretched his back. The gesture was so human that for a moment I forgot where I was and what he claimed to be; what I *knew* him to be.

‘I need blood in order to live. I must have the blood of humans or pigs, but nothing else. I cannot digest food as you do. It would sit in my stomach and rot. I would grow sick and die.’ He seemed to ponder this for a moment before continuing. ‘The heat of the sun will kill me. The blood of the dead. Nothing else.’

He looked at me as if to garner my reaction, but in truth I was overcome. I had no doubt that he told me the truth. My hands shook with the scope of it. I managed to voice a thought.

‘Why are you telling me this?’

He chuckled. ‘You may wonder if I am happy with what I have? Whether I give any thought after so many decades to my situation, and what I could have done to prevent it? Well, after so many years, any thought of what and when and how becomes irrelevant. And yet the why of it intrigues me still. Why must I drink blood in order to live, where you may eat meat and bread? Why may I not enjoy warmth on

my skin, when you sit in my house now fairly glowing with the sun's rays? I long to taste bread once more. I long to have warmth on my skin that is not generated by fire or electricity.'

I swallowed audibly and checked myself in the act of pouring another drink. He saw me and smiled.

'Please,' he gestured with a thin hand. I poured and drank, allowing the effects of the alcohol to numb slightly the effects of his rhetoric.

He continued.

'Strength I have, uncommon strength. Money I have. Security and all the...food...' (for my benefit, I am sure, he paused and gave that last considerable thought and accent) '...I need. I have all that. Has it been so long since my own humanity that I forget the smell of daylight? I grow weary of the night, of the blood, even of the strength. I need to feel the simple joy of a summer's day on my face, the helpless weakness of humanity.'

He sat once more on the table next to me and held his head in his hands. I quelled a feeling of revulsion as I imagined having to comfort him in his distress. I was spared that decision as he lifted his head. His face was dry of tears and emotionless. His eyes were black holes and showed me nothing of the man he must once have been. I pushed back into my chair.

'Simple really, John.'

This familiarity shocked me because until now he had not addressed me in any way. I never thought he might know my name.

He looked into my eyes, as much as he could with his cold shark's eyes, and spoke to my mind as he had done at the start of all this.

Simple.

I wish to change places with you. I want mortality and the only way I am to achieve this is to take yours.

There was such confidence and surety in his thoughts that I crumbled beneath them. I am ashamed to admit that I cried then. Not inward, noble tears. Great wracking sobs as the weight of his words struck me. All thoughts of escape left me then.

I hadn't noticed until that moment, but his cold hand encircled my wrist, the tips of the fingers easily touching at the pulsing veins. I felt a charge in his touch, not unpleasant, but I was sure that it was another of his glammers used to ensnare me. I knew he would kill me then and I steeled myself against the pierce of tooth or knife or bullet. He bent his great head and bit suddenly, savagely, at my throat, where neck and jaw met, rending the flesh there; releasing my blood into his mouth. I cried out, but was powerless to defend myself. I let him drink, and waited for death.

It never came however, for even as I could hear my heart beating like a drum in my ears, feel the pulse of it at my wrist, as if it would beat strongest at the last to defy him, he released me and I fell limp against the chair-back. The sound and heat of my heartbeat settled and faded like a great ship's engines over the horizon.

He stood back from me, and I saw my fluids give life to his otherwise deathly pallor. He flushed a pale rose, and as soon as the colour came, it faded. He sighed and shut his eyes for a moment, and this time a single red tear streaked his face from eye to jaw line. I was as immobile as a statue then, as if he had taken not only my blood but also my will.

'It has begun, John,' he whispered.

I saw a mist collecting around his form, more leaving him through pores and orifices, and all else went dark, so that I could see his aura and nothing else. It formed

exactly the contours of his body and once free from him, the mist took shape in front of him as a perfect copy. It spoke.

‘This happens every time I feed, John. I do not pretend to understand it. I like to think of it as my true self, leaving the nastiness of consumption and digestion to my physical being, while I am free for a few moments to enjoy life as I once did, I think. Perhaps even before mortality bound me, and immortality freed me.’ The mist shape looked pensively at me. ‘Ashen, the mortal.’ He stretched his ghostly limbs and he was impossibly big then. I closed my eyes, the only movement afforded me it seemed, and when I reopened them, he was as he had been.

‘Why I have never fully tried what I am about to try, I am not sure,’ he said. I took immeasurable discomfort in his words and tried to move away from his mist. My limbs were leaden, and I could not move. My eyes flicked back and forth like a wild horse, and I snorted and frothed like some rabid beast before him. He hushed me, knelt by my side and laid a transparent hand on my brow. I calmed. Against all my will and my instincts, I calmed.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It happened like this, a year ago. I had fed deeply; the mortal was lying as you are lying, close to death but not yet dead. I could still feel his heartbeat; still hear the ragged hiss of his last breaths. I knelt by him as I do now, and my mist form was pulled toward him. I could not prevent it, and I didn’t try. I actually lay on his prone body and felt myself sinking into him! Can you imagine that, John?’ I admit I couldn’t imagine any such thing. ‘My God, John, I was becoming one with this man who had late become my sustenance. I was terrified, and used all my will to repel myself. I felt the strength of the mortal’s soul doing the same and I left him to die. I could not feed for days afterwards. The episode had frightened me more than anything has frightened me for centuries. Could it be done? Could I become a mortal by taking a body?’

He left off then, as if to leave his words for me to digest as his physical body was digesting my blood. I flicked my eyes to look upon the body, and it stood still, eyes open but empty, no movement whatsoever from its limbs or head. It looked nothing so much as a photograph. The Ashen that was mist before me swirled and eddied like smoke, and yet was as clear to me as anything I had ever seen. I digested his words, as was his wish. I tried to move again, but again I felt an unseen and immense pressure preventing me from doing so. I was terrified, mortally terrified, for I had long ago stopped fearing death. I now feared for my soul, and although I am not a religious man, I prayed then. I prayed I would have the strength to repel this mist being from entering my body and ousting my quivering soul.

‘I knew it was possible then. I knew I could become mortal again. A year has passed, John, and I found you asleep and for no other reason than because I liked the look of your face as you slept, I wanted to try again. So here we are.’

I wept.

I cannot say for certain that I know the exact time that he began his assault. I felt rather than saw the misty shape begin to dissipate and felt what I can only describe as my soul begin to curl away, like paper from a flame. It began in my fingertips and moved slowly through my arms. I fought as best I could, and as the assault continued, I began to feel less and less like I was a part of it. It seemed that I was above looking down at the rape, for surely that’s what this was. I found a measure of strength and pushed against his intrusion. Images, like the ones that had entered my head when I had first met Ashen, struck me again; blood and flesh and death. I held onto those images as long as I could, for they tied me to a time when I was mortal, when I was terrified, and when I was me. My torso constricted suddenly, and I sat up.

I felt elated, as if I had won the greatest battle. I turned to find the shape in the mist, and was horrified to find my prone body lying where it had been all along. I looked at my hands, looked through them almost, and in my moment of distraction, he finished it.

It was too easy. I offered him no fight, and he took me, and then it was done. My body sat, and then stood. I could not move from where I was. When finally I did turn, the mechanics of it nearly drove me insane. There was no thought or physical exertion. Rather I felt like smoke in a wind, and went where the wind took me. I screamed then, and it was the howl of a wind and I felt my mouth stretch impossibly wide to allow the sound to escape.

Meanwhile, my body, Ashen, was rushing through the room, knocking chairs this way and that, howling, beating his hands on his chest and face. Almost by accident it seemed, he found the door to this place, and turning the handle, he was gone.

Panic hit me like a physical blow to the face. I felt myself dispersing, swirling, and I used whatever thought I had left to drag my components together, to draw all my smoke and shade into one coherent form. How I managed it is a mystery and my mind seemed to go blank with the effort.

Suddenly I felt utter despair and a feeling that in mortal terms was like terror and loneliness and paranoia. I cried out, a wind's breath, and was drawn to the only thing I recognised; the only thing that my soul needed at that time. Physicality. Of course.

I took his body as he had taken mine.

It was an easy transition. I thought of the movements needed and they were there in my powers. The mist that I had become edged toward the still body of the vampire, and by every hole and orifice and pore, I entered it, and filled it perfectly. There was silence and then there was cacophony.

I covered my ears and the sound of skin on skin was like two granite slabs being pulled over one another. I screamed and screamed, and dropped to my knees. I felt warmth coursing through me and I knew that this was my blood I could feel. His last meal. I took nourishment from it, as I had always done. A mirror hung from the far wall, and in its length I saw the creature I had become.

'Ashen,' I whispered.

I let my sight go dark with some mechanism I scarcely understood, and curled like a foetus on the stone floor. All went silent and dark.

That was six months ago. Had I but known it, I had forced myself into a hibernation that vampires need after every feed. It lasted until the next sunset, about ten hours, and I woke then, and stood and looked about my prison. I found pen and paper and set about writing the words that have become my tale. Of my body, my mortal body, there was no sign. I felt a kind of distant loss, but no more. That has grown in the intervening months, until now, in the dead of winter, my loss and fear has grown into a deep and powerful hatred.

Let me explain the nature of this beast that I find myself. As I woke that night, it seemed I knew what it was to be a vampire. I knew of the threats to my survival; the sun and dead blood. Of course, Ashen had told me these things almost in passing, but was he preparing me? Did he want me to preserve this body for him when he had grown tired of the mortal charade? Surely he knew that, as a vampire, I would be too strong for him?

I knew of the feeding that I must do, and I survived for the first of those

months on the blood of pigs. The first mouthful I took caused such violent rejection that I could have died right there and then, for I was laid out prone, shivering fits of nausea preventing any movement, until the warmth of the sun became the pain and fear of approaching death. I made it back to this place with minutes to spare, and now my skin has the darkened hue of sunburn. I like it that way. I am ashamed to admit that I have taken humans now. I feel for them, but rather as a human may sometimes regret the death of an animal so that he might eat. It is no more than that, and the blood sustains me and thrills me as the blood of pigs never did. It is an unexplainable sensation to drink human blood as a vampire, and I will not try to contort its pleasures into words here.

I knew of my strength, for that first pig, and the first human I took, both died of such severe spine trauma, such was the force that I fed, that I was again in grave danger, this time from drinking their dead blood.

I could scale buildings, and cloak myself, shield myself from eyes that had no business seeing me. As I have mentioned, I know not of any of these mechanisms. It is just my nature and I know how to do these things.

And of my mortal self? I am sure he assumed me dead, burned in my first sunrise. I am not dead, and in not realising this when he finally took up residence in my mortal home, he has made a grave error. I saw him for the first time tonight, and I have planned and seethed and raged for so long that I was almost powerless to approach. I shielded myself from him, and followed him, letting the thirst grow in me till the anticipation was almost unendurable. Where he has been these months, I do not care. Tomorrow will be his last day in my home, for I have learned his trick. I feed, and I feed, and at the last, I allow my soul-mist to leave my body. That first time, I stood and watched my stillness as I watched my prey breathe and stutter her last, and I knew I could do it. Timing will be everything, for I must have my body at the break of dawn, and allow him nowhere to hide. That will be the trick of it.

My night of Ashen is over.

Mortality awaits me.

Pray for me.

[Return to top](#)

Super Duper

Chapter Twelve

Loose papers had fallen off the desk and scattered on the floor. They had promised to be five minutes but it had taken more like twenty. The Don knew it was irresponsible but he was having trouble keeping his hands off Nicola. Nicola in turn, was struggling to ask The Don not to touch her.

Sat against the wall in undisguised relief at finding one another, Nicola's head lay on The Don's shoulder and The Don's arm wrapped comfortingly around her shoulder.

“You are such a distraction,” she told him.

“If anyone needs distracting, then it is definitely you.”

“I don’t mind the kids,” she said, “they’re certainly less juvenile than the majority of people who used to come into my job.”

“Less work too, I bet.”

“Let’s not get carried away.”

A post coital warmth suffused The Don’s limbs. He was in no mood to move or think clearly.

“Do you really have to go today?”

“I promised Smith, he’s been quite good.”

“He’s been brilliant, the kids love him. All the more reason for you two to stay.”

“I’ve known him for ten years, this is the most I’ve ever seen him do. And I’ve never seen him care about anything before; it is to be encouraged.”

“How long will you be?”

“It is hard to say, but I would conservatively estimate it taking two days, depending on what we find there.”

Nicola pouted a little. The Don liked that she did.

“After you’re done, will you come straight back and stay with us?”

“I’ll come straight back, of course.”

“But not stay.”

“It is too isolated here. I stock checked yesterday and you only have enough food, proper food, to last another fortnight. All of the fresh stuff is used or has turned. There’s only what’s in the freezer. We need to move you all.”

Nicola sighed.

“I don’t know if I want to move them. It’s safe here. Who knows what will have happened to the world outside now that society has broken down? People are probably devolving to savages as we speak.”

The Don flushed in irritation, only for a second. He spoke in his softest voice:

“Listen, society is not the hallmark of intelligence; enforced social roles exist in even the most mindless creatures we share our planet with. Humanity should not be worried that it will devolve to the level of ants, gibbons or cattle; rather, it should be concerned that it has never yet evolved past that level. Intelligence and empathy should not be enforced by some apathetic conglomerate of careerists but rather they should be innate to our construction.”

”I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, look at Smith. He never got on well in society but you could never hope to meet a more gentle and thoughtful chap.”

“Very smart,” said Nicola, as she wriggled further into the comfort of The Don’s chest, “but that will only work as long as everyone is like that.”

“Since when was allowing idiots to bully you the intelligent thing to do?”

“I love you,” said Nicola, and she fell asleep.

”I love you too.”

The Don wanted to muse on the words but he was just too comfortable. He fell asleep too.

Corrine couldn’t believe that she had allowed The Don’s mother to talk her into staying for the night. How did the woman do it? She could talk for England. Corrine had woken early [to try to slip off without too much trouble](#) but The Don’s mother had already woken and prepared breakfast. It was delicious.

Two hours later, Corrine passed through the gate of her driveway, her eyes black rimmed and her muscles exhausted from the effort of getting away. In the silence of the day, the rotation of bicycle tyres against concrete made a sound as lonely as Corrine felt. All the streets were devoid of life.

The gentle sound of the tread folding over the concrete was slowly accompanied by a clacking sound. It was familiar but Corrine could not place it at first. She glanced down at the chain of her bike to make sure that it hadn’t been damaged. As she did so, she spotted the figure behind her. It was a floppy eared Labrador, not much older than a puppy but old enough to keep pace with the bike.

Corrine turned her head sharply backwards. Behind the Labrador was an entire pack of domestic dogs, all chasing her. As she made eye contact with them, they began to bark. She tried picking up her pace but Village Road in Bebington proved a little too steep an ascent. Standing up on her bike Corrine pedalled with everything she had until she had passed Saint Andrew’s Church and the hill reached its peak. The ascent was not troubling the dog pack in the least. She felt one of them snap at her heel and then she began the descent, slipping to her lowest gear. She remained standing and upped her speed to about twenty miles an hour, straight down Peter Price’s Lane and down onto Brackenwood, the dogs falling further and further behind. At the roundabout, she took the second exit on to the M53.

The open stretch of motorway rolled away beneath her, although she did choose to walk up the first hill that she reached.

On another motorway, several hundreds of miles to the South of Corrine, Biggy and Jon were delighting in their newfound interpretation of the drink driving laws.

“Truckasaurus!”

Yelled Jon.

Biggy beeped the horn in rhythm with him,

“Truckasaurus.”

BEEP, BEEP.

“Truckasaurus.”

BEEP, BEEP.

“Mother fucking tequila.”

“Beep, beep,” shouted Jon.

The monster truck they had liberated from the army base warehouse was proving a most efficient mode of transportation. So far, they had rolled over about twenty miles of traffic.

There was a colossal crunch as they flattened a Nisan Almera.

“Let me take the wheel, please.”

“Why, Jon?”

Jon pointed. Not far away was a Lamborghini, top down and glistening, its occupant dead in a pile of his own filth.

“I want that one, Sarge.”

Biggy slammed on the breaks.

“Tequila break!” Biggy declared authoritatively.

“If you need me, I will be surfing on the roof.”

Jon took the steering wheel and aimed it directly toward the Lamborghini. As he did so, he noticed an immense stream of urine pouring down the front of the windscreen. Biggy was banging his feet on the roof of the truck.

“Mush, mush,” he was yelling.

The tranquillity of the manager’s office was shattered by the sound of the door flinging open. A boy ran in with tears in his eyes. Nicola leaped up off her feet, horror in her eyes.

“What is it, Abram?”

“It’s the police, they’re arresting Ellie.”

“In a game?” asked The Don, quite reasonably.

“No, they’re putting her in handcuffs. The policeman kicked George in the stomach.”

Nicola didn’t even wait for The Don to stand; he pulled himself together and sprinted after her.

The four remaining children in the car park were all crowded around George who was still holding his stomach and crying. When they saw Nicola, they all pointed to the car-filled slip road.

“They went down there,” said the eldest of the girls.

“Who went down there?”

“The policeman took Ellie and Smith chased them,” she looked accusingly at The Don. “He called for you.”

“I didn’t hear,” said The Don.

The look that Nicola was giving him indicated that the whole situation had been caused by his attraction to her.

“I’ll go after them,” he said.

“Wait,” said Nicola.

“Do you think that Smith can handle it?”

“No,” said The Don, honestly.

“Go on then, bring her back.”

The Don sprinted towards the slip road and jumped onto the roof of the first car. It was his plan simply to run over all of the cars but his feet flattened the light metal structures at every step and it was slow going. When he finally made it to the bottom of the slip road, The Don could not quite believe what he saw.

The policeman who had stopped him for insurance violation was lying supine on the concrete. It looked like someone with knuckledusters had punched him squarely across the bridge of his nose. Otherwise, there was no sign of Smith or Ellie whatsoever.

[Return to top](#)

Babbage Must Die

Chapter Nine

Ada lay in a grassy hollow surrounded by bracken, Will Yates at her side. Around them, the ground rose like a bowl and trees towered above them. From the other side of the rise, Ada heard the distant sound of marching feet, creaking wheels, jingling

equipment, muffled orders. She moved forward.

Will gripped her arm. She looked at him. Silent, he shook his head. She scowled, threw his arm off, and swarmed up the side to where Ludlam crouched, looking down at the scene below.

A small company of redcoats was marching down the road towards them, a mounted officer at their head. In the distance, across a landscape of heath and woodland, the grey walls of a mill bleakly counterpointed the placid natural scene. Ada rested her arms on a tree-root. The Royal Navy's appetite for timber had not reached this quiet corner of the countryside.

The redcoats were escorting a wagon whose contents were covered by canvas. A grubby, unshaven carter drove it, and he spoke idly with the officer as they progressed gradually towards the mill.

'Why are we doing this?' Ada whispered. She could see the glint of metal from musket barrels among the surrounding trees. Ludlam's men had been waiting for the wagon to approach since dawn.

He put his finger to his lips, enjoining silence.

Gradually, the wagon drew closer. Ada watched its approach in exasperation. Why were they bothering themselves with pinprick acts of sabotage like this when the real threat lay elsewhere? These Luddites had no conception of what faced humanity two hundred years in the future but Ada had seen the ultimate result of automation. All these reeking, gap-toothed peasants cared about was protecting their own livelihoods.

She had only remained with them because otherwise she would be friendless and alone in this century. Brian, assuming he was still alive, could be a thousand miles away by now, assuming he was still alive. Ada knew that Will supported her; he was hardly a natural Luddite, but his own self interest was at stake.

Ludlam moved slowly forward, his hand gripping the hilt of the cutlass he now wore at his side. She thought he sympathised with her and would be willing to aid her, but apparently assassinating Babbage was nowhere near the top of his list of priorities. No, he preferred to play Robin Hood with his Luddites comrades. Ludlam had been planning the ambush ever since Weaver had brought news that new stocking looms were being brought to this mill.

He rose, drew his sword, and bellowed:

'Fire!'

Instantly, the undergrowth came alive with the deafening crack of musketry. Ada put her hands over her ears as smoke drifted and flashes lit up the shadows beneath the trees. In that first volley, five troopers and the carter all fell.

Then the officer was barking orders, riding round and round with his sword drawn, glaring at the surrounding trees while his men formed up in a square. Half the soldiers

fired - again Ada clapped her hands to her ears as the noise resounded through the little valley - then they knelt and reloaded while the rest fired.

Ada heard a strangled cry from the bushes to her left, and looked up wide eyed as a scruffily-clad Luddite pitched out of the undergrowth clutching at a shattered chest. Musket balls whizzed through the trees all around Ada, humming like huge, lethal wasps. Dropping his sword, Ludlam pulled two pistols from his belt and fired both of them. Ada saw the officer flung from his horse, clutching a shoulder across which a stain was spreading, dark against the red of his jacket. Ludlam flung himself to the ground beside Ada as the soldiers concentrated their fire on his position.

‘This is insane!’ Ada yelled in his ear as he reloaded his pistols. ‘We’ll all be killed! What will that achieve?’

‘There be more of us than them,’ Ludlam replied, his voice calm. He clapped her on the shoulder and rose again, cutlass in hand, pistols back in his belt. He looked a bit like a pirate.

‘Charge!’ he shouted, and hared out of the bushes. On either side, men poured forth, charging across the roadway as the soldiers fired another volley. Several men fell, including one of the Lancashiremen who had come with Weaver – Ada couldn’t see Weaver himself, though, for all that this had been at his insistence – but then they reached the square and the fight turned to hand-to-hand combat, the soldiers with their bayonets and the rebels with cutlasses. Ada saw Ludlam engage the officer in a brief sword-fight, slashing and hacking at him before shooting him point blank with a pistol. Ada felt ill. This was horrible. She wanted to crawl away and hide, pretend she had never heard of the nineteenth century; pretend she had her job back in the faculty with Percy and nothing to worry about except her students handing in their essays on time.

Then the fight was over, as quick as it had begun. The surviving men dragged their severely wounded officer back up the road – his horse had bolted – and vanished round the bend. Weaver appeared from the trees.

‘After them!’ he shouted. ‘Kill them all!’

Breathing heavily, Ludlam dropped his cutlass and leaned against the cart, whose horses were straining in their traces and whinnying with fright.

‘No need, man,’ he said. ‘Us’ve got what us wanted.’ Solemnly, he gestured at the canvas-covered contents of the cart. Three men hauled the cover back to reveal four stocking looms: wooden frames including a mechanism that reminded Ada of an old-fashioned sewing machine.

She rose from where she lay, brushing herself down, and looked in repugnance at the bodies that littered the roadway. Will appeared at her side. His face was white, and he looked as if he was about to throw up.

‘We won,’ said Ada quietly.

Will nodded, and pushed back sweat-soaked hair from his face.

‘I didn’t realise it would be like this,’ he murmured.

Ada knew what he meant. There’d been the riot in Chester, and that had been hair-raising enough, but it hadn’t been as horrific as this. Suddenly she wondered what it would be like to kill Babbage. To kill a man, to gun him down in cold blood. Or would it be as easy as that? Would she have to cut his throat? She stared in sick horror at a man who lay in the dirt before her, unmoving, bright red blood from a bayonet thrust puddling on the ground. Flies were already buzzing around his head.

The men dragged the stocking looms from the wagon and flung them down to the roadway. Their wooden frames splintered as the men kicked at them and hammered them with their musket butts; Ludlam seized the mechanism from one and flung it against a rock. His normally phlegmatic face was alight with anger.

Ada and Will came to join them. Ada stared at the men as they pounded into the dust the machines that threatened their livelihoods. Then she saw figures in the distance, watching from the road to the mill. A man rode away from the gloomy building in the opposite direction. Ada grabbed Ludlam’s arm as he flung another loom into the ditch.

He looked up at her, his eyes ablaze.

‘Haven’t you done enough damage?’ she asked. ‘We can’t stay here.’

Will joined them. ‘Miss Ada’s right,’ he said. ‘Those soldiers will come back with reinforcements. The militia will be called out, too.’

‘I saw a man riding away from the mill,’ Ada added. ‘I expect he’s gone for help.’

Weaver swaggered up to them. ‘Afraid?’ he jeered. ‘We’ll fight them off!’

‘I didn’t see you fighting, Mr. Weaver,’ Ada said accusingly.

‘Didn’t see you, neither, miss,’ Weaver replied. ‘But I was in the thick of it, mark my words.’

‘Miss Ada’s reet, though,’ Ludlam said. ‘Time us were goin’. We’ve broken the frames. Four more that won’t put honest men out of work.’

‘You’ve put these honest men out of work,’ Asa said, indicating the motionless bodies in the road, redcoats and Luddites. Ludlam gave her a look of pain and turned away.

‘Come on, men, form up,’ he shouted. ‘Time we were moving. I want us to be in the next county before sunset.’

‘What about the dead and wounded?’ Ada demanded.

‘The dead’ll have to lay here,’ Ludlam said bleakly.

‘Leave the wounded as well,’ said Weaver. ‘They’ll only slow us down.’

Ludlam shook his head. ‘Don’t be a fool, Weaver,’ he said. ‘Thee knows they’ll hang anyone of us they find. Besides, anyone they capture could turn king’s evidence. We take ‘em with us.’

Frustrated, Weaver scowled. Supporting their wounded, they vanished into the trees.

‘Us’ll ‘ead southeast,’ Ludlam told them that evening as they camped in a remote stretch of woodland. They had evaded pursuit by heading for the hills, although the countryside behind them was in uproar. ‘There’s matters to settle, down that way.’

Ada looked at him in surprise. ‘You don’t mean we’re going to Cambridge at last!’ Was this a final chance to carry out her mission? But after the bloodshed that she had seen that day, the idea of killing a man in cold blood turned her stomach.

Ludlam shook his head. ‘Not Cambridge, lass,’ he said. ‘Nottinghamshire.’

Ada shook her head, not interested in why Ludlam wanted to visit the Midlands. ‘That’s not far from Cambridge,’ she said. She remembered the route her parents had taken her when she was at uni. They’d gone through Leicestershire, hadn’t they? That wasn’t far from Nottinghamshire. ‘Couldn’t we make a diversion?’ But Ludlam was no longer listening.

‘We’ll get there, Miss Ada,’ Will told her quietly.

Ada turned to her. ‘That’s where we should be concentrating our efforts...’ she began.

‘I know, I know,’ Will said, placatingly. He looked over at his brother-in-law, who was now talking animatedly to Weaver and a few others on the other side of the fire. ‘He hates the looms, miss. He has since he was young.’

‘He has?’ asked Ada.

‘He became a bit of a hero when he was a boy, my wife tells me,’ Will told her. ‘Broke a stocking frame when he was an apprentice in Leicestershire.’ He sighed, and looked into the fire. ‘I miss my wife,’ he said. ‘We’ve got some money put aside from my work, so it’ll be some time before she has to take in washing. All the same, she’ll be going short if I don’t get back soon. I want to be with her, but Ned says going back would only put her in danger.’

Ada lay back on the turf. She realised that it was because of her that Will had been dragged into all this. So many people’s lives were being disrupted by this uprising. She wondered if any of the men who’d died in the fight had had wives. The bloodshed had brought it home to her how grim this was. She’d found it hard to take these people seriously; their concerns seemed so pointless compared with her own, and it

had all felt like a strange dream, or a historical drama on TV. But to Ludlam and the rest, the threat of the stocking looms was real. At least back in her own day social security was enough to live on, even if the human race was rotting in its idleness.

In Will's time, losing a job didn't mean going down to the job centre to sign on, it could mean the poorhouse, or begging in the gutter. And that was what Ludlam and his men were fighting against. They were willing to kill or be killed, to save their families and their livelihoods. Her own concerns seemed meaningless in comparison. What did it matter if the human race made itself redundant in two hundred years time? A lot of people didn't care. The Brians of the world were happy to spend their lives in idleness, even if Ada wasn't. At least out of work people could survive in her own day.

If so, what was she doing in this time? She was here to kill Babbage, that's why she'd travelled back in time. And she had less than a year to do it, before she had to get back to the cellar and return to her own period. But what then?

The next day they set out again. Ada could see mountains in the distance, and she realised that they must be the Pennines. They would have to cross them or go round them to reach Nottinghamshire. She asked Will if they were going to go over by the Cat and Fiddle Road, but he didn't seem to know what she was talking about. After a short discussion, it became clear that not only did the Cat and Fiddle not been built, neither had the eponymous road. Suddenly, nineteenth century England started to seem a very strange and alien place.

They crossed the mountains by a winding packhorse trail. They met few people, and those they did encounter gave them a wide berth. It was cold and lonely up among the peaks, where the wind soughed mournfully among the heather, although Ada saw some signs of industry, with mines becoming prevalent as they came down the valleys on the other side. Nostalgically, she remembered a long ago school trip to the Blue John mine in the Peak District.

Then they were entering more densely inhabited areas, the fields and woods of Nottingham. As dusk was falling towards the end of one day, they reached the eaves of Sherwood Forest.

'You *are* kidding,' said Ada in amazement, as Ludlam led them into the darkness under the trees. She remembered her disparaging thoughts about "playing Robin Hood."

He shook his head. 'It's what you might call my 'eadquarters, lass.'

Fires were burning among the dark trees up ahead. Ada saw lookouts stationed in the branches above. Men with muskets and cutlass came to greet them.

'It's the General!' one called, and others took up the cry. 'The General! The General's back!'

As Ludlam led his companions into a firelit clearing packed with men, Ada looked at him questioningly.

‘General?’ she said.

He grinned at her. ‘That’s what they call me, lass,’ he replied. ‘Some of them even call me King, but my friends call me Ned. Welcome to Ned Ludd’s Army of Redressers. Some folk calls us the Luddites.’

Ada stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him. Edward Ludlam. Ned Ludlam. Ned...

‘You’re Ned Ludd?’ she asked in amazement.

[Return to top](#)

The Dark Place

Chapter 6

When Martin woke the next morning, he wondered if he had dreamed last night’s events. He could still smell Isobel’s perfume and the feel of her body pressed against him seemed to be permanently etched into his senses. The bedroom was still dark and he stretched out his hand, wishing he would touch Isobel’s warm flesh, only to be disappointed as his hand found only empty space. Martin looked over at the bedside clock and saw the time was only five minutes to seven.

Martin grabbed the bathrobe from the end of the bed as he got up and quickly slipped it on. The house was still chilly as the heating had been on for less than half an hour. Martin walked through the house opening the blinds. He went into the kitchen and Spook was sitting by his bowl, looking enquiringly at Martin with his bright amber eyes.

‘I can always rely on you, can’t I, Spook?’ said Martin as he fed the cat before rinsing the all the dishes from last night and stacking them in the dishwasher. Once the dishwasher was on, he made himself a coffee and went through to the lounge. Martin thought about last night and wondered again at his feelings for Isobel.

‘She was right of course,’ he thought to himself. ‘We’ve know each other for less than a week, so we need to be sure about things.’ Trying to rationalise his feelings did not make Martin feel any better.

‘Why am I thinking about Isobel all the time?’ he asked himself again. ‘Am I falling in love with her? Is it just infatuation and the newness of everything?’ Martin’s thoughts were spinning round and the more he tried to get things straight the more complicated they appeared. At the core of his dilemma was his fear that Isobel didn’t feel the same as he did. If she didn’t want to be with him, he knew he’d be devastated.

‘You need to tell her how you feel,’ his conscience told him.

‘I will when I see her today,’ he promised himself. Martin examined his new thoughts and was glad he’d decided to tell Isobel how he felt. He smiled to himself as he sat back and enjoyed his coffee.

Isobel was up at just after 7.30. She had quickly showered and dressed in a pair of blue jeans a white t-shirt and a black sweater. She pulled on a pair of white socks and a pair of ‘New Balance’ trainers before going downstairs to wait for her delivery to arrive. Isobel made sure the gate to her house was open and then went through into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. As she waited for the kettle to boil, she hugged herself and smiled as she thought about last night. She felt wonderful and hoped Martin felt the same way. Isobel made herself a cup of Earl Grey and went through into the lounge. She lit the gas fire and switched on the radio. Isobel had no idea who was singing the song she was listening to but the lyrics brought tears to her eyes. She sipped her tea and let the music surround her and she gave herself up to her emotions.

When the song had finished Isobel wiped her eyes and thought how foolish she was to cry over a song even if it had been beautiful. She ran upstairs and cleaned her face, applied a little make up and drew her hair back and tied it in a ponytail. After checking how she looked in the mirror Isobel returned to the lounge to wait.

At just after 10.30, the doorbell chimed. Isobel opened the door to see a large van on the drive and two burly looking deliverymen standing on her step.

‘Miss Stevens?’ the deliveryman holding a clipboard asked.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘Delivery from Aleksander Vukovic,’ said the man with the clipboard.

‘Great,’ said Isobel. ‘Can you bring them in and put them in the hall, please?’ she added as she opened the door wide. The two men walked back to the van and opened the rear doors before taking a hand truck out of the rear of the van.

One of the men steadied the hand truck as the other lifted two large wooden boxes from the van and placed them on the hand truck. They quickly brought the boxes to the steps and lifted the hand truck up them and into the large hallway. Once the boxes were safely stacked at the rear of the hall they went back to the van.

The next box was nearly six feet long and almost four feet high by three feet wide. Isobel knew that inside the box was the base to the oak sideboard and she couldn’t wait to see it. She had already cleared a space for the sideboard in the hall. The two men lifted the large box and between them carried it to the steps and into the hall.

‘Just put it over there by the wall, please,’ said Isobel.

‘Just one more,’ said one of the men as they returned to the van for the last time. The final box was as high and as long as the box that contained the base but was only a

foot deep. Isobel knew that this box must contain the rack, which went with the sideboard. She was unsure if she wanted the rack on display now, as she felt the sideboard without the rack on top was more in keeping with something displayed in the hall.

She knew the George III oak sideboard was stunning with or without the rack and that for £900; she had a bargain for such a piece of furniture dating from 1780, as it had to be worth at least £1700. She gave the deliveryman five pounds for bringing the cumbersome boxes into the hall, signed the delivery note, and watched them drive away. Isobel closed the gates using the remote control and went inside to examine her delivery.

Martin finished his coffee and remained seated in the lounge until after nine o'clock. He was thinking about Isobel and hoping she felt the same about him as he felt about her. Last night had been something special for him not just, because he hadn't had a woman in his life for so long, but because of the way, he felt about Isobel. Martin hoped it had been special for Isobel as well. At 9.30, Martin went upstairs and showered. He dressed in a black t-shirt, his jeans from last night and a thick grey pullover. At 10.15, he came back downstairs.

The dishwasher had finished so he switched it off. Spook was curled up on his chair sound asleep. Martin filled Spook's dish with food in case he got hungry during the day. Spook opened one eye and raised his head at the sound of the packet of cat food being opened and watched Martin before curling up again and going back to sleep. Martin grinned as he closed the kitchen door. He hoped Spook wouldn't get too hungry today, as he had no real idea what time he would get back. Martin took his leather jacket down from the coat rack. He fastened the jacket and wrapped his scarf round his neck before taking his keys from the table in the hall and making his way across the frozen ground to the garage.

The leather seats were cold on Martin's legs and he shivered as he turned the ignition key and the engine purred into life. It took a couple of minutes for the car to warm up and windscreen to de-mist. Martin eased the car out of the garage and once he had closed the garage doors, he drove out of his drive and began the short trip to Isobel's house.

'I wonder if I should have an automatic door put on the garage,' he wondered idly to himself as he drove. 'It would make parking the car or closing the garage doors a lot easier especially on these cold mornings.'

As Martin made his way into Sandfield Park and drove along Central Drive, he saw a large van driving away from Isobel's house. He stopped his car outside the closed gate to Isobel's drive and scanned the gatepost. Halfway up on the right gatepost he saw the intercom. Martin got out of the car and shivered in the cold air. He pressed the call button and a few seconds later, he heard Isobel's voice.

'Yes, can I help you?'

'Hi Isobel,' said Martin. 'It's me, Martin.'

'I thought you were the delivery guys coming back because you'd forgotten something,' she said. 'I'll just open the gate for you.'

The gate swung open, and Martin got back into his car and proceeded up the driveway as the gate swung shut behind him. As he got to the front door, it opened and Isobel came out to meet him. Isobel ran up to the car as Martin got out and threw her arms around him, hugging him close.

'Hi,' she said and she kissed him on the lips before releasing him and taking him by the hand and leading him up the steps and into the hallway. Closing the door behind them, Isobel said, 'You're just in time to help me unpack my new pieces.' Martin caught Isobel by the hand and pulled her close before wrapping his arms round her and kissing her.

'How about a cup of tea first?' said Martin laughing.

'Alright,' said Isobel. 'Come into the kitchen and I'll put the kettle on.'

Isobel took Martin by the hand and they walked into the open plan kitchen. The room was large with a big oblong wooden table in the centre, a range cooker stood against one wall and a Belfast sink was set into the unit underneath the window. Opposite the range cooker, there were units with dark marble tops lining the wall and cupboards above. Isobel filled the kettle and as she stood close to the sink, Martin admired her figure and the shapely curve of her hips that the faded blue jeans she was wearing accentuated.

Isobel switched the kettle on to boil then turned to face Martin and leant back against the worktop with her arms folded.

'I saw the delivery van leaving,' said Martin.

'They were here around 10.30,' Isobel replied. 'I thought it would take them longer to unload the boxes but they were finished really quickly.'

'I suppose they're doing it all the time, aren't they, so they know what they're doing,' said Martin.

Isobel pushed herself away from the worktop and walked over to Martin then slipped her arms round his waist and pulled him close. She looked into his eyes then kissed him and said, 'I need to talk to you about last night.'

'What about last night?' said Martin, as his brow creased and a worried look appeared on his face.

'I really enjoyed last night,' Isobel began slowly, 'and I know we spoke a little bit about commitment and taking things slowly but I need to know how you feel as well.'

'I thought last night was great,' answered Martin. 'I loved being with you. It felt special to me and I know we've only known each other for a week but I can't stop thinking about you. I've been really worried that you didn't feel the same way I did. I

feel a bit strange saying all these things I've never felt the way I feel about you with anyone else,' he said earnestly.

Isobel hugged Martin and said, 'I was feeling exactly the same way about you as well. I was worried that things were moving really fast last night and I don't want to be hurt by anybody again.' As they stood together and held each other Isobel and Martin both felt better for having spoken about how they felt.

Isobel made two cups of tea and together they walked hand in hand back into the hallway to begin opening the boxes containing the new pieces. They put the two cups on the floor then Isobel said, 'That's funny. I could have sworn I closed the front door.' The front door was slightly ajar and a cold draught was blowing through the gap.

'Maybe you didn't close it properly and the wind just blew it open?' suggested Martin.

'Yes, that's probably what happened,' said Isobel, still looking puzzled. She quickly crossed the hallway and closed the door then turned back towards Martin and the boxes. Isobel suddenly put her hand to her mouth.

'Oh!' she said looking at the floor next to the largest of the wooden boxes.

Martin turned and looked at what had caught Isobel's attention. On the floor was a puddle of water and in the middle of the puddle was a dead bird. Martin walked over and bent down to examine the bird. It was a beautifully marked thrush but it was unmistakably dead. One wing was folded underneath the body while the other was stretched out almost as though it was reaching for the edge of the water it was lying in. The bird's eyes were lidded and its beak was open wide as though it were still trying to utter a final song. Martin took a pen from his pocket and used it to turn the bird over and out of the water.

Isobel knelt on the floor next to Martin and said, 'I wonder what happened to the poor thing and how it got in here?'

'It must have come in when the door was open but why would it come in here and where did the water come from?' Martin replied.

'I'll go and get a plastic bag to put it in,' said Isobel. When she returned Martin took the bag and opened it over the thrush then picked the bird up with the bag before tightly knotting the bag with the bird inside it. Martin was reminded of disposing of the blackbird that Spook had brought home last week. 'You take that and put it in the bin and I'll mop this water up,' said Isobel.

Martin took the bag containing the bird outside. 'At least with this cold weather it won't smell,' he thought as he closed the lid of the bin.

When he returned to the house, Isobel had mopped up the water and dried the floor. 'I wonder where that water came from?' she said as Martin walked into the hallway.

‘Maybe it came out of the box?’ suggested Martin.

‘I hope not,’ replied Isobel, smiling. ‘There’s a wooden George III sideboard in that box.’

‘We’d better get the box open and have a look, then,’ said Martin. Using a screwdriver, he loosened the screws holding the box together. Between them, they removed the top and the sides of the box before sliding the sideboard off the base of the box. Martin and Isobel walked round the sideboard looking for signs of water or any other kind of damage but could find none. ‘That’s a lovely piece of furniture,’ said Martin. ‘It looks great in this hall.’

‘I thought it would look nice,’ said Isobel. ‘Let’s move it back against the wall.’

Martin and Isobel slid the sideboard back against the wall and then stood back to admire it. The sideboard had two cupboards, one on each side of three central drawers and two large drawers above the side cupboards and the central drawers. The sideboard stood on four ornate round feet, which were set outside the main carcass, which reached to within an eighth of an inch of the floor.

‘I’m not sure if it needs the rack on the top,’ said Isobel. ‘I think if I was going to use it in the kitchen I would, but here in the hall I think that would look out of place.’

Isobel was standing with her right foot crossed over her left and her right hand was cupping her chin with her right elbow supported by her left hand. Martin thought she looked beautiful as the light from the glass panels on either side of the front door illuminated her features.

‘OK, professor,’ said Martin, laughing. ‘Let’s have that cup of tea and then we can open the other boxes.’

Isobel cocked her head on one side as she turned towards Martin and said, ‘Are you making fun of me, Mr Davies?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ said Martin, laughing. ‘I’ll go and put the kettle on,’ he added, picking up the two cups of cold tea and making his way into the kitchen. Isobel watched him walk into the kitchen and smiled.

Martin filled the kettle and switched it on to boil before rinsing the two cups they had used earlier. He was puzzled by the dead thrush and the pool of water. The thrush could have come in through the open door, but where did the water come from? As he was thinking about what had happened Martin looked out of the kitchen window at the large well-kept rear garden. The lawn was covered in a thick white frost but the beds looked well managed and the surrounding trees were well placed so they didn’t block any light into the garden. As he gazed over the garden, Isobel came into the kitchen and walked up behind him. She put her arms around his waist and rested her head against his back.

‘How’s the tea doing?’ she said.

‘The kettle’s just boiling,’ said Martin. ‘I was just admiring your garden. It must be really nice out there in the summer.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Isobel replied. ‘The summer is my favourite time of year and the garden is lovely then.’

‘I’m looking forward to seeing it in all its glory,’ said Martin. He turned towards Isobel and kissed her. Isobel didn’t reply. She just hugged Martin and leant her head against his chest. Martin stroked Isobel’s long hair and then said, ‘Let’s get this tea made then.’ They parted and Martin quickly made two cups of tea and they returned to the hallway to finish opening the boxes.

Two hours later and the boxes were opened. The rack for the sideboard was upstairs in one of the bedrooms and the contents of the other boxes had been checked against the delivery note. Isobel and Martin were sitting at the table in the kitchen eating sandwiches.

‘I was wondering if you’d like to go out with a couple of my friends, tomorrow night,’ said Martin.

‘That sounds nice,’ said Isobel. ‘What exactly were you thinking of?’

‘You remember I told you about the friends I went to visit last Saturday?’ asked Martin.

‘Steve and Jess, wasn’t it?’ replied Isobel.

‘That’s right,’ said Martin. ‘They’re going out into Liverpool tomorrow night and wondered if we’d like to meet up with them.’

‘Sounds great,’ said Isobel. ‘Are we just going for drinks or for something to eat as well?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Martin. ‘I told Steve I’d ask you and get back to him today or tomorrow.’

‘I’d love to go,’ said Isobel.

‘Great,’ said Martin. ‘I’ll give him a ring later and let him know.’ As they were chatting neither of them noticed the gradually failing light and the dropping temperature until a sudden flurry of hailstones began to batter the kitchen window.

‘Goodness,’ said Isobel. ‘Look at those hailstones! They’re like golf balls.’ The hail quickly covered the already frozen ground with a thick carpet of ice.

‘I hope Spook has the sense to stay inside today,’ said Martin thoughtfully.

‘We can go back to your house later on this afternoon,’ suggested Isobel. ‘I’ll bring some food over and cook you something to eat, as long as you don’t mind me using your kitchen,’ she said, smiling.

‘I’d like that,’ said Martin.

‘That’s settled then,’ said Isobel.

Later that afternoon they left Isobel’s house. The weather had not improved. It seemed to be even colder and the low clouds were a threatening dark grey. Isobel had changed her trainers in favour of a pair of knee high black leather boots and she had her long grey overcoat on with the collar turned up. Her long hair was tucked into her collar and she had a white woollen hat pulled tight over the top of her head.

‘I wonder if it’s going to snow,’ said Martin as they stood hand in hand next to his car and looked at the sky.

‘I haven’t seen the weather forecast but it does look ominous,’ said Isobel. ‘I’ll go and get us something to eat on the way over to your house while you go and put the heating on.’

‘OK,’ said Martin.

‘Do you like steak?’ asked Isobel.

‘I love it,’ Martin replied.

‘Steak it is then,’ said Isobel as she leaned forward and kissed Martin. ‘I’ll only be an hour or so,’ she said as she pointed the remote control toward the gates to open them.

‘OK, see you later,’ said Martin as he kissed her cheek and got into his car. In convoy, they proceeded out of the driveway. Martin turned left to head towards West Derby and Isobel turned right to make her way towards Prescott Road and the large Sainsbury store.

Fifteen minutes later Martin had parked his car in the garage and was walking across the frozen garden towards his front door. It had started snowing as he drove home and it was now coming down thick and fast. Martin stamped his feet to get the snow off his shoes as he stood in the porch before opening the front door and entering the house. As soon as he went inside he could hear Spook meowing.

‘All right, all right, I’m coming,’ Martin shouted as he took off his wet shoes and walked into the kitchen.

Spook immediately ran over to the cupboard where the cat food was kept and sat patiently in front of it. He looked at Martin and yawned widely before meowing again. Martin laughed at the cat then bent down and stroked its head.

‘Hello Spook,’ he said. ‘I hope you weren’t out in all the hail earlier today.’

Spook got up and began to circle Martin’s legs meowing loudly before starting to purr. Martin took a packet of cat food from out of the cupboard and emptied it into Spook’s dish. As Spook began to eat, Martin went to the central heating boiler and

switched the heating control to constant.

Martin was glad he'd used the dishwasher that morning as it gave him time to go upstairs and put fresh bedding on the bed as well as clean towels in the en suite bathroom. It was dark outside now and the snow was still falling. Martin looked out of the bedroom window watching the snow pile on the garage roof and collect in the hollows of the branches on the leafless trees. The scene looked benign and threatening at the same time.

The snow gleamed white against the darkly shadowed trees and the clear expanse of the garden was untouched and pristine in the half-light. A cold shiver ran down Martin's back like icy fingers tracing the outline of his spine. He shrugged his shoulders to rid himself of the cold shiver. Martin closed the blinds then went downstairs to the lounge and lit the fire before closing the blinds and switching on the table lamps. He walked back into the hall and hung up his jacket before taking the telephone from its holder and returning to the lounge.

Martin sat in one of the comfortable armchairs and dialled Steve and Jess.

'Hello, Steve's massage parlour, how can I help you?' said Steve as he answered the phone.

'I'd like to book a full body massage,' said Martin.

'Will that be the usual? The full body rub followed by the relief massage then, Mr Davies?' said Steve recognising Martin's voice.

'OK, you've got me,' said Martin laughing. 'I wasn't sure if you'd be home yet.'

'I left a bit early as it's Friday,' said Steve. 'How's things going with you? Are you enjoying your couple of days off?'

'It's been great,' replied Martin.

'How did lunch with Isobel go?' asked Steve.

'It was great, we had lunch yesterday and dinner last night, as well,' said Martin, 'and Isobel's coming over here again tonight to cook a meal for me.'

'Again?' asked Steve. 'Again suggests she's been there before. Can you fault my reasoning, Mr Davies?'

'No,' said Martin laughing. 'I can't. We had dinner here last night.'

'OK, I won't ask anymore,' said Steve, laughing. 'I take it things are going well then?'

'It's going fantastic,' said Martin. 'Better than I could have wished for. I spoke to Isobel this afternoon and she'd love us to meet up with you and Jess tomorrow night. Have you decided what you're doing yet?'

‘Not yet,’ said Steve. ‘I think we’re going to go into town about eight and have a couple of drinks and then see what happens. Although with this weather, we may well have to give it a miss. I’ll have a word with Jess and give you a ring in the morning, if that’s OK?’ said Steve.

‘That’s fine,’ said Martin. ‘I’ll speak to you in the morning then.’

‘OK, mate,’ said Steve. ‘Speak to you tomorrow, bye.’

‘Bye,’ said Martin pressing the end call button on the phone.

Half an hour later, there was a ring on the doorbell. Martin opened the door to see two large carrier bags on the step and Isobel walking towards the door carrying two bottles.

‘I had these on the front seat,’ she said, holding up the two bottles of wine.

Martin picked up the two carrier bags and pushed the front door closed with his foot as Isobel came into the hallway.

Martin leaned forward and kissed Isobel. ‘Don’t take your coat off just yet,’ he said. ‘I’ll put these bags in the kitchen. Then we’d better get your car in the garage.’

Martin quickly took the carrier bags into the kitchen and returned to the hallway. Isobel put the two bottles of wine on the small table in the hall while Martin put his jacket and shoes on. Taking his keys from the table, Martin opened the front door and he and Isobel walked out into the falling snow.

‘Isn’t the snow lovely?’ said Isobel. She took Martin’s hand as they walked across the snow-covered grass.

‘It’s very nice,’ Martin replied, ‘but I think I’d rather be inside by the fire.’

Martin opened the door to the double garage while Isobel got into her car. She parked the BMW next to Martin’s Mercedes and once the garage door was securely closed, they walked hand in hand back to the house.

Back in the house, they hung their coats in the hallway and walked through into the kitchen. Spook jumped down from his chair and started to circle Isobel’s feet.

‘You’ve been fed,’ said Martin. Spook looked up at Isobel and meowed.

‘He just wants to say hello,’ said Isobel. Crouching down, she stroked Spook’s head and he began to purr loudly. ‘Hello Spook,’ she said. ‘How are you today? Has the cold weather kept you inside today?’

Spook continued to purr as Isobel rubbed the top of his head and scratched him under the chin. ‘See,’ said Isobel, as she stood up. ‘He just wanted to say hello.’ Spook walked out of the kitchen and into the lounge where he stretched out in front of the

fire.

Isobel had retrieved the bottles of wine from the table in the hall and passed one to Martin.

‘I think we should have a glass of wine, don’t you?’ she said.

‘Sounds like a good idea,’ Martin replied, taking the bottle and getting the bottle opener from one of the drawers.

Isobel began emptying the carrier bags onto the kitchen table. ‘I’ve got us two nice sirloin steaks, some mushrooms, and some blue cheese. I also have some potatoes and vegetable oil, so we can have some homemade thick chips as well as a strawberry cheesecake for afters. How does that sound?’ she asked.

‘It sounds fantastic,’ replied Martin. ‘What can I do to help?’

Isobel walked over to Martin and put her arms round his waist, forcing Martin to leave the partially uncorked bottle on the worktop, and kissed him.

‘You can tell me where the knives and the pots and pans are,’ said Isobel, between kisses. Martin showed Isobel which drawer the knives were in and pulled open a large pan drawer at the base of a set of drawers.

‘All the pans are in here and the plates are in the drawer above,’ said Martin.

‘Great,’ said Isobel. ‘Just one more thing, do you have an apron?’

‘What self respecting cook doesn’t?’ said Martin, laughing as he took a blue and white striped apron from a drawer.

‘Very professional looking,’ said Isobel, as she slipped the apron over her head and tied the drawstrings behind her back.

‘It looks a lot better on you than it does on me,’ said Martin, admiring the way the apron seemed to mould itself over Isobel’s breasts.

‘That could be classed as harassment,’ said Isobel, laughing. ‘Abusing your poor chef like that.’

‘I’ll just open the wine then and do as I’m told,’ said Martin, grinning, as he uncorked the wine and poured two glasses. He passed one of the glasses to Isobel and kissed her. ‘Cheers,’ he said as he raised his glass. Isobel touched her glass to Martin’s.

‘Cheers,’ she said as she sipped her wine.

Isobel peeled the potatoes and cut some thick chips as the oil she had put in the pan heated up. The two steaks were seasoned and resting on a plate, ready to be cooked. Isobel quickly sliced some mushrooms and put them to one side. She selected a thick-based frying pan and put it on the top of the cooker to heat up, before adding a little

oil and some butter. Once the pan was hot enough the steaks went in and sizzled as they began to cook.

‘Do you like your steak well done, medium or rare?’ Isobel asked Martin.

‘Medium rare,’ Martin replied. Isobel cooked the steaks and took them out of the pan to rest, then asked Martin where he kept the brandy. Martin took the brandy from a cupboard and passed the bottle to Isobel who proceeded to flame the frying pan with the spirit. Once the flames had died down, she added butter, the mushrooms, cream and blue cheese. She drained the chips on a kitchen towel before putting them on plates along with the steaks, which she topped with the mushroom and cheese sauce.

‘Dinner is served,’ said Isobel. ‘Shall we eat here in the kitchen or would you prefer to eat in the dining room?’

‘Let’s eat here,’ said Martin as he took cutlery from a drawer and set the table.

‘That was fantastic,’ said Martin, as he put his knife and fork down on the plate. ‘That steak was lovely and the sauce was brilliant.’

‘I’m glad you liked it,’ said Isobel as she took a sip of her wine. They chatted for a while about the pieces Isobel had bought and about how her business was doing. ‘I don’t know how I’d manage without Karen and Jane,’ said Isobel. ‘Karen looks after the shop in Liverpool a lot of the time and Jane has done a great job with the Chester shop. She knows so much about antiques and virtually runs the place without any help from me.’

‘It sounds like you’ve got a couple of good people there,’ said Martin.

‘Yes, I have,’ said Isobel. Together they cleaned the dishes away and stacked them in the dishwasher.

‘Would you like a coffee?’ asked Martin.

‘That would be nice,’ said Isobel.

‘You go and sit down and I’ll make them,’ said Martin.

‘OK,’ said Isobel as she kissed him and walked into the lounge.

As she sat on the settee, Spook lifted his head from the floor and regarded her with his amber coloured eyes.

‘Don’t worry, Spook,’ whispered Isobel. ‘I’m not going to take him away from you. But I do think I’m falling in love with him.’ Spook yawned and lay back down again. ‘I’m glad that’s OK, then,’ said Isobel, smiling.

‘Are you still talking to the cat?’ asked Martin as he came into the lounge with two cups of coffee.

‘They’re very intelligent, you know,’ said Isobel. ‘They know how you’re feeling, when you’re sad and when you’re happy.’

‘He’s always asleep or eating,’ said Martin, ‘so how he’s got time to even consider me I don’t know.’

Isobel punched Martin in the top of his arm as he sat down. ‘Don’t be so heartless,’ she said. ‘Spook will know when you’re happy and when you’re sad, believe me.’

‘So how am I feeling now then Spook?’ Martin asked. Spook lifted his head and looked first at Martin and then Isobel. He stretched his body and arched his back before getting up from the rug and coming over to sit in front of them. Martin leant forward and stroked Spook’s head. ‘Yes, you’re right,’ said Martin ‘I’m very happy and I want moments like this to last forever.’ As he said the last words, Martin looked over towards Isobel and smiled.

‘I was talking to Steve earlier today,’ said Martin. ‘They haven’t decided if they’re going out tomorrow night or not yet. With the weather being so bad, they want to wait to see what it’s like before they decide. If they change their mind about going out, I was thinking that we could ask them if they’d like to come over here and we could get a takeaway or something. What do you think?’

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ replied Isobel. ‘We don’t really want to be walking round town if the weather’s as bad as it’s been today, do we?’

‘Right,’ said Martin. ‘I’ll give Steve a ring in the morning and see what they think about that idea.’ Martin walked over to the window and parted the blinds. ‘It’s still snowing,’ he said. He looked out into the darkness at the falling snow before turning back towards Isobel.

‘I’d better be getting home,’ said Isobel as she stood up. Martin moved towards her and took hold of both her hands.

‘Will you take care driving home?’ he asked.

‘Of course I will,’ said Isobel, smiling. ‘I’m sure the main roads will be clear and I’ll be really careful, don’t worry.’

They walked to the hall and Martin held Isobel’s coat for her as she put it on.

‘I’m experiencing déjà-vu,’ said Martin laughing as Isobel turned back towards him buttoning her coat.

‘I know,’ said Isobel as she pulled her hat on, ‘but we’ll be seeing each other again tomorrow, won’t we?’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ said Martin as he pulled his own coat on and fastened it. Martin took his keys and together they went out into the snow-covered garden and walked towards the garage. Martin opened the garage and once they were both inside, he put his arms around Isobel. ‘Be careful on the way home,’ he said as he kissed her.

‘I will,’ said Isobel. ‘Don’t worry. We’ve got a date tomorrow night, remember?’ Isobel got into her car and started the engine. She opened the window. ‘Will you give me a ring in work and let me know what’s happening tomorrow night?’ she asked.

‘I’ll give you a call after I’ve spoken to Steve and Jess,’ said Martin, putting his hands on the car door before leaning inside the car and kissing Isobel. Isobel slowly drove out of the garage and onto the drive. Martin closed the garage door and walked round Isobel’s car to the driver’s door.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ he said through the open window, his breath making white clouds as he spoke. Isobel waved out of the window as she slowly drove out of the driveway. Martin watched her drive away then walked back to the house. He was glad to get back inside and out of the bitterly cold night air. Taking off his coat and wet shoes Martin walked into the kitchen and poured himself a brandy before returning to the lounge.

He sat down in one of the armchairs and sipped his brandy. Spook lifted his head from the floor where he had curled up in front of the fire and looked at Martin.

‘Don’t worry, she’ll be back tomorrow,’ Martin said. Spook just looked at him impassively before laying his head back on his paws. Martin picked up the remote control and switched on the hi-fi. The bland boring voice of a late night radio presenter oozed from the speakers and Martin quickly pressed the CD button to silence it. The CD program select was set to shuffle so Martin was never exactly sure which track would play first. As he sat back and relaxed, the driving beat of ‘Broadway’ by the Goo Goo Dolls filled the room. Martin listened for a minute before he pressed the skip button to select another track. An acoustic guitar with a slow muted drumbeat started and Martin let the music surround him.

As Martin sat and sipped his brandy and Isobel slowly drove home, the malevolent force that had entered Isobel’s house that day stalked the dark rooms, howled silently in the night, and waited.

[Return to top](#)

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STRANGE INTERVIEW.—THE CHASE THROUGH THE HALL.

It was with the most melancholy aspect that anything human could well bear, that Sir Francis Varney took his lonely walk, although perhaps in saying so much, probably we are instituting a comparison which circumstances scarcely empower us to do; for

who shall say that that singular man, around whom a very atmosphere of mystery seemed to be perpetually increasing, was human?

Averse as we are to believe in the supernatural, or even to invest humanity with any preternatural powers, the more than singular facts and circumstances surrounding the existence and the acts of that man bring to the mind a kind of shuddering conviction, that if he be indeed really mortal he still must possess some powers beyond ordinary mortality, and be walking the earth for some unhallowed purposes, such as ordinary men with the ordinary attributes of human nature can scarcely guess at.

Silently and alone he took his way through that beautiful tract of country, comprehending such picturesque charms of hill and dale which lay between his home and Bannerworth Hall. He was evidently intent upon reaching the latter place by the shortest possible route, and in the darkness of that night, for the moon had not yet risen, he showed no slight acquaintance with the intricacies of that locality, that he was at all enabled to pursue so undeviatingly a tract as that which he took.

He muttered frequently to himself low, indistinct words as he went, and chiefly did they seem to have reference to that strange interview he had so recently had with one who, from some combination of circumstances scarcely to be guessed at, evidently exercised a powerful control over him, and was enabled to make a demand upon his pecuniary resources of rather startling magnitude.

And yet, from a stray word or two, which were pronounced more distinctly, he did not seem to be thinking in anger over that interview; but it would appear that it rather had recalled to his remembrance circumstances of a painful and a degrading nature, which time had not been able entirely to obliterate from his recollection.

“Yes, yes,” he said, as he paused upon the margin of the wood, to the confines of which he, or what seemed to be he, had once been chased by Marchdale and the Bannerworths—”yes, the very sight of that man recalls all the frightful pageantry of a horrible tragedy, which I can never—never forget. Never can it escape my memory, as a horrible, a terrific fact; but it is the sight of this man alone that can recall all its fearful minutiae to my mind, and paint to my imagination, in the most vivid colours, every, the least particular connected with that time of agony. These periodical visits much affect me. For months I dread them, and for months I am but slowly recovering from the shocks they give me. ‘But once more,’ he says—’but once more,’ and then we shall not meet again. Well, well; perchance before that time arrives, I may be able to possess myself of those resources which will enable me to forestall his visit, and so at least free myself from the pang of expecting him.”

He paused at the margin of the wood, and glanced in the direction of Bannerworth Hall. By the dim light which yet showed from out the light sky, he could discern the ancient gable ends, and turret-like windows; he could see the well laid out gardens, and the grove of stately firs that shaded it from the northern blasts, and, as he gazed, a strong emotion seemed to come over him, such as no one could have supposed would for one moment have possessed the frame of one so apparently unconnected with all human sympathies.

“I know this spot well,” he said, “and my appearance here on that eventful occasion, when the dread of my approach induced a crime only second to murder itself, was on such a night as this, when all was so still and calm around, and when he who, at the merest shadow of my presence, rather chose to rush on death than be assured it was myself. Curses on the circumstances that so foiled me! I should have been most wealthy. I should have possessed the means of commanding the adulation of those who now hold me but cheaply; but still the time may come. I have a hope yet, and that greatness which I have ever panted for, that magician-like power over my kind, which the possession of ample means alone can give, may yet be mine.”

Wrapping his cloak more closely around him, he strode forward with that long, noiseless step which was peculiar to him. Mechanically he appeared to avoid those obstacles of hedge and ditch which impeded his pathway. Surely he had come that road often, or he would not so easily have pursued his way. And now he stood by the edge of a plantation which in some measure protected from trespassers the more private gardens of the Hall, and there he paused, as if a feeling of irresolution had come over him, or it might be, as indeed it seemed from his subsequent conduct, that he had come without any fixed intention, or if with a fixed intention, without any regular plan of carrying it into effect.

Did he again dream of intruding into any of the chambers of that mansion, with the ghastly aspect of that terrible creation with which, in the minds of its inhabitants, he seemed to be but too closely identified? He was pale, attenuated, and trembled. Could it be that so soon it had become necessary to renew the life-blood in his veins in the awful manner which it is supposed the vampyre brood are compelled to protract their miserable existence?

It might be so, and that he was even now reflecting upon how once more he could kindle the fire of madness in the brain of that beautiful girl, who he had already made so irretrievably wretched.

He leant against an aged tree, and his strange, lustrous-looking eyes seemed to collect every wandering scintillation of light that was around, and to shine with preternatural intensity.

“I must, I will,” he said, “be master of Bannerworth Hall. It must come to that. I have set an existence upon its possession, and I will have it; and then, if with my own hands I displace it brick by brick and stone by stone, I will discover that hidden secret which no one but myself now dreams of. It shall be done by force or fraud, by love or by despair, I care not which; the end shall sanctify all means. Ay, even if I wade through blood to my desire, I say it shall be done.”

There was a holy and a still calmness about the night much at variance with the storm of angry passion that appeared to be momentarily gathering power in the breast of that fearful man. Not the least sound came from Bannerworth Hall, and it was only occasionally that from afar off on the night air there came the bark of some watchdog, or the low of distant cattle. All else was mute save when the deep sepulchral tones of that man, if man he was, gave an impulse to the soft air around him.

With a strolling movement as if he were careless if he proceeded in that direction or not, he still went onward toward the house, and now he stood by that little summer-house once so sweet and so dear a retreat, in which the heart-stricken Flora had held her interview with him whom she loved with a devotion unknown to meaner minds.

This spot scarcely commanded any view of the house, for so enclosed was it among evergreens and blooming flowers, that it seemed like a very wilderness of nature, upon which, with liberal hand, she had showered down in wild luxuriance her wildest floral beauties.

In and around that spot the night air was loaded with sweets. The mingled perfume of many flowers made that place seem a very paradise. But oh, how sadly at variance with that beauty and contentedness of nature was he who stood amidst such beauty! All incapable as he was of appreciating its tenderness, or of gathering the faintest moral from its glory.

“Why am I here?” he said. “Here, without fixed design or stability of purpose, like some miser who has hidden his own hoards so deeply within the bowels of the earth he cannot hope that he shall ever again be able to bring them to the light of day. I hover around this spot which I feel—which I know—contains my treasure, though I cannot lay my hands upon it, or exult in its glistening beauty.”

Even as he spoke he cowered down like some guilty thing, for he heard a faint footstep upon the garden path. So light, so fragile was the step, that, in the light of day, the very hum of summer insects would have drowned the noise; but he heard it, that man of crime—of unholy and awful impulses. He heard it, and he shrunk down among the shrubs and flowers till he was hidden completely from observation amid a world of fragrant essences.

Was it some one stealthily in that place even as he was, unwelcome or unknown? or was it one who had observed him intrude upon the privacy of those now unhappy precincts, and who was coming to deal upon him that death which, vampire though he might be, he was yet susceptible of from mortal hands?

The footstep advanced, and lower down he shrunk until his coward-heart beat against the very earth itself. He knew that he was unarmed, a circumstance rare with him, and only to be accounted for by the disturbance of his mind consequent upon the visit of that strange man to his house, whose presence had awakened so many conflicting emotions.

Nearer and nearer still came that light footstep, and his deep-seated fears would not let him perceive that it was not the step of caution or of treachery, but owed its lightness to the natural grace and freedom of movement of its owner.

The moon must have arisen, although obscured by clouds, through which it cast but a dim radiance, for the night had certainly grown lighter; so that although there were no strong shadows cast, a more diffused brightness was about all things, and their outlines looked not so dancing, and confused the one with the other.

He strained his eyes in the direction whence the sounds proceeded, and then his fears for his personal safety vanished, for he saw it was a female form that was slowly advancing towards him.

His first impulse was to rise, for with the transient glimpse he got of it, he knew that it must be Flora Bannerworth; but a second thought, probably one of intense curiosity to know what could possibly have brought her to such a spot at such a time, restrained him, and he was quiet. But if the surprise of Sir Francis Varney was great to see Flora Bannerworth at such a time in such a place, we have no doubt, that with the knowledge which our readers have of her, their astonishment would more than fully equal his; and when we come to consider, that since that eventful period when the sanctity of her chamber had been so violated by that fearful midnight visitant, it must appear somewhat strange that she could gather courage sufficient to wander forth alone at such an hour.

Had she no dread of meeting that unearthly being? Did the possibility that she might fall into his ruthless grasp, not come across her mind with a shuddering consciousness of its probability? Had she no reflection that each step she took, was taking her further and further from those who would aid her in all extremities? It would seem not, for she walked onward, unheeding, and apparently unthinking of the presence, possible or probable, of that bane of her existence.

But let us look at her again. How strange and spectral-like she moves along; there seems no speculation in her countenance, but with a strange and gliding step, she walks like some dim shadow of the past in that ancient garden. She is very pale, and on her brow there is the stamp of suffering; her dress is a morning robe, she holds it lightly round her, and thus she moves forward towards that summer-house which probably to her was sanctified by having witnessed those vows of pure affection, which came from the lips of Charles Holland, about whose fate there now hung so great a mystery.

Has madness really seized upon the brain of that beautiful girl? Has the strong intellect really sunk beneath the oppressions to which it has been subjected? Does she now walk forth with a disordered intellect, the queen of some fantastic realm, viewing the material world with eyes that are not of earth; shunning perhaps that which she should have sought, and, perchance, in her frenzy, seeking that which in a happier frame of mind she would have shunned.

Such might have been the impression of any one who had looked upon her for a moment, and who knew the disastrous scenes through which she had so recently passed; but we can spare our readers the pangs of such a supposition. We have bespoken their love for Flora Bannerworth, and we are certain that she has it; therefore would we spare them, even for a few brief moments, from imagining that cruel destiny had done its worst, and that the fine and beautiful spirit we have so much commended had lost its power of rational reflection. No; thank Heaven, such is not the case. Flora Bannerworth is not mad, but under the strong influence of some eccentric dream, which has pictured to her mind images which have no home but in the airy realms of imagination. She has wandered forth from her chamber to that

sacred spot where she had met him she loved, and heard the noblest declaration of truth and constancy that ever flowed from human lips.

Yes, she is sleeping; but, with a precision such as the somnambulist so strangely exerts, she trod the well-known paths slowly, but surely, toward that summer's bower, where her dreams had not told her lay crouching that most hideous spectre of her imagination, Sir Francis Varney. He who stood between her and her heart's best joy; he who had destroyed all hope of happiness, and who had converted her dearest affections into only so many causes of greater disquietude than the blessings they should have been to her.

Oh! could she have imagined but for one moment that he was there, with what an eagerness of terror would she have flown back again to the shelter of those walls, where at least was to be found some protection from the fearful vampyre's embrace, and where she would be within hail of friendly hearts, who would stand boldly between her and every thought of harm.

But she knew it not, and onwards she went until the very hem of her garment touched the face of Sir Francis Varney.

And he was terrified—he dared not move—he dared not speak! The idea that she had died, and that this was her spirit, come to wreak some terrible vengeance upon him, for a time possessed him, and so paralysed with fear was he, that he could neither move nor speak.

It had been well if, during that trance of indecision in which his coward heart placed him, Flora had left the place, and again sought her home; but unhappily such an impulse came not over her; she sat upon that rustic seat, where she had reposed when Charles had clasped her to his heart, and through her very dream the remembrance of that pure affection came across her, and in the tenderest and most melodious accents, she said,—

“Charles! Charles! and do you love me still? No—no; you have not forsaken me. Save me, save me from the vampyre!”

She shuddered, and Sir Francis Varney heard her weeping.

“Fool that I am,” he muttered, “to be so terrified. She sleeps. This is one of the phases which a disordered imagination oft puts on. She sleeps, and perchance this may be an opportunity of further increasing the dread of my visitation, which shall make Bannerworth Hall far too terrible a dwelling-place for her; and well I know, if she goes, they will all go. It will become a deserted house, and that is what I want. A house, too, with such an evil reputation, that none but myself, who have created that reputation, will venture within its walls:—a house, which superstition will point out as the abode of evil spirits;—a house, as it were, by general opinion, ceded to the vampyre. Yes, it shall be my own; fit dwelling-place for a while for me. I have sworn it shall be mine, and I will keep my oath, little such as I have to do with vows.”

He rose, and moved slowly to the narrow entrance of the summer-house; a movement he could make, without at all disturbing Flora, for the rustic seat, on which she sat,

was at its further extremity. And there he stood, the upper part of his gaunt and hideous form clearly defined upon the now much lighter sky, so that if Flora Bannerworth had not been in that trance of sleep in which she really was, one glance upward would let her see the hideous companion she had, in that once much-loved spot—a spot hitherto sacred to the best and noblest feelings, but now doomed for ever to be associated with that terrific spectre of despair.

But she was in no state to see so terrible a sight. Her hands were over her face, and she was weeping still.

“Surely, he loves me,” she whispered; “he has said he loved me, and he does not speak in vain. He loves me still, and I shall again look upon his face, a Heaven to me! Charles! Charles! you will come again? Surely, they sin against the divinity of love, who would tell me that you love me not!”

“Ha!” muttered Varney, “this passion is her first, and takes a strong hold on her young heart—she loves him—but what are human affections to me? I have no right to count myself in the great muster-roll of humanity. I look not like an inhabitant of the earth, and yet am on it. I love no one, expect no love from any one, but I will make humanity a slave to me; and the lip-service of them who hate me in their hearts, shall be as pleasant jingling music to my ear, as if it were quite sincere! I will speak to this girl; she is not mad—perchance she may be.”

There was a diabolical look of concentrated hatred upon Varney’s face, as he now advanced two paces towards the beautiful Flora.

[Return to top](#)

The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Eight: The Battle for Carohaise

Arthur’s eyes opened to early morning sunlight streaming through a gap in the curtains.

Silk sheets enveloped him. A form that was warm and soft, yet firm, nestled against him. The air was heady with perfume. He felt more relaxed than he had for months – than he ever had felt. Relaxed, yet weary. He yawned, and the figure beside him stirred.

Nervously, he looked to see the Lady Lisanor beside him. He realised they were both naked. Memories of the night before flooded back as once again he gazed into Lisanor’s mesmerising eyes.

It had been difficult escaping his guests, but towards the end of the night he had slipped out with Lisanor, for a breath of fresh air. Arthur had seen Kay looking disapprovingly after them, and he’d felt a momentary thrill of vindictive pleasure. Back home, it had always been Kay who boasted of his conquests among the village girls, and Arthur had always been reduced to stammering, blushing awkwardness in their presence; something Kay had capitalised on. How things had changed!

Lisanor yawned, stretched, then suddenly ran her slim fingers down Arthur's chest. He quivered under her caress, and leaned over to kiss her.

'Well,' she murmured, after breaking off. 'Another conquest for King Arthur.'

Arthur laughed. 'I don't think this one was so hard-fought.'

Lisanor said nothing, but Arthur felt her stiffen. She drew away from him.

'What are you trying to tell me?' she demanded haughtily. 'Do you think I part my legs for every passing man?'

Arthur gazed at her in bewilderment, all his self-assurance and self-satisfaction fallen into ruin.

'No, no!' he said. 'I didn't mean that! I meant... I don't know what I meant.'

Lisanor turned her back on him. 'Typical man,' she hissed over her shoulder. Arthur reached out tentatively and touched her. She squirmed away from him. He felt heartbroken.

'I'm sorry,' he stammered. As he remembered, it had been her idea. He'd just gone along with it. She had been fascinated by his success, his power. She had seduced him, for God's sake!

For God's sake. Briefly, he wondered what Archbishop Brice would think of him, fornicating with an earl's daughter. Where was he, anyway? He didn't recognise the room. Was this Earl Sanam's hotel suite?

'I suppose I'd better leave,' he said. 'Before your father finds me. It might be... undiplomatic...'

'That's all you care about, isn't it?' Lisanor muttered. She moved further away from him.

Downhearted, Arthur rose, and went looking for his clothes, and a way out of this awkward situation.

Arthur rejoined his principal commanders and they spent much of the next few days making preparations for the relief of Carohaise. Ban and Bors provided much appreciated fresh insight into the struggle, while Bedivere and Kay also contributed ideas based on their recent experience in Brittany. Arthur was saddened to hear that his foster father Ector had returned to his estates to discover them occupied by Rience's road warriors. The idea of his childhood home transformed into a base for lawless bandits made him all the more determined to defeat the Welsh warlord.

The king and his commanders were deep in discussion in a large house on the edge of Castle Bedegraine that had been commandeered for the war effort. One of Arthur's soldiers entered the conservatory Arthur had chosen as the venue for their planning, where they sat around a large table overflowing with maps and charts.

'Your majesty.' The soldier saluted Arthur. 'There's a civilian outside who wants to see you.'

Arthur shook his head. 'No press,' he said.

Kay frowned at the soldier. 'The king made it clear to you that we're not to be disturbed!' His face flamed with anger.

'Sorry sir, sorry your majesty,' the soldier replied. 'But it's not a reporter. He seems to think he can help you.'

Arthur sighed, and looked round at his men. 'Send him in,' he said. 'But make it quick.'

A moment later, the soldier returned, escorting an eccentrically dressed figure. It was an elderly man with a withered face and horn-rimmed glasses, dressed in

hunting tweeds that had seen better days, and gave the impression he had spent the last twenty years or so sleeping under hedges.

‘Yes?’ Arthur snapped.

The old man smiled craftily. ‘What will you give me, youngster?’ he whined.

Arthur looked round at his companions. Ban and Bors were exchanging glances of incomprehension.

Arthur laughed. ‘Why should I give you anything?’

‘It would be better if you gave me a gift than you lost the wealth that is close to hand,’ the old man replied. ‘There’s enough treasure trove in Bedegraine Forest to finance your wars for years to come.’

Arthur looked the man up and down. If that were true, it would certainly come in handy. Treasure trove belonged to the Crown by law, unless he was mistaken. And who did the Crown represent, if not him.

‘How do you know?’ Arthur asked slowly.

‘Your majesty,’ the old man replied, ‘Merlin told me.’

Suddenly, Ulfen laughed. Arthur looked sharply at him. Brastias was also grinning.

‘Your majesty,’ Ulfen said, rising and striding to the old man’s side, ‘this is Merlin.’ He seized the man’s hair and it came away, revealing Merlin’s usual white thatch. Smiling, Merlin reached up to remove a prosthetic nose. He replaced his horn-rims with the more elegant pair of glasses Arthur had seen on Merlin’s nose before. Within seconds the transformation was complete, and Merlin Sylvester stood looking down at Arthur.

‘What was all that about?’ Arthur demanded. ‘Honestly, Merlin...’

‘You need to learn humility, Arthur,’ Merlin replied. ‘What if some obscure civilian had indeed found an Iron Age hoard deep in Bedegraine Forest brought to the light of day by shelling? Would you turn your nose up at it?’

‘The treasure trove is real?’ Arthur asked.

Merlin nodded. ‘I found it on my return from Northumberland. I’ll take some of your men to help me excavate it,’ he added.

‘That will help towards the war effort,’ Arthur said, looking round at his men, ‘but how much time do we have left?’

‘Don’t forget,’ Merlin replied, ‘you have the heathens to fight once Lord Cameliard is safe. I’ll take care of the excavation; you go to relieve Carohaise.’

Arthur’s forces and his Breton supporters were marshalled and mobilised by the next morning. They left Castle Bedegraine in trucks, driving down the main thoroughfare, which was lined by crowds of people who had returned to their homes after the battle ended. Arthur sat in a staff car in the midst of the procession, guarded by armoured cars, a pensive expression on his face.

Just before leaving, he had encountered Earl Sanam, who was still in town, and wanted to wish Arthur well. With him, to Arthur’s dismay, was his daughter.

He’d escaped the hotel the other morning without more than an embarrassing encounter with a maid on the backstairs, but he hadn’t seen Lisanor since. He’d been too busy, he told himself. It had all been a horrible mistake. He shouldn’t have let her seduce him.

‘Good luck fighting Rience, your majesty,’ said Sanam, shaking his hand. ‘Chap’s a menace. His men have a protection racket that stretches as far as my own lands. My tenants are in fear of him. There’s little I can do to withstand him. I’ll be glad to see him gone.’

‘I’ll do what I can,’ Arthur replied. ‘Thanks for your support.’

The earl coughed. 'Only wish it could be more substantial,' he said, 'but my estates are bankrupt. Well, here's my daughter. You were getting on very well the other evening. You're both young; you don't want an old feller like me getting in the way. Why don't I leave you two to make your own farewells?'

Tactfully, the earl withdrew. Arthur frowned. Had all this been a setup? Was the earl looking for a marriage alliance? He looked at Lisanor, who returned his gaze levelly. Why had she thrown him out, then?

'Well?' she said at last. 'Are you going to do anything except stare at me?'

'Sorry.' Arthur blushed. 'You're looking very well. I'm sorry I haven't been in touch' – why was he apologising, it had been here who had thrown him out – 'but I've been busy; affairs of state, you know...'

Lisanor drew him closer. 'I told you the other night that I was on the pill,' she replied.

Arthur nodded, and a feeling of relief chased away a realisation of the possible outcome of their dalliance.

'But it seems I'd forgotten to take it,' she added.

Arthur felt his face fall, like a badly built wall.

'If I get pregnant,' Lisanor added, 'what shall we call the child?'

Arthur didn't know what to say. At that moment, Kay entered the room. He looked curiously from Arthur to the girl and back again.

'I hope I'm not interrupting anything,' he said. 'We're ready to go, Arthur.'

Arthur took Lisanor's hands. 'I'll talk about it when I get back,' he promised, and turned away.

'What if you don't come back?' she was calling as he hurried down the steps towards the waiting car. Kay gave him a grin.

'Go Arthur, go!' he said. 'Being king has changed you, hasn't it? It always used to be me who was the love 'em and leave 'em type.'

'Shut up,' said Arthur.

'Yes your majesty,' said Kay woodenly.

The army advanced across the countryside towards Carohaise and the West. Choppers hovered over them in flocks, providing protection from sky pirate attacks. Arthur knew that much of Rience's power lay in his own aircraft; he controlled the old air base on Anglesey, and had used it to terrorise and dominate the surrounding lands: as far as Cardigan, it seemed. Arthur's ground troops were mainly infantry, although he had brought artillery and armoured cars, he had left his tanks behind. At Ban's suggestion, they had decided to attack as soon as possible, and needed to go in light, unencumbered by armour.

Sooner than Arthur had expected, the rolling moors gave way to farmland, empty, deserted under wide skies. This was familiar country to Arthur and Kay; they were within fifty miles or so of the Forest Sauvage. Almost immediately, they saw signs of war.

They passed through villages; deserted, but littered with bodies and bombed out vehicles.

'Rience must have sent his aircraft out to ravage the countryside,' Ban said, as they halted in one village and surveyed the devastation.

Arthur called up his wing commander. He had sent out reconnaissance squadrons to survey the approach to Carohaise.

‘What’s the situation?’ he called. ‘Over.’

‘Carohaise is surrounded, your majesty,’ the wing commander reported. ‘The nearby villages and towns have been ransacked. Our boys had a brush with some of Rience’s choppers, but most of his forces are ground troops. They’re bombarding Carohaise. The defenders are still fighting back, but the place has been reduced to rubble.’

Arthur looked to the west, and he saw light flickering against the clouds, like lightning. He remembered Carohaise’s broad shopping streets, its half-timbered buildings, and tried to imagine them levelled. He swallowed.

‘We attack,’ he said. ‘Out.’

Everyone was looking at Arthur in surprise.

‘Attack?’ asked Ban. ‘Just like that? Without a plan?’

Arthur put his hand to his eyes. ‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘We attack. Rience will be fighting on two fronts. If we can draw him away from the town...’

‘That’ll give Leodegrance a chance to come out fighting,’ Bedivere said. ‘Then we can crush him between us.’

Ban looked at his brother. Bors shrugged expansively. Band shook his head. ‘Very well,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll give the order to my men.’

They were no more than a mile further on when a distant humming sound reached Arthur’s ears. He saw dark specks fly up from the horizon. The humming resolved into the roar of rotor blades; the black specks were choppers, flying in low. Arthur began shouting orders over the walkie-talkie as the attack helicopters began to open fire. Rockets leapt out on plumes of white smoke to detonate amongst the advancing soldiers. Men leapt out of trucks to open fire on the hovering shapes. Suddenly more choppers were in the air, painted in Arthur’s own colours.

A rocket hit the ground near Arthur’s position, and the explosion knocked him off his feet. Deafened, dazed, he struggled up, looking round him in despair at a scene of horror. Helicopters were pitching out of the skies, gunfire and rockets churned up the ground. As the ringing in his ears subsided, Ban appeared in front of him.

‘Your choppers have to hold them,’ he shouted, indicating the dogfight above. ‘We must advance; we’re committed. They’ll be sending ground troops next.’

Arthur nodded wordlessly, and gave the orders to continue the advance.

His infantry advanced over the hillside on foot, unit by unit, troop by troop. As they did so, Arthur moved his artillery into position on the ridge overlooking the valley beyond. The area between the hill and the shattered suburbs of Carohaise was lined with trenches and fortifications, gun emplacements and encampments. Rience’s foot soldiers were here, besieging the town.

On the horizon stood the medieval walls of Carohaise, broken down in places, under heavy barrage from Rience’s own artillery. As Arthur watched he saw enemy infantry heading towards Arthur’s advancing forces. A ragged fire-fight broke out as soldiers on either side sniped at the enemy; these skirmishes began to develop into a full blown battle between the two sides, and soon rockets and grenades were exploding on either side. Smoke billowed across the battlefield and all was chaos.

Meanwhile, the big guns were in place, dominating the flat ground between them and the Carohaise suburbs. On Arthur’s order, they began the bombardment. First they took out several key positions occupied by Rience’s own artillery. Next they subjected command positions to a sustained barrage.

More and more of the warlord’s infantry began to withdraw from their attack on the beleaguered town and to concentrate their fire on Arthur’s attackers. In the sky above, the aerial combat continued, and occasionally blazing wrecks would fall from

the sky. Arthur surveyed the scene with mounting unease. As Rience's infantry began to withdraw from the attack on the town, it was becoming clear that his own forces were being overrun.

He caught Ban's eye, and Ban grimaced. Would they be forced into retreat? The situation was becoming desperate.

The situation was becoming desperate.

The soldiers barred the main doors and hurried to their positions at the windows, aiming their guns at the hordes of attackers outside. Lot looked around the hall and saw his wife and children waiting for him with wide eyes. It heartened him to see that Gawain, his eldest, showed no sign of fear despite the clamour from outside.

'I've radioed Urien,' he told them as his surviving troops began to fire sporadically from the windows at the besieging forces. 'He's marshalling reinforcements. But first he's sending a helicopter. It'll get you out of here, somewhere safe. When you go, tell the pilot to...'

'Won't you be coming with us?' Morgaine asked, anxiously. 'And where are we going? What safety will we find?'

He looked at her levelly. 'My place is here, defending my lands,' he said. 'But I can't see my family face butchery by the heathen. You have to go.'

'I want to stay and fight,' Gawain said angrily. 'I won't run away.'

Lot gripped him by the arms. 'You have to go!'

'Why?' Gawain demanded. 'I'm old enough to fight. I'm the same age as Arthur! Give me a gun, and I'll protect you all.'

'We want to fight, too,' Agravaire added, and Gaheris nodded emphatically.

Lot laughed, sighed, hugged his sons to his broad chest. 'My brave boys,' he said, feeling a wetness in his eyes. 'You have to go! You can't stay here. Gawain, I'm putting you in charge. Protect your mother and your brothers! I'm trusting you with this. They'll need your protection where you're going.'

'But where are we going?' Morgaine repeated, folding her arms. 'The heathens have overrun the east coast. Even London has seen their attacks. And the west of the country is in the hands of this boy, Arthur.'

'And it's to Arthur you must go,' Lot said, ignoring the looks of anger and incredulity that appeared on their faces. 'He's the only man in a position to shelter you. Everyone else is fighting the heathen.' He paused, and listened to the wild cries of the attackers who surrounded the house. 'Tell him I want to forget our differences. We have to unite against the common enemy.'

'He'll kill us!' Morgaine said wildly. 'Or at the very least take us hostage. You're playing into his hands, giving him an advantage which he won't hesitate to use against you.'

'Right now that doesn't matter,' said Lot. 'At least you'll be safe from the invaders. And while you're there you can test this boy-king, see how strong he is; see what intelligence you can glean. Morgaine, this will be your responsibility. I want you to...' Pausing, he cocked his head.

The hum of rotor blades was growing audible, even above the rattle of gunfire. Grim-faced, he seized an assault rifle from the wall.

'It's them!' he shouted. 'Get upstairs. The crew have been told to lower a rope ladder. Hurry up. I'll come with you.'

They found the helicopter hovering near a balcony, a rope ladder dangling close to the wall. Below, the well-manicured lawns were a seething mass of heathen, some in combat gear, their shaven skulls pink in the cold, others in black, with long matted hair and faces painted to resemble corpses. All were armed, dangerous, and ill disciplined.

Many corpses lay close to the house; some of them Lot's defenders, but more than heathen, yet this seemed not to deter the rest; death in battle was a fast track to their heathen heaven. As Lot looked out, he saw that although many were firing at the house, others were training their rifles on the hovering helicopter, and some had noticed the small group on the balcony.

'Go on!' Lot shouted, indicating the rope ladder. 'I'll cover you!' As his wife snatched at the swaying ladder, Lot ran to the side of the balcony and opened fire at the dark hordes below. They began to fire back, while the helicopter crew added their own fire.

Slowly, painfully, Morgaine and her three boys swarmed up the ladder and entered the comparative safety of the chopper. Lot sighed with relief as the helicopter ascended, bullets spanging off its sides, until it was out of range.

A hail of gunfire surrounded him. He fired back, then threw himself to the ground and crawled back into the safety of the house. He would have to rally his few remaining soldiers in the defence of his lands.

He hoped, prayed, that reinforcements would be coming soon.

[Return to top](#)

Brigands of the Moon

IX

"Good God, what was that?" Dr. Frank's face had gone white. Snap stood like a statue of horror.

The deck here was patched as always, with silver radiance from the deck ports. The empty deck chairs stood about. The scream was stilled, but now we heard a commotion inside—the rasp of opening cabin doors; questions from frightened passengers.

I found my voice. "Anita! Anita Prince!"

"Come on!" shouted Snap. "In her stateroom, A22!" He was dashing for the lounge archway.

Dr. Frank and I followed. I realized that we passed the deck door and window of A22. But they were dark, and evidently sealed on the inside. The dim lounge was in a turmoil; passengers standing at their cabin doors.

I shouted, "Go back to your rooms! We want order here—keep back!"

We came to the twin doors of A22 and A20. Both were closed. Dr. Frank was in advance of Snap and me now. He paused at the sound of Captain Carter's voice behind us.

"Was it from in there? Wait a moment!"

Carter dashed up. He had a large heat-ray projector in his hand. He shoved us aside. "Let me in first. Is the door sealed? Gregg, keep those passengers back!"

The door was not sealed. Carter burst into the room. I heard him gasp, "Good God!"

Snap and I shoved back three or four passengers. And in that instant Dr. Frank had been in the room and out again.

"There's been an accident! Get back, Gregg! Snap, help me keep the crowd away." He shoved me forcibly.

From within, Carter was shouting, "Keep them out! Where are you, Frank? Come back here! Send a flash for Balch!"

Dr. Frank went back into the room and banged the cabin door upon Snap and me. I was unarmed. Weapon in hand, Snap forced the panic-stricken passengers back to their rooms.

Snap reassured them glibly; but he knew no more about the facts than I. Moa, with a nightrobe drawn tight around her thin, tall figure, edged up to me.

"What has happened, Set Haljan?"

I gazed around for her brother Miko, but did not see him.

"An accident," I said shortly. "Go back to your room. Captain's orders."

She eyed me and then retreated. Snap was threatening everybody with his cylinder. Balch dashed up. "What in hell! Where is Carter?"

"In there." I pounded on A22. It opened cautiously. I could see only Carter, but I heard the murmuring voice of Dr. Frank through the interior connecting door to A20.

The Captain rasped, "Get out, Haljan! Oh, is that you, Balch? Come in." He admitted the older officer and slammed the door upon me again. And immediately reopened it.

"Gregg, keep the passengers quieted. Tell them everything's all right. Miss Prince got frightened—that's all. Then go to the turret. Tell Blackstone what's happened."

"But I don't know what's happened."

Carter was grim and white. He whispered, "I think it may turn out to be murder,

Gregg! No, not dead yet.... Dr. Frank is trying ... don't stand there like an ass, man. Get to the turret! Verify our trajectory—no—wait....”

The Captain was almost incoherent. “Wait a minute. I don't mean that! Tell Snap to watch his radio room. Arm yourselves and guard our weapons.”

I stammered, “If ... if she dies ... will you flash us word?”

He stared at me strangely. “I'll be there presently, Gregg.”

He slammed the door upon me.

I followed his orders but it was like a dream of horror. The turmoil of the ship gradually quieted. Snap went to the radio room; Blackstone and I sat in the tiny chart room; how much time passed, I do not know. I was confused. Anita hurt! She might die ... murdered.... But why? By whom? Had George Prince been in his own room when the attack came? I thought now I recalled hearing the low murmur of his voice in there with Dr. Frank.

Where was Miko? It stabbed at me. I had not seen him among the passengers in the lounge.

Carter came into the chart room. “Gregg, you get to bed. You look like a ghost.”

“But—”

“She's not dead. She may live. Dr. Frank and her brother are with her. They're doing all they can.” He told us what had happened. Anita and George Prince had both been asleep, each in his respective room. Someone unknown had opened Anita's corridor door.

“Wasn't it sealed?”

“Yes. But the intruder opened it.”

“Burst it? I didn't think it was broken.”

“It wasn't broken. The assailant opened it somehow, and assaulted Miss Prince—shot her in the chest with a heat ray. Her left lung.”

“Shot her?”

“Yes. But she did not see who did it. Nor did Prince. Her scream awakened him, but the intruder evidently fled out the corridor door of A22, the way he entered.”

I stood weak and shaken at the chart room entrance. Anita—dying, perhaps; and all my dreams were fading into a memory of what might have been.

I was glad enough to get away. I would lie down for an hour and then go to Anita's

stateroom. I'd demand that Dr. Frank let me see her.

I went to the stern deck where my cubby was located. My mind was confused but some instinct within me made me verify the seals of my door and window. They were intact. I entered cautiously, switched on the dimmer of the tube lights, and searched the room. It had only a bunk, my tiny desk, a chair and clothes robe. There was no evidence of any intruder here. I set my door and window alarm. Then I audiphoned to the radio room.

“Snap?”

“Yes.”

I told him about Anita. Carter cut in on us from the chart room. “Stop that, you fools!”

We cut off. Fully dressed, I flung myself on my bed. Anita might die....

I must have fallen into a tortured sleep, I was awakened by the sound of my alarm buzzer. Someone was tampering with my door! Then the buzzer ceased; the marauder outside must have found a way of silencing it. But it had done its work—awakened me.

I had switched off the light; my cubby was Stygian black. A heat cylinder was in the bunk-bracket over my head. I searched for it, pried it loose softly.

I was fully awake. Alert. I could hear a faint sizzling—someone outside trying to unseal the door. In the darkness, cylinder in hand, I crept softly from the bunk. Crouched at the door. This time I would capture or kill this night prowler.

The sizzling was faintly audible. My door seal was breaking. Upon impulse I reached for the door, jerked it open.

No one there! The starlit segment of deck was empty. But I leaped and struck a solid body, crouching in the doorway. A giant man. Miko!

His electronized metallic robe burned my hands. I lunged against him—I was almost as surprised as he. I shot, but the stab of heat evidently missed him. The shock of my encounter, short-circuited his robe; he materialized in the starlight. A brief, savage encounter. He struck the weapon from my hand. He had dropped his hydrogen torch, and tried to grip me. But I twisted away from his hold.

“So it's you!”

“Quiet, Gregg Haljan! I only want to talk.”

Without warning, a stab of radiance shot from a weapon in his hand. It caught me. Ran like ice through my veins. Seized and numbed my limbs.

I fell helpless to the deck. Nerves and muscles paralyzed. My tongue was thick and inert. I could not speak, nor move. But I could see Miko bending over me, and hear

him:

“I don’t want to kill you, Haljan. We need you.”

He gathered me up like a bundle in his huge arms; carried me swiftly across the deserted deck.

Snap’s radio room in the network under the dome was diagonally overhead. A white actinic light shot from it—caught us, bathed us. Snap had been awake; had heard the commotion of our encounter.

His voice rang shrilly: “Stop! I’ll shoot!” His warning siren rang out to alert the ship. His spotlight clung to us.

Miko ran with me a few steps. Then he cursed and dropped me; fled away. I fell like a sack of carbide to the deck. My senses faded into blackness....

“He’s all right now.”

I was in the chart room with Captain Carter, Snap and Dr. Frank bending over me. The surgeon said,

“Can you speak now, Gregg?”

I tried it. My tongue was thick, but it moved. “Yes.” I was soon revived. I sat up, with Dr. Frank vigorously rubbing me.

“I’m all right.” I told them what had happened.

Captain Carter said, “Yes, we know that. And it was Miko also who killed Anita Prince. She told us before she died.”

“Died!...” I leaped to my feet. “She ... died....”

“Yes, Gregg. An hour ago. Miko got into her stateroom and tried to force his love upon her. She repulsed him. He killed her....”

It struck me blank. And then with a rush came the thought, “He says Miko killed her”....

I heard myself stammering, “Why—why we must get him!” I gathered my wits; a surge of hate swept me; a wild desire for vengeance.

“Why, by God, where is he? Why don’t you go get him? I’ll get him—I’ll kill him!”

“Easy, Gregg!” Dr. Frank gripped me.

The Captain said gently. “We know how you feel, Gregg. She told us before she died.”

“I’ll bring him in here to you! But I’ll kill him, I tell you!”

“No you won’t, lad. We don’t want him killed, not attacked, even. Not yet. We’ll explain later.”

They sat me down, calming me....

Anita dead. The door of the shining garden was closed. A brief glimpse given to me and to her of what might have been. And now she was dead....

[Return to top](#)

The Hollow Hills

Part One

‘Whose stupid fuckin’ idea was it to come up into the hills in the winter, anyway?’ Nick demanded.

The mountains of Snowdonia loomed above them, dark against the snow-swirling sky, threatening, oppressive, titanic. Eloise shivered and glanced at her three friends.

‘Well, we’re stuck here,’ she said, glancing round the car park. ‘That lorry-driver said he was going no further.’

‘Aye,’ said Hamish, rubbing at his red-glowing shaven head. ‘But it’s gey cold!’ He glared around. The road wound on up past the Little Chef restaurant, up into the mountains towards the high pass. On the far side lay their goal, the town of Caer Pedryfan. But the mountains stood like an impenetrable wall between them and their destination.

‘We can’t stay here,’ said Osborne, brushing flakes of snow from his beard. ‘Night’s falling and we don’t want to be stuck here with t’ snow coming on.’

‘Why’s it snowing anyway?’ Eloise demanded. ‘It’s the middle of March.’

Nick shrugged and shivered.

‘Wales is like that,’ he said. ‘The weather makes up its own mind.’ He was the only one of the motley group assembled in the Little Chef car park who had been to Wales before: Eloise came from Sussex; Hamish was a Glaswegian skinhead; and Osborne the biker had been brought up in Yorkshire. Nick, during his Liverpoolian upbringing, had got to know the wild land of Wales fairly well, although he had never hitherto been stupid enough to go up into the high peaks when the weather was this bad.

They had been aided in the last leg of their journey to Wales when they hitched a lift with a delivery lorry heading up into the sunny uplands with a consignment of supplies for the cheery little restaurant behind them. They had thought that this was a gift from Providence, having been forced to walk half the way from their previous port of call, Westchester, in the Black Country. Their quest - to reach Caer Pedryfan before the Neo-Nazi occultist Tybalt Kohl located the mystic Cauldron of Rebirth and used it to thrust Europe back into the darkness of fascist domination - was imperative and nothing could stop them now.

Except the weather.

The driver had told them in the first place that he was going no further than Bryniau Ceudod Little Chef, but Eloise had calculated that this left them with only about ten miles to their destination. The driver had deposited them in the car park a quarter of an hour ago and they went for a meal in the little roadside restaurant to celebrate.

But the moment they came out, they had seen the first flakes of snow come drifting down from the north. Looking up the vast valley, they had seen the snow-clouds tumbling thick around the twin peaks of Mynnydd Bannawg and overshadowing the road through the pass. Here they were, miles from anywhere; the nearest sizeable village to the south was fifteen miles away, although Caer Pedryfan was closer - but that lay across the mountain wall.

‘Well, we can’t walk back,’ said Nick worriedly. ‘Caer Pedryfan is closer. But how are we going to get there?’

‘We couldn’t walk t’ last ten miles could we?’ asked Osborne tentatively. He saw Nick’s expression. ‘No, didn’t think so,’ he added hurriedly.

‘What if we asked for a lift from someone in the restaurant?’ asked Hamish. There were about eleven or twelve cars in the car park. Surely someone must be intending to cross the high pass?

‘Look!’ said Eloise. A family was hurrying out of the Little Chef, glancing up at the snow-streaked sky and hurrying towards a large Volvo not far away.

‘Eh, we could ask them,’ said Osborne. He hurried over. ‘Hey!’ he called. The others followed him. The father of the family glanced up as the travellers came towards him and he paled at the sight of the biker, the crustie, the skinhead and the Goth - an unsavoury combination to his mind. He grabbed his children and wife and ushered them hurriedly towards the car. ‘Hey!’ Osborne called again.

‘Yes?’ said the man nervously. He was tall and thin and shivered with cold as he confronted them.

‘Look, we’re stuck here, like,’ said Osborne. ‘We’re wanting to cross the high pass. Could you could give us a lift? T’ weather’s getting bad, you see...’

‘No!’ barked the man. He swallowed and repeated the word with less vehemence. ‘No, we’re going the other way. We were going to Caer Pedryfan, but the weather’s

bad, like you said. Unexpected, really, in March. But we're going back to our relatives in Shropshire. Sorry.'

He leapt into the Volvo and revved the engine. Despondently, the travellers moved away, to allow him space to manoeuvre his way out of the car park.

'Keech!' Hamish shouted after him as he shot down the road.

'Hamish,' said Eloise, remonstrating. 'That won't help.'

The skinhead glared at her. 'Did ye see that?' he snarled. 'Prejudiced bawbag! Just coz we don't look like him, just coz we don't conform to his ideas of...'

'Stop it, Hamish, you're turning into a liberal.' Nick grinned. 'We wouldn't want that!'

The others laughed, but Hamish rounded on the crustie.

'Shut up!' he snarled. 'Ye're the one who knows so much about Wales! It's time ye found us a way oota this situation.'

Nick shrugged. 'Like what?' he asked.

'Do you know this valley?' asked Eloise.

'I've been here,' he admitted. 'When I was a kid. What of it?'

'Is there any way we could get over t' mountains to Caer Pedryfan?' Osborne asked. 'We can't stay here all night.'

Nick shivered and pulled his German Army jacket closer round his scrawny body. 'No, mate. The only way we could get over the mountains is by car. Especially in this weather. In the summer, some people walk it, but you couldn't do that now.'

The snow was getting thicker.

'In a car?' asked Hamish, grinning. 'Well, there's plenty to chose from.' He waved his hand at the car park around them. 'Take yer pick!'

Eloise frowned. 'What are you suggesting?'

'He's saying we should steal a car,' Osborne said patiently. 'But can any of you kids drive?' Osborne was twenty-four and thought this made him superior to his teenage companions.

'Ah can,' Hamish grinned.

Osborne shuddered. 'No you can't,' he said definitely, remembering Hamish's attempt to drive a stolen prison van.

‘I was taking lessons before I ran away,’ said Eloise tentatively. ‘My dad showed me the basics.’

‘Cannie you drive, Osborne?’ Hamish demanded. ‘Or is it just motorbikes?’

Osborne shrugged and shivered again. ‘I can drive heavy goods vehicles,’ he boasted. ‘But..’

‘But what?’ Hamish demanded.

‘But we don’t want t’ police after us again,’ the biker added.

‘Fuck that,’ snarled Hamish - although he had the most to lose, having several previous convictions, including murder. He turned to Nick. ‘Nick, ma man,’ he growled. ‘Get us the best car in this car park.’

A few minutes later, they were standing beside a red Mercedes, as Nick slid a ‘Slim Jim’ (a long metal ruler with a hook cut out of one end), down between the window and doorframe of the driver’s door. He moved it up and down blindly, until, with a sudden click, the door sprang open.

At that moment, Hamish, who had been keeping an eye on the restaurant, shouted, ‘Quick! Someone’s coming!’

They glanced up to see a well-heeled young man with a long-legged blonde bombshell in tow, come striding down the steps of the Little Chef.

‘Hey!’ the man shouted. ‘Get off my car!’

‘Osborne!’ shouted Eloise. ‘Get in the front! Everyone else, in the back.’

Osborne leapt in and opened the rest of the doors. Eloise ran round and got in the other side and Hamish and Nick piled in the back.

Osborne sat at the wheel for a couple of seconds.

‘Just drive!’ shouted Eloise, glancing in the mirror to where she could see the owner sprinting across the car park towards them.

‘There’s no keys in t’ ignition,’ said the biker.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ Nick said. He wriggled through the gap between the two front seats and fumbled under the dash, producing a couple of wires, which he twisted together.

‘Now try!’ he mumbled, as the engine turned over. ‘Get moving!’

Osborne slammed his foot down and the car screeched in reverse, colliding with a bang into a stationary van. Osborne spun the wheel and accelerated across the car park towards the entrance, narrowly missing the car owner, who slithered backwards

to evade their approach. They shot past him, leaving him writhing in the slush, and screeched out onto the open road.

‘That way!’ shouted Eloise, pointing towards the high pass. She glanced in the mirror and caught a glimpse of the man shouting into his mobile phone while his girlfriend picked her way across the snow towards him, a shocked expression on her face.

Then they were coasting up the road and the Little Chef had disappeared from sight.

‘Osborne!’ said Eloise urgently. ‘I think he was calling the police!’

‘Well, of course he would,’ Nick said. ‘Sooner or later.’

‘What are we gonna do?’ shouted Hamish. He had more reason than the rest for evading capture.

Osborne put his foot down and the car went screeching up the road towards the pass. The peaks marched massively on either side of them, their tops lost in the mist that hung pendulously above the speeding car.

‘If we can just get across t’ pass and down into t’ valleys beyond,’ said the biker, ‘we can ditch the car as soon as we get away from t’ snowstorm and make the rest of the way on foot. If we get there before the Pigs appear.’

A distant siren wail lifted from the valley floor. Hamish and Nick turned to peer through the back window.

‘Too late, man,’ shouted Nick. ‘There’s two patrol cars coming up the road!’

‘How far?’ Osborne yelled over his shoulder.

‘Still some way away,’ Hamish replied. ‘But they’re gaining.’

The police cars shot up the valley, their lights flashing, their sirens wailing. They were about a quarter of a mile away now, but the gap was closing. Nick turned to stare through the windscreen.

‘How far have we got till we can ditch the car?’ he demanded.

Eloise had found an OS map in the glove compartment. ‘Hang on,’ she called, untangling it. She scanned it rapidly. ‘Where are we? Oh, hell. Why do they never make these things clear... Ah, here we are.’

‘How much further?’ Osborne shouted, swerving to round another corner.

‘Erm... Oh. We’ve got another two miles to go before we reach the head of the pass, then a further three miles down the other side before we’re out of the mountains.’

‘Shit!’ shouted Nick. ‘The bizzies are on our tail!’

‘Isn’t there anywhere nearer we could bail out and hide?’ Hamish demanded.

‘There’s a bit of forest on the left, a bit further ahead,’ said Eloise, glancing up in confusion as the roadside flashed by. ‘At least, I think it’s ahead of us. And what’s this...? Something about a mine?’

‘Give me that,’ Nick demanded. Eloise passed it over. Nick glanced at it. ‘I know that mine,’ he said. ‘Y Pwll Ddu!’ he added, his Welsh pronunciation far from flawless. ‘My mum took us there one summer, when we were kids. It’s this pure tourist trap these days, but...’

‘Watch out!’ Eloise shouted.

Osborne had just shot round another corner to find himself confronted by two more police cars speeding down the road towards them. To their right, the cliff rose steeply. To their left, serried ranks of pines mantled the sheer drop. Osborne spun the wheel. Whether he was trying to turn round and escape the oncoming patrol cars, or if he was looking to go to Valhalla with all his sins upon him, Eloise was never quite certain. But the next thing she knew, the car was skidding off the road, crashing through the dry stone wall at the side of the road and pitching out into the misty abyss.

With a splintering and a cracking of breaking trees, the car plummeted down through the forest, sending its passengers crashing from side to side. Eloise grabbed hold of the dashboard and tried to brace herself as they smashed through another pine tree, then spun round and began to bump rapidly backwards down a scree-covered slope.

Finally, they came to an abrupt, bone-jarring halt in another stand of trees.

Silence fell, as thick as the mist that swirled around them. Hamish was first to stir.

‘What the fuck did ye do that for?’ he shouted.

Muzzily, Osborne shook his head. There was a purple bruise across his forehead where he had collided with the wheel.

Nick looked out of the broken window on his side. ‘This car’s fucked. That bloke back at the Little Chef will be pissed off.’

‘Is everyone alright?’ asked Eloise tremulously.

There was a general chorus of assent.

‘Eh, I reckon we’ve all been a bit shook up by it all,’ said Osborne. ‘But no one’s broken anything, have they?’

‘No,’ said Nick. ‘We were fucking lucky, you mad bastard.’

‘Shit!’ Hamish cried, pointing through the back window.

Through the mist, Eloise saw dark figures in police uniforms picking their way down

the slope through the shattered trees.

‘We’d better get out of here!’ said Osborne.

‘But how?’ demanded Eloise, peering forward.

‘Come on, everybody,’ said Nick, forcing open his buckled door. ‘The Pigs are just as much at a disadvantage as us! We can scramble down the side.’

‘But where are we going to go?’ Eloise asked. She pushed open her own door and followed him out into the cold wet air. The other two followed.

‘Down here!’ Nick said, pointing at a muddy path leading through the pines. ‘It should take us to the bottom of the pass.’

‘Well, where are we going to go then?’ Eloise asked. They began to follow the crustie down the forest path. ‘The police will catch up with us when we reach the bottom.’

‘Just follow me!’ Nick said urgently. ‘And quickly!’

They slithered down the slushy path after him. As he followed the others into the trees, Hamish glanced up towards the road.

The Pigs were still making their way down the torn up hillside, while snow drifted down in sheets. He shuddered with cold and hurried after his friends.

‘Here we are!’ Nick exclaimed, a quarter of an hour later.

They had reached the misty valley bottom a few minutes earlier and Nick had been casting about through the murk, searching for something. Up above them, the calls of questing policemen echoed through the wet air, muffled by the fog and falling snow.

‘What is it?’ asked Eloise, hugging herself. She was freezing; her clothes were wet and she really had just had enough.

Nick pointed ahead of him. Eloise strained her eyes to see what he was indicating.

‘A road?’ she asked. Nick nodded. ‘Well, wonderful!’ she snapped. ‘We had a road up there and now you’ve led us all the way down here to another one! Terrific. So what’s so special about this one?’

Nick looked hurt.

‘This could be our ticket out of this situation! You know I was telling you about this tourist trap mine place? Where me mum took us when we was kids?’

The others had caught up by now.

‘You reckon you can lead us there?’ Osborne asked. ‘Hide out from the Pigs there?’

‘Yeah,’ said Nick, grinning. ‘I remember this road. It leads right up to the place.’

‘Well, we’d better get moving,’ Hamish urged. ‘Those Pigs are still after us!’

‘I know. Come on. Quick!’ said Nick. He led them at a run into the driving snow.

‘What’s up with those bloody kids?’ demanded PC Rhys. He picked his way down the snow-slippery slope. ‘They must be needing medical help after going over the side like that!’

His companion, a short, dark-haired man named PC Ellis, shrugged.

‘Kids are like that these days,’ he replied. ‘No respect for their elders and betters. We didn’t do that kind of thing when we were young, did we?’

‘No, but I reckon these are English kids,’ PC Rhys replied. ‘Their description matches the ones we were supposed to be keeping an eye out for. You know, the ones the new DI told us about.’

‘You mean that Saes bloke?’ Ellis replied. They were almost at the bottom of the valley now. ‘Inspector McCavity? I can’t stand him.’

‘Get a move on, men,’ said an English voice from the mist and out stepped the Inspector himself. The two constables glanced at each other, startled.

‘I thought you were still in the station, sir,’ said Ellis. Behind the inspector were the lads from the other cars that had been pursuing the stolen vehicle. ‘Didn’t know you’d be interested in a case like this.’

‘As soon as I heard the description of the car-thieves, I came straight over,’ the Inspector replied. ‘They’ve made a right mess of the place already, haven’t they? Typical. I’ve followed these criminals across the entire country and they’ve wreaked havoc wherever they’ve gone - got away with it, too.’

‘They’ll get away this time, as well,’ said DS Dover, his right hand man, looming up out of the mist. ‘PC Roberts here thinks they’re making for an old mine in the valley ahead.’

‘Just a suggestion, sir,’ said the middle-aged constable nearby.

The inspector rubbed his chin.

‘I suggest we split up and search,’ he said. ‘Call up air support - it’s probably going to be useless in this weather, but we may as well employ it in case. Now, you, you and you - down the valley with me. You, you and you - head towards this mine.’ He

pointed at Ellis, Rhys and Roberts in turn.

‘Here we are!’ cried Nick, as the side of the valley loomed up out of the fog. The snow was piling thickly now and it blanketed the area in a cold, silent shroud of white. But between the snow-hung buildings marked ‘SHOP’ and ‘TOILETS’, a single-track railway led into the black maw of the mine entrance.

‘In here?’ Eloise looked around at the cold landscape.

‘Yeah,’ Nick replied and then broke off.

‘What’s that?’ asked Hamish, at the same moment, staring up into the snowy sky. The muffled whirr of rotor-blades was audible, from somewhere up in the mist and snow. Osborne brushed snow out of his beard and turned on the others.

‘It must be a police helicopter!’ he shouted. ‘Quick, move!’

‘They won’t be able to spot us through this snow,’ Eloise objected.

‘They’ve got infra-red sensors, haven’t they?’ snapped Nick impatiently. ‘Osborne’s right! Into the tunnel!’

They slithered across the frozen mud towards the mine. Just as they were scrambling down the railway into the entrance, a shout alerted them from behind.

Eloise spun round to see three snow-encrusted policemen burst out of the mist.

‘Halt!’ the lead constable shouted. ‘Don’t go any further! You are under arrest!’

‘Come on!’ shouted Hamish urgently and they raced into the darkness of the mine tunnel.

It was dank in the mine and the tunnel roof dripped icy cold water. It was dark, too and after a few paces, Eloise could no longer see any of her companions.

‘Wait!’ she called. ‘All we have to do is find somewhere to hide! As long as we can escape them, that’s all we need.’

She bumped into Hamish’s brawny shoulders. The Scot had stopped short.

‘Are they following us?’ he asked. There was a patter of feet from the entrance.

Eloise glanced over her shoulder. Silhouetted against the cold skies outside were the three policemen, slipping on the rocks of the entrance and peering in. It was clear that they could not make out the fugitives.

‘Come out of there!’ said one of the policemen. ‘Or we’ll come in and get you.’

Eloise froze into stillness and around her, the sounds of her companions ceased.

‘Where have they got to?’ demanded another policeman. ‘Have they gone further in?’

‘I can’t see a thing,’ admitted the last. ‘It’s so dark. We should get torches.’

‘Come on,’ said the first policeman, a middle-aged man. ‘We haven’t the time. They could get away.’ He strode resolutely into the arch. His two companions followed him warily.

‘Shit,’ said Hamish. ‘Get further back up the tunnel,’ he hissed to the others. Eloise saw him rise up against the darkness, almost blotting out the advancing policemen, and dash over to the wall.

‘What are you doing, Hamish Wallis?’ she hissed, as he attacked the nearby pit prop.

‘Get back!’ he yelled. The three policemen were right up close.

‘No!’ shouted Eloise. The policemen were staring round, trying to locate them. Suddenly, a whole chunk of the roof broke off, there was an endless roar of falling rock... and then darkness, broken only by an occasional cough.

‘Let there be light,’ Nick said. And there was light.

The crustie stood in the centre of the tunnel, holding his Zippo over his head. Its guttering light revealed the settling dust and the crouching, choking figures of his friends. A little further away, towards the entrance, a huge rock-fall blocked the tunnel. Before it lay two uniformed figures. The third policeman was nowhere to be seen.

‘Och, shite,’ said Hamish. The two policemen were stirring.

‘Hamish, you idiot!’ Eloise snapped. ‘What did you think you were doing?’

‘I reckon he was trying to stop them,’ said Osborne slowly. ‘But it didn’t work. Now we’re all trapped down here.’

One of the policemen, the middle-aged one, got to his feet and started weakly towards them.

‘You’re under arrest!’ he called. ‘Don’t move, don’t do anything stupid and we’ll read you your rights. And boy, you are in trouble - especially if you caught our colleague in that rockfall.’

‘You haven’t got your helmet on!’ Nick crowed. ‘You can’t arrest us without your

helmet on!

‘Is that true?’ asked Eloise.

The Scouser nodded. ‘So I’ve been told,’ he said.

‘Ellis is under that rock-fall, Roberts,’ said the other policeman, advancing on his companion. ‘Never mind these kids - they’re as trapped as we are. We’ve got to radio for help!’

Roberts sighed. ‘You’re right, Rhys,’ he replied. ‘Try your radio.’

PC Rhys took out his walkie-talkie and started attempting to raise his superiors. While he was doing so, PC Roberts advanced on his prisoners.

‘Don’t imagine you’ve escaped us,’ he warned. ‘We’ve got you here. And don’t think about running off into the tunnels.’ He looked nervous. ‘They’re dangerous.’

‘How so?’ asked Eloise.

‘Well, miss...’ Roberts began, but he broke off. ‘Rhys, haven’t you raised the Inspector yet?’

Rhys looked up. ‘No, Roberts,’ he admitted. ‘All I’m getting is static. You try.’

Roberts took out his own radio, but the result was just the same. The two policemen looked at each other. Just at that second, Nick’s lighter went out.

‘Light!’ Roberts shouted, panicked. ‘We need light!’

A few seconds later, a glow flared up nearby and Rhys was revealed, holding up his own lighter. He looked around and so did Roberts.

‘Jesus!’ cursed the constable. ‘They’ve gone.’

‘Where are we going?’ demanded Eloise, as they fled down the tunnel.

‘Fuck knows,’ Nick admitted from the darkness beside her. ‘But we’re getting away from them!’

‘Nick, you said you’d been here before,’ Osborne panted, trying to keep up with the crustie. ‘Is there any other way to get out of the place?’

Nick slowed down.

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'It was a long time ago...'

'I think we should just stop here,' Eloise said. 'Before we do ourselves an injury.' As they obeyed, she added; 'Nick - your lighter.'

It flared up again and she gasped with shock.

Directly in front of them, the tunnel opened up into a large cavern. Three metres away, the floor plunged away as a vast shaft opened up, leading down into the bowels of the earth.

A flimsy barbed wire fence had been stretched across the edge of the abyss, but Eloise realised that if they had kept running in the dark, they would still have been falling.

'Shit... ' Hamish said.

At that moment, a terrified scream rang out through the mines, echoing and re-echoing through the dank tunnels.

'What was that?' demanded Eloise, her eyes wide.

'It was the bizzies!' replied Nick.

'We'd better go and see what's up!' Eloise replied.

'It could be a trap,' Osborne warned her.

'Don't be stupid,' Eloise said indignantly. 'You can see this shaft. There could be all sorts of other dangers lurking in the darkness. It's true what that policeman said. This place is dangerous.'

'Why don't we go and find out what's happened?' Hamish demanded impatiently.

Running footsteps abruptly split the brooding silence. They turned to see a wild-eyed figure dash out of the tunnel behind them.

It was PC Rhys, his face white, his eyes bulging.

'Stop!' shouted Eloise. 'Watch out! That shaft's bottomless.'

Rhys seemed not to have heard her, but he staggered to a halt and glared at them frenziedly. At last, he spat:

'Tylwyth teg!' and collapsed at their feet.

Gingerly, Osborne advanced on the twisted, unmoving form. He felt for a pulse, then shook his head and stood up again.

'He's dead,' said the biker flatly.

‘What killed him?’ Eloise gasped. Osborne shook his head.

‘I don’t know,’ he murmured. ‘But look at his face.’

Even in death, Rhys’ face was locked in a rictus of terror.

‘Looks like he’s been frightened to death,’ said Hamish. ‘But by what?’

There was a noise from the archway and Eloise spun round.

Standing in the cavern entrance, holding a lighter high, was the other policeman, the middle-aged man called Roberts. He stared down at Rhys’ unmoving corpse.

‘What happened?’ Eloise demanded.

Roberts shook his head. He turned off his lighter.

‘I don’t know, girlie,’ he said sadly. ‘I sent him a bit further up the tunnel, to see if the walkie-talkie would work up there. Next thing I knew, he was screaming and I could hear him running away. I followed him through the tunnels and then I found him here. With you.’

‘We didn’t do anything to him,’ Eloise said quickly. ‘He just ran in here and...’

Roberts nodded sadly.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t you.’ He looked down at Rhys’ corpse. ‘I think I know what did, though.’

‘He said something in Welsh,’ said Nick. ‘Just before he died. I don’t speak Welsh, but I went out with a Welsh girl once and I picked up a bit here and there. I couldn’t understand what he was saying, but it sounded like tylwyth teg.’ He looked closely at Roberts’ face. The policeman paled at these words.

‘You know what it means, though - don’t you?’ asked Eloise.

‘Tylwyth Teg,’ Roberts mused. ‘Now that’s something I’ve not heard in years.’ He shook his head. ‘Tylwyth Teg. Otherwise known as y pobl hên, y pobl bach ddu. The old people, the little dark people. The Little People.’

‘Who are the Little People?’ asked Nick, tentatively.

‘I’ve heard of them,’ said Eloise quietly.

‘So have I,’ added Osborne.

‘But who are they?’ Hamish asked impatiently. ‘What are they, pygmies, what?’

‘My grannie always said they were the old gods of the land,’ said Eloise. ‘Then again, she said all kinds of things like that. I’ve found that the truth is usually rather more

sinister.’

‘They weren’t t’ old gods,’ said Osborne. ‘Not from what I’ve heard.’

‘They were the old people,’ said Roberts. ‘Still are, if the stories are anything to go by - inside the hollow hills. They’re a legend, though,’ he added. ‘No one really believes in them anymore. A race of tiny people, about three feet high, who live underneath the mountains...’

‘Some people still believe in them,’ Eloise broke in. ‘Some of the legends say that the Little People were the old inhabitants of Britain, forced underground - literally - by the coming of the Celts. Other legends say that they shot at the cattle of the invaders with stone-tipped arrows...’

‘Like they were cavemen?’ asked Hamish slowly.

‘Exactly,’ Eloise replied. ‘The descriptions match the prehistoric inhabitants of Britain!’

‘But cavemen weren’t that small, were they?’ asked Nick. ‘I thought they were all big-massive bastards.’

‘In the aeons since they were thrust underground by the ancestors of the Celts,’ Osborne rumbled, ‘they have drawn apart. They are no longer like us. They have adapted to survive in their new environment - so much so that they are no longer human.’

A silence greeted his words, broken only by the distant drip - drip - drip of water, far away.

Nick broke the silence.

‘So now we’re lost in the mines. I suggest we start thinking about how to get out of here.’ He yawned again. ‘But right now, I think I’m going to have a little sleep.’

Seconds later, he was snoring.

Eloise shivered in the dark. What Nick said was true - they were lost. Lost, in a hostile environment. Something had done for the other policeman and his last words had alluded to creatures of legend. Were the Little People as vicious and hostile as the stories said?

‘What are we going to do?’ she murmured.

‘Well,’ said Roberts, ‘my old da’ worked down here, back when it was still a slate mine. I happen to know that there used to be another entrance on the far side of the mountain.’ He sighed. ‘But things might have changed recently.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Eloise. ‘Since it’s become a tourist trap?’

‘No,’ Roberts replied. ‘Since then. Last year we had to close the place down, at the height of the tourist season. Groups of visitors kept vanishing and when the police were called, all our search parties disappeared. We don’t know what’s happened in the mine since then.’ He sighed again. ‘At the time, I thought the place must just have been getting unstable - but...’ He laughed. ‘What would my old da’ think, the mine overrun by creatures from a fairy tale?’

‘The Little People are not creatures from a fairy tale,’ Osborne said ominously.

‘How come ye know so much about them?’ Hamish demanded. ‘Ah’ve never heard of them.’

‘You just have to read the right books,’ said Eloise. Or read at all, she added silently to herself. Hamish had never learnt to read.

Osborne was silent.

‘So, have you read the right books?’ Hamish sneered. ‘Or what?’

‘I’ve read the right books,’ Osborne replied. ‘And the wrong ones as well.’

‘A few years ago, me and my mates - the ones you met back in Westchester - we went up into the Dales, following up something Eric had read about in one of his books. There were fifteen of us back then, but only thirteen returned from our potholing expedition.’ He paused. ‘There are things living underneath this land that have no love for the dwellers on the surface.’

[Return to top](#)

Carmilla

VII

Descending

It would be vain my attempting to tell you the horror with which, even now, I recall the occurrence of that night. It was no such transitory terror as a dream leaves behind it. It seemed to deepen by time, and communicated itself to the room and the very furniture that had encompassed the apparition.

I could not bear next day to be alone for a moment. I should have told papa, but for two opposite reasons. At one time I thought he would laugh at my story, and I could

not bear its being treated as a jest; and at another I thought he might fancy that I had been attacked by the mysterious complaint which had invaded our neighborhood. I had myself no misgiving of the kind, and as he had been rather an invalid for some time, I was afraid of alarming him.

I was comfortable enough with my good-natured companions, Madame Perrodon, and the vivacious Mademoiselle Lafontaine. They both perceived that I was out of spirits and nervous, and at length I told them what lay so heavy at my heart.

Mademoiselle laughed, but I fancied that Madame Perrodon looked anxious.

“By-the-by,” said Mademoiselle, laughing, “the long lime tree walk, behind Carmilla’s bedroom window, is haunted!”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Madame, who probably thought the theme rather inopportune, “and who tells that story, my dear?”

“Martin says that he came up twice, when the old yard gate was being repaired, before sunrise, and twice saw the same female figure walking down the lime tree avenue.”

“So he well might, as long as there are cows to milk in the river fields,” said Madame.

“I daresay; but Martin chooses to be frightened, and never did I see fool more frightened.”

“You must not say a word about it to Carmilla, because she can see down that walk from her room window,” I interposed, “and she is, if possible, a greater coward than I.”

Carmilla came down rather later than usual that day.

“I was so frightened last night,” she said, so soon as we were together, “and I am sure I should have seen something dreadful if it had not been for that charm I bought from the poor little hunchback whom I called such hard names. I had a dream of something black coming round my bed, and I awoke in a perfect horror, and I really thought, for some seconds, I saw a dark figure near the chimneypiece, but I felt under my pillow for my charm, and the moment my fingers touched it, the figure disappeared, and I felt quite certain, only that I had it by me, that something frightful would have made its appearance, and, perhaps, throttled me, as it did those poor people we heard of.

“Well, listen to me,” I began, and recounted my adventure, at the recital of which she appeared horrified.

“And had you the charm near you?” she asked, earnestly.

“No, I had dropped it into a china vase in the drawing room, but I shall certainly take it with me tonight, as you have so much faith in it.”

At this distance of time I cannot tell you, or even understand, how I overcame my horror so effectually as to lie alone in my room that night. I remember distinctly that I

pinned the charm to my pillow. I fell asleep almost immediately, and slept even more soundly than usual all night.

Next night I passed as well. My sleep was delightfully deep and dreamless.

But I wakened with a sense of lassitude and melancholy, which, however, did not exceed a degree that was almost luxurious.

“Well, I told you so,” said Carmilla, when I described my quiet sleep, “I had such delightful sleep myself last night; I pinned the charm to the breast of my nightdress. It was too far away the night before. I am quite sure it was all fancy, except the dreams. I used to think that evil spirits made dreams, but our doctor told me it is no such thing. Only a fever passing by, or some other malady, as they often do, he said, knocks at the door, and not being able to get in, passes on, with that alarm.”

“And what do you think the charm is?” said I.

“It has been fumigated or immersed in some drug, and is an antidote against the malaria,” she answered.

“Then it acts only on the body?”

“Certainly; you don’t suppose that evil spirits are frightened by bits of ribbon, or the perfumes of a druggist’s shop? No, these complaints, wandering in the air, begin by trying the nerves, and so infect the brain, but before they can seize upon you, the antidote repels them. That I am sure is what the charm has done for us. It is nothing magical, it is simply natural.

I should have been happier if I could have quite agreed with Carmilla, but I did my best, and the impression was a little losing its force.

For some nights I slept profoundly; but still every morning I felt the same lassitude, and a languor weighed upon me all day. I felt myself a changed girl. A strange melancholy was stealing over me, a melancholy that I would not have interrupted. Dim thoughts of death began to open, and an idea that I was slowly sinking took gentle, and, somehow, not unwelcome, possession of me. If it was sad, the tone of mind which this induced was also sweet.

Whatever it might be, my soul acquiesced in it.

I would not admit that I was ill, I would not consent to tell my papa, or to have the doctor sent for.

Carmilla became more devoted to me than ever, and her strange paroxysms of languid adoration more frequent. She used to gloat on me with increasing ardor the more my strength and spirits waned. This always shocked me like a momentary glare of insanity.

Without knowing it, I was now in a pretty advanced stage of the strangest illness under which mortal ever suffered. There was an unaccountable fascination in its

earlier symptoms that more than reconciled me to the incapacitating effect of that stage of the malady. This fascination increased for a time, until it reached a certain point, when gradually a sense of the horrible mingled itself with it, deepening, as you shall hear, until it discolored and perverted the whole state of my life.

The first change I experienced was rather agreeable. It was very near the turning point from which began the descent of Avernus.

Certain vague and strange sensations visited me in my sleep. The prevailing one was of that pleasant, peculiar cold thrill which we feel in bathing, when we move against the current of a river. This was soon accompanied by dreams that seemed interminable, and were so vague that I could never recollect their scenery and persons, or any one connected portion of their action. But they left an awful impression, and a sense of exhaustion, as if I had passed through a long period of great mental exertion and danger.

After all these dreams there remained on waking a remembrance of having been in a place very nearly dark, and of having spoken to people whom I could not see; and especially of one clear voice, of a female's, very deep, that spoke as if at a distance, slowly, and producing always the same sensation of indescribable solemnity and fear. Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious.

It was now three weeks since the commencement of this unaccountable state.

My sufferings had, during the last week, told upon my appearance. I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which I had long felt began to display itself in my countenance.

My father asked me often whether I was ill; but, with an obstinacy which now seems to me unaccountable, I persisted in assuring him that I was quite well.

In a sense this was true. I had no pain, I could complain of no bodily derangement. My complaint seemed to be one of the imagination, or the nerves, and, horrible as my sufferings were, I kept them, with a morbid reserve, very nearly to myself.

It could not be that terrible complaint which the peasants called the oupire, for I had now been suffering for three weeks, and they were seldom ill for much more than three days, when death put an end to their miseries.

Carmilla complained of dreams and feverish sensations, but by no means of so alarming a kind as mine. I say that mine were extremely alarming. Had I been capable of comprehending my condition, I would have invoked aid and advice on my knees. The narcotic of an unsuspected influence was acting upon me, and my perceptions were benumbed.

I am going to tell you now of a dream that led immediately to an odd discovery.

One night, instead of the voice I was accustomed to hear in the dark, I heard one, sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible, which said,

“Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin.” At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her white nightdress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood.

I wakened with a shriek, possessed with the one idea that Carmilla was being murdered. I remember springing from my bed, and my next recollection is that of standing on the lobby, crying for help.

Madame and Mademoiselle came scurrying out of their rooms in alarm; a lamp burned always on the lobby, and seeing me, they soon learned the cause of my terror.

I insisted on our knocking at Carmilla’s door. Our knocking was unanswered.

It soon became a pounding and an uproar. We shrieked her name, but all was vain.

We all grew frightened, for the door was locked. We hurried back, in panic, to my room. There we rang the bell long and furiously. If my father’s room had been at that side of the house, we would have called him up at once to our aid. But, alas! he was quite out of hearing, and to reach him involved an excursion for which we none of us had courage.

Servants, however, soon came running up the stairs; I had got on my dressing gown and slippers meanwhile, and my companions were already similarly furnished. Recognizing the voices of the servants on the lobby, we sallied out together; and having renewed, as fruitlessly, our summons at Carmilla’s door, I ordered the men to force the lock. They did so, and we stood, holding our lights aloft, in the doorway, and so stared into the room.

We called her by name; but there was still no reply. We looked round the room. Everything was undisturbed. It was exactly in the state in which I had left it on bidding her good night. But Carmilla was gone.

[Return to top](#)