

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! Publishing

This Edition

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

[The Broker Beetles](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - a Faustian pact reaches its horrific conclusion!

[The Jackal: Part Three](#) by [Gavin Roach](#) - romance, betrayal, horror and a sinister obsidian statue spell trouble on the Spanish Main! *Third in a five-part series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Varney the Vampire](#) ascribed to [Thomas Preskett Prest](#) - Part Three - ...*everything that has happened has tended to confirm a belief in this most horrible of all superstitions concerning vampyres...* Before *Twilight*... before Nosferatu... before Dracula... there was Varney...

[Renewal](#) by [Gavin Roach](#) and [Gavin Chappell](#) - the river god learns that life - and death - is a complex thing.

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Edison's Conquest of Mars \(Part 3\)](#) by [Garrett P. Serviss](#) - Vengeance at Last Upon the Pitiless Martians!

[Book of Dead Names](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - three teenage runaways and a revenant occultist spell trouble. *First in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Saga of the Ere-Dwellers](#) - supernatural soap opera from Iceland, translated by [William Morris](#) and Eirikr Magnusson.

[Viriconium Nights](#) by Rex Mundy - first of a thrilling two-part adventure featuring Walwain the Pict!

[Retribution](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - on the analyst's couch, but is Mr Ray's delusion more than it seems?

Schlock! Classic: [Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller](#) by [Lord Dunsany](#) - Wildly extravagant fantasy by the man who inspired every fantasy writer from HP Lovecraft to JRR Tolkien, not to mention Keir Hardie. (CS Lewis hated it, so it can't be bad!)

The Broker Beetles by James Rhodes

The clouds took on an orange hue that gradually surpassed the glow of the streetlights and the shadows retreated behind the objects that had generated them, as if to hide from the coming sun. As tranquil as Sean felt gazing out of the window that morning, he was still on the lookout: it was at times like this that the broker beetles went hunting. One does not just walk away from that kind of a contract. The beetles masqueraded as shiny black BMWs, tens of thousands of them crawling over each other compiling a simulacrum that no casual bystander could distinguish from the original.

After fourteen moves, within five different countries and three different continents, Sean had accepted that the company was not going to give up. He had accepted that all his best escape tricks had failed. With a grim resolution, he had gone back to meet his fate in his childhood home, and patience was the only dignity left to him.

“Ah, Faustus,” he muttered to himself, “now hast thou but one bare hour to live.”

In spite of his dire situation, Sean felt smug at making a literary reference. It balanced his emotions, allowing him to reflect rationally on his circumstances: If it had occurred to Sean that he would ever want to walk away from that kind of money then he would never have signed the contract in the first place. Sean knew the rationalisation to be false but it comforted him.

There had been plenty of other companies that would have paid a sizeable amount to have Sean on their books. However, there was none that could match that salary: It was a country's wage.

That alone should have given him some perspective on what he was signing up for, but he possessed a single-minded avarice that would not have let him choose any other way. Only after three decades of ninety-hour weeks without respite: not having time to contemplate the extraordinary numbers he had accumulated, did the phrase *in perpetuity* begin to niggle at him.

The rushed last minute dinners at restaurants that celebrities had to book months in advance, and the Sunday afternoon visits from high-class escorts, had both lost their thrill for him; everything had. He had thought that he'd had enough money to buy his way out of the contract.

The back car's wheels screeched suddenly. Sean barely had time to observe the events before the beetles were upon him. The impact of the wheels on the kerb side burst the BMW like a water balloon and spilled a black puddle of the insects out on to the street. Without pausing for the impact of the drop, the puddle trickled up the steps to his parent's semi-detached house and disappeared under the front door.

In the time it took for Sean to turn his head they had already made it into the room.

The beetles' advance paused as they surrounded him, cutting off any chance of exit. Any sense of composure or acceptance that he had possessed was lost in the realisation that it was truly the end. At the sensation of the creatures crawling past

his socks and up his naked legs, Sean flew into an energetic panic, clutching at the things and crushing them in his fists. It was futile; for each thirty he stopped, another hundred made it up his legs.

Sean stamped at the beetles with both feet, even as they covered his entire torso. He frantically slapped himself and, in desperation, he fell to the ground rolling and writhing in the effort to snuff them out. When his whole body was covered with the insects, he felt them bite into him in unison. Thousands of pincers knitted themselves into Sean's torso. There was an intense burning pain, so strong that it deafened his whimpers. Then, there came euphoria.

Most of the clothes in Sean's wardrobe no longer fitted. He marvelled that his mother still kept them. However, the new suit he saw in the mirror was perfect. It was tailor-fitted black silk, each beetle woven as fine as a thread. Now that the pain was over Sean felt optimistic. It was time he went back to work.

The Jackal (Part Three) by Gavin Roach

As Louis crept along the hallway, it struck him how their lives had changed, quite literally overnight. Only yesterday, Charlotte had been sitting for the portrait he was working on and Tobias was writing a new poem. How carefree their lives had been. Not one of them had any clue what ill news the following day would bring. But this was no time for idle reminiscing, Louis thought as he approached the front door. Still, with all the excitement he had a strong desire to tell Charlotte his true feelings. He couldn't do that, not now, but when they were safe he resolved to tell her and let the cards fall where they may. Tobias was his friend but hiding his feelings was driving him mad. He took a deep breath, opened the front door a fraction, then peered out into the night.

Upstairs, Charlotte helped Tobias throw a few necessities in a bag. She couldn't quite contain her excitement; she was soon going to be married to the man she loved and leave this island and fat merchants far behind.

"It is all working out, Charlotte," said Tobias in a breathless whisper. "Once we are away from your father and at sea, nothing will be able to separate us. When we reach England, we can be husband and wife!" He gathered her up in his arms and planted a passionate kiss upon her lips.

A muffled thud interrupted their moment. "Come my love, I think we had better see if Louis is all right." The lovers gazed into each other's eyes for a second longer, then dashed down the staircase to join their friend.

Tobias stopped at the foot of the stair and Charlotte narrowly avoided running into him. Confused, she looked at him. "What is wrong? Why have you stopped?" As she spoke Charlotte looked past her lover, and saw what held his attention. Breath catching in her throat, her mind refused to register what her eyes were telling her.

The front door was hanging wide open. The living room was in disarray and there was a small group of men inside that she did not know. One of them, a huge bear-like brute, clutched Louis by the front of his shirt. The young painter sagged like a broken doll and blood poured from his ruined face.

Charlotte stumbled down the last few steps as Tobias lunged for his friend. Tobias' furious charge was cut short as one of the intruders lashed out with a cruel cudgel. The club smashed into Tobias' face and he fell sprawling to the floor.

Charlotte reached out for her Tobias, but a rough hand gripped her shoulder and shoved her back into the stairs, dashing her head against the banister as she fell. As her vision faded she glimpsed a tall, bearded, shaven headed man stride past into the front room drawing a knife. The man kicked Tobias as the poet tried to clamber to his feet and then planted his booted foot on his chest. In the moonlight it appeared as if the tattoos upon the man's face writhed and twisted as he pushed Tobias' jaw back, exposing his neck. With the blade clutched in his fist, he slashed the poet's throat.

~oOo~

Thornville shrugged on his coat then tossed a handful of coins onto the bed where Mary lay. "You are, as always, the light in my darkness," he murmured. The girl lay still as Thornville ogled her naked form; then he closed the curtains and made his way down the stairs.

The tavern was quiet now. The night's revelry being over, most of the other patrons had returned to wherever they called home. One or two inebriates lay upon

the floor, amongst empty bottles and other detritus. Manfred Thornville picked his way through these lost souls and out into the predawn light. He paused outside the tavern doors, took a deep breath, stretched, then walked to the spot he had told Mortimer to wait with the carriage. He rapped upon the door, waking his driver.

Mortimer lurched into a sitting position "...Yes m'lord?"

"Home, Mortimer," said Thornville, climbing into the carriage.

"Very good, m'lord," said Mortimer as he turned the carriage and began the journey home.

"What do you mean, gone?" Thornville raged as Rachel flinched away from him. What was Charlotte thinking of? She was due to meet her future husband today, if she ruined his plans there would be hell to pay!

"It's like I said, sir. Miss Thornville has gone to visit Mr. Day. She left with that Mr. Baskin fellow last night."

Thornville turned away from the cowering maid. "Mortimer, have my horse saddled immediately and fetch my pistols!" He stormed off towards the stables. "If that bloody poet has had a hand in this I'll kill him myself!" Thornville muttered. "And I think a word or two with Captain Cole is also in order."

As Thornville rounded the corner to the stable block, Mortimer was leading Thornville's charger out to meet him.

"I imagine this will not take long," said Thornville as he mounted the stallion. "If Hobart arrives before I return, keep him entertained. He is not to leave under any circumstance."

"Very good, m'lord," Mortimer replied, handing him a brace of pistols. Thornville checked the pistols then kicked the stallion into a gallop. He made straight for Road Town, specifically the address of one Tobias Day.

Varney the Vampire Part 3

CHAPTER VII.

THE VISIT TO THE VAULT OF THE BANNERWORTHS, AND ITS UNPLEASANT RESULT.—THE MYSTERY.

Henry and his brother roused Flora, and after agreeing together that it would be highly imprudent to say anything to her of the proceedings of the night, they commenced a conversation with her in encouraging and kindly accents.

“Well, Flora,” said Henry, “you see you have been quite undisturbed to-night.”

“I have slept long, dear Henry.”

“You have, and pleasantly too, I hope.”

“I have not had any dreams, and I feel much refreshed, now, and quite well again.”

“Thank Heaven!” said George.

“If you will tell dear mother that I am awake, I will get up with her assistance.”

The brothers left the room, and they spoke to each other of it as a favourable sign, that Flora did not object to being left alone now, as she had done on the preceding morning.

“She is fast recovering, now, George,” said Henry. “If we could now but persuade ourselves that all this alarm would pass away, and that we should hear no more of it, we might return to our old and comparatively happy condition.”

“Let us believe, Henry, that we shall.”

“And yet, George, I shall not be satisfied in my mind, until I have paid a visit.”

“A visit? Where?”

“To the family vault.”

“Indeed, Henry! I thought you had abandoned that idea.”

“I had. I have several times abandoned it; but it comes across my mind again and again.”

“I much regret it.”

“Look you, George; as yet, everything that has happened has tended to confirm a belief in this most horrible of all superstitions concerning vampyres.”

“It has.”

“Now, my great object, George, is to endeavour to disturb such a state of things, by getting something, however slight, or of a negative character, for the mind to rest upon on the other side of the question.”

“I comprehend you, Henry.”

“You know that at present we are not only led to believe, almost irresistibly that we have been visited here by a vampyre but that that vampyre is our ancestor, whose portrait is on the panel of the wall of the chamber into which he contrived to make his way.”

“True, most true.”

“Then let us, by an examination of the family vault, George, put an end to one of the evidences. If we find, as most surely we shall, the coffin of the ancestor of ours, who seems, in dress and appearance, so horribly mixed up in this affair, we shall be at rest on that head.”

“But consider how many years have elapsed.”

“Yes, a great number.”

“What then, do you suppose, could remain of any corpse placed in a vault so long ago?”

“Decomposition must of course have done its work, but still there must be a something to show that a corpse has so undergone the process common to all nature. Double the lapse of time surely could not obliterate all traces of that which had been.”

“There is reason in that, Henry.”

“Besides, the coffins are all of lead, and some of stone, so that they cannot have all gone.”

“True, most true.”

“If in the one which, from the inscription and the date, we discover to be that of our ancestor whom we seek, we find the evident remains of a corpse, we shall be satisfied that he has rested in his tomb in peace.”

“Brother, you seem bent on this adventure,” said George; “if you go, I will accompany you.”

“I will not engage rashly in it, George. Before I finally decide, I will again consult with Mr. Marchdale. His opinion will weigh much with me.”

“And in good time, here he comes across the garden,” said George, as he looked from the window of the room in which they sat.

It was Mr. Marchdale, and the brothers warmly welcomed him as he entered the

apartment.

“You have been early afoot,” said Henry.

“I have,” he said. “The fact is, that although at your solicitation I went to bed, I could not sleep, and I went out once more to search about the spot where we had seen the—the I don’t know what to call it, for I have a great dislike to naming it a vampyre.”

“There is not much in a name,” said George.

“In this instance there is,” said Marchdale. “It is a name suggestive of horror.”

“Made you any discovery?” said Henry.

“None whatever.”

“You saw no trace of any one?”

“Not the least.”

“Well, Mr. Marchdale, George and I were talking over this projected visit to the family vault.”

“Yes.”

“And we agreed to suspend our judgments until we saw you, and learned your opinion.”

“Which I will tell you frankly,” said Mr. Marchdale, “because I know you desire it freely.”

“Do so.”

“It is, that you make the visit.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes, and for this reason. You have now, as you cannot help having, a disagreeable feeling, that you may find that one coffin is untenanted. Now, if you do find it so, you scarcely make matters worse, by an additional confirmation of what already amounts to a strong supposition, and one which is likely to grow stronger by time.”

“True, most true.”

“On the contrary, if you find indubitable proofs that your ancestor has slept soundly in the tomb, and gone the way of all flesh, you will find yourselves much calmer, and that an attack is made upon the train of events which at present all run one way.”

“That is precisely the argument I was using to George,” said Henry, “a few moments since.”

“Then let us go,” said George, “by all means.”

“It is so decided then,” said Henry.

“Let it be done with caution,” replied Mr. Marchdale.

“If any one can manage it, of course we can.”

“Why should it not be done secretly and at night? Of course we lose nothing by making a night visit to a vault into which daylight, I presume, cannot penetrate.”

“Certainly not.”

“Then let it be at night.”

“But we shall surely require the concurrence of some of the church authorities.”

“Nay, I do not see that,” interposed Mr. Marchdale. “It is the vault actually vested in and belonging to yourself you wish to visit, and, therefore, you have right to visit it in any manner or at any time that may be most suitable to yourself.”

“But detection in a clandestine visit might produce unpleasant consequences.”

“The church is old,” said George, “and we could easily find means of getting into it. There is only one objection that I see, just now, and that is, that we leave Flora unprotected.”

“We do, indeed,” said Henry. “I did not think of that.”

“It must be put to herself, as a matter for her own consideration,” said Mr. Marchdale, “if she will consider herself sufficiently safe with the company and protection of your mother only.”

“It would be a pity were we not all three present at the examination of the coffin,” remarked Henry.

“It would, indeed. There is ample evidence,” said Mr. Marchdale, “but we must not give Flora a night of sleeplessness and uneasiness on that account, and the more particularly as we cannot well explain to her where we are going, or upon what errand.”

“Certainly not.”

“Let us talk to her, then, about it,” said Henry. “I confess I am much bent upon the plan, and fain would not forego it; neither should I like other than that we three should go together.”

“If you determine, then, upon it,” said Marchdale, “we will go to-night; and, from your acquaintance with the place, doubtless you will be able to decide what tools are

necessary.”

“There is a trap-door at the bottom of the pew,” said Henry; “it is not only secured down, but it is locked likewise, and I have the key in my possession.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; immediately beneath is a short flight of stone steps, which conduct at once into the vault.”

“Is it large?”

“No; about the size of a moderate chamber, and with no intricacies about it.”

“There can be no difficulties, then.”

“None whatever, unless we meet with actual personal interruption, which I am inclined to think is very far from likely. All we shall require will be a screwdriver, with which to remove the screws, and then something with which to wrench open the coffin.”

“Those we can easily provide, along with lights,” remarked Mr. Marchdale.

“I hope to Heaven that this visit to the tomb will have the effect of easing your minds, and enabling you to make a successful stand against the streaming torrent of evidence that has poured in upon us regarding this most fearful of apparitions.”

“I do, indeed, hope so,” added Henry; “and now I will go at once to Flora, and endeavour to convince her she is safe without us to-night.”

“By-the-bye, I think,” said Marchdale, “that if we can induce Mr. Chillingworth to come with us, it will be a great point gained in the investigation.”

“He would,” said Henry, “be able to come to an accurate decision with respect to the remains—if any—in the coffin, which we could not.”

“Then have him, by all means,” said George. “He did not seem averse last night to go on such an adventure.”

“I will ask him when he makes his visit this morning upon Flora; and should he not feel disposed to join us, I am quite sure he will keep the secret of our visit.”

All this being arranged, Henry proceeded to Flora, and told her that he and George, and Mr. Marchdale wished to go out for about a couple of hours in the evening after dark, if she felt sufficiently well to feel a sense of security without them.

Flora changed colour, and slightly trembled, and then, as if ashamed of her fears, she said,—

“Go, go; I will not detain you. Surely no harm can come to me in presence of my

mother.”

“We shall not be gone longer than the time I mention to you,” said Henry.

“Oh, I shall be quite content. Besides, am I to be kept thus in fear all my life? Surely, surely not. I ought, too, to learn to defend myself.”

Henry caught at the idea, as he said,—

“If fire-arms were left you, do you think you would have courage to use them?”

“I do, Henry.”

“Then you shall have them; and let me beg of you to shoot any one without the least hesitation who shall come into your chamber.”

“I will, Henry. If ever human being was justified in the use of deadly weapons, I am now. Heaven protect me from a repetition of the visit to which I have now been once subjected. Rather, oh, much rather would I die a hundred deaths than suffer what I have suffered.”

“Do not allow it, dear Flora, to press too heavily upon your mind in dwelling upon it in conversation. I still entertain a sanguine expectation that something may arise to afford a far less dreadful explanation of what has occurred than what you have put upon it. Be of good cheer, Flora, we shall go one hour after sunset, and return in about two hours from the time at which we leave here, you may be assured.”

Notwithstanding this ready and courageous acquiescence of Flora in the arrangement, Henry was not without his apprehension that when the night should come again, her fears would return with it; but he spoke to Mr. Chillingworth upon the subject, and got that gentleman’s ready consent to accompany them.

He promised to meet them at the church porch exactly at nine o’clock, and matters were all arranged, and Henry waited with much eagerness and anxiety now for the coming night, which he hoped would dissipate one of the fearful deductions which his imagination had drawn from recent circumstances.

He gave to Flora a pair of pistols of his own, upon which he knew he could depend, and he took good care to load them well, so that there could be no likelihood whatever of their missing fire at a critical moment.

“Now, Flora,” he said, “I have seen you use fire-arms when you were much younger than you are now, and therefore I need give you no instructions. If any intruder does come, and you do fire, be sure you take a good aim, and shoot low.”

“I will, Henry, I will; and you will be back in two hours?”

“Most assuredly I will.”

The day wore on, evening came, and then deepened into night. It turned out to be a

cloudy night, and therefore the moon's brilliance was nothing near equal to what it had been on the preceding night. Still, however, it had sufficient power over the vapours that frequently covered it for many minutes together, to produce a considerable light effect upon the face of nature, and the night was consequently very far, indeed, from what might be called a dark one.

George, Henry, and Marchdale, met in one of the lower rooms of the house, previous to starting upon their expedition; and after satisfying themselves that they had with them all the tools that were necessary, inclusive of the same small, but well-tempered iron crow-bar with which Marchdale had, on the night of the visit of the vampyre, forced open the door of Flora's chamber, they left the hall, and proceeded at a rapid pace towards the church.

"And Flora does not seem much alarmed," said Marchdale, "at being left alone?"

"No," replied Henry, "she has made up her mind with a strong natural courage which I knew was in her disposition to resist as much as possible the depressing effects of the awful visitation she has endured."

"It would have driven some really mad."

"It would, indeed; and her own reason tottered on its throne, but, thank Heaven, she has recovered."

"And I fervently hope that, through her life," added Marchdale, "she may never have such another trial."

"We will not for a moment believe that such a thing can occur twice."

"She is one among a thousand. Most young girls would never at all have recovered the fearful shock to the nerves."

"Not only has she recovered," said Henry, "but a spirit, which I am rejoiced to see, because it is one which will uphold her, of resistance now possesses her."

"Yes, she actually—I forgot to tell you before—but she actually asked me for arms to resist any second visitation."

"You much surprise me."

"Yes, I was surprised, as well as pleased, myself."

"I would have left her one of my pistols had I been aware of her having made such a request. Do you know if she can use fire-arms?"

"Oh, yes; well."

"What a pity. I have them both with me."

"Oh, she is provided."

“Provided?”

“Yes; I found some pistols which I used to take with me on the continent, and she has them both well loaded, so that if the vampyre makes his appearance, he is likely to meet with rather a warm reception.”

“Good God! was it not dangerous?”

“Not at all, I think.”

“Well, you know best, certainly, of course. I hope the vampyre may come, and that we may have the pleasure, when we return, of finding him dead. By-the-bye, I—I—. Bless me, I have forgot to get the materials for lights, which I pledged myself to do.”

“How unfortunate.”

“Walk on slowly, while I run back and get them.”

“Oh, we are too far—”

“Hilloa!” cried a man at this moment, some distance in front of them.

“It is Mr. Chillingworth,” said Henry.

“Hilloa,” cried the worthy doctor again. “Is that you, my friend, Henry Bannerworth?”

“It is,” cried Henry.

Mr. Chillingworth now came up to them and said,—

“I was before my time, so rather than wait at the church porch, which would have exposed me to observation perhaps, I thought it better to walk on, and chance meeting with you.”

“You guessed we should come this way?”

“Yes, and so it turns out, really. It is unquestionably your most direct route to the church.”

“I think I will go back,” said Mr Marchdale.

“Back!” exclaimed the doctor; “what for?”

“I forgot the means of getting lights. We have candles, but no means of lighting them.”

“Make yourselves easy on that score,” said Mr. Chillingworth. “I am never without some chemical matches of my own manufacture, so that as you have the candles, that can be no bar to our going on a once.”

“That is fortunate,” said Henry.

“Very,” added Marchdale; “for it seems a mile’s hard walking for me, or at least half a mile from the hall. Let us now push on.”

They did push on, all four walking at a brisk pace. The church, although it belonged to the village, was not in it. On the contrary, it was situated at the end of a long lane, which was a mile nearly from the village, in the direction of the hall, therefore, in going to it from the hall, that amount of distance was saved, although it was always called and considered the village church.

It stood alone, with the exception of a glebe house and two cottages, that were occupied by persons who held situations about the sacred edifice, and who were supposed, being on the spot, to keep watch and ward over it.

It was an ancient building of the early English style of architecture, or rather Norman, with one of those antique, square, short towers, built of flint stones firmly embedded in cement, which, from time, had acquired almost the consistency of stone itself. There were numerous arched windows, partaking something of the more florid gothic style, although scarcely ornamental enough to be called such. The edifice stood in the centre of a grave-yard, which extended over a space of about half an acre, and altogether it was one of the prettiest and most rural old churches within many miles of the spot.

Many a lover of the antique and of the picturesque, for it was both, went out of his way while travelling in the neighbourhood to look at it, and it had an extensive and well-deserved reputation as a fine specimen of its class and style of building.

In Kent, to the present day, are some fine specimens of the old Roman style of church, building; and, although they are as rapidly pulled down as the abuse of modern architects, and the cupidity of speculators, and the vanity of clergymen can possibly encourage, in older to erect flimsy, Italianised structures in their stead, yet sufficient of them remain dotted over England to interest the traveller. At Walesden there is a church of this description which will well repay a visit. This, then, was the kind of building into which it was the intention of our four friends to penetrate, not on an unholy, or an unjustifiable errand, but on one which, proceeding from good and proper motives, it was highly desirable to conduct in as secret a manner as possible.

The moon was more densely covered by clouds than it had yet been that evening, when they reached the little wicket-gate which led into the churchyard, through which was a regularly used thoroughfare.

“We have a favourable night,” remarked Henry, “for we are not so likely to be disturbed.”

“And now, the question is, how are we to get in?” said Mr. Chillingworth, as he paused, and glanced up at the ancient building.

“The doors,” said George, “would effectually resist us.”

“How can it be done, then?”

“The only way I can think of,” said Henry, “is to get out one of the small diamond-shaped panes of glass from one of the low windows, and then we can one of us put in our hands, and undo the fastening, which is very simple, when the window opens like a door, and it is but a step into the church.”

“A good way,” said Marchdale. “We will lose no time.”

They walked round the church till they came to a very low window indeed, near to an angle of the wall, where a huge abutment struck far out into the burial-ground.

“Will you do it, Henry?” said George.

“Yes. I have often noticed the fastenings. Just give me a slight hoist up, and all will be right.”

George did so, and Henry with his knife easily bent back some of the leadwork which held in one of the panes of glass, and then got it out whole. He handed it down to George, saying,—

“Take this, George. We can easily replace it when we leave, so that there can be no signs left of any one having been here at all.”

George took the piece of thick, dim-coloured glass, and in another moment Henry had succeeded in opening the window, and the mode of ingress to the old church was fair and easy before them all, had there been ever so many.

“I wonder,” said Marchdale, “that a place so inefficiently protected has never been robbed.”

“No wonder at all,” remarked Mr. Chillingworth. “There is nothing to take that I am aware of that would repay anybody the trouble of taking.”

“Indeed!”

“Not an article. The pulpit, to be sure, is covered with faded velvet; but beyond that, and an old box, in which I believe nothing is left but some books, I think there is no temptation.”

“And that, Heaven knows, is little enough, then.”

“Come on,” said Henry. “Be careful; there is nothing beneath the window, and the depth is about two feet.”

Thus guided, they all got fairly into the sacred edifice, and then Henry closed the window, and fastened it on the inside as he said,—

“We have nothing to do now but to set to work opening a way into the vault, and I trust that Heaven will pardon me for thus desecrating the tomb of my ancestors, from

a consideration of the object I have in view by so doing.”

“It does seem wrong thus to tamper with the secrets of the tomb,” remarked Mr. Marchdale.

“The secrets of a fiddlestick!” said the doctor. “What secrets has the tomb I wonder?”

“Well, but, my dear sir—”

“Nay, my dear sir, it is high time that death, which is, then, the inevitable fate of us all, should be regarded with more philosophic eyes than it is. There are no secrets in the tomb but such as may well be endeavoured to be kept secret.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is one which very probably we shall find unpleasantly revealed.”

“Which is that?”

“The not over pleasant odour of decomposed animal remains—beyond that I know of nothing of a secret nature that the tomb can show us.”

“Ah, your profession hardens you to such matters.”

“And a very good thing that it does, or else, if all men were to look upon a dead body as something almost too dreadful to look upon, and by far too horrible to touch, surgery would lose its value, and crime, in many instances of the most obnoxious character, would go unpunished.”

“If we have a light here,” said Henry, “we shall run the greatest chance in the world of being seen, for the church has many windows.”

“Do not have one, then, by any means,” said Mr. Chillingworth. “A match held low down in the pew may enable us to open the vault.”

“That will be the only plan.”

Henry led them to the pew which belonged to his family, and in the floor of which was the trap door.

“When was it last opened?” inquired Marchdale.

“When my father died,” said Henry; “some ten months ago now, I should think.”

“The screws, then, have had ample time to fix themselves with fresh rust.”

“Here is one of my chemical matches,” said Mr. Chillingworth, as he suddenly irradiated the pew with a clear and beautiful flame, that lasted about a minute.

The heads of the screws were easily discernible, and the short time that the light lasted

had enabled Henry to turn the key he had brought with him in the lock.

“I think that without a light now,” he said, “I can turn the screws well.”

“Can you?”

“Yes; there are but four.”

“Try it, then.”

Henry did so, and from the screws having very large heads, and being made purposely, for the convenience of removal when required, with deep indentations to receive the screw-driver, he found no difficulty in feeling for the proper places, and extracting the screws without any more light than was afforded to him from the general whitish aspect of the heavens.

“Now, Mr. Chillingworth,” he said “another of your matches, if you please. I have all the screws so loose that I can pick them up with my fingers.”

“Here,” said the doctor.

In another moment the pew was as light as day, and Henry succeeded in taking out the few screws, which he placed in his pocket for their greater security, since, of course, the intention was to replace everything exactly as it was found, in order that not the least surmise should arise in the mind of any person that the vault had been opened, and visited for any purpose whatever, secretly or otherwise.”

“Let us descend,” said Henry. “There is no further obstacle, my friends. Let us descend.”

“If any one,” remarked George, in a whisper, as they slowly descended the stairs which conducted into the vault—“if any one had told me that I should be descending into a vault for the purpose of ascertaining if a dead body, which had been nearly a century there, was removed or not, and had become a vampyre, I should have denounced the idea as one of the most absurd that ever entered the brain of a human being.”

“We are the very slaves of circumstances,” said Marchdale, “and we never know what we may do, or what we may not. What appears to us so improbable as to border even upon the impossible at one time, is at another the only course of action which appears feasibly open to us to attempt to pursue.”

They had now reached the vault, the floor of which was composed of flat red tiles, laid in tolerable order the one beside the other. As Henry had stated, the vault was by no means of large extent. Indeed, several of the apartments for the living, at the hall, were much larger than was that one destined for the dead.

The atmosphere was dump and noisome, but not by any means so bad as might have been expected, considering the number of months which had elapsed since last the vault was opened to receive one of its ghastly and still visitants.

“Now for one of your lights. Mr. Chillingworth. You say you have the candles, I think, Marchdale, although you forgot the matches.”

“I have. They are here.”

Marchdale took from his pocket a parcel which contained several wax candles, and when it was opened, a smaller packet fell to the ground.

“Why, these are instantaneous matches,” said Mr. Chillingworth, as he lifted the small packet up.

“They are; and what a fruitless journey I should have had back to the hall,” said Mr. Marchdale, “if you had not been so well provided as you are with the means of getting a light. These matches, which I thought I had not with me, have been, in the hurry of departure, enclosed, you see, with the candles. Truly, I should have hunted for them at home in vain.”

Mr. Chillingworth lit the wax candle which was now handed to him by Marchdale, and in another moment the vault from one end of it to the other was quite clearly discernible.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COFFIN.—THE ABSENCE OF THE DEAD.—THE MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCE, AND THE CONSTERNATION OF GEORGE.

They were all silent for a few moments as they looked around them with natural feelings of curiosity. Two of that party had of course never been in that vault at all, and the brothers, although they had descended into it upon the occasion, nearly a year before, of their father being placed in it, still looked upon it with almost as curious eyes as they who now had their first sight of it.

If a man be at all of a thoughtful or imaginative cast of mind, some curious sensations are sure to come over him, upon standing in such a place, where he knows around him lie, in the calmness of death, those in whose veins have flowed kindred blood to him—who bore the same name, and who preceded him in the brief drama of his existence, influencing his destiny and his position in life probably largely by their actions compounded of their virtues and their vices.

Henry Bannerworth and his brother George were just the kind of persons to feel strongly such sensations. Both were reflective, imaginative, educated young men, and, as the light from the wax candle flashed upon their faces, it was evident how deeply they felt the situation in which they were placed.

Mr. Chillingworth and Marchdale were silent. They both knew what was passing in the minds of the brothers, and they had too much delicacy to interrupt a train of thought which, although from having no affinity with the dead who lay around, they could not share in, yet they respected. Henry at length, with a sudden start, seemed to recover himself from his reverie.

“This is a time for action, George,” he said, “and not for romantic thought. Let us proceed.”

“Yes, yes,” said George, and he advanced a step towards the centre of the vault.

“Can you find out among all these coffins, for there seem to be nearly twenty,” said Mr. Chillingworth, “which is the one we seek?”

“I think we may,” replied Henry. “Some of the earlier coffins of our race, I know, were made of marble, and others of metal, both of which materials, I expect, would withstand the encroaches of time for a hundred years, at least.”

“Let us examine,” said George.

There were shelves or niches built into the walls all round, on which the coffins were placed, so that there could not be much difficulty in a minute examination of them all, the one after the other.

When, however, they came to look, they found that “decay’s offensive fingers” had been more busy than they could have imagined, and that whatever they touched of the earlier coffins crumbled into dust before their very fingers.

In some cases the inscriptions were quite illegible, and, in others, the plates that had borne them had fallen on to the floor of the vault, so that it was impossible to say to which coffin they belonged.

Of course, the more recent and fresh-looking coffins they did not examine, because they could not have anything to do with the object of that melancholy visit.

“We shall arrive at no conclusion,” said George. “All seems to have rotted away among those coffins where we might expect to find the one belonging to Marmaduke Bannerworth, our ancestor.”

“Here is a coffin plate,” said Marchdale, taking one from the floor.

He handed it to Mr. Chillingworth, who, upon an inspection of it, close to the light, exclaimed,—

“It must have belonged to the coffin you seek.”

“What says it?”

“Ye mortale remains of Marmaduke Bannerworth, Yeoman. God reste his soule. A.D. 1540.”

“It is the plate belonging to his coffin,” said Henry, “and now our search is fruitless.”

“It is so, indeed,” exclaimed George, “for how can we tell to which of the coffins that have lost the plates this one really belongs?”

“I should not be so hopeless,” said Marchdale. “I have, from time to time, in the pursuit of antiquarian lore, which I was once fond of, entered many vaults, and I have always observed that an inner coffin of metal was sound and good, while the outer one of wood had rotted away, and yielded at once to the touch of the first hand that was laid upon it.”

“But, admitting that to be the case,” said Henry, “how does that assist us in the identification of a coffin?”

“I have always, in my experience, found the name and rank of the deceased engraved upon the lid of the inner coffin, as well as being set forth in a much more perishable manner on the plate which was secured to the outer one.”

“He is right,” said Mr. Chillingworth. “I wonder we never thought of that. If your ancestor was buried in a leaden coffin, there will be no difficulty in finding which it is.”

Henry seized the light, and proceeding to one of the coffins, which seemed to be a mass of decay, he pulled away some of the rotted wood work, and then suddenly exclaimed,—

“You are quite right. Here is a firm strong leaden coffin within, which, although quite black, does not otherwise appear to have suffered.”

“What is the inscription on that?” said George.

With difficulty the name on the lid was deciphered, but it was found not to be the coffin of him whom they sought.

“We can make short work of this,” said Marchdale, “by only examining those leaden coffins which have lost the plates from off their outer cases. There do not appear to be many in such a state.”

He then, with another light, which he lighted from the one that Henry now carried, commenced actively assisting in the search, which was carried on silently for more than ten minutes.

Suddenly Mr. Marchdale cried, in a tone of excitement,—

“I have found it. It is here.”

They all immediately surrounded the spot where he was, and then he pointed to the lid of a coffin, which he had been rubbing with his handkerchief, in order to make the inscription more legible, and said,—

“See. It is here.”

By the combined light of the candles they saw the words,—

“Marmaduke Bannerworth, Yeoman, 1640.”

“Yes, there can be no mistake here,” said Henry. “This is the coffin, and it shall be opened.”

“I have the iron crowbar here,” said Marchdale. “It is an old friend of mine, and I am accustomed to the use of it. Shall I open the coffin?”

“Do so—do so,” said Henry.

They stood around in silence, while Mr. Marchdale, with much care, proceeded to open the coffin, which seemed of great thickness, and was of solid lead.

It was probably the partial rotting of the metal, in consequence of the damps of that place, that made it easier to open the coffin than it otherwise would have been, but certain it was that the top came away remarkably easily. Indeed, so easily did it come off, that another supposition might have been hazarded, namely, that it had never at all been effectually fastened.

The few moments that elapsed were ones of very great suspense to every one there present; and it would, indeed, be quite sure to assert, that all the world was for the time forgotten in the absorbing interest which appertained to the affair which was in progress.

The candles were now both held by Mr. Chillingworth, and they were so held as to cast a full and clear light upon the coffin. Now the lid slid off, and Henry eagerly gazed into the interior.

There lay something certainly there, and an audible “Thank God!” escaped his lips.

“The body is there!” exclaimed George.

“All right,” said Marchdale, “here it is. There is something, and what else can it be?”

“Hold the lights,” said Mr. Chillingworth; “hold the lights, some of you; let us be quite certain.”

George took the lights, and Mr. Chillingworth, without any hesitation, dipped his hands at once into the coffin, and took up some fragments of rags which were there. They were so rotten, that they fell to pieces in his grasp, like so many pieces of tinder.

There was a death-like pause for some few moments, and then Mr. Chillingworth said, in a low voice,—

“There is not the least vestige of a dead body here.”

Henry gave a deep groan, as he said,—

“Mr. Chillingworth, can you take upon yourself to say that no corpse has undergone the process of decomposition in this coffin?”

“To answer your question exactly, as probably in your hurry you have worded it,” said Mr. Chillingworth, “I cannot take upon myself to say any such thing; but this I can say, namely, that in this coffin there are no animal remains, and that it is quite impossible that any corpse enclosed here could, in any lapse of time, have so utterly and entirely disappeared.”

“I am answered,” said Henry.

“Good God!” exclaimed George, “and has this but added another damning proof, to those we have already on our minds, of one of the most dreadful superstitions that ever the mind of man conceived?”

“It would seem so,” said Marchdale, sadly.

“Oh, that I were dead! This is terrible. God of heaven, why are these things? Oh, if I were but dead, and so spared the torture of supposing such things possible.”

“Think again, Mr. Chillingworth; I pray you think again,” cried Marchdale.

“If I were to think for the remainder of my existence,” he replied, “I could come to no other conclusion. It is not a matter of opinion; it is a matter of fact.”

“You are positive, then,” said Henry, “that the dead body of Marmaduke Bannerworth is not rested here?”

“I am positive. Look for yourselves. The lead is but slightly discoloured; it looks tolerably clean and fresh; there is not a vestige of putrefaction—no bones, no dust even.”

They did all look for themselves, and the most casual glance was sufficient to satisfy the most sceptical.

“All is over,” said Henry; “let us now leave this place; and all I can now ask of you, my friends, is to lock this dreadful secret deep in your own hearts.”

“It shall never pass my lips,” said Marchdale.

“Nor mine, you may depend,” said the doctor. “I was much in hopes that this night’s work would have had the effect of dissipating, instead of adding to, the gloomy fancies that now possess you.”

“Good heavens!” cried George, “can you call them fancies, Mr. Chillingworth?”

“I do, indeed.”

“Have you yet a doubt?”

“My young friend, I told you from the first, that I would not believe in your vampyre; and I tell you now, that if one was to come and lay hold of me by the throat, as long as I could at all gasp for breath I would tell him he was a d——d impostor.”

“This is carrying incredulity to the verge of obstinacy.”

“Far beyond it, if you please.”

“You will not be convinced?” said Marchdale.

“I most decidedly, on this point, will not.”

“Then you are one who would doubt a miracle, if you saw it with your own eyes.”

“I would, because I do not believe in miracles. I should endeavour to find some rational and some scientific means of accounting for the phenomenon, and that’s the very reason why we have no miracles now-a-days, between you and I, and no prophets and saints, and all that sort of thing.”

“I would rather avoid such observations in such a place as this,” said Marchdale.

“Nay, do not be the moral coward,” cried Mr. Chillingworth, “to make your opinions, or the expression of them, dependent upon any certain locality.”

“I know not what to think,” said Henry; “I am bewildered quite. Let us now come away.”

Mr. Marchdale replaced the lid of the coffin, and then the little party moved towards the staircase. Henry turned before he ascended, and glanced back into the vault.

“Oh,” he said, “if I could but think there had been some mistake, some error of judgment, on which the mind could rest for hope.”

“I deeply regret,” said Marchdale, “that I so strenuously advised this expedition. I did hope that from it would have resulted much good.”

“And you had every reason so to hope,” said Chillingworth. “I advised it likewise, and I tell you that its result perfectly astonishes me, although I will not allow myself to embrace at once all the conclusions to which it would seem to lead me.”

“I am satisfied,” said Henry; “I know you both advised me for the best. The curse of Heaven seems now to have fallen upon me and my house.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said Chillingworth. “What for?”

“Alas! I know not.”

“Then you may depend that Heaven would never act so oddly. In the first place, Heaven don’t curse anybody; and, in the second, it is too just to inflict pain where pain is not amply deserved.”

They ascended the gloomy staircase of the vault. The countenances of both George and Henry were very much saddened, and it was quite evident that their thoughts were

by far too busy to enable them to enter into any conversation. They did not, and particularly George, seem to hear all that was said to them. Their intellects seemed almost stunned by the unexpected circumstance of the disappearance of the body of their ancestor.

All along they had, although almost unknown to themselves, felt a sort of conviction that they must find some remains of Marmaduke Bannerworth, which would render the supposition, even in the most superstitious minds, that he was the vampyre, a thing totally and physically impossible.

But now the whole question assumed a far more bewildering shape. The body was not in its coffin—it had not there quietly slept the long sleep of death common to humanity. Where was it then? What had become of it? Where, how, and under what circumstances had it been removed? Had it itself burst the bands that held it, and hideously stalked forth into the world again to make one of its seeming inhabitants, and kept up for a hundred years a dreadful existence by such adventures as it had consummated at the hall, where, in the course of ordinary human life, it had once lived?

All these were questions which irresistibly pressed themselves upon the consideration of Henry and his brother. They were awful questions.

And yet, take any sober, sane, thinking, educated man, and show him all that they had seen, subject him to all to which they had been subjected, and say if human reason, and all the arguments that the subtlest brain could back it with, would be able to hold out against such a vast accumulation of horrible evidences, and say—"I don't believe it."

Mr. Chillingworth's was the only plan. He would not argue the question. He said at once,—

"I will not believe this thing—upon this point I will yield to no evidence whatever."

That was the only way of disposing of such a question; but there are not many who could so dispose of it, and not one so much interested in it as were the brothers Bannerworth, who could at all hope to get into such a state of mind.

The boards were laid carefully down again, and the screws replaced. Henry found himself unequal to the task, so it was done by Marchdale, who took pains to replace everything in the same state in which they had found it, even to the laying even the matting at the bottom of the pew.

Then they extinguished the light, and, with heavy hearts, they all walked towards the window, to leave the sacred edifice by the same means they had entered it.

"Shall we replace the pane of glass?" said Marchdale.

"Oh, it matters not—it matters not," said Henry, listlessly; "nothing matters now. I care not what becomes of me—I am getting weary of a life which now must be one of misery and dread."

“You must not allow yourself to fall into such a state of mind as this,” said the doctor, “or you will become a patient of mine very quickly.”

“I cannot help it.”

“Well, but be a man. If there are serious evils affecting you, fight out against them the best way you can.”

“I cannot.”

“Come, now, listen to me. We need not, I think, trouble ourselves about the pane of glass, so come along.”

He took the arm of Henry and walked on with him a little in advance of the others.

“Henry,” he said, “the best way, you may depend, of meeting evils, be they great or small, is to get up an obstinate feeling of defiance against them. Now, when anything occurs which is uncomfortable to me, I endeavour to convince myself, and I have no great difficulty in doing so, that I am a decidedly injured man.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; I get very angry, and that gets up a kind of obstinacy, which makes me not feel half so much mental misery as would be my portion, if I were to succumb to the evil, and commence whining over it, as many people do, under the pretence of being resigned.”

“But this family affliction of mine transcends anything that anybody else ever endured.”

“I don’t know that; but it is a view of the subject which, if I were you, would only make me more obstinate.”

“What can I do?”

“In the first place, I would say to myself, ‘There may or there may not be supernatural beings, who, from some physical derangement of the ordinary nature of things, make themselves obnoxious to living people; if there are, d—n them! There may be vampires; and if there are, I defy them.’ Let the imagination paint its very worst terrors; let fear do what it will and what it can in peopling the mind with horrors. Shrink from nothing, and even then I would defy them all.”

“Is not that like defying Heaven?”

“Most certainly not; for in all we say and in all we do we act from the impulses of that mind which is given to us by Heaven itself. If Heaven creates an intellect and a mind of a certain order, Heaven will not quarrel that it does the work which it was adapted to do.”

“I know these are your opinions. I have heard you mention them before.”

“They are the opinions of every rational person. Henry Bannerworth, because they will stand the test of reason; and what I urge upon you is, not to allow yourself to be mentally prostrated, even if a vampyre has paid a visit to your house. Defy him, say I—fight him. Self-preservation is a great law of nature, implanted in all our hearts; do you summon it to your aid.”

“I will endeavour to think as you would have me. I thought more than once of summoning religion to my aid.”

“Well, that is religion.”

“Indeed!”

“I consider so, and the most rational religion of all. All that we read about religion that does not seem expressly to agree with it, you may consider as an allegory.”

“But, Mr. Chillingworth, I cannot and will not renounce the sublime truths of Scripture. They may be incomprehensible; they may be inconsistent; and some of them may look ridiculous; but still they are sacred and sublime, and I will not renounce them although my reason may not accord with them, because they are the laws of Heaven.”

No wonder this powerful argument silenced Mr. Chillingworth, who was one of those characters in society who hold most dreadful opinions, and who would destroy religious beliefs, and all the different sects in the world, if they could, and endeavour to introduce instead some horrible system of human reason and profound philosophy.

But how soon the religious man silences his opponent; and let it not be supposed that, because his opponent says no more upon the subject, he does so because he is disgusted with the stupidity of the other; no, it is because he is completely beaten, and has nothing more to say.

The distance now between the church and the hall was nearly traversed, and Mr. Chillingworth, who was a very good man, notwithstanding his disbelief in certain things of course paved the way for him to hell, took a kind leave of Mr. Marchdale and the brothers, promising to call on the following morning and see Flora.

Henry and George then, in earnest conversation with Marchdale, proceeded homewards. It was evident that the scene in the vault had made a deep and saddening impression upon them, and one which was not likely easily to be eradicated.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OCCURRENCES OF THE NIGHT AT THE HALL.—THE SECOND APPEARANCE OF THE VAMPYRE, AND THE PISTOL-SHOT.

Despite the full and free consent which Flora had given to her brothers to entrust her solely to the care of her mother and her own courage at the hall, she felt greater fear

creep over her after they were gone than she chose to acknowledge.

A sort of presentiment appeared to come over her that some evil was about to occur, and more than once she caught herself almost in the act of saying,—

“I wish they had not gone.”

Mrs. Bannerworth, too, could not be supposed to be entirely destitute of uncomfortable feelings, when she came to consider how poor a guard she was over her beautiful child, and how much terror might even deprive of the little power she had, should the dreadful visitor again make his appearance.

“But it is but for two hours,” thought Flora, “and two hours will soon pass away.”

There was, too, another feeling which gave her some degree of confidence, although it arose from a bad source, inasmuch as it was one which showed powerfully how much her mind was dwelling on the particulars of the horrible belief in the class of supernatural beings, one of whom she believed had visited her.

That consideration was this. The two hours of absence from the hall of its male inhabitants, would be from nine o’clock until eleven, and those were not the two hours during which she felt that she would be most timid on account of the vampyre.

“It was after midnight before,” she thought, “when it came, and perhaps it may not be able to come earlier. It may not have the power, until that time, to make its hideous visits, and, therefore, I will believe myself safe.”

She had made up her mind not to go to bed until the return of her brothers, and she and her mother sat in a small room that was used as a breakfast-room, and which had a latticed window that opened on to the lawn.

This window had in the inside strong oaken shutters, which had been fastened as securely as their construction would admit of some time before the departure of the brothers and Mr. Marchdale on that melancholy expedition, the object of which, if it had been known to her, would have added so much to the terrors of poor Flora.

It was not even guessed at, however remotely, so that she had not the additional affliction of thinking, that while she was sitting there, a prey to all sorts of imaginative terrors, they were perhaps gathering fresh evidence, as, indeed, they were, of the dreadful reality of the appearance which, but for the collateral circumstances attendant upon its coming and its going, she would fain have persuaded herself was but the vision of a dream.

It was before nine that the brothers started, but in her own mind Flora gave them to eleven, and when she heard ten o’clock sound from a clock which stood in the hall, she felt pleased to think that in another hour they would surely be at home.

“My dear,” said her mother, “you look more like yourself, now.”

“Do, I, mother?”

“Yes, you are well again.”

“Ah, if I could forget—”

“Time, my dear Flora, will enable you to do so, and all the fear of what made you so unwell will pass away. You will soon forget it all.”

“I will hope to do so.”

“Be assured that, some day or another, something will occur, as Henry says, to explain all that has happened, in some way consistent with reason and the ordinary nature of things, my dear Flora.”

“Oh, I will cling to such a belief; I will get Henry, upon whose judgment I know I can rely, to tell me so, and each time that I hear such words from his lips, I will contrive to dismiss some portion of the terror which now, I cannot but confess, clings to my heart.”

Flora laid her hand upon her mother’s arm, and in a low, anxious tone of voice, said,—

“Listen, mother.”

Mrs. Bannerworth turned pale, as she said,—“Listen to what, dear?”

“Within these last ten minutes,” said Flora, “I have thought three or four times that I heard a slight noise without. Nay, mother, do not tremble—it may be only fancy.”

Flora herself trembled, and was of a death-like paleness; once or twice she passed her hand across her brow, and altogether she presented a picture of much mental suffering.

They now conversed in anxious whispers, and almost all they said consisted in anxious wishes for the return of the brothers and Mr. Marchdale.

“You will be happier and more assured, my dear, with some company,” said Mrs. Bannerworth. “Shall I ring for the servants, and let them remain in the room with us, until they who are our best safeguards next to Heaven return?”

“Hush—hush—hush, mother!”

“What do you hear?”

“I thought—I heard a faint sound.”

“I heard nothing, dear.”

“Listen again, mother. Surely I could not be deceived so often. I have now, at least, six times heard a sound as if some one was outside by the windows.”

“No, no, my darling, do not think; your imagination is active and in a state of excitement.”

“It is, and yet—”

“Believe me, it deceives you.”

“I hope to Heaven it does!”

There was a pause of some minutes' duration, and then Mrs. Bannerworth again urged slightly the calling of some of the servants, for she thought that their presence might have the effect of giving a different direction to her child's thoughts; but Flora saw her place her hand upon the bell, and she said,—

“No, mother, no—not yet, not yet. Perhaps I am deceived.”

Mrs. Bannerworth upon this sat down, but no sooner had she done so than she heartily regretted she had not rung the bell, for, before, another word could be spoken, there came too perceptibly upon their ears for there to be any mistake at all about it, a strange scratching noise upon the window outside.

A faint cry came from Flora's lips, as she exclaimed, in a voice of great agony,—

“Oh, God!—oh, God! It has come again!”

Mrs. Bannerworth became faint, and unable to move or speak at all; she could only sit like one paralysed, and unable to do more than listen to and see what was going on.

The scratching noise continued for a few seconds, and then altogether ceased. Perhaps, under ordinary circumstances, such a sound outside the window would have scarcely afforded food for comment at all, or, if it had, it would have been attributed to some natural effect, or to the exertions of some bird or animal to obtain admittance to the house.

But there had occurred now enough in that family to make any little sound of wonderful importance, and these things which before would have passed completely unheeded, at all events without creating much alarm, were now invested with a fearful interest.

When the scratching noise ceased, Flora spoke in a low, anxious whisper, as she said,—

“Mother, you heard it then?”

Mrs. Bannerworth tried to speak, but she could not; and then suddenly, with a loud clash, the bar, which on the inside appeared to fasten the shutters strongly, fell as if by some invisible agency, and the shutters now, but for the intervention of the window, could be easily pushed open from without.

Mrs. Bannerworth covered her face with her hands, and, after rocking to and fro for a moment, she fell off her chair, having fainted with the excess of terror that came over her.

For about the space of time in which a fast speaker could count twelve, Flora thought her reason was leaving her, but it did not. She found herself recovering; and there she sat, with her eyes fixed upon the window, looking more like some exquisitely-chiselled statue of despair than a being of flesh and blood, expecting each moment to have its eyes blasted by some horrible appearance, such as might be supposed to drive her to madness.

And now again came the strange knocking or scratching against the glass of the window.

This continued for some minutes, during which it appeared likewise to Flora that some confusion was going on at another part of the house, for she fancied she heard voices and the banging of doors.

It seemed to her as if she must have sat looking at the shutters of that window a long time before she saw them shake, and then one wide hinged portion of them slowly opened.

Once again horror appeared to be on the point of producing madness in her brain, and then, as before, a feeling of calmness rapidly ensued.

She was able to see plainly that something was by the window, but what it was she could not plainly discern, in consequence of the lights she had in the room. A few moments, however, sufficed to settle that mystery, for the window was opened and a figure stood before her.

One glance, one terrified glance, in which her whole soul was concentrated, sufficed to shew her who and what the figure was. There was the tall, gaunt form—there was the faded ancient apparel—the lustrous metallic-looking eyes—its half-opened month, exhibiting the tusk-like teeth! It was—yes, it was—the vampyre!

It stood for a moment gazing at her, and then in the hideous way it had attempted before to speak, it apparently endeavoured to utter some words which it could not make articulate to human ears. The pistols lay before Flora. Mechanically she raised one, and pointed it at the figure. It advanced a step, and then she pulled the trigger.

A stunning report followed. There was a loud cry of pain, and the vampyre fled. The smoke and the confusion that was incidental to the spot prevented her from seeing if the figure walked or ran away. She thought she heard a crashing sound among the plants outside the window, as if it had fallen, but she did not feel quite sure.

It was no effort of any reflection, but a purely mechanical movement, that made her raise the other pistol, and discharge that likewise in the direction the vampyre had taken. Then casting the weapon away, she rose, and made a frantic rush from the room. She opened the door, and was dashing out, when she found herself caught in the circling arms of some one who either had been there waiting, or who had just at that moment got there.

The thought that it was the vampyre, who by some mysterious means, had got there, and was about to make her his prey, now overcame her completely, and she sunk into a state of utter insensibility on the moment.

Renewal by Gavin Roach and Gavin Chappell

As the river god strolled along his river's banks, he admired the work of his fellow gods: the lofty trees; the vault of the heavens; the hot sun; the sandy soil; the beasts as they scurried about their business.

A bearded human knelt by the bank. The river god recognised him as one he had named Crazy Eyes, from his wild gaze. One of the few who could see him, he normally greeted the river god with joy. The god was concerned to see pain in the human's eyes.

'Why are there no fish in the river?' Crazy Eyes asked. 'My tribe starve.'

'No fish?' the god asked. It was true: the tribe must have eaten them all. 'But is there nothing else you can eat?'

'Left Hand says we must kill one of us for the others to eat,' Crazy Eyes replied. 'Red Hair sent me to ask you.'

With a flick of his hand, the river god filled the waters with fish. Crazy Eyes expressed his gratitude and the river god walked down to the beach, where the river mingled its waters with those of the sea. Along the beach, two more humans stood talking angrily. As the god watched, the red-haired female turned away from her companion, a short, dark-haired male with a withered right arm. The man seized a rock in his left hand and brought it down on the woman's skull. She fell to the sand and did not move.

The man looked about shiftily, and vanished into the trees.

Something was wrong. Why did the female not move? The god's unease grew as he headed up the beach. His chest tightened as he looked down at the motionless form. It was Red Hair, a tribal leader: her hair pooled about her head, but it was

mingled with a darker red. Her cooling body seemed strangely heavy when he touched it.

Looking up, the river god saw a shimmering figure before him. It resembled Red Hair but it was vague, insubstantial. Its eyes were wide with horror.

A tainted feeling overwhelmed him. The river god turned instinctively to see a hideous figure bursting out of the jungle. It bore down on the shimmering form. Red Hair's image turned and ran.

The hideous thing sprinted after it, long matted hair bouncing against furry shoulders. Its clawed, bloodstained hands were raised to seize Red Hair's fleeing image.

Quick as a flash, the river god interposed himself between them. Red Hair's image crossed the stream. The pursuer halted, glaring balefully.

'What are you?' the river god asked. The thing glowered, then stared at its feet.

'My name is Murder. Give me the soul!' it growled, indicating Red Hair's image.

'I do not know you. Are you a god? I have not seen you at the divine council.'

'Give me the soul!'

'The soul, as you call it, is mine. Begone from my realm!'

Murder pawed at the ground with its left foot, casting glances about it, not meeting his eyes. Defeated, it shambled away.

The god turned to the soul. 'What happened to you?'

'Left Hand – he killed me!'

'Killed?'

At a shout from further up the beach, the god turned to see Crazy Eyes staring down at Red Hair's body. He looked up with tears glittering in his eyes.

'She is dead!' he said. 'Left Hand returned, said she was still on the beach. She... But what is that with you?'

'This is Red Hair's soul. Left Hand killed her.'

'What should we do?'

'I must take her to the council of the gods,' the god said slowly. 'Remain with your people. Ensure that Left Hand does not do this again.'

He led Red Hair's soul away, leaving Crazy Eyes alone on the beach.

The gods clustered round Red Hair's soul, gazing down in curiosity. The sea god looked at his subordinate.

'Well? What is it? Is it yours, river god?'

'It is called a soul. It is what remains when a human dies.'

'Doesn't happen when other animals die,' the sky god boomed disapprovingly.

'You shouldn't have done this without consulting us!' the earth goddess said.

The river god flushed, and looked around the glade where the gods lounged in the shadow of megaliths.

'I did nothing. It simply... happened.'

'We have failed,' the rain god said gloomily. 'We must create a new world at once.'

'Too drastic,' said the storm god. 'But what are you going to do with it?' it asked. 'Where will you put it?'

The river god shrugged helplessly.

'Well, let's ask Mystery,' the earth goddess suggested.

Mystery stepped from the shadows and gazed about him sardonically. Tall and

thin, he wore a long hooded cloak that kept his face in darkness. The gods looked expectantly at the river god.

He explained the situation. 'So what are we to do?'

'What do you think you should do, river god?' Mystery's voice was a smooth, silky drawl.

'We need to do something about this soul.'

'What do you need to do?'

'Find somewhere to put her? She seems to... distress humans.'

'Where will you put her?'

The river god thought. 'There's a cavern in my realm,' he said. 'A river flows into it. I could put her there.'

'Of course you will,' Mystery murmured.

'Well, river god,' the sky god boomed. 'Now you know.'

'I think so. But what of this new god, Murder? What do you think, Mystery?'

He turned. Mystery was gone.

'New god?' the storm god asked. 'What does all this mean?'

'We must discuss this,' the earth goddess began. They were still debating the issue as the river god led the bewildered soul away.

The canoe drifted across the calm waters of the underground lake. Red Hair looked about in wonder as the reflections from the water's surface rippled across her ethereal form.

The craft reached the edge of the lake. They stepped out onto the black sand of the beach.

'Here it is,' the river god said. 'I often wondered what I would do with this place.'

Torchlight flickered across the walls, making shadows shift and dance. Waves lapped gently as the river god and his companion entered the main chamber. Many tunnels led into the comforting darkness. Natural balconies hung above them and phosphorescent fungus clustered upon rocky outcroppings. Curious shades of lichen clung to the walls, resembling intricate tapestries in the half light. The thunder of a waterfall was audible in the distance.

'So this is to be your new home. Is it to your taste?' the river god asked Red Hair. The look of wonder had been replaced by cold anger.

'I am dead and cannot return. It is not right that the man who did this still lives! He cannot be allowed to lead the tribe.'

As the river god stepped once more into the mortal world he met the acrid stench of smoke and the now familiar smell of death. In the clearing a writhing mass of humanity screamed and bellowed. Human killed human with bare hands; some wielded tools made solely for murder.

Left Hand stood upon a hill at the centre of an armed group, exhorting his followers into further acts of brutality. He looked gaunt and unhealthy as if too many summers had passed him by. As he ranted, a coughing fit seized him. Some of the large males went to his side to support him until the fit passed.

The river god felt an oily presence amidst the chaos. Above it all, Murder was laughing and crooning like a child, smacking his lips as if enjoying a delicious meal. With every death he grew larger.

A howl of triumph came from the throng of humans. Murder's laughter ceased and dismay replaced his exultation. Left Hand's followers fled from the clearing.

Crazy Eyes stood before the remaining humans, who cheered and threw stones at the retreating band. How different he looked! His wild mane of hair was now greying and his beard reached to his waist. But his eyes remained the same, sparking with intensity.

Crazy Eyes turned to survey his followers, and his wild eyes widened as they met the river god's across the clearing. The river god walked towards him.

'God of the river!' Crazy Eyes exclaimed. 'I thought you left us long ago. I did all I could but... could not stop Left Hand from killing. Now my followers kill in self defence.'

'What of their souls?' the god asked.

'Murder takes them. He grows stronger with every death.' As they spoke, Crazy Eyes' followers knelt around them, unable to hear the river god's responses. The river god looked at them in pity.

'Take those who have died,' he said. 'I will care for their souls. Send them to me.'

'How?'

'Place their bodies in canoes and float them downstream.'

Crazy Eyes bowed, and the river god felt uneasy. It seemed oddly as if he was no different from Murder.

The canoe drifted across the water towards the sand. Red Hair stood on the beach, at peace. She had fallen easily into the role of comforter of souls and in return she was loved by the multitude that dwelt there.

The river god stepped onto the sand. The lake glittered with tiny lights, growing brighter as they came closer, illuminating the prows of the canoes where they rested. Souls sat in each canoe: some looked mournful and others gazed in awe at their new home.

A sigh of greeting came from the souls with Red Hair. It was their custom to greet the newcomers.

'There are fewer these days,' said Red Hair. 'Surely Murder is losing his power.'

'I hope so. Too many here should yet be alive,' the god replied. 'I must visit Crazy Eyes again. You have matters in hand?'

'They will be well looked after. But should you travel? You look pale.'

'I am tired from governing two realms. It is nothing.'

Red Hair led the new souls into the river god's halls, giving words of comfort where needed. Too many here, the god thought. This madness must stop.

The journey to the mortal world was harder this time as if he was climbing uphill. All was quiet among the trees as he followed the stream. No sign of war or murder but he felt drained. Turning a corner, he saw something that made him reel.

A tangled construction of trees lay across the stream, a wide pool behind it. The waters rushed through a narrow channel, beside which stood a hut. A large wheel turned beside it. The trees had been cut back and the ground arranged in strips of grass or vegetables. Cowed-looking men and women moved among them. Others took baskets of grain to the hut by the pool. A man stood within, attending to a device of two stones turned by the wheel.

The river god turned to see Crazy Eyes and his followers creeping through the trees. The god called to him.

'The war is over,' Crazy Eyes said. 'Few live. Left Hand enslaved most survivors. Even your river toils for him. And Murder reigns under the name of Law.'

He indicated three corpses hanging from a tree among a collection of huts.

The river god struggled for breath. 'Destroy it! Free me!'

'Left Hand is too strong for us,' said Crazy Eyes

'But I must save the souls.'

'You must save yourself. But we shall do our best to fight them. We must prepare.'

Crazy Eyes vanished into the forest and the river god drifted downstream, listening to the burble of the water and the sighing of reeds. His mind wandered as the river flowed through Murder's machines, the dead-eyed slaves unaware of his passing. He discovered weaknesses in these devices and tested the strength of the dam.

He gathered his power at a waterfall in the mountains. Rejoicing in the roar of water, he summoned a herd of his proud white horses with a cry, whipped them into a frenzy and thundered downstream, riding the energy of the waterfall.

Murder's dam hove into view and he threw himself against it, bursting it and shattering the machines. The exertion drained his energy and he fell into darkness.

He awoke to find himself in Red Hair's arms. 'What happened?' she asked, concern etching her face.

'Murder's dam is destroyed, his machines flooded. But I used too much of my power.'

Red Hair helped him up. 'You cannot rule two realms. It will destroy you.'

She was quiet for a moment. 'I will be your herald and lead the souls here. You must rest.' She got into the canoe and rowed away.

He looked around the hall as souls cavorted and played among the flickering shadows. The place was overcrowded. He compared it with the half-deserted mortal world. Soon there would be no more room.

A shadow detached itself from the rocks. He turned towards it.

'Mystery?' the river god asked. 'I did as you said. But now we have no more room. And my struggles with Murder weaken me. What of the gods?'

'They talk,' said Mystery.

'But what now? More humans are here than in the mortal realm. Where can I put them?'

'Where can they go?'

'There are no caves left. The only other place I control is in the mortal realm.'

'Where the humans grow less and less.'

He stared at Mystery. 'There is an imbalance. If there were more there and less here... These souls must be reborn!'

The river god grew excited. He would send the souls to be reborn among the surviving humans, with their memories and hatreds gone, to people the world anew. To live without Murder.

He turned to speak to Mystery, but Mystery was gone.

He stood on the beach, marshalling the souls before they returned to the world. As he did so, he saw a canoe approaching. Red Hair stood in the prow and beside her crouched a familiar figure.

'Crazy Eyes!' he exclaimed as Red Hair helped him from the canoe. 'Then... You died?'

Crazy Eyes looked bitterly at his god.

'I led my warriors against Left Hand. The fighting was terrible as the river

broke through the dam. Left Hand's bodyguard are fierce, merciless killers. We slew many but could get nowhere near Left Hand. One slew me.' He looked around. 'Do I dwell here forever?'

The river god shook his head.

'No!' he said. 'You can be reborn.' He explained. 'Any of you – you, Red Hair...'

Red Hair shook her head. 'My duty is here, with the dead.'

'I would not wish to return as a mortal,' Crazy Eyes said bitterly.

The idea was not working, the river god realised. A thought struck him. 'I am torn between two worlds,' he said. 'God of the river, I also must care for the dead.'

'It is this that weakens you, makes you vulnerable to Murder's attacks,' said Red Hair. 'You cannot be river god and god of the dead.'

'We need a new river god,' he replied, and looked expectantly at Crazy Eyes.

'I?' said the soul in wonder.

Left Hand lay in his bed. He was old now, so very old. He thought over his life, all that he had done. The palace he'd had built, the opulence that surrounded him, meant nothing.

He was dying, he could feel it. The thought terrified him. His god had abandoned him since the great flood destroyed his beautiful dam. He still felt Murder's presence occasionally, but it was faint and bitter. His own people diminished, yet life burgeoned in the surrounding lands. Children were being born and the new tribes thrived. Many of his followers had turned their weapons upon themselves. Others had simply left. No one who had tried to kill him had got through his bodyguard. He was alone, an old man dying in bed. Too weak to end this waiting with his own hand.

'How will this end?' he whispered to the shadows.

'With a journey,' a voice replied from the dark.

Left Hand screamed and clutched the blankets. 'You! You're dead! I killed you...' Red Hair stepped into the circle of light. 'Go on, take your revenge! I am weak and can do nothing to defend myself. I would do it if I were you.'

Red Hair simply looked at him.

'Speak!' he cried. 'I killed you and your people. You deserve revenge! Take it! Please.' He fell back into his pillows.

'The river is rich with life, and the new tribes do well. This is good,' said Red Hair. 'Where is your god, old man?'

'I don't know. Out there,' Left Hand whispered, and closed his eyes.

Left Hand sat hunched in the canoe as Red Hair rowed them down the primal river.

'What now?' asked Left Hand.

Red Hair was silent for a while, then turned. 'That is for me to decide.'

'If I choose, I can throw you overboard. You will be left to wander the earth alone forever. My lord would not think ill of me for this. You know of him, I think. He was the enemy of your master.'

Left Hand paled. 'Not him! How has he become this powerful?' he asked.

'In many ways, you and your master were responsible,' said Red Hair.

'But...' She sighed. 'I suppose you can ask him yourself,' she said as the canoe sailed into the land of the dead.

Edison's Conquest of Mars

Chapter VII.

The squadron had been rapidly withdrawn to a very considerable distance from the asteroid. The range of the mysterious artillery employed by the Martians was unknown to us. We did not even know the limit of the effective range of our own disintegrators. If it should prove that the Martians were able to deal their strokes at a distance greater than any we could reach, then they would of course have an insuperable advantage.

On the other hand, if it should turn out that our range was greater than theirs, the advantage would be on our side. Or—which was perhaps most probable—there might be practically no difference in the effective range of the engines.

Anyhow, we were going to find out how the case stood, and that without delay.

Ready with the Disintegrator.

Everything being in readiness, the disintegrators all in working order, and the men who were able to handle them, most of whom were experienced marksmen, chosen from among the officers of the regular army of the United States, and accustomed to the straight shooting and the sure hits of the West, standing at their posts, the squadron again advanced.

In order to distract the attention of the Martians, the electrical ships had been distributed over a wide space. Some dropped straight down toward the asteroid; others

approached it by flank attack, from this side and that. The flagship moved straight in toward the point where the first disaster occurred. Its intrepid commander felt that his post should be that of the greatest danger, and where the severest blows would be given and received.

A Strategic Advance.

The approach of the ships was made with great caution. Watching the Martians with our telescopes we could clearly see that they were disconcerted by the scattered order of our attack. Even if all of their engines of war had been in proper condition for use it would have been impossible for them to meet the simultaneous assault of so many enemies dropping down upon them from the sky.

But they were made of fighting metal, as we knew from old experience. It was no question of surrender. They did not know how to surrender, and we did not know how to demand a surrender. Besides, the destruction of the two electrical ships with the forty men, many of whom bore names widely known upon the earth, had excited a kind of fury among the members of the squadron which called for vengeance.

Another Attack.

Suddenly a repetition of the quick movement by the Martians, which had been the forerunner of the former coup, was observed; again a blinding flash burst from their war engine and instantaneously a shiver ran through the frame of the flagship; the air within quivered with strange pulsations and seemed suddenly to have assumed the temperature of a blast furnace.

We all gasped for breath. Our throats and lungs seemed scorched in the act of breathing. Some fell unconscious upon the floor. The marksmen, carrying the disintegrators ready for use, staggered, and one of them dropped his instrument.

But we had not been destroyed like our comrades before us. In a moment the wave of heat passed; those who had fallen recovered from their momentary stupor and staggered to their feet.

The electrical steersman stood hesitating at his post.

“Move on,” said Mr. Edison sternly, his features set with determination and his eyes afire. “We are still beyond their effective range. Let us get closer in order to make sure work when we strike.”

The ship moved on. One could hear the heartbeats of its inmates. The other members of the squadron, thinking for the moment that disaster had overtaken the flagship, had paused and seemed to be meditating flight.

“Signal them to move on,” said Mr. Edison.

The Battle Commences.

The signal was given, and the circle of electrical ships closed in upon the asteroid.

In the meantime Mr. Edison had been donning his air-tight suit. Before we could clearly comprehend his intention he had passed through the double-trapped door

which gave access to the exterior of the car without permitting the loss of air, and was standing upon what served as the deck of the ship.

In his hand he carried a disintegrator. With a quick motion he sighted it.

As quickly as possible I sprang to his side. I was just in time to note the familiar blue gleam about the instrument, which indicated that its terrific energies were at work. The whirring sound was absent, because here, in open space, where there was no atmosphere, there could be no sound.

The Disintegrator's Power.

My eyes were fixed upon the Martians' engine, which had just dealt us a staggering, but not fatal, blow, and particularly I noticed a polished knob projecting from it, which seemed to have been the focus from which its destructive bolt emanated.

A moment later the knob disappeared. The irresistible vibrations darted from the electrical disintegrator and had fallen upon it and instantaneously shattered it into atoms.

"That fixes them," said Mr. Edison, turning to me with a smile.

And indeed it did fix them. We had most effectually spiked their gun. It would deal no more death blows.

The doings of the flagship had been closely watched throughout the squadron. The effect of its blow had been evident to all, and a moment later we saw, on some of the nearer ships, men dressed in their air suits, appearing upon the deck, swinging their arms and sending forth noiseless cheers into empty space.

A Telling Stroke.

The stroke that we had dealt was taken by several of the electrical ships as a signal for a common assault, and we saw two of the Martians fall beside the ruin of their engine, their heads having been blown from their bodies.

"Signal them to stop firing," commanded Mr. Edison. "We have got them down, and we are not going to murder them without necessity."

"Besides," he added, "I want to capture some of them alive."

The signal was given as he had ordered. The flagship then alone dropped slowly toward the place on the asteroid where the prostrate Martians were.

A Terrible Scene.

As we got near them a terrible scene unfolded itself to our eyes. There had evidently been not more than half a dozen of the monsters in the beginning. Two of these were stretched headless upon the ground. Three others had suffered horrible injuries where the invisible vibratory beams from the disintegrators had grazed them, and they could not long survive. One only remained apparently uninjured.

The Gigantic Martian.

It is impossible for me to describe the appearance of this creature in terms that would be readily understood. Was he like a man? Yes and no. He possessed many human characteristics, but they were exaggerated and monstrous in scale and in detail. His head was of enormous size, and his huge projecting eyes gleamed with a strange fire of intelligence. His face was like a caricature, but not one to make the beholder laugh. Drawing himself up, he towered to a height of at least fifteen feet.

But let the reader not suppose from this inadequate description that the Martians stirred in the beholder precisely the sensation that would be caused by the sight of a gorilla, or other repulsive inhabitant of one of our terrestrial jungles, suddenly confronting him in its native wilds.

With all his horrible characteristics, and all his suggestions of beast and monster, nevertheless the Martian produced the impression of being a person and not a mere animal.

His Frightened Aspect.

I have already referred to the enormous size of his head, and to the fact that his countenance bore considerable resemblance to that of a man. There was something in this face that sent a shiver through the soul of the beholder. One could feel in looking upon it that here was intellect, intelligence developed to the highest degree, but in the direction of evil instead of good.

The sensations of one who had stood face to face with Satan, when he was driven from the battlements of heaven by the swords of his fellow archangels, and had beheld him transformed from Lucifer, the Son of the Morning, into the Prince of Night and Hell, might not have been unlike those which we now experienced as we gazed upon this dreadful personage, who seemed to combine the intellectual powers of a man, raised to their highest pitch, with some of the physical features of a beast, and all the moral depravity of a fiend.

The Martian's Rage.

The appearance of the Martian was indeed so threatening and repellent that we paused at the height of fifty feet above the ground, hesitating to approach nearer. A grin of rage and hate overspread his face. If he had been a man I should say he shook his fist at us. What he did was to express in even more telling pantomime his hatred and defiance, and his determination to grind us to shreds if he could once get us within his clutches.

Mr. Edison and I still stood upon the deck of the ship, where several others had gathered around us. The atmosphere of the little asteroid was so rare that it practically amounted to nothing, and we could not possibly have survived if we had not continued to wear our air-tight suits. How the Martians contrived to live here was a mystery to us. It was another of their secrets which we were yet to learn.

Mr. Edison retained his disintegrator in his hand.

“Kill him,” said someone. “He is too horrible to live.”

“If we do not kill him we shall never be able to land upon the asteroid,” said another.

Shall We Kill Him?

“No,” said Mr. Edison, “I shall not kill him. We have got another use for him. Tom,” he continued, turning to one of his assistants, whom he had brought from his laboratory, “bring me the anaesthetizer.”

This was something entirely new to nearly all the members of the expedition. Mr. Edison, however, had confided to me before we left the earth the fact that he had invented a little instrument by means of which a bubble, strongly charged with a powerful anaesthetic agent, could be driven to a considerable distance into the face of an enemy, where, exploding without other damage, it would instantly put him to sleep.

When Tom had placed the instrument in his hands Mr. Edison ordered the electrical ship to forge slightly ahead and drop a little lower toward the Martian, who, with watchful eyes and threatening gestures, noted our approach in the attitude of a wild beast on the spring. Suddenly Mr. Edison discharged from the instrument in his hand a little gaseous globe, which glittered like a ball of tangled rainbows in the sunshine, and darted with astonishing velocity straight into the upturned face of the Martian. It burst as it touched and the monster fell back senseless upon the ground.

One of the Bellicose Martians Falls Into the Hands of the Worldians.

“You have killed him!” exclaimed all.

“No,” said Mr. Edison, “he is not dead, only asleep. Now we shall drop down and bind him tight before he can awake.”

When we came to bind our prisoner with strong ropes we were more than ever impressed with his gigantic stature and strength. Evidently in single combat with equal weapons he would have been a match for twenty of us.

All that I had read of giants had failed to produce upon my mind the impression of enormous size and tremendous physical energy which the sleeping body of this immense Martian produced. He had fallen on his back, and was in a most profound slumber. All his features were relaxed, and yet even in that condition there was a devilishness about him that made the beholders instinctively shudder.

The Unconscious Martian.

So powerful was the effect of the anaesthetic which Mr. Edison had discharged into his face that he remained perfectly unconscious while we turned him half over in order the more securely to bind his muscular limbs.

In the meantime the other electrical ships approached, and several of them made a landing upon the asteroid. Everybody was eager to see this wonderful little world, which, as I have already remarked, was only five miles in diameter.

Exploring the Planet.

Several of us from the flagship started out hastily to explore the miniature planet. And now our attention was recalled to an intensely interesting phenomenon which had engaged our thoughts not only when we were upon the moon, but during our flight

through space. This was the almost entire absence of weight.

On the moon, where the force of gravitation is one-sixth as great as upon the earth, we had found ourselves astonishingly light. Five-sixths of our own weight, and of the weight of the air-tight suits in which we were incased, had magically dropped from us. It was therefore comparatively easy for us, encumbered as we were, to make our way about on the moon.

But when we were far from both the earth and the moon, the loss of weight was more astonishing still—not astonishing because we had not known that it would be so, but nevertheless a surprising phenomenon in contrast with our lifelong experience on the earth.

Men Without Weight.

In open space we were practically without weight. Only the mass of the electrical car in which we were enclosed attracted us, and inside that we could place ourselves in any position without falling. We could float in the air. There were no up and no down, no top and no bottom for us. Stepping outside the car, it would have been easy for us to spring away from it and leave it forever.

One of the most startling experiences that I have ever had was one day when we were navigating space about half way between the earth and Mars. I had stepped outside the car with Lord Kelvin, both of us, of course, wearing our air-tight suits. We were perfectly well aware what would be the consequence of detaching ourselves from the car as we moved along. We should still retain the forward motion of the car, and of course accompany it in its flight. There would be no falling one way or the other. The car would have a tendency to draw us back again by its attraction, but this tendency would be very slight, and practically inappreciable at a distance.

Stepping Into Space.

“I am going to step off,” I suddenly said to Lord Kelvin. “Of course I shall keep right along with the car, and step aboard again when I am ready.”

“Quite right on general principles, young man,” replied the great savant, “but beware in what manner you step off. Remember, if you give your body an impulse sufficient to carry it away from the car to any considerable distance, you will be unable to get back again, unless we can catch you with a boathook or a fishline. Out there in empty space you will have nothing to kick against, and you will be unable to propel yourself in the direction of the car, and its attraction is so feeble that we should probably arrive at Mars before it had drawn you back again.”

All this was, of course, perfectly self-evident, yet I believe that but for the warning word of Lord Kelvin, I should have been rash enough to step out into empty space with sufficient force to have separated myself hopelessly from the electrical ship.

A Reckless Experiment.

As it was, I took good care to retain a hold upon a projecting portion of the car. Occasionally cautiously releasing my grip, I experienced for a few minutes the delicious, indescribable pleasure of being a little planet swinging through space, with nothing to hold me up and nothing to interfere with my motion.

Mr. Edison, happening to come upon the deck of the ship at this time, and seeing what we were about, at once said:

“I must provide against this danger. If I do not, there is a chance that we shall arrive at Mars with the ships half empty and the crews floating helplessly around us.”

Edison Always Prepared.

Mr. Edison’s way of guarding against the danger was by contriving a little apparatus, modeled after that which was the governing force of the electrical ships themselves, and which, being enclosed in the air-tight suits, enabled their wearers to manipulate the electrical charge upon them in such a way that they could make excursions from the cars into open space like steam launches from a ship, going and returning at their will.

These little machines being rapidly manufactured, for Mr. Edison had a miniature laboratory aboard, were distributed about the squadron, and henceforth we had the pleasure of paying and receiving visits among the various members of the fleet.

But to return from this digression to our experience of the asteroid. The latter being a body of some mass was, of course, able to impart to us a measurable degree of weight. Being five miles in diameter, on the assumption that its mean density was the same as that of the earth, the weight of bodies on its surface should have borne the same ratio to their weight upon the earth that the radius of the asteroid bore to the radius of the earth; in other words, as 1 to 1,600.

Having made this mental calculation, I knew that my weight, being 150 pounds on the earth, should on this asteroid be an ounce and a half.

Curious to see whether fact would bear out theory, I had myself weighed with a spring balance. Mr. Edison, Lord Kelvin and the other distinguished scientists stood by watching the operation with great interest.

To our complete surprise, my weight, instead of coming out an ounce and a half, as it should have done, on the supposition that the mean density of the asteroid resembled that of the earth—a very liberal supposition on the side of the asteroid, by the way—actually came out five ounces and a quarter!

“What in the world makes me so heavy?” I asked.

“Yes, indeed, what an elephant you have become,” said Mr. Edison.

Lord Kelvin screwed his eyeglass in his eye, and carefully inspected the balance.

Weight, Five and a Quarter Ounces.

“It’s quite right,” he said. “You do indeed weigh five ounces and a quarter. Too much; altogether too much,” he added. “You shouldn’t do it, you know.”

“Perhaps the fault is in the asteroid,” suggested Professor Sylvanus P. Thompson.

“Quite so,” exclaimed Lord Kelvin, a look of sudden comprehension overspreading his features. “No doubt it is the internal constitution of the asteroid which is the cause of the anomaly. We must look into that. Let me see? This gentleman’s weight is three and one-half times as great as it ought to be. What element is there whose density exceeds the mean density of the earth in about that proportion?”

“Gold,” exclaimed one of the party.

The Golden Asteroid!

For a moment we were startled beyond expression. The truth had flashed upon us.

This must be a golden planet—this little asteroid. If it were not composed internally of gold it could never have made me weigh three times more than I ought to weigh.

“But where is the gold?” cried one.

“Covered up, of course,” said Lord Kelvin. “Buried in star dust. This asteroid could not have continued to travel for millions of years through regions of space strewn with meteoric particles without becoming covered with the inevitable dust and grime of such a journey. We must dig down, and then doubtless we shall find the metal.”

This hint was instantly acted upon. Something that would serve for a spade was seized by one of the men, and in a few minutes a hole had been dug in the comparatively light soil of the asteroid.

The Precious Metal Discovered.

I shall never forget the sight, nor the exclamations of wonder that broke forth from all of us standing around, when the yellow gleam of the precious metal appeared under the “star dust.” Collected in huge masses it reflected the light of the sun from its hiding place.

Evidently the planet was not a solid ball of gold, formed like a bullet run in a mould, but was composed of nuggets of various sizes, which had come together here under the influence of their mutual gravitation, and formed a little metallic planet.

Judging by the test of weight which we had already tried, and which had led to the discovery of the gold, the composition of the asteroid must be the same to its very centre.

An Incredible Phenomenon.

In an assemblage of famous scientific men such as this the discovery of course immediately led to questions as to the origin of this incredible phenomenon.

How did these masses of gold come together? How did it chance that, with the exception of the thin crust of the asteroid, nearly all its substance was composed of the precious metal?

One asserted that it was quite impossible that there should be so much gold at so great a distance from the sun.

“It is the general law,” he said, “that the planets increase in density toward the sun. There is every reason to think that the inner planets possess the greater amount of dense elements, while the outer ones are comparatively light.”

Whence Came the Treasure?

But another referred to the old theory that there was once in this part of the solar system a planet which had been burst in pieces by some mysterious explosion, the fragments forming what we know as the asteroids. In his opinion, this planet might have contained a large quantity of gold, and in the course of ages the gold, having, in consequence of its superior atomic weight, not being so widely scattered by the explosion as some of the other elements of the planet, had collected itself together in this body.

But I observed that Lord Kelvin and the other more distinguished men of science said nothing during this discussion. The truly learned man is the truly wise man. They were not going to set up theories without sufficient facts to sustain them. The one fact that the gold was here was all they had at present. Until they could learn more they were not prepared to theorize as to how the gold got there.

And in truth, it must be confessed, the greater number of us really cared less for the explanation of the wonderful fact than we did for the fact itself.

Gold is a thing which may make its appearance anywhere and at any time without offering any excuses or explanations.

Visions of Mighty Fortunes.

“Phew! Won’t we be rich?” exclaimed a voice.

“How are we going to dig it and get it back to earth?” asked another.

“Carry it in your pockets,” said one.

“No need of staking claims here,” remarked another. “There is enough for everybody.”

Mr. Edison suddenly turned the current of talk.

“What do you suppose those Martians were doing here?”

“Why, they were wrecked here.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Mr. Edison. “According to your own showing they could not have been wrecked here. This planet hasn’t gravitation enough to wreck them by a fall, and besides I have been looking at their machines and I know there has been a fight.”

“A fight?” exclaimed several, pricking up their ears.

“Yes,” said Mr. Edison; “those machines bear the marks of the lightning of the Martians. They have been disabled, but they are made of some metal or some alloy of

metals unknown to me, and consequently they have withstood the destructive force applied to them, as our electric ships were unable to withstand it. It is perfectly plain to me that they have been disabled in a battle. The Martians must have been fighting among themselves.”

A Martian Civil War!

“About the gold!” exclaimed one.

“Of course. What else was there to fight about?”

At this instant one of our men came running from a considerable distance, waving his arms excitedly, but unable to give voice to his story, in the inappreciable atmosphere of the asteroid, until he had come up and made telephonic connection with us.

“There is a lot of dead Martians over there,” he said. “They’ve been cleaning one another out.”

“That’s it,” said Mr. Edison. “I knew it when I saw the condition of those machines.”

“Then this is not a wrecked expedition, directed against the earth?”

“Not at all.”

“This must be the great gold mine of Mars,” said the president of an Australian mining company, opening both his eyes and his mouth as he spoke.

“Yes, evidently that’s it. Here’s where they come to get their wealth.”

“And this,” I said, “must be their harvest time. You notice that this asteroid, being several million miles nearer to the sun than Mars is, must have an appreciably shorter period of revolution. When it is in conjunction with Mars, or nearly so, as it is at present, the distance between the two is not very great, whereas when it is in the opposite part of its orbit they are separated by an enormous gap of space and the sun is between them.”

“Manifestly in the latter case it would be perilous if not entirely impossible for the Martians to visit the golden asteroid, but when it is near Mars, as it is at present, and as it must be periodically for several years at a time, then is their opportunity.”

“With their projectile cars sent forth with the aid of the mysterious explosives which they possess, it is easy for them under such circumstances, to make visits to the asteroid.”

“Having obtained all the gold they need, or all that they can carry, a comparatively slight impulse given to their car, the direction of which is carefully calculated, will carry them back again to Mars.”

“If that’s so,” exclaimed a voice, “we had better look out for ourselves! We have got into a very hornet’s nest! If this is the place where the Martians come to dig gold, and if this is the height of their season, as you say, they are not likely to leave us here long

undisturbed.”

“These fellows must have been pirates that they had the fight with,” said another.

“But what’s become of the regulars, then?”

“Gone back to Mars for help, probably, and they’ll be here again pretty quick, I am afraid!”

Considerable alarm was caused by this view of the case, and orders were sent to several of the electrical ships to cruise out to a safe distance in the direction of Mars and keep a sharp outlook for the approach of enemies.

Discovery That the Asteroid is a Solid Mass of Gold.

Meanwhile our prisoner awoke. He turned his eyes upon those standing about him, without any appearance of fear, but rather with a look of contempt, like that which Gulliver must have felt for the Lilliputians who had bound him under similar circumstances.

There were both hatred and defiance in his glance. He attempted to free himself, and the ropes strained with the tremendous pressure that he put upon them, but he could not break loose.

The Martian Safely Bound.

Satisfied that the Martian was safely bound, we left him where he lay, and, while awaiting news from the ships which had been sent to reconnoitre, continued the exploration of the little planet.

At a point nearly opposite to that where we had landed we came upon the mine which the Martians had been working. They had removed the thin coating of soil, laying bare the rich stores of gold beneath, and large quantities of the latter had been removed. Some of it was so solidly packed that the strokes of the instruments by means of which they had detached it were visible like the streaks left by a knife cutting cheese.

Reason for Astonishment.

The more we saw of this golden planet the greater became our astonishment. What the Martians had removed was a mere nothing in comparison with the entire bulk of the asteroid. Had the celestial mine been easier to reach, perhaps they would have removed more, or, possibly, their political economists perfectly understood the necessity of properly controlling the amount of precious metal in circulation. Very likely, we thought, the mining operations were under government control in Mars and it might be that the majority of the people there knew nothing of this store of wealth floating in the firmament. That would account for the battle with the supposed pirates, who, no doubt, had organized a secret expedition to the asteroid and been caught red-handed at the mine.

Richer Than the Klondike.

There were many detached masses of gold scattered about, and some of the men, on picking them up, exclaimed with astonishment at their lack of weight, forgetting for

the moment that the same law which caused their own bodies to weigh so little must necessarily affect everything else in like degree.

A mass of gold that on the earth no man would have been able to lift could here be tossed about like a hollow rubber ball.

While we were examining the mine, one of the men left to guard the Martian came running to inform us that the latter evidently wished to make some communication. Mr. Edison and others hurried to the side of the prisoner. He still lay on his back, from which position he was not able to move, notwithstanding all his efforts. But by the motion of his eyes, aided by a pantomime with his fingers, he made us understand that there was something in a metallic box fastened at his side which he wished to reach.

The Martian's Treasure Box.

With some difficulty we succeeded in opening the box and in it there appeared a number of bright red pellets, as large as an ordinary egg.

When the Martian saw these in our hands he gave us to understand by the motion of his lips that he wished to swallow one of them. A pellet was accordingly placed in his mouth, and he instantly and with great eagerness swallowed it.

The Mysterious Pellets.

While trying to communicate his wishes to us, the prisoner had seemed to be in no little distress. He exhibited spasmodic movements which led some of the bystanders to think that he was on the point of dying, but within a few seconds after he had swallowed the pellet he appeared to be completely restored. All evidences of distress vanished, and a look of content came over his ugly face.

"It must be a powerful medicine," said one of the bystanders. "I wonder what it is."

"I will explain to you my notion," said Professor Moissan, the great French chemist. "I think it was a pill of the air, which he has taken."

"What do you mean by that?"

Artificial Atmosphere.

"My meaning is," said Professor Moissan, "that the Martian must have, for that he may live, the nitrogen and the oxygen. These can he not obtain here, where there is not the atmosphere. Therefore must he get them in some other manner. This has he managed to do by combining in these pills the oxygen and the nitrogen in the proportions which make atmospheric air. Doubtless upon Mars there are the very great chemists. They have discovered how this may be done. When the Martian has swallowed his little pill, the oxygen and the nitrogen are rendered to his blood as if he had breathed them, and so he can live with that air which has been distributed to him with the aid of his stomach in the place of his lungs."

If Monsieur Moissan's explanation was not correct, at any rate it seemed the only one that would fit the facts before us. Certainly the Martian could not breathe where there was practically no air, yet just as certainly after he had swallowed his pill he seemed as comfortable as any of us.

Signals from a Ship.

Suddenly, while we were gathered around the prisoner, and interested in this fresh evidence of the wonderful ingenuity of the Martians, and of their control over the processes of nature, one of the electrical ships that had been sent off in the direction of Mars was seen rapidly returning and displaying signals.

The Martians Are Coming.

It reported that the Martians were coming!

Chapter VIII.

The alarm was spread instantly among those upon the planet and through the remainder of the fleet.

One of the men from the returning electrical ship dropped down upon the asteroid and gave a more detailed account of what they had seen.

His ship had been the one which had gone to the greatest distance in the direction of Mars. While cruising there, with all eyes intent, they had suddenly perceived a glittering object moving from the direction of the ruddy planet, and manifestly approaching them. A little inspection with the telescope had shown that it was one of the projectile cars used by the Martians.

Our ship had ventured so far from the asteroid that for a moment it seemed doubtful whether it would be able to return in time to give warning, because the electrical influence of the asteroid was comparatively slight at such a distance, and, after they had reversed their polarity, and applied their intensifier, so as to make that influence effective, their motion was at first exceedingly slow.

Fortunately after a time they got under way with sufficient velocity to bring them back to us before the approaching Martians could overtake them.

The latter were not moving with great velocity, having evidently projected themselves from Mars with only just sufficient force to throw them within the feeble sphere of gravitation of the asteroid, so that they should very gently land upon its surface.

Indeed, looking out behind the electrical ship which had brought us the warning, we immediately saw the projectile of the Martians approaching. It sparkled like a star in the black sky as the sunlight fell upon it.

Ready for the Enemy.

The ships of the squadron whose crews had not landed upon the planet were signalled to prepare for action, while those who were upon the asteroid made ready for battle there. A number of disintegrators were trained upon the approaching Martians, but Mr. Edison gave strict orders that no attempt should be made to discharge the vibratory force at random.

“They do not know that we are here,” he said, “and I am convinced that they are unable to control their motions as we can do with our electrical ships. They depend simply upon the force of gravitation. Having passed the limit of the attraction of Mars,

they have now fallen within the attraction of the asteroid, and they must slowly sink to its surface.”

The Martians Cannot Stop.

“Having, as I am convinced, no means of producing or controlling electrical attraction and repulsion, they cannot stop themselves, but must come down upon the asteroid. Having got here they could never get away again, except as we know the survivors got away from earth, by propelling their projectile against gravitation with the aid of an explosive.”

“Therefore, to a certain extent they will be at our mercy. Let us allow them quietly to land upon the planet, and then I think, if it becomes necessary, we can master them.”

Notwithstanding Mr. Edison’s reassuring words and manner, the company upon the asteroid experienced a dreadful suspense while the projectile which seemed very formidable as it drew near, sank with a slow and graceful motion toward the surface of the ground. Evidently it was about to land very near the spot where we stood awaiting it.

Its inmates had apparently just caught sight of us. They evinced signs of astonishment, and seemed at a loss exactly what to do. We could see projecting from the fore part of their car at least two of the polished knobs, whose fearful use and power we well comprehended.

Several of our men cried out to Mr. Edison in an extremity of terror:

“Why do you not destroy them? Be quick, or we shall all perish.”

“No,” said Mr. Edison, “there is no danger. You can see that they are not prepared. They will not attempt to attack us until they have made their landing.”

The Martians Land.

And Mr. Edison was right. With gradually accelerated velocity, and yet very, very slowly in comparison with the speed they would have exhibited in falling upon such a planet as the earth, the Martians and their car came down to the ground.

We stood at a distance of perhaps three hundred feet from the point where they touched the asteroid. Instantly a dozen of the giants sprang from the car and gazed about for a moment with a look of intense surprise. At first it was doubtful whether they meant to attack us at all.

We stood on our guard, several carrying disintegrators in our hands, while a score more of these terrible engines were turned upon the Martians from the electrical ships which hovered near.

A Speech from Their Leader.

Suddenly he who seemed to be the leader of the Martians began to speak to them in pantomime, using his fingers after the manner in which they are used for conversation by deaf and dumb people.

Of course, we did not know what he was saying, but his meaning became perfectly evident a minute later. Clearly they did not comprehend the powers of the insignificant-looking strangers with whom they had to deal. Instead of turning their destructive engines upon us, they advanced on a run, with the evident purpose of making us prisoners or crushing us by main force.

Awed by the Disintegrator.

The soft whirr of the disintegrator in the hands of Mr. Edison standing near me came to my ears through the telephonic wire. He quickly swept the concentrating mirror a little up and down, and instantly the foremost Martian vanished! Part of some metallic dress that he wore fell upon the ground where he had stood, its vibratory rate not having been included in the range imparted to the disintegrator.

His followers paused for a moment, amazed, stared about as if looking for their leader, and then hurried back to their projectile and disappeared within it.

“Now we’ve got business on our hands,” said Mr. Edison. “Look out for yourselves.” As he spoke, I saw the death-dealing knob of the war engine contained in the car of the Martians moving around toward us. In another instant it would have launched its destroying bolt.

Before that could occur, however, it had been dissipated into space by a vibratory stream from a disintegrator.

But we were not to get the victory quite so easily. There was another of the war engines in the car, and before we could concentrate our fire upon it, its awful flash shot forth, and a dozen of our comrades perished before our eyes.

“Quick! Quick!” shouted Mr. Edison to one of his electrical experts standing near. “There is something the matter with this disintegrator, and I cannot make it work. Aim at the knob, and don’t miss it.”

Martians and Terrestrials Fight a Terrible Battle.

But the aim was not well taken, and the vibratory force fell upon a portion of the car at a considerable distance from the knob, making a great breach, but leaving the engine uninjured.

A section of the side of the car had been destroyed, and the vibratory energy had spread no further. To have attempted to sweep the car from end to end would have been futile, because the period of action of the disintegrators during each discharge did not exceed one second, and distributing the energy over so great a space would have seriously weakened its power to shatter apart the atoms of the resisting substance. The disintegrators were like firearms, in that after each discharge they must be readjusted before they could be used again.

The Martians Are Desperate.

Through the breach we saw the Martians inside making desperate efforts to train their engine upon us, for after their first disastrous stroke we had rapidly shifted our position. Swiftly the polished knob, which gleamed like an evil eye, moved round to sweep over us. Instinctively, though incautiously, we had collected in a group.

A single discharge would sweep us all into eternity.

A Ticklish Position.

“Will no one fire upon them?” exclaimed Mr. Edison, struggling with the disintegrator in his hands, which still refused to work.

At this fearful moment I glanced around upon our company, and was astonished at the spectacle. In the presence of the danger many of them had lost all self-command. A half dozen had dropped their disintegrators upon the ground. Others stood as if frozen fast in their tracks. The expert electrician, whose poor aim had had such disastrous results, held in his hand an instrument which was in perfect condition, yet with mouth agape, he stood trembling like a captured bird.

The Electricians Lose Their Heads.

It was a disgraceful exhibition. Mr. Edison, however, had not lost his head. Again and again he sighted at the dreadful knob with his disintegrator, but the vibratory force refused to respond.

The means of safety were in our hands, and yet through a combination of ill luck and paralyzing terror we seemed unable to use them.

In a second more it would be all over with us.

The suspense in reality lasted only during the twinkling of an eye, though it seemed ages long.

Unable to endure it, I sharply struck the shoulder of the paralyzed electrician. To have attempted to seize the disintegrator from his hands would have been a fatal waste of time. Luckily the blow either roused him from his stupor or caused an instinctive movement of his hand that set the little engine in operation.

I am sure he took no aim, but providentially the vibratory force fell upon the desired point, and the knob disappeared.

Saved!

We were saved!

Instantly half a dozen rushed toward the car of the Martians. We bitterly repented their haste; they did not live to repent.

Unknown to us the Martians carried hand engines, capable of launching bolts of death of the same character as those which emanated from the knobs of their larger machines. With these they fired, so to speak, through the breach in their car, and four of our men who were rushing upon them fell in heaps of cinders. The effect of the terrible fire was like that which the most powerful strokes of lightning occasionally produce on earth.

The destruction of the threatening knob had instantaneously relieved the pressure upon the terror-stricken nerves of our company, and they had all regained their

composure and self-command. But this new and unexpected disaster, following so close upon the fear which had recently overpowered them, produced a second panic, the effect of which was not to stiffen them in their tracks as before, but to send them scurrying in every direction in search of hiding places.

A Curious Effect.

And now a most curious effect of the smallness of the planet we were on began to play a conspicuous part in our adventures. Standing on a globe only five miles in diameter was like being on the summit of a mountain whose sides sloped rapidly off in every direction, disappearing in the black sky on all sides, as if it were some stupendous peak rising out of an unfathomable abyss.

In consequence of the quick rounding off of the sides of this globe, the line of the horizon was close at hand, and by running a distance of less than 250 yards the fugitives disappeared down the sides of the asteroid, and behind the horizon, even from the elevation of about fifteen feet from which the Martians were able to watch them. From our sight they disappeared much sooner.

The slight attraction of the planet and their consequent almost entire lack of weight enabled the men to run with immense speed. The result, as I subsequently learned, was that after they had disappeared from our view they quitted the planet entirely, the force being sufficient to partially free them from its gravitation, so that they sailed out into space, whirling helplessly end over end, until the elliptical orbits in which they travelled eventually brought them back again to the planet on the side nearly opposite to that from which they had departed.

Hunting for the Enemy.

But several of us, with Mr. Edison, stood fast, watching for an opportunity to get the Martians within range of the disintegrators. Luckily we were enabled, by shifting our position a little to the left, to get out of the line of sight of our enemies concealed in the car.

“If we cannot catch sight of them,” said Mr. Edison, “we shall have to riddle the car on the chance of hitting them.”

“It will be like firing into a bush to kill a hidden bear,” said one of the party.

But help came from a quarter which was unexpected to us, although it should not have been so. Several of the electric ships had been hovering above us during the fight, their commanders being apparently uncertain how to act—fearful, perhaps, of injuring us in the attempt to smite our enemy.

But now the situation apparently lightened for them. They saw that we were at an immense disadvantage, and several of them immediately turned their batteries upon the car of the Martians.

They riddled it far more quickly and effectively than we could have done. Every stroke of the vibratory emanation made a gap in the side of the car, and we could perceive from the commotion within that our enemies were being rapidly massacred in their fortification.

So overwhelming was the force and the advantage of the ships that in a little while it was all over. Mr. Edison signalled them to stop firing because it was plain that all resistance had ceased and probably not one of the Martians remained alive.

We now approached the car, which had been transpierced in every direction, and whose remaining portions were glowing with heat in consequence of the spreading of the atomic vibrations. Immediately we discovered that all our anticipations were correct and that all of our enemies had perished.

The effect of the disintegrators upon them had been awful—too repulsive, indeed, to be described in detail. Some of the bodies had evidently entirely vanished; only certain metal articles which they had worn remaining, as in the case of the first Martian killed, to indicate that such beings had ever existed. The nature of the metal composing these articles was unknown to us. Evidently its vibratory rhythm did not correspond with any included in the ordinary range of the disintegrators.

The Disintegrators' Awful Effect.

Some of the giants had been only partially destroyed, the vibratory current having grazed them, in such a manner that the shattering undulations had not acted upon the entire body.

One thing that lends a peculiar horror to a terrestrial battlefield was absent; there was no bloodshed. The vibratory energy, not only completely destroyed whatever it fell upon but it seared the veins and arteries of the dismembered bodies so that there was no sanguinary exhibition connected with its murderous work.

All this time the shackled Martian had lain on his back where we had left him bound. What his feeling must have been may be imagined. At times, I caught a glimpse of his eyes, wildly rolling and exhibiting, when he saw that the victory was in our hands, the first indications of fear and terror shaking his soul that had yet appeared.

“That fellow is afraid at last,” I said to Mr. Edison.

“Well, I should think he ought to be afraid,” was the reply.

“So he ought, but if I am not mistaken this fear of his may be the beginning of a new discovery for us.”

“How so?” asked Mr. Edison.

“In this way. When once he fears our power, and perceives that there would be no hope of contending against us, even if he were at liberty, he will respect us. This change in his mental attitude may tend to make him communicative. I do not see why we should despair of learning his language from him, and having done that, he will serve as our guide and interpreter, and will be of incalculable advantage to us when we have arrived at Mars.”

“Capital! Capital!” said Mr. Edison. “We must concentrate the linguistic genius of our company upon that problem at once.”

The Deserter's Return.

In the meantime some of the skulkers whose flight I have referred to began to return, chapfallen, but rejoicing in the disappearance of the danger. Several of them, I am ashamed to say, had been army officers. Yet possibly some excuse could be made for the terror by which they had been overcome. No man has a right to hold his fellow beings to account for the line of conduct they may pursue under circumstances which are not only entirely unexampled in their experience, but almost beyond the power of the imagination to picture.

Paralyzing terror had evidently seized them with the sudden comprehension of the unprecedented singularity of their situation. Millions of miles away from the earth, confronted on an asteroid by these diabolical monsters from a maleficent planet, who were on the point of destroying them with a strange torment of death—perhaps it was really more than human nature, deprived of the support of human surroundings, could have been expected to bear.

Those who, as already described, had run with so great a speed that they were projected, all unwilling, into space, rising in elliptical orbits from the surface of the planet, describing great curves in what might be denominated its sky, and then coming back again to the little globe on another side, were so filled with the wonders of their remarkable adventure that they had almost forgotten the terror which had inspired it.

There was nothing surprising in what had occurred to them the moment one considered the laws of gravitation on the asteroid, but their stories aroused an intense interest among all who listened to them.

Lord Kelvin was particularly interested, and while Mr. Edison was hastening preparations to quit the asteroid and resume our voyage to Mars, Lord Kelvin and a number of other scientific men instituted a series of remarkable experiments.

Jumping Into Empty Space.

It was one of the most laughable things imaginable to see Lord Kelvin, dressed in his air-tight suit, making tremendous jumps into empty space. It reminded me forcibly of what Lord Kelvin, then plain William Thompson, and Professor Blackburn had done when spending a Summer vacation at the seaside, while they were undergraduates of Cambridge University. They had spent all their time, to the surprise of onlookers, in spinning rounded stones on the beach, their object being to obtain a practical solution of the mathematical problem of "precession."

Immediately Lord Kelvin was imitated by a dozen others. With what seemed very slight effort they projected themselves straight upward, rising to a height of four hundred feet or more, and then slowly settling back again to the surface of the asteroid. The time of rise and fall combined was between three and four minutes.

On this little planet the acceleration of gravity or the velocity acquired by a falling body in one second was only four-fifths of an inch. A body required an entire minute to fall a distance of only 120 feet. Consequently, it was more like gradually settling than falling. The figures of these men of science, rising and sinking in this manner,

appeared like so many gigantic marionettes bobbing up and down in a pneumatic bottle.

“Let us try that,” said Mr. Edison, very much interested in the experiments.

A Delightful Experience.

Both of us jumped together. At first, with great swiftness, but gradually losing speed, we rose to an immense height straight from the ground. When we had reached the utmost limit of our flight we seemed to come to rest for a moment, and then began slowly, but with accelerated velocity, to sink back again to the planet. It was not only a peculiar but a delicious sensation, and but for strict orders which were issued that the electrical ships should be immediately prepared for departure, our entire company might have remained for an indefinite period enjoying this new kind of athletic exercise in a world where gravitation had become so humble that it could be trifled with.

While the final preparations for departure were being made, Lord Kelvin instituted other experiments that were no less unique in their results. The experience of those who had taken unpremeditated flights in elliptical orbits when they had run from the vicinity of the Martians suggested the throwing of solid objects in various directions from the surface of the planet in order to determine the distance that they would go and the curves they would describe in returning.

Mars, the Death-Dealing Planet, at Length at Hand!

For these experiments there was nothing more convenient or abundant than chunks of gold from the Martians' mine. These, accordingly, were hurled in various directions, and with every degree of velocity. A little calculation had shown that an initial velocity of thirty feet per second imparted to one of these chunks, moving at right angles to the radius of the asteroid, would, if the resistance of an almost inappreciable atmosphere were neglected, suffice to turn the piece of gold into a little satellite that would describe an orbit around the asteroid, and continue to do so forever, or at least until the slight atmospheric resistance should eventually bring it down to the surface.

But a less velocity than thirty feet per second would cause the golden missile to fly only part way around, while a greater velocity would give it an elliptical instead of a circular orbit, and in this ellipse it would continue to revolve around the asteroid in the character of a satellite.

If the direction of the original impulse were at more than a right angle to the radius of the asteroid, then the flying body would pass out to a greater or less distance in space in an elliptical orbit, eventually coming back again and falling upon the asteroid, but not at the same spot from which it had departed.

Interesting Experiments.

So many took part in these singular experiments, which assumed rather the appearance of outdoor sports than of scientific demonstrations, that in a short time we had provided the asteroid with a very large number of little moons, or satellites, of gold, which revolved around it in orbits of various degrees of ellipticity, taking, on the average, about three-quarters of an hour to complete a circuit. Since, on completing a revolution, they must necessarily pass through the point from which they started, they

kept us constantly on the qui vive to avoid being knocked over by them as they swept around in their orbits.

Finally the signal was given for all to embark, and with great regret the savants quitted their scientific games and prepared to return to the electric ships.

Just on the moment of departure, the fact was announced by one, who had been making a little calculation on a bit of paper, that the velocity with which a body must be thrown in order to escape forever the attraction of the asteroid, and to pass on to an infinite distance in any direction, was only about forty-two feet in a second.

Manifestly it would be quite easy to impart such a speed as that to the chunks of gold that we held in our hands.

A Message to the Earth.

“Hurrah!” exclaimed one. “Let’s send some of this back to the earth.”

“Where is the earth?” asked another.

Being appealed to, several astronomers turned their eyes in the direction of the sun, where the black firmament was ablaze with stars, and in a moment recognized the earth-star shining there, with the moon attending close at hand.

“There,” said one, “is the earth. Can you throw straight enough to hit it?”

“We’ll try,” was the reply, and immediately several threw huge golden nuggets in the direction of our far-away world, endeavoring to impart to them at least the required velocity of forty-two feet in a second, which would insure their passing beyond the attraction of the asteroid, and if there should be no disturbance on the way, and the aim were accurate, their eventual arrival upon the earth.

“Here’s for you, Old Earth,” said one of the throwers, “good luck, and more gold to you!”

If these precious missiles ever reached the earth we knew that they would plunge into the atmosphere like meteors and that probably the heat developed by their passage would melt and dissipate them in golden vapors before they could touch the ground.

Yet, there was a chance that some of them—if the aim were true—might survive the fiery passage through the atmosphere and fall upon the surface of our planet where, perhaps, they would afterward be picked up by a prospector and lead him to believe that he had struck a new bonanza.

But until we returned to the earth it would be impossible for us to tell what had become of the golden gifts which we had launched into space for our mother planet.

Chapter IX.

All Aboard for Mars!

“All aboard!” was the signal, and the squadron having assembled under the lead of the flagship, we started again for Mars.

This time, as it proved, there was to be no further interruption, and when next we paused it was in the presence of the world inhabited by our enemies, and facing their frowning batteries.

Difficulty in Starting.

We did not find it so easy to start from the asteroid as it had been to start from the earth; that is to say, we could not so readily generate a very high velocity.

In consequence of the comparatively small size of the asteroid, its electric influence was very much less than that of the earth, and notwithstanding the appliances which we possessed for intensifying the electrical effect, it was not possible to produce a sufficient repulsion to start us off for Mars with anything like the impulse which we had received from the earth on our original departure.

The utmost velocity that we could generate did not exceed three miles in a second, and to get this required our utmost efforts. In fact, it had not seemed possible that we should attain even so great a speed as that. It was far more than we could have expected, and even Mr. Edison was surprised, as well as greatly gratified, when he found that we were moving with the velocity that I have named.

Mars 6,000,000 Miles Away.

We were still about 6,000,000 miles from Mars, so that, travelling three miles in a second, we should require at least twenty-three days to reach the immediate neighborhood of the planet.

Meanwhile we had a plenty of occupation to make the time pass quickly. Our prisoner was transported along with us, and we now began our attempts to ascertain what his language was, and, if possible, to master it ourselves.

Before quitting the asteroid we had found that it was necessary for him to swallow one of his "air pills," as Prof. Moissan called them, at least three times in the course of every twenty-four hours. One of us supplied him regularly and I thought that I could detect evidences of a certain degree of gratitude in his expression. This was encouraging, because it gave additional promise of the possibility of our being able to communicate with him in some more effective way than by mere signs. But once inside the car, where we had a supply of air kept at the ordinary pressure experienced on the earth, he could breathe like the rest of us.

Learning the Martians' Language.

The best linguists in the expedition, as Mr. Edison had suggested, were now assembled in the flagship, where the prisoner was, and they set to work to devise some means of ascertaining the manner in which he was accustomed to express his thoughts.

We had not heard him speak, because until we carried him into our car there was no atmosphere capable of conveying any sounds he might attempt to utter.

It seemed a fair assumption that the language of the Martians would be scientific in its structure. We had so much evidence of the practical bent of their minds, and of the

immense progress which they had made in the direction of the scientific conquest of nature, that it was not to be supposed their medium of communication with one another would be lacking in clearness, or would possess any of the puzzling and unnecessary ambiguities that characterized the languages spoken on the earth.

“We shall not find them making he’s and she’s of stones, sticks and other inanimate objects,” said one of the American linguists. “They must certainly have gotten rid of all that nonsense long ago.”

“Ah,” said a French professor from the Sorbonne, one of the makers of the never-to-be-finished dictionary. “It will be like the language of my country. Transparent, similar to the diamond, and sparkling as is the fountain.”

The Volapuk of Mars.

“I think,” said a German enthusiast, “that it will be a universal language, the Volapuk of Mars, spoken by all the inhabitants of that planet.”

“But all these speculations,” broke in Mr. Edison, “do not help you much. Why not begin in a practical manner by finding out what the Martian calls himself, for instance.”

This seemed a good suggestion, and accordingly several of the bystanders began an expressive pantomime, intended to indicate to the giant, who was following all their motions with his eyes, that they wished to know by what name he called himself. Pointing their fingers to their own breasts they repeated, one after the other, the word “man.”

If our prisoner had been a stupid savage, of course any such attempt as this to make him understand would have been idle. But it must be remembered that we were dealing with a personage who had presumably inherited from hundreds of generations the results of a civilization, and an intellectual advance, measured by the constant progress of millions of years.

Accordingly we were not very much astonished, when, after a few repetitions of the experiment, the Martian—one of whose arms had been partially released from its bonds in order to give him a little freedom of motion—imitated the action of his interrogators by pressing his finger over his heart.

The Martian Speaks.

Then, opening his mouth, he gave utterance to a sound which shook the air of the car like the hoarse roar of a lion. He seemed himself surprised by the noise he made, for he had not been used to speak in so dense an atmosphere.

Our ears were deafened and confused, and we recoiled in astonishment, not to say, half in terror.

With an ugly grin distorting his face as if he enjoyed our discomfiture, the Martian repeated the motion and the sound.

“R-r-r-r-r-h!”

It was not articulate to our ears, and not to be represented by any combination of letters.

“Faith,” exclaimed a Dublin University professor, “if that’s what they call themselves, how shall we ever translate their names when we come to write the history of the conquest?”

“Whist, mon,” replied a professor from the University of Aberdeen, “let us whip the gillraving villains first, and then we can describe them by any intitulation that may suit our deesposition.”

The beginning of our linguistic conquest was certainly not promising, at least if measured by our acquirement of words, but from another point of view it was very gratifying, inasmuch as it was plain that the Martian understood what we were trying to do, and was, for the present, at least, disposed to aid us.

These efforts to learn the language of Mars were renewed and repeated every few hours, all the experience, learning and genius of the squadron being concentrated upon the work, and the result was that in the course of a few days we had actually succeeded in learning a dozen or more of the Martian’s words and were able to make him understand us when we pronounced them, as well as to understand him when our ears had become accustomed to the growling of his voice.

Finally, one day the prisoner, who seemed to be in an unusually cheerful frame of mind, indicated that he carried in his breast some object which he wished us to see.

The Martian’s Book.

With our assistance he pulled out a book!

Actually, it was a book, not very unlike the books which we have upon the earth, but printed, of course, in characters that were entirely strange and unknown to us. Yet these characters evidently gave expression to a highly intellectual language. All those who were standing by at the moment uttered a shout of wonder and of delight, and the cry of “A book! a book!” ran around the circle, and the good news was even promptly communicated to some of the neighboring electric ships of the squadron. Several other learned men were summoned in haste from them to examine our new treasure.

The Martian, whose good nature had manifestly been growing day after day, watched our inspection of his book with evidences of great interest, not unmingled with amusement. Finally he beckoned the holder of the book to his side, and placing his broad finger upon one of the huge letters—if letters they were, for they more nearly resembled the characters employed by the Chinese printer—he uttered a sound which we, of course, took to be a word, but which was different from any we had yet heard. Then he pointed to one after another of us standing around.

“Ah,” explained everybody, the truth being apparent, “that is the word by which the Martians designate us. They have a name, then, for the inhabitants of the earth.”

“Or, perhaps, it is rather the name for the earth itself,” said one.

But this could not, of course, be at once determined. Anyhow, the word, whatever its precise meaning might be, had now been added to our vocabulary, although as yet our organs of speech proved unable to reproduce it in a recognizable form.

This promising and unexpected discovery of the Martian's book lent added enthusiasm to those who were engaged in the work of trying to master the language of our prisoner, and the progress that they made in the course of the next few days was truly astonishing. If the prisoner had been unwilling to aid them, of course, it would have been impossible to proceed, but, fortunately for us, he seemed more and more to enter into the spirit of the undertaking, and actually to enjoy it himself. So bright and quick was his understanding that he was even able to indicate to us methods of mastering his language that would otherwise, probably, never have occurred to our minds.

The Prisoner Teaches.

In fact, in a very short time he had turned teacher and all these learned men, pressing around him with eager attention, had become his pupils.

I cannot undertake to say precisely how much of the Martian language had been acquired by the chief linguists of the expedition before the time when we arrived so near to Mars that it became necessary for most of us to abandon our studies in order to make ready for the more serious business which now confronted us.

But, at any rate, the acquisition was so considerable as to allow of the interchange of ordinary ideas with our prisoner, and there was no longer any doubt that he would be able to give us much information when we landed on his native planet.

At the end of twenty-three days as measured by terrestrial time, since our departure from the asteroid, we arrived in the sky of Mars.

For a long time the ruddy planet had been growing larger and more formidable, gradually turning from a huge star into a great red moon, and then expanding more and more until it began to shut out from sight the constellations behind it. The curious markings on its surface, which from the earth can only be dimly glimpsed with a powerful telescope, began to reveal themselves clearly to our naked eyes.

I have related how even before we had reached the asteroid, Mars began to present a most imposing appearance as we saw it with our telescopes. Now, however, that it was close at hand, the naked eye view of the planet was more wonderful than anything we had been able to see with telescopes when at a greater distance.

Mars in Sight.

We were approaching the southern hemisphere of Mars in about latitude 45 degrees south. It was near the time of the vernal equinox in that hemisphere of the planet, and under the stimulating influence of the Spring sun, rising higher and higher every day, some such awakening of life and activity upon its surface as occurs on the earth under similar circumstances was evidently going on.

Around the South Pole were spread immense fields of snow and ice, gleaming with

great brilliance. Cutting deep into the borders of these ice fields, we could see broad channels of open water, indicating the rapid breaking of the grip of the frost.

Almost directly beneath us was a broad oval region, light red in color, to which terrestrial astronomers had given the name of Hellas. Toward the south, between Hellas and the borders of the polar ice, was a great belt of darkness that astronomers had always been inclined to regard as a sea. Looking toward the north, we could perceive the immense red expanses of the continents of Mars, with the long curved line of the Syrtis Major, or "The Hour Glass Sea," sweeping through the midst of them toward the north until it disappeared under the horizon.

Crossing and recrossing the red continents, in every direction, were the canals of Schiaparelli.

Mars Reached at Last—Thrilling Adventures.

Plentifully sprinkled over the surface we could see brilliant points, some of dazzling brightness, outshining the daylight. There was also an astonishing variety in the colors of the broad expanses beneath us. Activity, vivacity and beauty, such as we were utterly unprepared to behold, expressed their presence on all sides.

The excitement on the flagship and among the other members of the squadron was immense. It was certainly a thrilling scene. Here, right under our feet, lay the world we had come to do battle with. Its appearances, while recalling in some of their broader aspects those which it had presented when viewed from our observatories, were far more strange, complex and wonderful than any astronomer had ever dreamed of. Suppose all of our anticipations about Mars should prove to have been wrong, after all?

There could be no longer any question that it was a world which, if not absolutely teeming with inhabitants, like a gigantic ant-hill, at any rate bore on every side the marks of their presence and of their incredible undertakings and achievements.

Here and there clouds of smoke arose and spread slowly through the atmosphere beneath us. Floating higher above the surface of the planet were clouds of vapor, assuming the familiar forms of stratus and cumulus with which we were acquainted upon the earth.

Dense Clouds Appear.

These clouds, however, seemed upon the whole to be much less dense than those to which we were accustomed at home. They had, too, a peculiar iridescent beauty as if there was something in their composition or their texture which split up the chromatic elements of the sunlight and thus produced internal rainbow effects that caused some of the heavier cloud masses to resemble immense collections of opals, alive with the play of ever-changing colors and magically suspended above the planet.

As we continued to study the phenomena that was gradually unfolded beneath us we thought that we could detect in many places evidences of the existence of strong fortifications. The planet of war appeared to be prepared for the attacks of enemies. Since, as our own experience had shown, it sometimes waged war with distant planets, it was but natural that it should be found prepared to resist foes who might be

disposed to revenge themselves for injuries suffered at its hands.

As had been expected, our prisoner now proved to be of very great assistance to us. Apparently he took a certain pride in exhibiting to strangers from a distant world the beauties and wonders of his own planet.

The Martian Is Understood.

We could not understand by any means all that he said, but we could readily comprehend, from his gestures, and from the manner in which his features lighted up at the recognition of familiar scenes and objects, what his sentiments in regard to them were, and, in a general way, what part they played in the life of the planet.

He confirmed our opinion that certain of the works which we saw beneath us were fortifications, intended for the protection of the planet against invaders from outer space. A cunning and almost diabolical look came into his eyes as he pointed to one of these strongholds.

Cause for Anxiety.

His confidence and his mocking looks were not reassuring to us. He knew what his planet was capable of, and we did not. He had seen, on the asteroid, the extent of our power, and while its display served to intimidate him there, yet now that he and we together were facing the world of his birth, his fear had evidently fallen from him, and he had the manner of one who feels that the shield of an all-powerful protector had been extended over him.

But it could not be long now before we should ascertain, by the irrevocable test of actual experience, whether the Martians possessed the power to annihilate us or not.

How shall I describe our feelings as we gazed at the scene spread beneath us? They were not quite the same as those of the discoverer of new lands upon the earth. This was a whole new world that we had discovered, and it was filled, as we could see, with inhabitants.

But that was not all. We had not come with peaceful intentions.

We were to make war on this new world.

Deducting our losses we had not more than 940 men left. With these we were to undertake the conquest of a world containing we could not say how many millions!

A Hard Task Ahead.

Our enemies, instead of being below us in the scale of intelligence were, we had every reason to believe, greatly our superiors. They had proved that they possessed a command over the powers of nature such as we, up to the time when Mr. Edison made his inventions, had not even dreamed that it was possible for us to obtain.

It was true that at present we appeared to have the advantage, both in our electrical ships and in our means of offence. The disintegrator was at least as powerful an engine of destruction as any that the Martians had yet shown that they possessed. It did not seem that in that respect they could possibly excel us.

During the brief war with the Martians upon the earth it had been gunpowder against a mysterious force as much stronger than gunpowder as the latter was superior to the bows and arrows that preceded it.

There had been no comparison whatever between the offensive means employed by the two parties in the struggle on the earth.

But the genius of one man had suddenly put us on the level of our enemies in regard to fighting capacity.

Then, too, our electrical ships were far more effective for their purpose than the projectile cars used by the Martians. In fact, the principle upon which they were based was, at bottom, so simple that it seemed astonishing the Martians had not hit upon it.

Mr. Edison himself was never tired of saying in reference to this matter:

The Martians a Mystery.

“I cannot understand why the Martians did not invent these things. They have given ample proof that they understand electricity better than we do. Why should they have resorted to the comparatively awkward and bungling means of getting from one planet to another that they have employed when they might have ridden through the solar system in such conveyances as ours with perfect ease?”

“And besides,” Mr. Edison would add, “I cannot understand why they did not employ the principle of harmonic vibrations in the construction of their engines of war. The lightning-like strokes that they deal from their machines are no doubt equally powerful, but I think the range of destruction covered by the disintegrators is greater.”

However, these questions must remain open until we could effect a landing on Mars, and learn something of the condition of things there.

The thing that gave us the most uneasiness was the fact that we did not yet know what powers the Martians might have in reserve. It was but natural to suppose that here, on their own ground, they would possess means of defence even more effective than the offensive engines they had employed in attacking enemies so many millions of miles from home.

It was important that we should waste no time, and it was equally important that we should select the most vulnerable point for attack. It was self-evident, therefore, that our first duty would be to reconnoitre the surface of the planet and determine its weakest point of defence.

At first Mr. Edison contemplated sending the various ships in different directions around the planet in order that the work of exploration might be quickly accomplished. But upon second thought it seemed wiser to keep the squadron together, thus diminishing the chance of disaster.

Besides, the commander wished to see with his own eyes the exact situation of the various parts of the planet, where it might appear advisable for us to begin our assault.

Thus far we had remained suspended at so great a height above the planet that we had hardly entered into the perceptible limits of its atmosphere and there was no evidence that we had been seen by the inhabitants of Mars; but before starting on our voyage of exploration it was determined to drop down closer to the surface in order that we might the more certainly identify the localities over which we passed.

This manoeuvre nearly got us into serious trouble.

A Huge Airship.

When we had arrived within a distance of three miles from the surface of Mars we suddenly perceived approaching from the eastward a large airship which was navigating the Martian atmosphere at a height of perhaps half a mile above the ground.

More Stirring Adventures of Our Warriors Against Mars.

This airship moved rapidly on to a point nearly beneath us, when it suddenly paused, reversed its course, and evidently made signals, the purpose of which was not at first evident to us.

But in a short time their meaning became perfectly plain, when we found ourselves surrounded by at least twenty similar aerostats approaching swiftly from different sides.

It was a great mystery to us where so many airships had been concealed previous to their sudden appearance in answer to the signals.

But the mystery was quickly solved when we saw detaching itself from the surface of the planet beneath us, where, while it remained immovable, its color had blended with that of the soil so as to render it invisible, another of the mysterious ships.

Then our startled eyes beheld on all sides these formidable-looking enemies rising from the ground beneath us like so many gigantic insects, disturbed by a sudden alarm.

In a short time the atmosphere a mile or two below us, and to a distance of perhaps twenty miles around in every direction, was alive with airships of various sizes, and some of most extraordinary forms, exchanging signals, rushing to and fro, but all finally concentrating beneath the place where our squadron was suspended.

We had poked the hornet's nest with a vengeance!

As yet there had been no sting, but we might quickly expect to feel it if we did not get out of range.

Escaping Danger.

Quickly instructions were flashed throughout the squadron to instantly reverse polarities and rise as swiftly as possible to a great height.

It was evident that this manoeuvre would save us from danger if it were quickly

effected, because the airships of the Martians were simply airships and nothing more. They could only float in the atmosphere, and had no means of rising above it, or of navigating empty space.

To have turned our disintegrators upon them, and to have begun a battle then and there, would have been folly.

They overwhelmingly outnumbered us, the majority of them were yet at a considerable distance and we could not have done battle, even with our entire squadron acting together, with more than one-quarter of them simultaneously. In the meantime the others would have surrounded and might have destroyed us. We must first get some idea of the planet's means of defence before we ventured to assail it.

Having risen rapidly to a height of twenty-five or thirty miles, so that we could feel confident that our ships had vanished at least from the naked eye view of our enemies beneath, a brief consultation was held.

It was determined to adhere to our original programme and to circumnavigate Mars in every direction before proceeding to open the war.

Intimidated by the Enemy.

The overwhelming forces shown by the enemy had intimidated even some of the most courageous of our men, but still it was universally felt that it would not do to retreat without a blow struck.

The more we saw of the power of the Martians, the more we became convinced that there would be no hope for the earth, if these enemies ever again effected a landing upon its surface, the more especially since our squadron contained nearly all of the earth's force that would be effective in such a contest.

With Mr. Edison and the other men of science away, they would not be able at home to construct such engines as we possessed, or to manage them even if they were constructed.

Our planet had staked everything on a single throw.

These considerations again steeled our hearts, and made us bear up as bravely as possible in the face of the terrible odds that confronted us.

Turning the noses of our electrical ships toward the west, we began our circumnavigation.

Book of Dead Names

Hamish Wallis was drinking in a backstreet pub in Silchester when he saw Nick and Eloise peering warily through the door.

The Scottish skinhead clasped his pint harder and leant back against the panelled wall, hoping the crowd of beery, unemployed men would hide him. Not that he was afraid of his friends, but he had a perfectly good reason to hope they would go and look for him elsewhere.

He stared into the dark sludge of his Guinness and considered the unlikely events that had led him to this lowest point in his fortunes. He had always wanted a life full of excitement and danger, but things had really come to a head in the last few months. Here he was, on the run with a crustie and a Goth! He sneered to himself. Who would have thought, when he left his cold, grey Glaswegian home for the sleazy delights of the South, that such would be the result?

‘Hamish,’ Eloise’s voice came, breaking into his thoughts. He scowled up from his drink and saw the black-clad girl standing before him. She looked at him reprovably as Nick shuffled about behind her, glancing nervously about him so that his thick brown dreadlocks swayed about his acne-riddled face.

‘What the fuck d’you two want?’ Hamish growled. ‘Cannie you leave me to enjoy ma pint in a bit o’ peace?’

Eloise threw an impatient glance at Nick, who was still looking ineffectual in the

background, then slid round the table to sit by the Scot.

‘You know it’s dangerous, going places like this,’ she murmured, gazing coolly into his eyes. That always made him uncomfortable; it was like she was reading his mind. Then again, for all he knew, it was true. She was a self-confessed witch.

A rogue lock of black-dyed hair fell across her eyes and she tossed her head back. ‘When you disappeared from the caravan-site, we both knew where you’d go. Just a case of finding the right pub.’

‘You’re not ma fuckin’ mother, bitch,’ Hamish barked. She was giving him a headache, always going on like this. Who was she to run his life? Wasn’t as if he even fancied the Gothic tart - not really. Not that he expected he had much of a chance with her, anyway. ‘Ah’m okay here,’ he went on as she stared at him, clearly expecting self-justification. ‘Ah can look after maself,’ he added with bitter pride.

‘We know you can,’ Nick said uncomfortably in his nasal voice, as he parked himself on a barstool on the other side of the table. There was a newspaper under his arm.

‘Want me to prove it, do ye?’ Hamish snarled, glaring at the Scouser with venom in his eyes.

‘No,’ said Nick, laughing nervously and glancing away at Eloise, who was still gazing intently at Hamish from his left. ‘Eloise, you tell...’

‘Oi!’ Hamish barked. Nick flinched. ‘Do you want me to prove it?’ the skinhead demanded again. Nick laughed.

‘What, here?’

‘No, we’ll go outside. Yeah? A barnie, the noo - outside.’

‘Not tonight, Hamish,’ Nick said, laughing again.

‘You dinna think Ah’m serious, do you?’ Hamish demanded. ‘Ah hate people who...’

‘Hamish,’ Eloise said sternly. ‘That’s enough! Listen to me. You know the police are still after you - your description’s on the files, isn’t it?’

‘Ah don’t know what they’re bothered about,’ Hamish sneered. ‘It wasn’t that big a deal.’

‘Hamish!’ Eloise said. ‘You mu...’ She checked herself and glanced around. Then, lowering her voice, she went on. ‘You murdered someone. You’re not going to get away with it if you’re so careless.’

A long silence followed. Nick fidgeted on his barstool. Hamish stared down at the floor. The conversation buzzed around them, but it was as if they were cut off from the normal world forever.

Eloise broke the silence.

‘Anyway, Nick’s found something interesting in the paper. You might find it as

intriguing as I did.'

Hamish looked up and his eyes cleared.

'Interesting in what way?' he asked, taking on a different tone.

'Nick, the paper,' Eloise commanded. The crustie handed it to her. She opened it and flicked through the first few pages. Finding what she was looking for, she folded it back and smoothed out the sheet, placing it on the table. She pointed at an article.

'Read that...' She broke off. 'Oh, sorry.' She'd forgotten he couldn't read. Hamish glowered at her and she looked contrite. 'I'll read it out,' she said quickly.

She turned to the paper.

'Found dead in his home last night, Samaël Anghelides, shipping magnate and noted occultist, of uncertain causes. Indications of a disturbance in the residence (Saturbury House), but no signs of burglary. Police are baffled. The funeral will be postponed until further notice...'

'So what, Eloise?' Hamish demanded. 'An occultist, this Anghelides bauchle? What do you know about him?'

Nick stared at the Scot. 'You mean you've never heard of Samaël Anghelides?' he said, grinning. 'He was all over the papers a few years back.'

'Ah never read the fuckin' papers, do Ah?' Hamish snarled. 'Who was this bawbag?'

'He was known in the City as a big business type,' Eloise said quietly. 'But in occult circles he gained a fair bit of notoriety. Published several works on chaos magick that even chaos magickians thought a bit dubious. I read one of them once.'

Hamish frowned. 'What, when you were in yer granny's coven?' he asked.

Eloise nodded. She made a face. 'It wasn't a pleasant book.'

Hamish digested this. Eloise was not weak-stomached; he knew that, so something that made a morbid Goth like her shudder must be pretty sick. He frowned.

'So what's it to do with us?'

Nick broke in. 'Saturbury House is about ten miles off the Silchester Bypass,' he said quickly. 'We could get there in about an hours, if we walked quickly.'

'So?' said Hamish. 'So what? Is this another of yer morbid nights, Eloise? Wanna see a corpse or something?'

Eloise sighed patiently. 'No, Hamish. Nick and I were thinking we could maybe break in, look around, retrieve a bit of property. I want a look at his magical regalia, of course, but you and Nick should find something to interest your grubby little minds.'

'Rich, was he?' Hamish asked.

‘He was a shipping magnate, wasn’t he?’ Nick shrugged. ‘Must’ve been loaded.’

Hamish shrugged. ‘Let’s do it, then. But one thing. We’re not walking to this place.’

‘There won’t be a bus there this time of night,’ Eloise warned.

Hamish shook his head, turned to Nick and grinned.

‘We’re gonna get ourselves a car. Aren’t we, Nick?’

Half an hour later, they pulled up in a narrow country lane. To their right, a long chainlink fence surrounded an area of thick woodland and beyond it - out of sight beyond the trees - was Saturbury House. The moon shone down on their stolen car.

Eloise sat in the back, staring glumly out of the window. There were things she was happy about doing and breaking into rich people’s houses was one of them. But she wasn’t too keen on robbing perfectly innocent people; and the Ford Cortina Nick had hotwired was unlikely to have belonged to any fat capitalist.

She glanced at her two companions, comparing them. She’d met Nick first, not long after she’d run away from home. Faced with a futile future of A-levels, university and some meaningless job at the end of it - probably in sales and marketing - she’d gone for the option of many of her contemporaries, to leave behind the material shackles of society and live an alternative lifestyle on the road.

Of course, not all the travellers were as idealistic as she was; Nick, for example, would have been described as a ‘petty crook’ in urban society. He was an affable, chatty, cheeky lad; a little nervous and not much good at anything apart from breaking and entering, thieving and stealing cars. But all petty stuff, by capitalist society’s standards.

Hamish was a different matter. He seriously scared Eloise. He had turned up on the campsite a week or two after Eloise had started hanging around with Nick. He had been on the run for days by then and was as thin and undernourished as a famished dog. The travellers had taken him in, as they took in all runaways, fed him, hid him when the Pigs came round and treated him as one of their own. It was only then that they get to know him. To start with, his politics were hardly progressive. Eloise knew a few ageing skins who followed the Convoy, but they were old-style sixties types who’d known the days of ska and reggae, before racist politics took over. Hamish was one of the newer breed: a foul-mouthed lout with a narrow, paranoid outlook and a fanatical hatred for anyone not of his kind. He saw the travellers as degenerates, Eloise was certain, but he was using them for what he could get, so he kept his resentment to himself. But he’d let a few things slip, carelessly, when he was drunk. One of them really chilled Eloise; the reason he was on the run.

He hadn’t explained anything, but what he had said had made Eloise want to avoid him as much as possible, though it was proving extremely difficult in the small community of the campsite.

Hamish had murdered his girlfriend.

Eloise had wanted to stay away from him ever since. Especially when his cold blue

eyes turned her way. He would stare at her when he thought she didn't realise, stare constantly. She wanted to stay away from him, but he'd attached himself to her and Nick and they found it impossible to shake him off. Nowadays, they just tried to make sure he didn't get himself or the travellers into too much trouble.

'Well, here we are,' said Nick unnecessarily. 'We getting out, or what?'

Without answering, Hamish threw open the car door and headed for the fence. A look passed between Eloise and Nick, but they followed the moody skinhead, all the same.

They found him staring at the chainlink fence. He turned to face them.

'The house is through the trees?' he asked. Eloise nodded. She'd studied an OS map of the area before setting out and had a rough idea of the direction they should be heading in. She turned to Nick.

'Just got to get over this fence,' she said. 'How's it look to you?'

Nick studied it briefly.

'It's not electrified,' he said in the businesslike tones he adopted on these occasions. Eloise always felt confident when Nick spoke like that. 'There could be security patrols beyond, but I wouldn't expect it.'

'The wood's too thick,' Hamish agreed. 'Come on. Ah'll gie you two a bunk up.'

A couple of minutes of struggling, clambering and jumping and they were across the fence and crouching silently in the bracken that grew between the gnarled old trees. These were the grounds of Saturbury House. Nick had his head cocked.

'What d'ya hear, Tonto?' Hamish whispered after a few seconds.

Nick shrugged. 'Sounds like there's something moving, a long way off, in the bushes. I can't make it out - the noise from the main road drowns everything out.'

'Well, as long as we're careful,' Eloise murmured, getting up and brushing down her skirt. She reflected that she should have changed before coming out on an expedition like this, but it was too late to turn back. She slipped into the shadows beneath the trees and her two companions followed.

The edge of the woods lay silent and empty for a quarter of an hour. The faint noises of the trio's advance were audible for a while, but they died out into the distance. Silence reigned.

After a while, the same sound of furtive approach started up from the right, but faded away quickly in the opposite direction. After a moment's silence, it returned, this time from the left.

A while later, Hamish staggered out into the clearing between the fence and the thicker woods and stood staring around. The dark shapes of Eloise and Nick joined him.

He glared around.

‘We’re back where we started,’ he complained. He crouched down and squinted through the bushes. ‘Look,’ he added, pointing. ‘There’s the car.’

‘That’s right,’ murmured Eloise. ‘Strange,’ she added enigmatically.

‘You must’ve got us lost.’ Nick shrugged.

‘But I’ve got an excellent sense of direction,’ Eloise replied, shaking her head.

‘Come off it,’ snapped Hamish. ‘You got us lost there.’ He scowled. ‘Not surprising,’ he added, generously. ‘Ah’d have got lost in that maze if Ah was leading the way.’

This admission did nothing to mollify Eloise.

‘You might get confused in woodland,’ she said angrily. ‘Both of you are townies. But I was brought up in Sussex. I’m used to woods.’

‘So am I, like,’ complained Nick. ‘My mum always took us to the Wirral at weekends. There’s shitloads of woods there.’

Eloise sighed and shook her head emphatically. ‘You don’t understand - I spent all my childhood around trees. I don’t get lost.’

‘Well, you have done this time,’ Hamish sneered. ‘You must be losin’ yer knack.’

‘We could always go home,’ suggested Nick nervously. He hadn’t enjoyed stumbling around in the darkness. ‘Looks like we’re not gonna get to the house from this side, anyway.’

‘No,’ said Eloise decisively. ‘We’re not giving up now. This might be my only chance to...’ She bit her lips, having let on to more than she’d intended.

‘To what?’ demanded Hamish. ‘What are you really after?’

Eloise gazed at her two companions, seeming to touch their souls with her deep, dark eyes. In a voice that reflected the hypnotic fascination of her gaze, she began to explain.

‘Some time ago, months before his death, Samaël Anghelides published an excerpt from a book he was translating in Nexus magazine. The book was the Necronomicon. He was not the first to publish a work claiming to be from that particular grimoire - there were at least three hoaxes during the seventies - but the excerpt he published was far more convincing than any of the previous attempts. What I want to do is to find the original manuscript and check whether or not it’s authentic.’

Hamish broke in impatiently.

‘Och, so it’s just another of yer freaky Gothic occult trips, is it? Well, let me tell you what I...’

‘But how does this help if we can’t find a way into the place?’ Nick interrupted, earning himself a hot glare from the skinhead. He ignored it and went on. ‘The woods make a better barrier than any magic would...’ He broke off as a flash of

comprehension lit up Eloise's sombre face. Hamish didn't see it.

'Shut up, you Scouse keech!' he snarled. 'Listen, Eloise - if there's nuhin' worth ma while in this place, you'll regret it! Ah'll...' He broke off, seeing the girl's face. 'What's up?' he asked.

'I've got it,' she murmured, 'Why we can't get in the place.'

'You're not gonna tell us it's something fuckin' supernatural...'

Eloise laughed. 'Hardly supernatural.' She smiled. 'There's nothing supernatural about low magick.'

'Magic isn't supernatural?' Nick frowned.

'Some kinds are, some aren't,' Eloise replied. 'What we're up against here is rather more psychologically based. Look, I'd explain it if we had the time, but we don't. Basically, what we need to do is to use the same kind of magick to annul the effect.'

Hamish growled. 'Ah'mno messing around with yer hocus-pocus...'

'There's nothing to it,' Eloise insisted. 'Just an expression of the will. And it seems to me you're pretty strong-willed already.'

Hamish shrugged indifferently, but was secretly pleased. 'What do we have to do, then?'

'Both of you, take my hands,' Eloise commanded. They complied and followed her as she began to advance in a straight line towards the trees. 'What's been happening is that the ritual performed on this site had created a blind spot in our consciousness. There is a way through the trees, but we can't find it. What we have to do is to concentrate our minds on penetrating through the veil of illusion...'

Beside her, Hamish's brow was wrinkling with the effort. He searched the undergrowth ahead for a path. He couldn't work out how they'd find one this time when the previous attempt had led them round in circles. Still, Eloise seemed to know what she was talking about. He felt sick at the idea of occultism and diabolism, but if there was no other way... Nick's voice broke in on his thoughts.

'Look!' he whispered. Hamish peered ahead before them, snaking through the trees and bushes, was a narrow but clearly defined path. The Scot shook his head. He was sure they had been this way before and he hadn't seen anything last time.

'Where the fuck did that come from?' he demanded. Eloise turned to him, her dark eyes shining.

'Don't you see?' she whispered. 'We've broken the spell. We can get on with it now.'

Nick moved closer.

'Ssh,' he said urgently. They turned to him questioningly. He was listening again.

'It's stopped,' he said, frowning. He glanced up at his two companions. 'That noise I

heard before; the crashing. I thought I could hear it again. But it's stopped now.'

'Did it sound like it might be a security guard?' Hamish demanded. He clenched his fists in anticipation.

Nick shook his head, bewildered. 'No, nothing like that...'

'After all, if Anghelides could protect himself like this, he wouldn't have needed to employ security guards,' Eloise broke in.

'Och, we've nuhin' to worry aboot, then,' Hamish grunted, relaxing.

They stood in silence for a few seconds.

'Unless...' Nick said slowly. 'Unless the spell was supposed to keep something in.'

The other two stared at him for some time.

Eventually, Hamish broke the silence.

'Come on,' he said, pushing through the bushes towards the distant path.

Warily, the other two followed.

They vanished into the shadows of the wood. Silence held full sway for a while.

Then something horrifically vast pushed aside two interlinking trunks and lumbered down the path after them.

The trees began to thin on either side of the dark path and finally petered out at the edge of a formal lawn. Out of their cover, the three companions halted and crouched down, staring about them.

'There's the house,' hissed Nick, indicating a large shadow that loomed squarely before them about forty yards away. They gazed at it from the edge of the woods.

Saturbury House was a Victorian Gothic folly, with crenellated walls, thin, arrow-slit shaped windows, buttressed walls and arched doorways. The gloomy edifice seemed to emanate a sense of age-old evil, though Eloise knew this could have nothing to do with the building itself. But it reflected the late owner's character remarkably well. As Eloise scanned the building for an entrance, she noticed one anomaly that broke up the monotony of blindly staring windows and ivy-covered walls.

'Look! Up on the second floor,' she murmured. The other two followed her gaze.

'It looks like someone's already broken in,' murmured Nick. It was true; the windows directly above the front door were shattered and the stone facing surrounding them seemed to bulge outwards.

'Someone's got here before us!' hissed Hamish. 'Who the fuck caught on to this before we did?'

'No,' Eloise said. 'Remember the paper. There were signs of a disturbance in the

house. This must be it.'

'Surely the police would have done something about the hole,' Nick murmured. 'It looks as if it's going to fall in at any moment.'

'Or out,' Eloise agreed. 'It looks more like something's broken out, than broken in.'

Hamish raised an eyebrow. 'Have to be gey strong to bash its way oota there,' he said.

'Hey, what's with the "it"?' asked Nick. 'There isn't some kind of demon running round, is there?'

'No!' Eloise laughed. 'Demons only exist within. The only corporeal form they can take is through possession.'

She got up and strode across the lawn towards the steps up to the front door. The other two hurried after her. Nick caught her arm. She glanced at him questioningly.

'We won't get in through the front door,' he said. 'We'd be better off finding a way in round the back, or something.' Eloise shrugged and allowed Nick to lead them off round the side of the gloomy mansion.

As they disappeared, something moved heavily through the trees towards the lawn. As its great paws touched the grass, it turned to face the house, searching for something. Its gaze lit upon the broken windows. Two webbed membranes extended out on either side of its massive torso and it launched itself towards the second floor, landing soundlessly on the windowsill. As it lowered its head to fit inside, a moonbeam caught briefly on its dark, slimy hide.

Nick trod cautiously, leading Hamish and Eloise along the path that surrounded the mansion. As he made a circuit of the house, he kept his eyes open for a way in. He turned a corner to find himself on the far side of the building from their starting point and stopped. Eloise bumped into him.

'What's up?' demanded Hamish, who was at the back.

Nick crouched down, pointing towards the nearby basement window. Although the inside was curtained by dark red drapes that obscured their view of the room beyond, it was clear to a practised eye that someone had left the catch up on the window.

'Tut, tut,' he clucked to himself, turning to his fellow burglars.

'What is it? Eloise whispered. Nick indicated the window. 'What?' Eloise repeated uncomprehendingly. Nick grinned.

'Poor security,' he said sententiously. 'Someone forgot to close this window properly. Just a second.'

The crustie slipped something long and thin out of his pocket and slid it into the crack between window and lock. A few seconds jiggling and suddenly, the window sprang open. Eloise stared admiringly at Nick.

'How do you do that?' she murmured. In the dark, Nick blushed and said something.

‘Well, come on then,’ Hamish demanded impatiently. Nick shrugged, climbed over the sill and slid into the room beyond, fighting his way through the billowing drapes. Hamish heaved himself after the Scouser. Then Eloise, after taking one last glance around the shadow-shrouded gardens that surrounded the house, threw a leg over the sill and pulled herself into the mysterious room.

She forced the heavy drape aside and stumbled into Hamish. The Scot grunted. The dark shape of Nick turned at the noise.

‘Quiet!’ he hissed. He waved his hands towards a dull beam of light that pierced the gloom of the room ahead.

‘Dodgy seventies burglar alarm thing,’ he said. ‘This business tycoon bloke must have really believed in cutting corners when it came to security. Don’t cross that beam, either of you, it’ll set the alarm off. We’ll have to get under it or over it.’

‘Some light would be a good idea,’ whispered Eloise as she collided with something at thigh level. Reaching out, she felt around it. It seemed to be a table of some sort. Her groping hands came into contact with a thick wax candle.

‘Nick, throw me your lighter,’ she called. Something whirred through the darkness from Nick’s direction and Eloise reached out to grab it. It fell with a clatter to the floor beside her foot and she bent to pick it up.

‘What the fuck’s this?’ came Hamish’s voice from the nearby wall. The lighter flame flared up, illuminating the area that immediately surrounded Eloise. She stared down at the table.

Black cloth covered an altar upon which stood seven black candles. Before them lay a wavy-bladed dagger and a metal dish. Eloise shuddered at the sight of the greasy candles, with a horrible feeling that she knew their origin. But she ignored her fears and quickly lit them.

The guttering flames illuminated the room, sending shadows dancing into the darkness beyond the ambit of the light. It revealed Nick crouching near the centre of the room and Hamish feeling along the left-hand wall. The skinhead turned round as the candles flared up, then swung back to stare at the thing he had felt in the dark.

A severed goat’s head hung from a hook. Its glassy eyes returned the gaze of another that dangled on the far side of the altar.

The rest of the room was furnished as a satanic temple; red and black drapes and demonic idols ranged the walls; strange symbols including inverted pentagrams and chaos stars had been painted on the dark floor. A heady reek of incense was beginning to drift up from the smoking candles.

‘Fuck,’ said Hamish in disgust. He turned to the others. ‘What the fuck is this place?’ Eloise smiled eerily at him from the altar, where she stood wreathed in sweet-smelling smoke.

‘It’s a temple,’ she whispered. ‘This must be where Anghelides performed his rituals, when he was alive.’

As she spoke, a thumping sound came from the floor above. The three intruders gaped up at the ceiling as they heard the sound of... footsteps? moving across the floor of an upstairs room. Nick glanced at Eloise.

‘You sure this guy’s dead?’ he asked wryly. ‘Cause someone’s upstairs.’

Hamish shook his head. ‘Don’t be stupid, Scouser,’ he snapped. ‘It must be one of his relations or something.’

Eloise shook her head. ‘Anghelides was practically a recluse. I wouldn’t have suggested we did this if I thought there’d be anyone around.’

Hamish grinned. ‘Well, they won’t get in our way,’ he said grimly. He crossed over to the wall, where a ceremonial sword hung from a hook. He drew it, then turned and headed for the door to the rest of the house.

Nick reached him just in time. He grabbed Hamish’s arm and the skinhead swung round, glaring balefully.

‘What’s the matter, bollocks?’ he demanded. Nick indicated the light beam.

‘You almost went through that,’ he hissed. ‘Be careful.’

Eloise drifted up to them through the incense smoke.

‘Hamish, where d’you think you’re going with that sword?’ she demanded. ‘Don’t be stupid!’

Hamish glowered at her. ‘Ah’mno coming back another time,’ he declared. ‘Ah came here to rob the place and that’s what Ah’m gonna do and no bawbag’s gonna get in ma way.’ This said, he ducked under the light beam and strode for the door.

Eloise looked anxiously at Nick, who shrugged.

‘We’d better stop him,’ she said wildly. Ducking under the beam, she headed for the door, which was just closing as she approached it. She pulled it open and disappeared into the corridor beyond.

Nick took one nervous glance round the temple, then followed the example of his two companions.

He found Eloise and Hamish arguing outside the door, in a long, narrow corridor. ‘Ah’m gaun this way,’ he heard Hamish say defiantly, as he reached the pair. The Scot broke away from Eloise’s restraining arm and strode off to the left, holding the sword out in front of him.

Nick caught up with Eloise and together they hurried after the Scot.

They followed him into a larger hallway. Ahead of them was a staircase going up to the ground floor. Doors led off to the left and right, but Hamish had ignored these and was striding purposefully up the steps.

‘Hamish,’ hissed Eloise. He ignored her and disappeared out of sight round the corner. Eloise and Nick pursued him up the steps.

They caught up with him in the front hall, which was dark and shadowy, except for one end, where eerie silver moonlight shone through the front door windows. Hamish was standing silently near the back of the hall. On a table beside him was a large box.

‘Hamish,’ Nick hissed. ‘Slow down. We’ve got to talk about this. Even if that noise up there is Samaël Anghelides’ walking corpse, you can’t just go and attack it...’

Hamish swung round.

‘Whoever or whatever is upstairs,’ he said brutally, ‘it isn’t Anghelides.’ He indicated the box. They hurried over and peered inside.

A motionless figure lay within what was clearly an open coffin. Immaculately dressed, with a pale, handsome face and iron-grey hair, a strong jaw and a pointed beard, the mortal remains of the shipping magnate and chaos magickian Samaël Anghelides seemed merely to be sleeping. Eloise moved closer, gazing down at the corpse in dark fascination.

‘What secrets will he take to his grave?’ she murmured.

A clatter from upstairs alerted them.

‘Nick, see if you can work out what’s happening,’ Eloise ordered. As the crustie slipped silently away, she turned to Hamish. ‘And now I think you and me had better have a little talk.’

‘What about?’ demanded Hamish truculently.

‘You can’t just go about killing people...’ Eloise began.

‘Why the fuck not?’ The skinhead shrugged. ‘Who’s to stop me? You?’

‘What about the police?’ Eloise asked quietly. Hamish glared at her. ‘You already have a police record,’ she added.

But before Hamish could think of a retort, Nick came running back down the stairs. They turned to greet him. His face was pale in the gloom.

‘What happened?’ Hamish asked him.

‘I couldn’t find them,’ Nick stuttered. ‘But I don’t think I want to. I heard it scuttling towards me... and I ran... And I... Oh my god!’

He broke off, staring over their shoulders. Eloise looked uncertainly at him.

‘Yes, very funny,’ she said. ‘Then what?’

But all Nick did was wave his hand vaguely towards the coffin. Nervously, Eloise turned...

And found herself face to face with Samaël Anghelides.

The corpse stared at her. Eloise stared back. She wasn't afraid - she just felt numb. She kept on telling herself that this was absurd. Hamish turned to see the cadaver had risen, he leapt into a battle-stance and threatened it with his sword.

A look of mild distaste crossed Anghelides' face as he stared at the desperate figure.

'Put that down, please,' he murmured.

The three intruders stared at him in shock.

Anghelides took hold of the sides of his coffin and swung himself lithely out. Pushing Hamish's sword aside, he stared at the burglars in some surprise.

'What exactly are you doing here, incidentally?' he asked in mild tones.

'Er,' said Eloise. 'Well, we thought you were dead.'

'And you intended to burgle me while I lay lifeless?'

'We weren't exactly expecting an open coffin in the hall,' Eloise replied, spiritedly. 'What are you, a vampire? Why did you make the police think you were dead?'

'I was dead,' Anghelides shrugged. 'To all intents and purposes. My body was lifeless. My soul was elsewhere.'

'So where the fuck was it?' Hamish asked, raising his sword again.

Anghelides gave him a weary look. 'I was on the astral plane,' he explained condescendingly. 'Not something petty criminals would understand.'

'I would,' said Eloise indignantly. 'I've been there myself, once or twice. I've been to the Akashic Records and read the Book of Dzyan.'

'Very impressive,' replied Anghelides sardonically. 'But I have been there many times; so many that I must have been getting sloppy in my habits. I forgot to cast the necessary protection spells and was attacked by a demon. I fought it for a long time with my will alone, but eventually it got the better of me, almost annihilating my soul. Then it took advantage of my unprotected state to burst through me into the material world.' He glanced at them all in turn. 'And it's still here, somewhere.'

Eloise swallowed. She shook her head in bewilderment.

'But my granny always said that demons only exist within and can only appear in the material realm when they possess someone!'

Anghelides laughed condescendingly.

'I'm sure your grandmother is a knowledgeable lady in her own way, in her own field, but I am an Ipsissimus sorcerer of the Temple of Typhon and have access to the only genuine copy of the Necronomicon. And I tell you that demons from the lowest circles of the infernal planes have the ability to take physical form from the very ether that surrounds us - an ectoplasmic shell. It was such a demon that attacked me on the astral plane. It left my physical husk lifeless, while my spirit struggled to renew itself.'

Luckily, I had been aware of such a possibility for some time and had included a clause in my will to the effect that my corpse must be kept in an open coffin for a week after my demise. But now I have returned to life; now I can defeat the demon.'

There was a clatter from upstairs and Hamish went to investigate.

'How will you do that?' Eloise asked. Anghelides leered. He lunged forward and grabbed her.

'Eloise!' shouted Nick and threw himself at the black magician. But Anghelides was incredibly strong, as Eloise had already discovered and he sent Nick flying across the hall, to collide with the wall and slide down it in a daze. Hamish, at the foot of the stairs, swung round to see Anghelides dragging the struggling Eloise towards the steps to the basement.

'Leave her alone!' Hamish commanded. Anghelides gave him a slitted glance.

'I'm afraid we have no time to discuss this,' he said quickly. 'Very soon we will all be dealing with my mistake - I by magic, your lovely friend here in a more passive role - and yourself...'

He stopped short as something dark, black and slimy hurtled down the stairs and bowled Hamish over. As the skinhead turned to get to grips with his loathsome, enigmatic assailant, Anghelides tightened his hold on Eloise and dragged her kicking and screaming down the steps.

Hamish struggled in the grip of something black, vast and putrid-smelling. In the dark of the hall he could only make out a shiny black head, somehow resembling that of a pig; surrounding it was an ever-changing mass of stinging flesh that strove constantly to absorb him. He lashed out with his sword and felt brief gratification at the sight of thick black ichor oozing from the resulting wound. But then a black tentacle lashed down like a flail, leaving a singed hole on his T-shirt and a glistening expanse of flayed skin beneath. Hamish gritted his teeth, feeling faint. But he willed himself on manfully, thrusting his blade again and again into the dark, flabby shape.

Eloise lay on the altar in Anghelides' temple. The sorcerer was on the far side of the room, making some kind of preparations. He'd dragged her in here, carrying her over the light beam, then strapped her down on the altar; she'd been fighting all the way, of course, but resistance was futile. Anghelides was impossibly strong.

He crossed over to the altar, a wavy-bladed dagger in his right hand. Eloise struggled against her bonds, but they seemed like iron.

'What are you going to do?' she demanded, glaring up at the sorcerer.

'Surely one so well versed in the dark arts has no need to ask that question?' he laughed.

'I'm a white witch,' Eloise replied proudly, 'not a black magician. What do you intend to do, sacrifice me? Why?'

'To defeat the demon your loutish friend is bravely combating, I shall need a stronger

but more reliable demon. To raise such a one requires a sacrifice of a higher order than the usual chicken or goat. It is your privilege, my dear, to fulfil that role...'

He raised the knife. Eloise's eyes widened.

The dark form had Hamish pinned to the ground, one tentacle wrapped round his throat, another lashing repeatedly and painfully at his bare flesh. He had dropped his sword as it bore him to the ground and the weapon lay out of reach of his vainly grasping hand. A tide of black, flabby flesh rose up his chin, making for his nose. As it slithered over his mouth, he opened his jaw. The flesh poured in and he bit down savagely. The stuff tasted like burnt rubber and it squirmed horribly as he clamped his teeth down, but he refused to let go. With an inhuman howl of agony, the thing tore itself away and slithered towards the steps.

The Scot staggered to his feet, grabbed the sword from where it lay close by, then shook his muzzy head. He stared after the rapidly disappearing creature.

'Ya won't get away that easily!' he shouted and flung himself down the steps after the demon.

He caught up with the flowing mass on the landing. It turned at bay, raising itself up like a vast black wave. And Hamish struck.

During the battle, he had seen that the only part of the demon to be unaffected by its constant shape shifting was the black, porcine head. It was at this that he thrust his sword, rather than at the ever changing, constantly healing, bloated mass surrounding it. The blade ripped into the fragile flesh and the head burst like a spit-bubble, spattering Hamish with sizzling, white-hot ichor. He fell back, brushing desperately at himself. Luckily, only a small amount had reached his already tender skin. He stood silent, gasping for breath.

Beneath him, the creature's flabby body deliquesced and liquefied, rapidly collapsing into a pool of foul smelling, smoking liquid. Hamish spat at it, then turned to glance back up the steps to the hall.

'Eloise?' he called. 'Nick?' He listened.

A shriek rang out from below him: his own name. It was Eloise. Hamish raised his sword, turned and dashed downstairs.

A few seconds later, Nick, who had been lying stunned in a dark corner, got to his feet. He glanced around curiously.

'Hamish?' he called. 'Where are you?'

No reply. For a while, Nick hovered uncertainly in the hall. Then he approached the steps and headed for the first floor.

Hamish rushed down the passage and skidded to a halt outside the door to the temple. Without stopping to consider his position, he booted the door down and burst into the room.

He caught a confused impression of the sorcerer standing threateningly over Eloise, who was bound to the altar. Raising his sword high, Hamish charged in, his blood aflame with the same berserk spirit that had inspired his wild Celtic ancestors to

charge naked at the armoured might of Rome; to brave Redcoat musket-fire with no more than a claymore and targe; to march in serried ranks towards German machine gun emplacements.

Anghelides swung round, dropping his sacrificial dagger in shock as the maddened Scottish skinhead smashed his way into the temple. His eyes narrowed. Then he grabbed his staff from where he'd leant it against the altar and flung it at Hamish. The Scot stopped dead in his tracks as the staff hit him... and wrapped scaly, hissing folds around him. He found himself glaring directly into the eyes of an Indian cobra. Tearing it from him, he attempted to hack it in two with his sword. It swayed out of his way and struck.

He dodged the attack by a millisecond.

From the altar, Eloise looked on in horror as her erstwhile rescuer struggled with the snake. She glanced at Anghelides, hearing him laugh quietly to himself and saw him look in her direction. He leant down to pick up the fallen dagger.

An involuntary burst of will shot through Eloise's mind, directed at the dagger. Before Anghelides could grab at it, it shot up from the floor, circled twice around the occultist's bewildered face, then plunged straight into his neck. He staggered backwards towards the centre of the room.

Beside the doors, Hamish had just sliced the serpent in half. As he did so, the two halves fell to the ground and he stared in amazement at the two pieces of Anghelides' staff. At the same time, the magician's blood-spouting form stumbled through the light beam and collapsed against a guttering brazier. As the strident wails of the burglar alarm rang out throughout the house, the nearby wall hangings went up in flames.

'Fuck,' said Hamish.

From the altar, Eloise cried out. 'Hamish, help me get free!' She was still struggling vainly against her bonds. Around her, the contents of the room were rapidly catching light. Hamish ran through the surrounding flames to her side. He took one glance at the straps and then began to cut through them with his sword blade.

'What did you do to the keech?' he grunted as he freed Eloise.

'I made his dagger stab him in the neck,' she shouted over the howl of the alarm. 'I'm not hanging around on an altar and waiting for some big brute with a sword to rescue me.'

Hamish cut away the last restraining strap and grinned.

'Och, aren't you?' he laughed, lazily ogling her prone body. For a second, Eloise had warmed towards her rescuer, but at this, she shivered with revulsion.

She got up quickly and glowered at him.

'Come on,' Hamish urged blithely. 'We'd better be getting out.' He grabbed her hand and dragged her towards the window. She broke free and turned towards the raging inferno in the centre of the room.

‘Where’s Nick?’ she shouted.

‘Fuck him,’ Hamish replied savagely. ‘He can look after himself.’ The scoobies will be doon here the noo. We gotta be gaun.’

He grabbed her round the waist and hoisted her through the window.

Outside, Eloise staggered round and stared up at the blazing house.

‘Come on,’ Hamish gasped. He was holding his wounded torso, gritting his teeth against the pain of the weal-marks. ‘Come on; he’s not coming. We’ve got to get away before the polis come!’

He grabbed her hand again and they disappeared into the trees.

By the time they reached the edge of the woods, the police had already arrived and with them, the fire brigade. The two fugitives could hear sirens in the distance and flashing blue lights occasionally lit up the trees with a ghostly glow. They flung themselves into a hollow and lay in cover, waiting for a chance to get to the car.

Eloise lay next to Hamish and tried to bring order to her chaotic thoughts. She shouldn’t like Hamish, she knew that much. He was a murderer and a racist, a foul-mouthed Glaswegian job. Then again, he was a chivalrous hero who had risked his own life in an attempt to rescue her. And yet she hated him more for trying to force her into the subservient role of helpless damsel in distress than for his political leanings. But hate was not the only feeling she had for him. Sometimes she wondered if...

His voice broke into her thoughts.

‘How much longer are the keeches gonna be poking round?’ he grumbled.

‘I don’t know,’ Eloise sighed. ‘This has been an unmitigated disaster, hasn’t it? We’ve lost Nick, I never got a chance to look at Anghelides’ manuscript and now we’ve got the police down on us.’

‘Aye,’ Hamish replied dismally. ‘And Ah never got a chance to rob the place. Ah even dropped that sword, back in the temple.’ He fell silent for a while. ‘Ah really think it’d be a bad idea if we go back in the car,’ he went on after a while, ‘if the Pigs are gonna be in the area. We’d be better off walking.’

Eloise turned to him in surprise. ‘Hamish,’ she said wonderingly. ‘Surely not! A sensible idea from you?’

Hamish glared at her. She stared back, laughing quietly. For a while, his face remained locked in his characteristic scowl. Then it softened. He gazed into her eyes.

‘Hamish...’ Eloise said quietly. ‘I...’

A sudden rustling from the bushes behind alerted them and they swung round, scrambling to their feet. A dark figure stood between two trees, lit up from behind by the distant blue flashes of police car lights. The pair of them stared in trepidation at

their visitor.

‘You two,’ it said, stepping forward. ‘What are you doing here?’

Eloise stared intently at the figure, then rushed forward to hug him.

‘Nick!’ she cried. ‘We thought we’d lost you!’

The crustie flushed with pleasure as he disentangled himself from Eloise. He shrugged and they noticed the scratches on his face and how torn his coat was. He had a sack over his back.

‘I got out before the fire got too bad,’ he laughed. ‘Trouble was, I’d gone upstairs, so I had to jump a fair way. Still, I managed to fill this sack with stuff.’ He slung it down at Hamish’s feet. The Scot glared at him, refusing to speak. ‘Aren’t you going to take a look at our loot?’ Nick asked.

Eloise threw an impatient look at Hamish, then opened the bag. A cascade of gold, silver and gems rushed out onto the ground. Eloise stared at it in wonder.

‘Seems our shipping magnate recluse had a secret fetish for women’s jewellery,’ the Scouser said. ‘There was shitloads of women’s clothes in one room, as well, all bundled up. Fuckin’ weirdo.’

‘Fuckin’ pervert,’ Hamish agreed, scowling.

Eloise frowned. ‘Unless...’ she started. But she didn’t want to spoil the moment of triumph, so she kept her intimations to herself. Still, she remembered what Anghelides had said about human sacrifice. His casualness had suggested he’d led many women along the path that she had almost followed.

‘Oh and I kept an eye out for manuscripts, Eloise,’ Nick added, pulling a notebook from his pocket. ‘And I found this in one room. Not sure if it’s this Nicronemicon, but...’

Eloise took it and flicked through the pages.

‘No,’ she said slowly, sadly, shaking her head. ‘The Necronomicon must’ve gone up in the inferno.’ She looked more closely at one page. ‘But this is rather more interesting.’

‘What?’ demanded Hamish sulkily. ‘What’s so gey interesting about a tatty notebook?’

Eloise looked up. ‘It seems that this was Anghelides’ personal diary. It details all the secret rituals of the Inner Sanctum of the Temple of Typhon... And here’s something really interesting! About Anghelides’ spiritual master. Dead now, apparently, but it refers to something in a vault beneath the old man’s tower... Some refortified castle in North Wales...’

‘Long way to Wales,’ said Nick as he put the loot away. ‘And that car we nicked will have been reported by now. We can’t use it to get there.’

Hamish looked around, glancing worriedly towards the house, where the clamour of the police pursuing their inquiries rang out loudly in the still night air and the roaring of flames spat and crackled at the edge of hearing.

‘Mebbe,’ he said slowly. ‘But Wales is a long way from Silchester. And I think this area’s getting a little too hot for us.’

Eloise linked arms with her two companions. ‘So, we’re decided?’ she asked, looking winsomely at them. ‘Wales?’

‘Wales it is,’ growled Hamish and they headed for the road.

Saga of the Ere-Dwellers

CHAPTER I

Herein Is Told How Ketil Flatneb Fares To West-Over-Sea.

Ketil Flatneb was hight a famous hersir (lord) in Norway; he was the son of Biorn Rough-foot, the son of Grim, a hersir of Sogn. Ketil Flatneb was a wedded man; he had to wife Yngvild, daughter of Ketil Wether, a hersir of Raumarik; Biorn and Helgi were hight their sons, but their daughters were these, Auth the Deep-minded, Thorun the Horned, and Jorun Manwitbrent. Biorn, the son of Ketil, was fostered east in Iamtaland with that earl who was called Kiallak, a wise man, and most renowned; he had a son whose name was Biorn, and a daughter hight Giaflaug. That was in the days when King Harald Hairfair came to the rule of Norway. Because of that unpeace many noble men fled from their lands out of Norway; some east over the Keel, some West-over-the-sea. Some there were withal who in winter kept themselves in the South-isles, or the Orkneys, but in summer harried in Norway and wrought much scathe in the kingdom of Harald the king.

Now the bonders bemoaned them of that to the king, and prayed him deliver them from that unpeace. Then Harald the king took such rede that he caused dight an army for West-over-the-sea, and said that Ketil Flatneb should be captain of that host. Ketil begged off therefrom, but the king said he must needs go; and when Ketil saw that the king would have his will, he betook himself to the faring, and had with him his wife and those of his children who were at home. But when Ketil came West-over-the-sea,

some deal of fighting had he and his, and ever got the victory. He laid under him the South-isles, and made himself chief over them. Then he made peace with the mightiest chiefs West-over-the-sea, and made alliances with them, and therewithal sent the army back east. But when they met Harald the king, they said that Ketil Flatneb was lord of the South-isles, but that they wotted not if he would drag the rule west of the sea to King Harald. But when the king knew that, he took to himself those lands that Ketil owned in Norway.

Ketil Flatneb gave his daughter Auth to Olaf the White, who at that time was the greatest war-king West-over-the-sea; he was the son of Ingiald, the son of Helgi; but the mother of Ingiald was Thora, the daughter of Sigurd Worm-in-eye, the son of Ragnar Hairy-breeks. Thorun the Horned he gave in wedlock to Helgi the Lean, the son of Eyvind the Eastman and Rafarta, the daughter of Kiarfal, King of the Irish.

CHAPTER II

Of Biorn Ketilson and Thorolf Most-Beard.

Biorn the son of Ketil Flatneb was in Iamtaland till Kiallak the earl died; he gat to wife Giaflaug the earl's daughter, and thereafter fared west over the Keel, first to Thrandheim and then south through the land, and took to himself those lands which his father had owned, and drove away the bailiffs that King Harald had set over them. King Harald was in the Wick when he heard that, and thereon he fared by the inland road north to Thrandheim, and when he came there he summoned an eight-folks' mote; and at that mote he made Biorn Ketilson outlaw from Norway, a man to be slain or taken wheresoever he might be found. Thereafter he sent Hawk High-breeks and other of his warriors to slay him if they might find him. But when they came south beyond Stath, the friends of Biorn became ware of their journey and sent him tidings thereof. Then Biorn got him aboard a bark which he owned, with his household and chattels, and fled away south along the land, because that this was in the heart of winter, and he durst not make for the main. Biorn fared on till he came to the island called Most which lies off South-Hordaland, and there a man hight Rolf took him in, who was the son of Ornof the Fish-driver. There lay Biorn privily the winter through. But the king's men turned back when they had settled Biorn's lands and set men over them.

CHAPTER III

Thorolf Most-Beard Outlawed By King Harald Hairfair.

Rolf was a mighty chief, and a man of the greatest largesse; he had the ward of Thor's temple there in the island, and was a great friend of Thor. And therefore he was called Thorolf. He was a big man and a strong, fair to look on, and had a great beard; therefore was he called Most-beard, and he was the noblest man in the island.

In the spring Thorolf gave Biorn a good long-ship manned with a doughty crew, and gave him Hallstein his son to bear him fellowship; and therewith they sailed West-over-the-sea to meet Biorn's kindred.

But when King Harald knew that Thorolf Mostbeard had harboured Biorn Ketilson the king's outlaw, then sent he men to see him and bade him begone from his lands, and fare as an outlaw even as Biorn his friend, but if he come and meet the king and

lay the whole matter in his hand. This was ten winters after Ingolf Arnarson had fared out to take up his abode in Iceland, and that faring was grown to be very famous, because that those men who came out from Iceland told of good choice of land therein.

CHAPTER IV

Thorolf Most-Beard Comes Out To Iceland, And Sets Up House There.

Thorolf Most-Beard made a great sacrifice, and asked of Thor his well-beloved friend whether he should make peace with the king, or get him gone from out the land and seek other fortunes. But the Word showed Thorolf to Iceland; and thereafter he got for himself a great ship meet for the main, and trimmed it for the Iceland-faring, and had with him his kindred and his household goods; and many friends of his betook themselves to faring with him. He pulled down the temple, and had with him most of the timbers which had been therein, and mould moreover from under the stall whereon Thor had sat.

Thereafter Thorolf sailed into the main sea, and had wind at will, and made land, and sailed south along and west about Reekness, and then fell the wind, and they saw that two big bights cut into the land.

Then Thorolf cast overboard the pillars of his high-seat, which had been in the temple, and on one of them was Thor carven; withal he spake over them, that there he would abide in Iceland, whereas Thor should let those pillars come a-land.

But when they drifted from off the ship they were borne towards the westernmost firth in sight, and folk deemed that they went in sooth no slower than might have been looked for.

After that came a sea breeze, and they sailed west about Snowfellsness and stood into the firth. There see they that the firth is mighty broad and long, with great fells rising on either side thereof. Then Thorolf gave name to the firth and called it Broadfirth. He took land on the south side of the firth, nigh the midmost, and laid his ship in the creek, which thereafter they called Templewick.

Thereafter they espied the land and found on the outermost point of a ness north of the bay that Thor was come a-land with the pillars. That was afterwards called Thorsness.

Thereafter Thorolf fared with fire through his land out from Staff-river in the west, and east to that river which is now called Thors-river, and settled his shipmates there. But he set up for himself a great house at Templewick which he called Templestead. There he let build a temple, and a mighty house it was. There was a door in the side-wall and nearer to one end thereof. Within the door stood the pillars of the high-seat, and nails were therein; they were called the Gods' nails. Therewithin was there a great frith-place. But off the inmost house was there another house, of that fashion whereof now is the choir of a church, and there stood a stall in the midst of the floor in the fashion of an altar, and thereon lay a ring without a join that weighed twenty ounces, and on that must men swear all oaths; and that ring must the chief have on his arm at all man-motes.

On the stall should also stand the blood-bowl, and therein the blood-rod was, like unto a sprinkler, and therewith should be sprinkled from the bowl that blood which is called "Hlaut", which was that kind of blood which flowed when those beasts were smitten who were sacrificed to the Gods. But round about the stall were the Gods arrayed in the Holy Place.

To that temple must all men pay toll, and be bound to follow the temple-priest in all farings even as now are the thingmen of chiefs. But the chief must uphold the temple at his own charges, so that it should not go to waste, and hold therein feasts of sacrifice.

Now Thorolf called that ness Thorsness which lieth between Swordfirth and Templewick; on the ness is a fell, and that fell Thorolf held in such worship that he laid down that no man unwashed should turn his eyes thither, and that nought should be done to death on the fell, either man or beast, until it went therefrom of its own will. That fell he called Holy Fell, and he trowed that thither he should fare when he died, and all his kindred from the ness. On the tongue of the ness whereas Thor had come a-land he made all dooms be held, and thereon he set up a county Thing.

And so holy a place that was, that he would nowise that men should defile the field with blood-shedding, and moreover none should go thither for their needs, but to that end was appointed a skerry called Dirts Kerry.

Now Thorolf waxed of great largesse in his housekeeping, and had many men about him; for in those days meat was good to get both from the isles and from the take of the sea.

CHAPTER V

Biorn Ketilson Comes West-Over-The-Sea, But Will Not Abide There.

Now must we tell of Biorn, the son of Ketil Flatneb, that he sailed West-over-the-sea when he and Thorolf Most-beard sundered as is aforesaid.

He made for the South-isles; but when he came West-over-the-sea, then was Ketil Flatneb his father dead, but he found there Helgi his brother and his sisters, and they offered him good entertainment with them.

But Biorn saw that they had another troth, and nowise manly it seemed to him that they had cast off the faith that their kin had held; and he had no heart to dwell therein, and would not take up his abode there. Yet was he the winter through with Auth his sister and Thorstein her son.

But when they found that he would not be at one with his kindred, they called him Biorn the Easterner, and deemed it ill that he would not abide there.

CHAPTER VI

Biorn Comes Out To Iceland.

Biorn was two winters in the South-isles before he dight him to fare to Iceland; with him in that faring was Hallstein Thorolfson; and they made haven at Broadfirth, and

took land out from Staff-river, betwixt that and Lavafirth, by Thorolf's rede. Biorn dwelt at Burgholt in Bearhaven, and he was the most noble-hearted of men.

Hallstein, the son of Thorolf, deemed it less than manly to take land at the hands of his father; so he fared west over Broadfirth, and there took to himself land, and dwelt at Hallsteinsness.

Certain winters thereafter came out Auth the Deep-minded; and the first winter she was with Biorn her brother, but afterwards she made her own all the Dale-lands in Broadfirth between Skraumuhlaups-river and Daymeal-water, and dwelt at Hvamm.

In those days was all Broadfirth settled; but little need there is to speak of the land-taking of those men who come not into the story.

CHAPTER VII Of The Kin Of Kiallak.

There was a man hight Geirrod who took land from Thors-river eastward unto Longdale, and dwelt at Ere; with him came out Ulfar the Champion, to whom Geirrod gave lands round about Ulfar's-fell; with him too came Fingeir, son of Thorstein Snowshoe. He dwelt in Swanfirth, and his son was Thorfin, the father of Thorbrand of Swanfirth.

There was a man hight Vestar, son of Thorolf Bladderpate; he brought to Iceland his father, a man well on in years, and took land west away from Whalefirth, and dwelt at Onward-ere. His son was Asgeir, who dwelt there afterwards.

Biorn the Easterner died the first of these land-settlers, and was buried at Burgbrook. He left behind two sons: one was Kiallak the Old, who dwelt at Bearhaven after his father. Kiallak had to wife Astrid, daughter of Rolf the Hersir, and sister of Steinolf the Low. They had three children: Thorgrim the Priest was a son of theirs, and their daughter was Gerd, she whom Thorrodd the Priest, son of Odd the Strong, had to wife; their third child was Helga, whom Asgeir of Ere had to wife.

From the children of Kiallak is sprung a great kindred, which is called the Kiallekings.

Ottar was the name of another son of Biorn; he married Gro, the daughter of Geirleif of Bardstrand. Their sons were these: Helgi, the father of Osvif the Wise, and Biorn, the father of Vigfus of Drapalith; but Vilgeir was the third son of Ottar Biornson.

Thorolf Most-beard married in his old age, and had to wife her who is called Unn; some say that she was daughter of Thorstein the Red, but Ari the Learned, son of Thorgils, numbers her not among his children. Thorolf and Unn had a son who was called Stein; that lad Thorolf gave to Thor his friend, and called him Thorstein, and the boy was very quick of growth.

Now Hallstein Thorolfson had to wife Osk, daughter of Thorstein the Red; Thorstein was their son; he was fostered at Thorolf's, and was called Thorstein the Swart; but his own son Thorolf called Thorstein Codbiter.

CHAPTER VIII

Of Thorolf Halt-Foot.

In those days came out Geirrid, the sister of Geirrod of Ere, and he gave her dwelling in Burgdale up from Swanfirth. She let build her hall athwart the highway, and all men should ride through it who passed by. Therein stood ever a table, and meat to be given to whomsoever had will thereto, and therefore was she deemed to be the greatest and noblest of women. Biorn, son of Bolverk Blinding-snout, had had Geirrid to wife, and their son was called Thorolf, and was a mighty viking; he came out some time after his mother, and was with her the first winter. Thorolf deemed the lands of Burgdale but too narrow, and he challenged Ulfar the Champion for his lands, and bade him to the holm-gang because he was an old man and a childless. But Ulfar had liefer die than be cowed by Thorolf. They went to holm in Swanfirth, and Ulfar fell, but Thorolf was wounded in the leg, and went halt ever after, and therefore was he called Halt-foot. Now he set up house in Hvamm in Thorsriverdale. He took to himself the land after Ulfar, and was the most wrongful of men. He sold land to the freedmen of Thorbrand of Swanfirth; Ulfar's-fell to Ulfar, to wit, and Orligstead to Orlig; and they dwelt there long after. Thorolf Halt-foot had three children; his son was called Arnkel, but his daughter Gunnfrid, whom Thorbein of Thorbeinstead up on Waterneck east from Drapalith had to wife; their sons were Sigmund and Thorgils, but their daughter was hight Thorgerd, whom Vigfus of Drapalith had to wife. Another daughter of Thorolf was Geirrid, whom Thorolf the son of Heriolf Holkinrazi had to wife. They dwelt at Mewlithe; their children were Thorarin the Swart and Gudny.

CHAPTER IX

Of Thorstein Codbiter. Battle At Thorsness Thing.

Thorolf Most-Beard died at Templestead, and then Thorstein Codbiter took his inheritance after him. He then took to wife Thora, daughter of Olaf Feilan and sister of Thord the Yeller, who dwelt at Hvamm in those days.

Thorolf was buried at Howness, west of Templestead.

At that time so great was the pride of the kin of Kiallak, that they thought themselves before all other men in that countryside; and so many were the kinsmen of Biorn that there was no kindred so mighty in all Broadfirth.

In those days Barne-Kiallak, their kinsman, dwelt in Midfell-strand, at the stead which is now called Kiallakstead, and a many sons he had who were of good conditions; they all brought help to their kin south of the firth at Things and folk-motes.

On a spring-tide at Thorsness Thing these brothers-in-law Thorgrim Kiallakson and Asgeir of Ere gave out that they would not give a lift to the pride of the Thorsness-folk, and that they would go their errands in the grass as otherwhere men do in man-motes, though those men were so proud that they made their lands holier than other lands of Broadfirth. They gave forth that they would not tread shoe for the going to the out-skerries for their easements.

But when Thorstein Codbiter was ware of this, he had no will that they should defile that field which Thorolf his father had honoured over all other places in his lands.

So he called his friends to him, and bade them keep those folk from the field by battle if they were minded to defile it.

In this rede were with him Thorgeir the son of Geirrood of Ere, and the Swanfirthers Thorfin and Thorbrand his son, Thorolf Halt-foot, and many other thingmen and friends of Thorstein.

But in the evening when the Kiallekings were full of meat they took their weapons and went out on to the ness; but when Thorstein and his folk saw that they turned off from the road that lay skerry-ward, they sprang to their weapons and ran after them with whooping and egging on. And when the Kiallekings saw that, they ran together and defended themselves.

But those of Thorsness made so hard an onset that Kiallak and his men shrunk off the field and clown to the foreshore, and then they turned against them therewith, and there was a hard battle between them; the Kiallekings were the fewer, but they had a chosen band. But now the men of Woodstrand were ware of this, Thorgest the Old and Aslak of Longdale; they ran thereto and went betwixt them; but both sides were of the fiercest, nor could they sunder them before they gave out that they would aid those who should hearken to their bidding to sunder.

Therewith were they parted, but yet in such wise that the Kiallekings might not go up on to the field; so they took ship, and fared away from the Thing.

There fell men of either side, the most of the Kiallekings; and a many were hurt. No truce could be struck, because neither side would handsel it, but swore to fall on each other as soon as it might be brought about. The field was all bloody whereas they fought, as well as there whereas the men of Thorsness had stood while the fight was toward.

CHAPTER X

Peace Made.

After the Thing the chiefs on either side sat at home with many men about them, and much ill blood there was between them. Their friends took this rede, to send word to Thord the Yeller, who was then the greatest chief in Broadfirth: he was akin to the Kiallekings, but closely allied to Thorstein; therefore he seemed to be the likeliest of men to settle peace between them. But when this message came to Thord, he fared thither with many men, and strove to make peace. He found that far apart were the minds of them; yet he brought about truce between them, and a meeting to be summoned. The close of the matter was that Thord should make it up, on such terms that whereas the Kiallekings laid down that they would never go their errands to Dirtserry, Thorstein claimed that they should not defile the field now more than aforetime. The Kiallekings claimed that all they who had fallen on Thorstein's part should be fallen unhallowed, because they had first set on them with the mind to fight. But the Thorsnessings said that all the Kiallekings had fallen unhallowed because of

their law-breaking at a Holy Thing.

But though the terms laid down were hard for the award, yet Thord yeasaid the taking it on him rather than that they should part unappeased. Now Thord thus set forth the beginning of the award: "Let hap abide as hap befell"; said that for no manslayings nor hurts which had happed at Thorsness should man-gild be paid. The field he gave out unhallowed because of the blood shed in wrath that had fallen thereon, and that land he declared now no holier than another, laying down that the cause thereof were those who first bestirred them to wounding others. And that he called the only peace-breaking that had betid, and said withal that no Thing should be held there thenceforward. But that they might be well appeased and friends thenceforth, he made this further award, that Thorgrim Kiallakson should uphold the temple half at his own costs, and answer for half the temple toll, and the Thingmen the other half. He should also help Thorstein thenceforth in all law-cases, and strengthen him in whatso hallowing he might bestow on the Thing, whereso it should next be set up.

Withal Thord the Yeller gave to Thorgrim Kiallakson Thorhild his kinswoman, the daughter of Thorkel Main-acre his neighbour; and thenceforth was he called Thorgrim the Priest. Then they moved the Thing up the ness, where it now is; and whenas Thord the Yeller settled the Quarter Things, he caused this to be the Quarter Thing of the Westfirthers, and men should seek to that Thing from all over the Westfirths. There is yet to be seen the Doom-ring, where men were doomed to the sacrifice. In that ring stands the stone of Thor over which those men were broken who were sacrificed, and the colour of the blood on that stone is yet to be seen.

And at that Thing was one of the holiest of steads, but there men were not forbidden to go their errands.

CHAPTER XI

Of Thorgrim The Priest, The Death Of Thorstein Codbiter.

Thorstein Codbiter became a man of the greatest largesse; he had ever with him sixty freedmen; he was a great gatherer of household stuff, and was ever going a-fishing. He first let raise the homestead at Holyfell, and brought thither his household, and it was the greatest of temple-steads of those days.

Withal he let make a homestead on the ness near to where had been the Thing. That homestead he let make well arrayed, and he gave it afterwards to Thorstein the Swart, his kinsman, who dwelt there thenceforth, and was the wisest of men. Thorstein Codbiter had a son who was called Bork the Thick. But on a summer when Thorstein was five-and-twenty winters old, Thora bore him a man-child who was called Grim, and sprinkled with water. That lad Thorstein gave to Thor, and said that he should be a Temple-Priest, and called him Thorgrim.

That same harvest Thorstein fared out to Hoskuldsey to fish; but on an evening of harvest a shepherd-man of Thorstein's fared after his sheep north of Holyfell; there he saw how the fell was opened on the north side, and in the fell he saw mighty fires, and heard huge clamour therein, and the clank of drinking-horns; and when he hearkened if perchance he might hear any words clear of others, he heard that there was welcomed Thorstein Codbiter and his crew, and he was bidden to sit in the high-seat

over against his father.

That foretoken the shepherd told in the evening to Thora, Thorstein's wife; she spake little thereon, and said that might be a foreboding of greater tidings.

The morning after came men west-away from Hoskuldsey and told these tidings: that Thorstein Codbiter had been drowned in the fishing; and men thought that great scathe. Thora went on keeping house there afterwards, and thereto joined himself with her he who is called Hallward; they had a son together, who was called Mar.

CHAPTER XII

Of Arnkel The Priest And Others.

The sons of Thorstein Codbiter grew up at home with their mother, and they were the hopefullest of men; but Thorgrim was the foremost of them in all things, and was a chief as soon as he had age thereto. Thorgrim wedded west in Dyrafirth, and had to wife Thordis Sur's daughter, and betook himself west to his brothers- in-law Gisli and Thorkel.

Now Thorgrim slew Vestein Vesteinson at the harvest feast in Hawkdale; but the autumn next after, when Thorgrim was five-and- twenty years old, even as his father, Gisli his brother-in-law slew him at the harvest feast at Seastead. Some nights after Thordis his wife brought forth a son, and the lad was called Thorgrim after his father. A little thereafter Thordis was wedded to Bork the Thick, Thorgrim's brother, and betook her to housekeeping with him at Holyfell. Then fared Thorgrim her son to Swanfirth, and was there at fostering with Thorbrand; he was somewhat reckless in his youth, and was called Snerrir, but afterwards Snorri. Thorbrand of Swanfirth had to wife Thurid, daughter of Thorfin Selthorison from Redmell.

These were their children: Thorleif Kimbi was the eldest, the second was Snorri, the third Thorod, the fourth Thorfin, the fifth Thormod; their daughter was called Thorgerd; all these were foster-brethren of Snorri Thorgrimson.

At that time Arnkel, son of Thorolf Haltfoot, dwelt at Lairstead by Vadils-head; he was the biggest and strongest of men, a great lawman and mighty wise, and was a good and true man, and before all others, even in those parts, in luck of friends and hardihood; he was withal a Temple-Priest, and had many Thingmen.

Thorgrim Kiallakson dwelt at Bearhaven as is aforesaid, and he and Thorhild had three sons: Brand was the eldest; he dwelt at Crossness by Sealriver head. Another was Arngrim; he was a big man and a strong, large of nose, big-boned of face, bleak-red of hair, early bald in front; sallow of hue, his eyes great and fair; he was very masterful, and exceeding in wrongfulness, and therefore was he called Stir.

Vermund was the name of the youngest son of Thorgrim Kiallakson; he was a tall man and a slender, fair to look on; he was called Vermund the Slender. The son of Asgeir of Ere was called Thorlak; he had to wife Thurid, the daughter of Audum Stote of Lavafirth. These were their children: Steinthor, Bergthor, Thormod, Thord Wall-eye, and Helga. Steinthor was the foremost of the children of Thorlak; he was a big man and a strong, and most skilled in arms of all men, and he was the best knit of

men, and meek of mood in every-day life. Steinthor is held for the third best man-at-arms of Iceland, along with these, Helgi, the son of Droplaug, and Vemund Kogr.

Thormod was a wise man and a peaceful. Thord Wall-eye was a very masterful man. Bergthor was the youngest, yet had he all the makings of a man in him.

Viriconium Nights - Part One

*... races wronged,
And ancient glories overcast,
And treasures flung to fire and rabble wrath...*

Wilfred Owen, *Viriconium*.

1 The Saxon Witch

The Pict awoke to the dim grey light of dawn and a clopping of hoofs outside the window.

Gently, he rose from Julilla's side, slipped out of the bed and padded across the tiny room he had rented above the *Golden Grasshopper*. He leant his bare arms against the sill and peered out of the window.

In the street below, a cavalcade of horsemen was trotting past. Their faces were grim, their second-rate Roman armour dull and tarnished, and the stains of travel besmirched their colourful plaid clothes. The dawn light glinted feebly from spear-tips and shield rims, and the warriors stared wearily and warily around them.

The Pict heard a pad from behind him, and turned his head slightly as Julilla, now wrapped in the coverlet, slipped her arms around him. The whore glanced over his shoulder.

'Who are they?' the Pict whispered darkly.

Julilla shook her head. 'They look like Vortimer's men,' she murmured, softly stroking the Pict's tattooed chest.

‘What are they doing in Viriconium, then?’ the Pict asked. ‘Vortimer and his father have avoided each other since the people deposed Vortigern and put Vortimer in his place.’

‘Last night, while you were at the palace, I heard that Vortimer has defeated Hengest and forced the Saxons out of the country,’ Julilla said softly. ‘One of Vortigern’s men had me before you returned, and he was talking politics with the other officers before we went upstairs.’

‘If it is Vortimer,’ the Pict muttered, ‘does this mean that he and his father have agreed to put the past behind them? If that’s the case, my work here could become difficult.’ He was talking to himself, but Julilla listened attentively.

‘Did you get the post you were after, then?’ she asked.

The Pict shook his head. ‘They wouldn’t accept a Pict into the ranks of Vortigern’s bodyguard - not these days.’

Julilla shrugged. ‘I’m not surprised,’ she replied. ‘Your people have a bad reputation here in the South.’

She regarded the naked, barbaric figure that stood before her. He gave no sign of discomfort despite the draught from the battered old door, but she supposed Pictish warriors were accustomed to the cold. Though no taller than herself, he was sinewy and strong, his blazing eyes enhanced by flame-red hair and intricate tattoos that covered his face as well as his body; his whole persona spoke of the heather-clad hills and pine-steeped valleys of Caledonia. Flaming red hair topped a brutal-seeming face that, as far as she was aware, only relaxed its natural truculence in her own presence.

But now the savage expression had returned.

‘My father was in the bodyguard of the Count of Britannia!’ the Pict said. ‘Vortigern incited the Count’s bodyguard to murder their lord so the usurper could take the throne.’

‘I never heard that!’ Julilla gasped. ‘I knew that Picts killed the Count. Vortigern’s government took control of Britannia during the chaos... But you say it was a conspiracy?’

‘Of course it was,’ the Pict murmured, but his face was gentle again, though brooding. ‘That was why we renewed our attacks on the South. We never raid you except when we’re provoked.’ He stared moodily into the distance, and said no more.

She led him back to bed. As they lay down together, she turned her painted face to him, and asked a question.

‘Why are you here?’

He looked at her suspiciously. ‘I told you. I want to join Vortigern’s men.’

She smiled archly.

‘I can’t believe that,’ she murmured. ‘What you say makes it unlikely that you’d want employment from the man who used to be High King of Britannia. Admit it. You have some other reason for being here.’ She touched him on the arm. ‘You can trust me,’ she added in a low voice. ‘If you’re going to fulfil your promise to me, and free me from slavery, you can confide in me. I owe you. If you tell me what you’re about, I might even be able to help you. I know all of Vortigern’s men’ - she giggled - ‘intimately. My inside knowledge’ - and here she smiled knowingly - ‘could help you.’

The Pict grunted. He was regretting the promise he had made to the girl the night before, in a haze of passion. Still, he was a Pict and his word was his bond. Briefly, he considered what the girl had to say, and decided to confide in her.

‘I’m here to kill Vortigern,’ he said quietly. Julilla’s eyes widened and she put a hand to her painted mouth.

‘To kill him?’ she murmured. ‘But why? A year or two ago, back when he

married that flaxen-haired Saxon witch, you'd have been hailed a hero throughout Britannia if you did that. But now he's only King of Powys.'

'He had my father killed, thirty years ago,' the Pict murmured. 'He will die for it.' His face was troubled. 'Furthermore, he called in the Saxon auxiliaries who banished me from my kingdom.'

'Your kingdom?' If Julilla's eyes had been wide before, now they were almost bulging. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'Walwain,' he replied. 'Once I was king of the Walweithan Picts.'

The only sound to be heard in the silence that ensued was Julilla swallowing.

'M-my lord!' she exclaimed, moving away from him in awe.

He grabbed her, and pulled her roughly back into his embrace.

'Don't be absurd, girl! I'm a landless exile now, and have been for five or six years. But though I've lost my rank, I remain true to the honour that was mine in my youth. I will avenge my father and myself, and it will be through spilling Vortigern's blood on the marble floor of his decaying palace that I shall achieve this. Now - can I trust you? Will you keep this to yourself?'

Julilla nodded, her eyes wide. 'If you truly intend to free me,' she replied, 'I'll do anything for you.'

Vortimer reined his horse in the palace courtyard. His troop trotted in behind him. He looked around with an almost fond eye at the building where he had spent his childhood. Far inland from Britannia's violent shores, the city of Viriconium had suffered few raids or rebellions, unlike the coastal towns. Viriconium was the best organised, best preserved city in Britannia. This was why his father had chosen it as his capital; it was a place from which all Britannia could be controlled, nominally if not actually. But it was all beginning to look a little frayed around the edges.

Speaking of which, his brother Pascentius was heading over towards him, swaying in the saddle. His eyes were bleary, and it was obvious he had been drinking the previous night - aye, and every night since the battle of Set Thirgabail, when their brother Catigern had fallen in combat with the Saxon warrior Horsa.

'Well, brother,' Pascentius mumbled quietly. 'Back in the bosom of the family, eh?'

Vortimer smiled coldly. 'Depends on how our father receives us,' he replied. 'He was never one to forgive and forget.'

'Can you forgive him putting away our mother for the Saxon witch?' Pascentius demanded, with a drunkard's sudden anger. 'Can you forget?'

'It's better for Britannia if we do,' Vortimer replied. 'Now we've put an end to the Saxon threat, we can concentrate on the important issue; Britannia should remain strong, free, and independent of Roman rule.'

'And you expect that to happen under your own guidance, Vortimer?'

The voice cut harshly through the cold dawn air. Turning in his saddle, Vortimer saw a tall, gangling figure standing in the great doorway of the palace. Trust their father to come and meet them personally, thought Vortimer. He eyed the man he had only seen once since stealing the throne of High Kingship from under him. A respite from the pressures of rule had done his father some good.

The last time Vortimer had seen him, Vortigern had been thin and unhealthy, with blotched skin and a nervous twitch around the mouth. Now he stood straight-backed before them; an old man, true, but his stance recalled the proud politician who had married Magnus Maximus' daughter, led the coup against the usurper Constantine's military governor, and ruled the people of Britannia through war and peace.

He answered his father's question. 'Aye, father,' he said boldly. 'I do.'

Vortigern gave him a piercing glance.

'All that you know of ruling an independent Britannia you learnt at my knee,' he declared. He glanced at the weary warriors again. 'None too well, it seems.'

'He's done a better job of it than you, father!' Pascentius broke in hotly. 'We've forced your treacherous friends the Saxons into the sea, and the Picts no longer trouble the Wall - even the British chiefs remain united!'

'For the moment,' Vortigern sneered. 'What of Ambrosius? How do you intend to deal with his threat?'

Vortimer broke in hastily. 'I didn't come here to quarrel, father, and if we must, then not in front of my men. I came here to make amends. I took the throne from you at the urging of the government, not from personal desire. Now that I have achieved what they wanted, we can forget the past and look to the future.'

Vortigern regarded him cynically for a second.

'Very well,' he said abruptly. 'But you can arrange for your men's accommodation yourself.' He led them into the palace.

That night there was a wine-soaked debauch in the palace hall. The two troops outdid each other in feats of feasting and drinking. But after informing the assembled multitude that he had accepted his erring sons back to his bosom, the former High King of Britannia abandoned his guests. He retired to a small chamber off the hall to consult his wizards.

Although a true Christian and an abhorrer of the pernicious Augustinian heresy, Vortigern had long been obsessed with black magic and sorcery. Unlike his Saxon wife, due to his lack of patience he dabbled little himself, but he had amassed a collection of wise men, defrocked clerics, astrologers and parasitic charlatans who had advised him in his daily business, or at least kept him amused, for the last seven years.

Maugantius was their leader. 'Your son has returned to you, indeed,' said the man, stroking his thick black beard, and gazing around the marble-walled atrium. 'But he still holds the throne, and you are merely king of Powys, the lands around Viriconium.'

Vortigern slumped on a couch nearby. He turned to the other wizards.

'What do you say, Nechtan?' he asked of the renegade Pictish druid who sat in the corner, communing with his ancient and disreputable gods. 'And you, Celestinus? And Sæwulf, my wife's servant - what say you?'

Nechtán looked up from his subdued chanting and scratched his smooth, tattooed face. 'Maugantius' words are as wise as ever,' he sneered with his habitual sarcasm. 'But he does not mention that it is you who hold Viriconium, keystone in the politics of the Southland, while our current High King remains a homeless wanderer. True, he and his warband have cast out your wife's people, and the mob sees this as a virtuous achievement. But you have power at your fingertips. All that is required is for him to be removed.'

'Removed?' Vortigern questioned with a raised eyebrow. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to Celestinus. 'And what do you say, priest?'

Celestinus jumped nervously, as he did whenever his previous occupation was mentioned. 'Ah, well -' he swallowed, and blushed guiltily. 'That great tutor of the Church, the blessed Pelagius - who I once heard speak with great wisdom in the refectory at Bangor monastery - he tells us that we are put upon this earth with the choice to perform acts good or evil. Adam's act was an evil one, Jesus' was good. It is all very arbitrary, and we are therefore free to work out our own salvation...'

‘Which means?’ Vortigern rumbled impatiently.

Celestinus smirked, and licked his lips. ‘As I see it, it means that we may do as we please. An evil act, such as the assassination of your son, could be seen as part of your own salvation. After all, God has willed it that you should be king, while Vortimer has gone against God’s will by deposing you. An evil act will return you to God’s favour.’ He sniggered at some memory and glanced around guiltily, looking hot and flushed. Vortigern did not know why he employed Celestinus, except that whenever he felt alone, unloved, reviled by those around him, contemplation of the ex-priest and all his secret sins improved his mood no end.

He turned to Sæwulf, who stood impassive near the doorway; six foot of pure Saxon muscle, a distant relative of his wife, and by his own account, the mightiest magician of Germania since Veleda.

Sæwulf shrugged laconically.

‘He is an obstacle to your power,’ he replied. ‘Obstacles must be removed, one way or another.’

Vortigern leapt to his feet and began to stride restlessly up and down the room. He paused before a marble bust of the Emperor Commodus, and patted it affectionately. Then he turned to face his coven.

‘But if I just have him throttled at a feast, there will be uproar! The fickle mob loves him, as much as they hate your people, Sæwulf, and yours, Nechtan. If I kill him, they may turn against me completely.’

Maugantius drew himself to his feet, an impressive figure in his dark, wizardly robes, with his black beard and long, untrimmed black hair. He stared directly at Vortigern.

‘My lord, you know full well that everything achievable by natural means - and many other things as well - may also be brought about through the agency of demons. With one spirit from Tartarus, if correctly summoned, I could make myself richer than the Emperor; with another, I could cause young virgins to disrobe themselves and dance naked in my presence...’

‘You could?’ gaped Celestinus, rubbing his sweaty palms on his robe. Maugantius contemptuously ignored him.

‘... with another, I could strike down my enemies in such a way that no suspicion would fall upon me,’ the sorcerer continued. He gazed at Vortigern with the cold, glittering eyes of a serpent.

‘This is true,’ Sæwulf rumbled. ‘All men know the swart elves have many powers to work harm.’

Nechtán nodded in whiskery agreement.

Returning to his couch, Vortigern settled himself thoughtfully on its padded surface. His glance flickered up to take in all his wizards.

‘How could this be done?’

Maugantius folded his arms. ‘The full moon rises tomorrow night,’ he declared. ‘If, at the hour of Mars - the tenth hour of the night - we retire to an ancient holy site, such as the disused Mithræum beneath this palace, we will there be able to perform the ritual that shall bring your son to ruin and death, and return you to your rightful position as High King of Britannia.’

At this, Vortigern smiled slowly, cruelly. ‘He will die,’ he vowed. He got to his feet, and silently led the wizards from the room.

Sæwulf was last to rise, but just as he was about to depart he heard a soft noise from behind the crimson drapes on the far side of the room. As he turned his baffled attention towards them, a small, blonde-haired figure in a long night-blue kirtle

slipped out. He gasped.

'In Wodnes nama! Hlæfdige min!' he hissed in his own tongue.

The young woman laughed throatily. *'Wylisc cweðan we nu, min wicca - We speak the Welsh language now, Sæwulf,'* she remonstrated in a deep, vibrant voice. *'We have no secrets. And my reading tells me that the name foreigners give to the god of wisdom is "Mercurius".'*

'Ac ðu sceaw... But you spy on your husband, my lady?'

Renwein, daughter of Hengest the Saxon and the most hated woman in all Britannia, stepped up close to her servant. Smiling wickedly, she stroked his long moustaches. He withered under her feline gaze. *'But he would punish you severely if he found out,'* he added.

'Then we shall ensure that he doesn't, won't we, Sæwulf?' she said huskily. *'Just as he will never learn of all the favours I have bestowed upon my favourite servant, yes?'* She reached down to his groin, and gave his balls a playful squeeze.

Sæwulf swallowed.

'Of course, my lady - I would never betray you, I swear on the Ring of Ðunær! But why did you spy on him?'

'I wanted to know what he was going to do about that tediously self-righteous son of his,' she said airily. *'Now I know. And I think it absurd.'*

'To raise up one of these Roman demons?' Sæwulf questioned. *'But all know that the gods and devils of Rome are the mightiest in the world. How else could they have conquered so much, and held it for so long?'*

Renwein spat contemptuously on the marble floor. She snarled. *'The Romans are weak these days! Oh, they were mighty once, and their gods were doubtless equally strong. But now they've cast them out in favour of this carpenter's son, and their power is waning.'*

After marrying Vortigern she had quickly mastered the Roman tongue and alphabet and prevailed upon her doting husband to supply her with the lays and epics of Classical civilisation. A voracious reader, she had been deeply impressed by the power that the Romans had once held, and fascinated by the stories of mighty gods and heroes, but this only led her to despise their degenerate descendants all the more. *'Men like my father will inherit the earth,'* she declared, shaking her head with aggressive scorn for her husband and his people. *'No. Vortimer must indeed be removed - not only does he threaten my husband, but more importantly, his brother Catigern slew my uncle Horsa at the battle of Egelesðrep. You know our laws - blood for blood. My father has been cast out of the country, and he cannot gain vengeance. I shall bring about his death instead. But the gods of Rome are not the answer. I will deal with this matter in my own way.'*

'But I intend to sleep on it.' She swept from the room. Like a faithful but troubled hound, Sæwulf trailed after her.

When they had passed down the lamp-lit corridor, another figure stirred in the shadows beneath the drapes that covered a long window. Clad in a simple woollen kirtle, wearing a hood to cover his tattooed face, and with a wicked-looking dirk hanging at his belt, Walwain rose up from the ascetic coldness of the marble floor and padded down the passage after them.

He was indebted to Julilla. His attempts to infiltrate the palace had met with failure, but Julilla, from her retentive repertoire of pillow-talk, had supplied him with the information that had helped him enter the closely guarded palace without hindrance. An unfortunately positioned tree, a knowledge of climbing learnt in the misty hills of Caledonia, a few seconds' work at the decaying surround of a window

on the first floor, and he was in. Now all he had to do was find Vortigern and return him to the hell from which he'd risen, and his people's honour would be satisfied. But where was the king?

He trotted down the wide corridor, keeping close to the shadows. After a while, it opened out into an antechamber, beyond which he could see the main hall. Through an archway he caught a glimpse of its rich mosaic floor littered with recumbent warriors and darkly stained with spilt wine; in the moonlight it resembled a deserted battlefield. To his left rose a wide, sweeping stairway.

Surely Vortigern's chambers would be on a higher floor? His heart pounding at being so exposed, he hurried up the marble stairway, quickly reaching the landing above. There were two corridors leading off it, and he took the closest. Hearing an echoing tramp of sandaled feet from the steps behind him, he ducked through an archway into the dim room beyond, and crouched down with one eye to the crack in the curtains.

'Is that you, Sæwulf?' murmured a sleepy female voice from a bed in the centre of the room. Walwain cursed to himself. Just his luck to pick a room with an inhabitant.

The marching feet came closer.

'Sæwulf?' the woman said querulously. 'What's the matter? Tell me!'

Walwain considered continuing the deception, but just then he heard the guards halt outside the room. Through the gap in the curtains he saw them; wild British tribesmen, uncomfortable in their Roman armour. They seemed troubled.

'Sæwulf!' the woman snapped, fully awake now. 'What are you playing at, by Hæleth? Tell me this minute!'

She broke off as Walwain rushed across the room and pinned her to the bed.

'Silence!' he hissed. A shaft of moonlight from the window fell upon him, revealing his ghastly tattooed face to the woman in the bed. She drew a breath to scream at the Pictish warrior who straddled her, but Walwain slapped a hand across her mouth, then tugged out his dirk and pressed it to her soft white throat. She squirmed in his grip.

'My lady!' A voice came from outside. 'Our apologies for disturbing you in your repose, but we have found indications of a break-in downstairs. Have you seen anyone suspicious? My lady?'

Walwain whispered harshly in her ear; 'Tell them you've seen nothing!'

He took his hand away. Fully awake now, the woman called out in a deep voice;

'No-one's been here! Now leave me immediately.'

'My most abject apologies, madam,' the officer replied. Booted feet moved off, and soon they could hear the soldier questioning another sleeper.

'Now keep quiet,' Walwain muttered as soon as they went. 'Where is Vortigern's bedchamber?'

'Tell me what you want with him, first,' she said, fixing him with a cool gaze. To his surprise, Walwain found himself telling her everything. She listened absorbedly, and as he helplessly confessed his desire to kill Vortigern, a cold, calculating look crossed her beautiful face.

'His bedchamber is down the corridor from here,' she replied when he had finished. 'He likes to keep me close. He's uxorious, though indifferent in bed.'

Walwain stared at her oddly after she made this statement. In the dark he could just about make out that she was blonde, blue-eyed... A Saxon? But there could be no Saxons this far inland, except...

'You're his wife?' Walwain hissed.

'Aye! I am Renwein, daughter of Hengest, a descendant of Woden, god of death

and magic. My husband doesn't have any other wives, to my knowledge. Except for that superannuated British slut who birthed his unnatural brood of sons - and he put her away as soon as he saw me.'

'But you told me where to find him!' Walwain hissed. 'When you know I'm sworn to kill him! Why?'

'I hate him,' she murmured, looking up at him with wide, unhappy eyes. 'He beats me, treats me worse than one of his hounds. I have no other way to protect myself from his evil ways.' Walwain nodded, looking pityingly down at her. He hated violence against women, though he'd been forced to use it himself sometimes. Renwein continued. 'Now listen to me. The guard know there's an intruder, so your chances of killing him tonight are low. But return to my chamber tomorrow night if you can, and I will provide you with the means to rid us of the tyrant.'

Walwain looked down at the woman. He had heard that she was a witch. She seemed to live by a different set of morals than most. But she would be a useful tool in his vengeance.

'Very well,' he said in the end. 'I will return tomorrow.' Quickly and lithely, without another word, he sped from the room.

In the darkness, Renwein smiled wickedly. The gods had sent her this chance. Already, her plan was working!

Out in the passage, in the light of the lamps, Walwain looked left and right, briefly disorientated. Where was the stairway? After a moment's panic he caught sight of it, and headed back the way he had come.

Reaching the flight of steps, he was just about to hurry down them when he heard voices floating towards him from up ahead. He glanced round quickly for another hiding place - how he hated this sneaking around! - and spotted the plinth upon which stood a statue of Hercules slaying the Hydra.

He ducked behind it.

Two officers strode up the steps, carrying their helmets under their arms.

'No sign of the intruder downstairs,' barked the first. 'He must be up here. We'll have to search every inch.'

'The king won't like it,' warned the second officer. 'And neither will Vortimer.'

'Vortimer can...' the first officer began, but thought better of it. He glanced around. 'Just look at this place! Statues all over! He could be hiding in here for all we know! Come on, we'll have to tell the king our intentions.'

They disappeared into the nearby passage. Walwain eased his cramped body from behind the plinth, and looked about him. That had been a narrow escape.

Hurrying down the steps he rushed into the wider, better lit area below. To his right, the passage led back to his point of entry. But surely they'd have that guarded by now? He suddenly realised that he was sweating with fear.

The arch to his left led into the main hall, which was still strewn with sleeping warriors; it wasn't far from the main gates, but there was no escape for him that way. Beside it was a small passage that probably led to the servants' quarters. That would be quieter, he thought. But just as he was padding across the polished stone floor towards it, he heard an outraged cry from down the main passage.

'Stop, intruder!'

Walwain's heart leapt into his throat at the shout. He'd been spotted! Without wasting time looking for his foes, he glanced wildly around for an escape route. The muttering of disturbed sleepers hummed through the palace like a swarm of angry bees. Walwain turned to dash down the narrow corridor, and stopped short when he saw the twenty crested guards who were thundering down towards him from the right,

their hobnailed boots striking sparks from the cold floor, their harness jingling.

‘There he is!’ the officer shouted. ‘A Pict!’

His hood had fallen back in his panic, and his blue-tattooed face was clear for all to see. Briefly cursing the fate that had caused him to be born amongst such a distinctive people, he turned and ran back towards the narrow passage. Speeding down it, he flung himself through an archway as the soldiers lumbered after him.

He found himself in another passage, and ran down it with his heart booming like a war-drum. Turning a corner, he saw a window in the wall up ahead, and dashed in it’s direction. But before he could reach it, the soldiers skidded round the corner and spotted him.

‘Stop, Pict!’ shouted the officer, and a spear flashed through the dimly-lit corridor towards him. He dodged it with a leap that would have graced a salmon, and flung himself through the window.

It smashed open, pitching his flying body out in a glittering shower of glass through into the cold night air beyond. He hit the glass-strewn flagstones beneath the window with bone-jarring force, and it was only the power of his relentless will that dragged him immediately to his feet. Darting a glance back at the broken window, which he saw was filling with breastplate-wearing guards, he dashed across the courtyard.

Ahead of him was the arch leading into town. Two sentries stood in it, resolute, their spears at the ready.

Confidently, they watched as he ran towards them.

‘There’s no escape for you this way,’ shouted one of them. But as Walwain came close, he leapt up into the air again as only a Pictish warrior could, spinning over and over as he passed above their startled faces. A foot-jab to the head settled one, and as Walwain landed lightly in the archway, he span round, and sent his dirk thudding into the other guard’s neck. Spouting blood, the body collapsed to the flagstones.

Not waiting for a sequel to this episode in the drama, Walwain ran into the wide street beyond - the Via Londinia, they called it; it was the principal street of the city. Shuttered shops lined it, and its paving stones were littered with ox-dung from the trader’s carts that moved constantly up and down the street during daytime. Walwain pelted down this road with the pursuing warriors raising a hue-and-cry behind him; after a couple of minutes he reached the forum and the bathhouse where he turned right, darting down the Via Bravonia, the other major road of the city. All around him lights flared in the windows as the shouting of the soldiers awoke the citizenry, but happily the curfew Walwain was breaking ensured that they all remained in their beds. No-one came out to assist the soldiers.

Walwain was aiming to get into the warren of alleyways and small streets to the left of the Via Bravonia, through which, after shaking off the pursuit, he hoped to reach the *Golden Grasshopper*, which lay near to the city wall, at the far end of the Via Londinia. But as he hurried down the street, easily outpacing the palace guards, a patrol of warriors charged out of a side street - to the left.

He rushed past them before they could stop him and ran on down the shadow-hung street, but now he was cut off from the inn, and their pursuit would force him into a rapidly narrowing corner of the city. He sped now towards the Porta Sabrina, the main gate, beyond which lay the Pons Sabrinae, the bridge across the river. The one thought in his mind was to escape, but rapidly it bore in upon him that there was nothing ahead of him except the city gate - and that would definitely be guarded. If he’d kept his dirk, he might have been able to turn on his pursuers like a hunted boar at the edge of a lake, and gone down in the honourable way of the warriors of old,

surrounded by a ring of dead foes.

But he was unarmed, and helpless.

Then he caught sight of a church ahead of them. Sanctuary! Though Vortigern was a heretic, the folk of Viriconium were devout Christians, like most city-dwellers in the Roman world. Anyone who pursued him into a church and broke its peace would be cursed for all eternity. In a last spurt of strength, the mighty Pictish runner ran towards the church door.

He banged desperately on the hard oaken planks as the warriors clanked rapidly towards him. He felt convinced that this was how he would die, hanging from the door-ring of a Southland church. But then he heard the slipping of bolts and a creaking of hinges, and the doors were opening inwards.

He fell into the church at the feet of a dark-robed, hollow-eyed man.

‘Save me, Father,’ he gasped. ‘Give me sanctuary!’

The priest turned commandingly to the nearing soldiers. ‘This man has begged sanctuary from me,’ he called. ‘It is my duty to protect him. Leave now or the curse of God will go with you.’

‘No, Father!’ growled the leader. ‘The man’s a heathen Pict! There’s a rumour that they’re attacking the city. This man must have been a spy. Hand him over to us.’

‘I’m no heathen!’ Walwain shouted, as he struggled to his feet, careful to stay within the church porch. ‘I come from Walweitha!’

The priest nodded, and called out to the guards. ‘It is true - the Picts of Walweitha have been Christian since the days of the Emperor Magnus Maximus. Now go your ways in peace, and look to protect the city from these raiders.’ Grumbling, the blood-hungry guards turned and departed. Walwain followed the priest into the church.

It was dark inside the nave until the priest, now silent and sombre, lit a pair of candles. He turned to his charge.

‘Man of blood,’ he said quietly, ‘I will give you sanctuary. It is my Christian duty. But in return, I hope that you will satisfy my curiosity.’

Walwain folded his arms. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘When will the Pictish force attack the city?’ the priest enquired. ‘And why have you come here before them?’

Walwain laughed bitterly. ‘There’s no army at my back,’ he sneered. ‘I’m an outcast. An exile. Through the machinations of your king.’

‘Then what do you want in Viriconium?’ the priest asked. ‘You may tell me in all confidentiality.’

Walwain was about to reply, when he shivered. ‘Can’t we go somewhere warmer?’ he asked.

Nodding sombrely, the priest led him away.

‘You realise that to seek personal revenge is a sin?’ asked the priest, who had introduced himself as Marcellus, after Walwain explained his mission. ‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord.’

Walwain shrugged casually.

‘Abbot Sulpicius, who taught me my catechism, told me that we are born into a world of sin,’ he said. He smiled slightly. ‘I doubt one more sin will make much difference.’

Marcellus became animated. ‘That’s just what is wrong with the nonsense Augustine spouts!’ he said, going red in the face. He calmed himself, and went on. ‘You see, you’ve been led astray! There are priests in Rome, whose lies have spread across the Empire and beyond, who tell us that Adam’s sin cursed Man from the beginning, and that Christus’ death was a sacrifice to atone for it! They say that we

are doomed from the beginning, and only through good works can we attain salvation.'

Walwain shrugged again. He had never really listened to the monks; the perils of Hell had stuck in his mind, but he found the minutiae of salvation incomprehensible. He was a man of action - much of it sinful, he would grudgingly admit, though he honestly couldn't see why priests were so opposed to fighting and fornication. These intellectual abstractions meant nothing to him.

'So what is the truth, as you see it?' he asked, for politeness' sake. After all, the man had saved him from painful death at the hands of the soldiers. He was well within his rights to hold forth about his personal hobbies.

'Through the grace of God,' Marcellus began, 'anyone who performs virtuous deeds can enter the Kingdom. Adam sinned, and so did many of his descendants. But Christ, the 'second Adam' of the Augustinians, showed us the way by his example! God didn't sacrifice his Son, like a pagan! He lived and died in this world to show how one may escape Satan's snares...'

Walwain smiled to himself. He had never been one to evade temptation - though he had battled demons in his time. 'But what's the difference?' he asked. 'What does all this mean to me, or anyone else who isn't a priest? What does it matter to us how you interpret religion?'

The priest looked affronted. 'It matters a great deal, in this world and beyond,' he said sternly. 'Your soul is at stake...'

'I'm sorry,' said Walwain, smiling insincerely. 'But I'm a sinful, worldly man. That means little to me.'

Marcellus leaned forward excitedly. 'And you don't see the implications on a mundane level? But it's obvious! If it was as the Roman theologians say - that apostate Manichean and his crew of scribblers - it would justify Rome's right to empery of the world! The heresy of predestination they preach is designed for the oppressive tyrant Rome has become - the tyrannical picture they paint of God reflects and justifies the actions of whichever usurper wears the purple at the time.

'The Empire is the work of Satan, and it crumbles as we rapidly approach Armageddon - it is over forty years since Rome, mother of cities, was sacked by the Goths, and it is clear to all right-thinking men that the end times are near. Only the faithful will survive the Final Days, and if we are to be with them then we must be independent of Rome. If we accept that we are all doomed by the sin of Adam, and only the Roman church can save us, then we are halfway to accepting Roman domination of the world, and bending our neck submissively to the Satanic rulers. But if what Pelagius says is true, then we are free to work out our own salvation, to live as individuals, free from Rome...'

'This is what I told Vortigern, when he was a young man. That is why he threw out the Roman Count and set up his own state, independent of the Empire, just as his father-in-law Magnus Maximus once did - but this time carving a kingdom from the crumbling Empire with the highest of motives in mind, not mere personal aggrandisement. It was to be a holy country, free from the machinations of Satan.... But for our sins, God sent us the Saxon Terror.'

'You're a Pelagian?' Walwain asked. 'I've heard of your kind. Heretics, the monks say. Didn't Bishop Germanus chase you out years ago?'

'The Romans certainly tried to reassert nominal control,' Marcellus agreed. 'But Vortigern supported us, and we merely went underground until Germanus departed.'

'Vortigern!' snarled Walwain. He shook his head in disgust.

The priest sighed. 'Many people feel that way about him, even those whose

fathers didn't die in the revolution,' he replied sadly. 'I understand why. I prefer to avoid him myself, these days. But when he was young, he was such an idealist! He overthrew the corrupt establishment to form a truly Christian kingdom! But the Plague, and the Picts, and then the Saxons, and finally his sons' rebellion against him, have all weakened him; he's become paranoid, intolerant, cynical. He's put away his wife for a woman of the pagans. Rumour says he only believes in magic these days.

'Sometimes I think he's lost to the Faith entirely.'

Walwain stared at the priest. He felt he was beginning to understand his enemy. Vortigern had not always been evil. Even when he put Walwain's father to death, the end had perhaps justified the means. But later he had turned corrupt, evil, tyrannical - demonic. He could have been the ruler of a sinless country, but the way he had gone about creating the new Britannia perfectly justified his later troubles. And now it was up to Walwain to remove the tyrant! His desire to kill the man had only been increased by these revelations.

The holy kingdom of Britannia must be purged so that it could enter that other Kingdom beyond all worldly ones, spotless and sinless.

To be continued...

Retribution by Gavin Chappell

'Come in, Mr. Ray.'

He entered the white-walled room with something like terror clutching at him. Swallowing nervously, he blinked at the psychiatrist.

'Er... yes, yes of course,' Ray replied. Inwardly, he cursed. This wasn't like him.

'Now, if you'd lie down here, and tell me what you wanted to see me about.' The psychiatrist was a tall, thin, unhealthy man who carried himself in a manner part arrogant, part obsequious. As Ray sat down uncomfortably on the couch, two enormous eyes behind convex lensed glasses fixed him with a curious gaze.

'I believe you have suffered some kind of breakdown,' the psychiatrist prompted, glancing at his clipboard.

Ray frowned at him.

'Who told you that?' he demanded. 'Nonsense! I... I... it isn't true... I just...'

But as the psychiatrist silently returned his stare, Ray caught a hold of himself. He turned away.

After a minute or two, he began to speak.

‘This must sound stupid,’ he began. ‘I am of the firm belief that’ - he laughed nervously - ‘that a hitman is after me. Now, for a man in my position this is unlikely. The whole idea must sound like galloping paranoia to you, but... there it is.’ He paused.

‘Go on,’ said the psychiatrist. ‘Do you have any idea where this belief, this delusion, stems from?’

‘Yes.’ The patient swallowed. He concentrated on the wall in front of him.

‘It began at school. I was in the fourth or fifth form... No, I’m wrong - it was the sixth form. In the first year of the sixth form I was re-sitting my exams, having made an unholy mess of them in the fifth form. This meant I had plenty of spare time for once. And it was during one of these free periods that it began.

‘I forget precisely why, but for some reason I had been up on the first floor, and I was just heading down the stairs into the entrance hall. On the far side, a boy was standing, studying a noticeboard. He would have been beneath my notice normally, but something made me glance over at him. As I did so, he swung round and - well, he seemed to be pretending to aim a gun at me. A small, ginger-haired, thin young lad in a school uniform, for no apparent reason training an imaginary gun on me. I smiled, bemused, and walked across the hall to the far side, shaking my head as he swung round to keep his gun trained on me.’ Ray stopped, his throat dry again.

The psychiatrist noticed sweat had broken out on his patient’s fleshy brow. His face was white, and his hands were fumbling nervously at the sides of the couch.

‘I appreciated the absurdity of it all, and treated it as no more than a weird schoolboy joke. At the time I was very pleased with my new-found maturity, and a little contemptuous of the lower school.

‘So, I just laughed it off.

‘A few days later, I was in the entrance hall again, at lunchtime. The hall bustled with schoolchildren buying snacks from the tuck-shop and being ushered outside by the prefects. I was chatting with another sixth former by the foot of the steps. I think we were looking out for someone, and that was why I turned round.

‘The thin, ginger-haired boy was standing just behind me, with his imaginary gun.

‘I just looked at him.

‘My friend saw him too, and spoke rather condescendingly to him, asking him if he was going to shoot me. The boy said that he was a hitman, and he was going to shoot me, but he was waiting for some bullets. While this was going on, I just stood there, tongue-tied, amused by the weirdness of it, but also feeling - well, disturbed, I suppose.’

‘And you see this as the root of your paranoia?’ asked the psychiatrist, toying with an unlit cigarette. ‘Did you have any other traumatic experiences at the time? Perhaps you may have forgotten them, or relegated them to the darker corners of your psyche.’

‘This was the beginning of it,’ Ray replied. ‘But there’s more.’

‘I stayed in the sixth form for a year, and all the while - about once a month - I’d see him, with his hands held as if he was training a gun on me. I used to worry about him, and I wondered if he had any friends.’

‘I could never speak to him; I suppose I was just struck dumb by the whole weirdness of it. Anyway, I secretly enjoyed it - it was just so bizarre.’

The psychiatrist lit up, filling the room with sweet smelling, expensive smoke.

‘I this all you can tell me?’ he asked.

‘All? All? No, I told you - this was just the start.’

‘It was towards the end of the lower sixth that I began to believe that the boy was a ghost...’ said Ray. His face was pale. The psychiatrist raised an eyebrow. Ray smiled, a little embarrassed. ‘He was certainly haunting me,’ he said. ‘But I still couldn’t work out why he’d picked on me. It was only then that I... I remembered the first year... Oh god.’

‘Yes?’

‘Oh, it was nothing,’ said Ray dismissively. ‘I got mixed up in some nonsense with Ouija boards, you know the sort of thing kids get up to. After a while, we became convinced that we’d summoned up the spirit of a former pupil, and the game began to get a bit serious - we were convinced that the boy wanted something, and we tried to provide it. There was one boy, a friend of mine, who was the real ringleader... But he was asked to leave the school in the end, and afterwards everything calmed down. We left the ghosts well alone, and gave them nothing.’

‘This was years before. It’s probably irrelevant.’ But the patient was shaking.

‘But you feel there must be some kind of connection?’

‘No, no, it was something I just remembered now. I don’t know why.’

‘But the business with the kid continued until I left school. On the last day, I saw him again. This time, I spoke to him.’

‘I demanded to know why he kept on doing this, and he said.... “They’re coming... The bullets... Some day soon, or maybe not so soon - but I’m going to finish you off one day, when you think you’re on top of it all...” I just stared at him, then hurried off. By then I was starting to get pretty paranoid. But then I left, and got a job in the city, a lovely wife, and three equally lovely children.’

'I am now thirty-four, and until a few days ago, I'd forgotten all about this.'

'Until a few days ago, you say.'

Ray took a deep breath.

'Could I have a glass of water, please?'

The psychiatrist nodded, and went to the sink. Filling a glass with water, he stared out of the window. It was getting dark.

He returned to the patient and handed him a glass. Ray drank.

'I was out shopping,' he said suddenly, putting the glass down. 'I was with my wife. We were in the Precinct, just coming out of a shop. I heard something, I don't know what - a whispering? A rustling? - but it made me turn round. I could see nothing out of the ordinary, just someone standing there... But then I recognised him.'

'The boy?'

'The boy indeed! He hadn't changed! He was just the same as he'd been twenty years ago! He stood there in the middle of the deserted walkway, and although it was some way off, I could see that he was holding something.'

'I became aware of my wife speaking to me, asking me what I was staring at. She couldn't see him. Then he turned and vanished round a corner.'

Ray was silent.

'So you decided to get help?' asked the psychiatrist.

Ray nodded.

'I remember now that when we all placed our hands on the glass in the circle of letters, I had heard a rustling that made me look over my shoulder for no reason - and it was then that I thought I saw the dark figure in the shadows. Then it happened again, when I first saw the boy! He's tracked me down after all these years, and he's going to kill me!'

'Calm down, man! You're becoming irrational!' said the psychiatrist sharply, disturbed. In a few seconds the debonair, if slightly nervous, Mr. Ray had transformed into a frothing madman. At the psychiatrist's words, he sat back, calming.

There was a sound from outside, like the rustle of leaves.

'What was that?' Ray demanded. The psychiatrist shot a glance over his shoulder, towards the window.

'Nothing!' he said suddenly, laying a hand on him. 'J-just stay there... it's nothing.' The stammer he had taken such pains to eradicate had returned. Nothing in

his experience or his reading had prepared him for this.

‘What is it?’ Ray shouted. He tore away the psychiatrist’s restraining hand, and leapt from the couch to stare....

At the window.

He was standing at the window, the ginger-haired boy, in his outdated school uniform. He was cradling something in his hands.

Ray froze, unable to move, as the boy pulled the trigger...

Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller by Lord Dunsany

When Thangobrind the jeweller heard the ominous cough, he turned at once upon that narrow way. A thief was he, of very high repute, being patronized by the lofty and elect, for he stole nothing smaller than the Moomoo’s egg, and in all his life stole only four kinds of stone--the ruby, the diamond, the emerald, and the sapphire; and, as jewellers go, his honesty was great.

Now there was a Merchant Prince who had come to Thangobrind and had offered his daughter’s soul for the diamond that is larger than the human head and was to be found on the lap of the spider-idol, Hlo-hlo, in his temple of Moun-ga-ling; for he had heard that Thangobrind was a thief to be trusted.

Thangobrind oiled his body and slipped out of his shop, and went secretly through byways, and got as far as Snarp, before anybody knew that he was out on business again or missed his sword from its place under the counter. Thence he moved only by night, hiding by day and rubbing the edges of his sword, which he called Mouse because it was swift and nimble. The jeweller had subtle methods of travelling; nobody saw him cross the plains of Zid; nobody saw him come to Mursk or Tlun. O, but he loved shadows! Once the moon peeping out unexpectedly from a tempest had betrayed an ordinary jeweller; not so did it undo Thangobrind: the watchman only saw a crouching shape that snarled and laughed: “‘Tis but a hyena,” they said. Once in the city of Ag one of the guardians seized him, but Thangobrind was oiled and slipped from his hand; you scarcely heard his bare feet patter away. He knew that the Merchant Prince awaited his return, his little eyes open all night and glittering with greed; he knew how his daughter lay chained up and screaming night and day. Ah, Thangobrind knew. And had he not been out on business he had almost allowed himself one or two little laughs. But business was business, and the diamond that he

sought still lay on the lap of Hlo-hlo, where it had been for the last two million years since Hlo-hlo created the world and gave unto it all things except that precious stone called Dead Man's Diamond. The jewel was often stolen, but it had a knack of coming back again to the lap of Hlo-hlo. Thangobrind knew this, but he was no common jeweller and hoped to outwit Hlo-hlo, perceiving not the trend of ambition and lust and that they are vanity.

How nimbly he threaded his way through the pits of Snood!--now like a botanist, scrutinising the ground; now like a dancer, leaping from crumbling edges. It was quite dark when he went by the towers of Tor, where archers shoot ivory arrows at strangers lest any foreigner should alter their laws, which are bad, but not to be altered by mere aliens. At night they shoot by the sound of the strangers' feet. O, Thangobrind, Thangobrind, was ever a jeweller like you! He dragged two stones behind him by long cords, and at these the archers shot. Tempting indeed was the snare that they set in Woth, the emeralds loose-set in the city's gate; but Thangobrind discerned the golden cord that climbed the wall from each and the weights that would topple upon him if he touched one, and so he left them, though he left them weeping, and at last came to Theth. There all men worship Hlo-hlo; though they are willing to believe in other gods, as missionaries attest, but only as creatures of the chase for the hunting of Hlo-hlo, who wears Their halos, so these people say, on golden hooks along his hunting-belt. And from Theth he came to the city of Moug and the temple of Moug-ga-ling, and entered and saw the spider-idol, Hlo-hlo, sitting there with Dead Man's Diamond glittering on his lap, and looking for all the world like a full moon, but a full moon seen by a lunatic who had slept too long in its rays, for there was in Dead Man's Diamond a certain sinister look and a boding of things to happen that are better not mentioned here. The face of the spider-idol was lit by that fatal gem; there was no other light. In spite of his shocking limbs and that demoniac body, his face was serene and apparently unconscious.

A little fear came into the mind of Thangobrind the jeweller, a passing tremor--no more; business was business and he hoped for the best. Thangobrind offered honey to Hlo-hlo and prostrated himself before him. Oh, he was cunning! When the priests stole out of the darkness to lap up the honey they were stretched senseless on the temple floor, for there was a drug in the honey that was offered to Hlo-hlo. And Thangobrind the jeweller picked Dead Man's Diamond up and put it on his shoulder and trudged away from the shrine; and Hlo-hlo the spider-idol said nothing at all, but he laughed softly as the jeweller shut the door. When the priests awoke out of the grip of the drug that was offered with the honey to Hlo-hlo, they rushed to a little secret room with an outlet on the stars and cast a horoscope of the thief. Something that they saw in the horoscope seemed to satisfy the priests.

It was not like Thangobrind to go back by the road by which he had come. No, he went by another road, even though it led to the narrow way, night-house and spider-forest.

The city of Moug went towering by behind him, balcony above balcony, eclipsing half the stars, as he trudged away with his diamond. Though when a soft pittering as of velvet feet arose behind him he refused to acknowledge that it might be what he feared, yet the instincts of his trade told him that it is not well when any noise whatever follows a diamond by night, and this was one of the largest that had ever

come to him in the way of business. When he came to the narrow way that leads to spider-forest, Dead Man's Diamond feeling cold and heavy, and the velvety footfall seeming fearfully close, the jeweller stopped and almost hesitated. He looked behind him; there was nothing there. He listened attentively; there was no sound now. Then he thought of the screams of the Merchant Prince's daughter, whose soul was the diamond's price, and smiled and went stoutly on. There watched him, apathetically, over the narrow way, that grim and dubious woman whose house is the Night.

Thangobrind, hearing no longer the sound of suspicious feet, felt easier now. He was all but come to the end of the narrow way, when the woman listlessly uttered that ominous cough.

The cough was too full of meaning to be disregarded. Thangobrind turned round and saw at once what he feared. The spider-idol had not stayed at home. The jeweller put his diamond gently upon the ground and drew his sword called Mouse. And then began that famous fight upon the narrow way in which the grim old woman whose house was Night seemed to take so little interest. To the spider-idol you saw at once it was all a horrible joke. To the jeweller it was grim earnest. He fought and panted and was pushed back slowly along the narrow way, but he wounded Hlo-hlo all the while with terrible long gashes all over his deep, soft body till Mouse was slimy with blood. But at last the persistent laughter of Hlo-hlo was too much for the jeweller's nerves, and, once more wounding his demoniac foe, he sank aghast and exhausted by the door of the house called Night at the feet of the grim old woman, who having uttered once that ominous cough interfered no further with the course of events. And there carried Thangobrind the jeweller away those whose duty it was, to the house where the two men hang, and taking down from his hook the left-hand one of the two, they put that venturesome jeweller in his place; so that there fell on him the doom that he feared, as all men know though it is so long since, and there abated somewhat the ire of the envious gods.

And the only daughter of the Merchant Prince felt so little gratitude for this great deliverance that she took to respectability of a militant kind, and became aggressively dull, and called her home the English Riviera, and had platitudes worked in worsted upon her tea-cosy, and in the end never died, but passed away at her residence.
