



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

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

For details of previous editions, please go to the Archive.

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk).

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

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### **This Edition**

***This week's cover illustration is "Asesino" by Gonzalez Canedo. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.***

**Editorial by Gavin Chappell**

**Are There Vampires in America? by Chuck Borgia - The virgin shore of America lent itself well to an infective invasion of those ghouls of the cannibalistic persuasion... SURREALISM**

**Patterns by Michael Lizarraga - An obsession since childhood... HORROR**

**Ayame's Love - Part Seven by Thomas C Hewitt - Who would challenge a man whose cheeks had lines like the string wrapping around uncooked ham and so obviously were the work of knives?... EPIC POEM**

**A Picture from Harriett - Part Three by John L Campbell - "Give me a location on 17." There was a long stretch of silence, and then Kathy's voice came across sounding strained. "Same place as that LaCroix business last year." .... HORROR**

**A Child's Nightmare by Hollis Whitlock - Jeff awakes in darkness to the cries of a child. HORROR**

**Reactors by Nathan Rowark - The sentence is unspoken, but drifts above the head... POETRY**

**The House of Skulls - Part Six by Gavin Chappell - Yeduza leads her barbarian allies against the Kikwenzi... FANTASY/HORROR**

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

## Schlock! Classic Serial: After London - Part Five by Richard Jefferies - The geography of the post apocalyptic world... SCIENCE FICTION

### EDITORIAL

This week's edition has a distinctly surreal edge with two of three new writers contributing hallucinatory, nightmare stories: *Are There Vampires In America?* by Chuck Borgia, and Hollis Whitlock's *A Child's Nightmare*. We also have a story entitled *Patterns* from Michael Lizarraga, a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and martial artist.

We also have more poetry from Nathan Rowark, the conclusion of John L Campbell's story *A Picture from Harriett. Ayame's Love* and *Varney the Vampyre* both continue while *The House of Skulls* reaches its penultimate episode. Meanwhile, *After London* reaches the end of its first book, which introduces the post apocalyptic world: next week, the story itself begins.

Still accepting submission for our [anniversary](#) edition!

-Gavin Chappell

ARE THERE VAMPIRES IN AMERICA? by Chuck Borgia

Considering the Lord tooketh but gave them haggis I rue not the Scottish maggots that had dragged me to that blighted hole for disease control. The drams of my street trolley delirium trams had left me within an institution for those diseased with the draughts of destitution in the land of Picts and Argyle knicks.

Myself the teller of tales I had found an audience within this asylum of fetid phylums, relating the story of the guzzling of the witches' wine preceded by the marriage and subsequent murder of the sacrificial swine. After an abundance of hoos and haws and the sticking of craws, I related a horrific history of vampires in America that silenced all those not given to abject histrionics.

"In olden times of Crusades and head cheese marmalades an orgiastic cult of material malfeasance manifested in a dying city by the sea - shrines to parasitic fleas and the undead gods of Tripoli gave rise to a denominational darkness, a bloodsucking reckoning for organic red paint beckoning. Centuries later, these phantoms of flayed flesh found themselves more drunken than drinking and relocated to a land of abundant maternity and potential plasma draining infirmity.

The virgin shore of America lent itself well to an infective invasion of those ghouls of the cannibalistic persuasion, as vampiric conquistadors in their Catholic evasions and occultist equations invaded a nation to plant seeds for future demonic occasions. A successful rebellion occurred after the discovery by a mestizo that the bleeding red chorizo served to Spanish aristocrats in their crimson machismo was made of ground-up school girls or the minty white pearls of long dead English earls.

This heretical history of the New World has been lost to damnation, and yet the ancestors of those insular Iberian anomalies still lurk and prey upon derelicts; entitled

archaic monsters still emanating from the districts of the privileged class of elite within those countries of America ranging from Canada to Colombia and beyond, south to reclusive regions of Chilean archipelagos and north to the frozen reaches of the Eskimo."

A disclaimer to all travelers of an international inclination as these original vampires of America still exist and haunt the whorish motels of harlots with particular hubris in the American heartland, even as the proper authorities seek to hide this cancerous horror that has now spread to all continents of the globe.

PATTERNS by Michael Lizarraga

The apartment window was wide and low enough for any willing spectator, and The Watcher, hidden behind shrubbery and a smooth-skinned, light-gray tree trunk, didn't appear that he would be caught by anyone.

He crunched on twigs and pebbles as he approached the closed, curtained window, the noises muddled by the Los Angeles valley traffic behind him. The evening dusk also worked in his favor, though it would take a while for the August heat to cool.

The Watcher was lean and well chiseled, a narrow faced Latino with high cheekbones, tan complexion and a goatee. The 34-year-old wore a security outfit consisting of a beige shirt and green trousers. A uniform he could use to his advantage if caught by anyone. Could say he was "Just patrolling; looking for a suspect", though he was long off duty and far from his job site. He knelt at the window's bottom corner, his head tucked neatly behind the white plaster wall and red dining room curtain, unnoticed by the woman in the kitchen. The Watcher had only two inches of viewing space at the curtain's edge, but that was all the space he needed.

The woman wore a messy apron draped over business attire, working a pot of stew like a restaurant manager subbing for her chef. Smell of chicken, scallion and onion subdued the air. Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street" played from iPod speakers as the woman swayed to the music's rhythm.

She was a petite, 32-year-old Black woman with black and white braided hair, trailing almost to the small of her back. She had smooth cocoa skin, full lips, a long slender nose, and wide, round fish eyes.

She spoke on her cell phone with what The Watcher guessed was a girlfriend, sharing her evening plans. The Watcher gently pressed an ear to the warm glass, clasping the pebbly-textured wall below, listening to her recite to her friend a Facebook message she wrote that day.

"Cooking dinner for a guy: \$32.73. My dinner date being a high-end marketing manager who requests a second date so he could cook you dinner and offer free advice on your start-up company – priceless." The woman laughed.

Then she mentioned a man's name.

"I'll tell Steven you said hello, mamas," she said to her girlfriend.

Steven. The name echoed in The Watcher's head. There was a nauseating jolt in the pit of his stomach. His fingernails clawed the stucco wall like a cat working its scratch-post, everything in his throat now. He watched with moistened eyes as the woman dropped the cell phone into her apron pocket, smiling ear-to-ear, dancing a little more to the song while doing a 360 spin.

The Watcher grimaced, eyes welling as he closed them tightly to whisper an often-repeated prayer. "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...the things I cannot change...the things I cannot change..."

But the crave was powerful, like a relentless rash that kept itching. He wanted her. Now. And now would be his chance – while no one was around. He felt like opening the window. Felt like climbing in.

He opened his eyes. His gaze veered off the dining room window, to the side, to the white wall before him, pale-lit by a neighbor's back porch light. The Watcher studied the wall's plaster design - smooth in parts, mostly rough and bumpy throughout. Its contour lines, together with jutting lumps and circular holes and blemishes, simulated a three-dimensional world globe.

He focused with furrowed brows, and like a curious kid, mentally manipulated the wall tile into images. Characters. People, resembling sketch drawings, having bizarre features with assorted shapes and sizes. One character had what seemed like large hands, tiny legs, and no head. Another had only a face, distorted, no mouth, and only one eyeball. Another, a small faceless head and half-body, having buffed body-builder arms.

It wasn't always walls where he saw the images. Sometimes he would find them in ceilings, or on floors. Other times chairs, or clothing. And they weren't always composed of lines. Sometimes they were dirt stains, or dots, or decorative designs. Any and every place he could form and forge an eye or a head or something that resembled a character.

An obsession since childhood.

He fixated on one particular image, just beside the window. It resembled a cartoon-like face: small, triangular eyes set close together, bulging from the wall. The rest of its face was smoother, having a button nose just beneath the eyes. Further down was a thin, horizontal mouth. He concentrated on the face for some time, as though spellbound. Two children playing cops and robbers in the distance caught his attention, The Watcher glancing up toward them like a puppy or child aroused from a nap.

As he turned back to the wall face, he found a slight alteration: diagonal lines were now at both ends of its horizontal mouth, aimed downward, simulating a frown. The man's brows arched, eyes narrowed, head moved toward the face for closer examination. He was certain the lines were not there before. He peered at the ground, gazed at twigs and weeds for a moment, slightly shook his head and blinked his eyes

to clear his head. He looked back up, refocusing on the character. His head quickly back-jerked as his eyes widened, the bewildered man finding another alteration: set just above the face's triangular eyes were short, thin streaks dipped downward, grazing the eyes, resembling trenched brows. Lines not there before. The face was now a full scowl, glaring angrily.

The Watcher relaxed his face a bit, un-arched his brows, his glare of disarray slipping into one of keenness and understanding. He tucked in his lips, nodded slightly, as though a boy yielding to his father's orders.

The Watcher stood up, wiped sweat off his upper lip with a clammy backhand. Rubbed mud off his pant leg from where he knelt, brushing off a fat funnel-web spider. He looked again at the face before him, seeing it back the way it was before – horizontal, un-frowned mouth with no angry brows and scowl. The Watcher gently placed a palm on the wall-face before him, eyeing it with a gleam of adoration, slightly cocking his head. He slowly backed away, backed into the smooth tree trunk that stood a few feet from the window.

Then he retreated.

\* \* \*

"I've never been a drinker, smoker or user," said the speaker. "That was the one good thing about having a Pentecostal mother."

Group members chuckled, an ensemble of seven men and two women, late twenties to late fifties, seated in a somewhat organized circle, most casually dressed.

"But my addiction," the narrow-face Latino continued, throat making a lump-glump sound, "is the equivalent to a heroin addict."

A first-time visitor would never guess the upstairs, bedroom-size hall was part of a church, its blue scraped-stained walls decorated with only a beat up bulletin board and a Spanish supermarket calendar. The one working light bulb gave off a dungeon-like aura, while two barely functioning fans fought the summer-sauna heat.

The speaker, wearing a beige shirt with patches that read "Security" along the upper sleeves, rested his tan, tone forearms on his knees, chiseling crusty mud off his green uniform trousers. "Like many other addicts, my problem started early. Age six. I won't share all the twisted things I've done throughout my life, but let's just say, it took less than 20 minutes with a therapist to be referred here."

A small smile formed past the speaker's black goatee like sunlight through a raincloud. "A year ago, I balked at this program's definition of sobriety. I thought no man alive could do it.

"But I've come to realize that I can do nothing, that I am powerless over this problem of mine. Surrendering to the program's standards is what works for me."

He held out the One-Year Chip he received moments before. A small, square, silver metal key chain with an etched logo of a rising sun. “Thanks to this program, working the steps, a terrific sponsor, and my higher power...” The speaker glanced at the floor. “...I can experience true freedom and confidence. Thank you for letting me share and celebrating my one year of sobriety with me.

“I’m Louis, and I’m a sexaholic.”

Claps and cheers followed. Across the circle was Robert, a stocky, fifty-something man with glasses and salt and pepper hair offering the Pacoima-native Chicano a modest grin. As members responded to Louis’s testimony, the honored man stared at the hickory hardwood floor. Studied it, searching for images.

The floor had long rectangular planks, ranging from butterscotch to camel colors, each with its own unique design. One particular plank had lines with jagged arches, each line repeating the other, each having what resembled a head and broad shoulders - a growing creature or monster, like Dr. Jekyll or Dr. Banner.

He began hearing low whispers from the floor figure, noises only audible to him. Fragmented words, as though searching for a radio frequency. He was soon able to decipher clear phrases. It was the usual way he listened to them, sometimes many fragmented voices at once. The Line People, he often called them.

\* \* \*

“How long were you at that window last night?” Robert asked the younger man who sat opposite from him, his plump forearms folded on the smooth, marble table before his coffee.

Louis quick-glanced around their dining area. Except for a mother with kids, bus boys clinging silverware and smell of smoky bacon, Samuel’s was desolate as usual. Which made the restaurant a favorite one-on-one spot for Louis and Robert after meetings.

Louis turned back to Robert. As he answered, Louis’s eyes shifted up and to the right. “I’d say about...”

“I don’t want to hear ‘I’d say about’,” Robert interrupted, studying Louis’s eyes, noticing him accessing the creative centers of his brain. Tricks Robert learned from his other program, *Alcoholics Anonymous*

Louis paused, meeting Robert’s heavy gaze. “Two hours,” Louis replied, straight faced. Robert was always firm, yet fair with him, the kind of “ring man” he needed in his corner.

“First time since getting sober?” Robert queried. Horizontal lines formed on his aging forehead, arching like four long-winged bats stacked on top of each other.

Louis dipped his head.

“Ex-girlfriend,” Robert said. “Kim, right?”

Again, the guard nodded.

Robert looked upon his sponsee with blue empathetic eyes, into Louis's brown eyes that hid a deep mystery.

"I'm glad you got out of there, Louis. I know it wasn't easy." Robert stared into his coffee, then back at Louis. "So let's talk about your obsession with this girl."

Louis ran his fingers through his hair while briefly closing his eyes, releasing some breath. He hung one arm over the booth's backrest, peering at the table's burgundy/black/beige/gray-colored design, composed of small square and circular speckle-blotches, resembling turkey stuffing, or a drug store checkout counter.

Eyes on the table, Louis replied in a low voice, "I thought her and I would stay together." Louis glared off, spotting a Black waitress, then looked back at Robert.

"Finally a chance to date a good girl, and she breaks up with me just like that."

Louis shook his head, eyes reddening, swimming. "Then starts dating this joker. Steven. I see their pictures online. All kinds of 'em."

He folded his arms, looking away as he continued. "S'posed to be some big shot marketing director. She's an account executive. Guess it fits."

A tear trickled down Louis's high cheekbone, onto his gold, patched security badge sewn along the shirt's left breast area.

Robert gently shifted his head so that he and the crestfallen man regained eye contact. "Are you connecting with your higher power, Louis?"

He had introduced Louis to the concept a year before – the need of surrendering to a higher power in combating addiction. Robert never knew or asked what Louis's higher power specifically entailed – nor did he care. So long as he surrendered to whatever He, it or they were.

Louis cleared his throat. Peering down at the table, cuffing his mouth, he uttered softly, "I'm trying, Rob."

Robert nodded subtly. He checked his watch. "Gotta get goin'. Wife's got something on the stove." He placed a tip on the table and unfastened himself from the booth.

As Louis watched Robert put on his coat, he asked him bluntly, "You ever question the fairness of your higher power?"

Robert's forehead bunched, caught off guard. "My higher power's...fairness?"

"You ever wonder how he, she, they – or whatever your higher power is – can allow bad things to happen? Without any justice to those who do harm?"



Robert looked at Louis as though figuring out a math problem. “Justice. I see.”

Setting an elbow on the booth’s backrest, Robert said, “You know, Louis, I think in matters dealing with your higher power, it’s safe to say that we need to embrace mystery.”

Louis nodded, poker-faced.

“Then again,” Robert added, peering over bifocals, “justice was met in my higher power two millenniums ago on wood.”

Both men shared a half-grin.

Robert shifted back to a serious demeanor, placed a hand on Louis’s shoulder, looked him in the face. In a father-like manner, said, “You’re better than last night. Mm-kay?”

The Latin man dipped his head with a single blink, folded in his lips. The men embraced, and Louis watched his friend leave the restaurant.

Louis remained at the booth, twirling his One-Year Chip before him, twirling it around and around to view the etched sunrise and the inscription on the other side: “You’re Worth It!”

He met Kim in February of that year, through a mutual friend who knew Louis’s taste for Black women. He being Mexican, this sort of cultural clash excited him. “Hot/Chocolate”, he often called it, once even writing a poem about it. To Louis, Latinos were highly emotional and passionate, a bill he clearly fit – in spades. Black women, according to Louis, were strong, independent and “go-getters”, Kim being all these. A USC Journalism grad who made her way out of the South Los Angeles jungle she grew up in. A businesswoman who gave a sweet, sensitive and cute security guard a chance. And after two months, dumped him, leaving him with no clue as to why.

He now needed his higher power more than ever.

He looked at the table, searched out an image within its design. Sorted out a face, having rectangular, white-burgundy eyes. Its mouth was a crooked half-grin, composed of two white-burgundy squares that drew closely under its left eye. The rest of the face was simply beige/black/gray square and circular speckle-blotches.

The guard glanced at a teenage girl in a booth across from his, immersed in a Trigonometry textbook. She looked about 16 or 17. Pretty. A light-skinned Latina wearing a jean jacket, black shirt and pink skirt.

Louis’s eyes returned to the table face. He winced, noticing a change: the face’s white-burgundy mouth had more squares, its half-grin now a u-shaped smile, resembling a kid with missing teeth or braces. He sipped his coffee as he stared.

He once shared his secret Line People phenomenon with his doctor, a therapist he saw once a week for his addiction. He was curious to hear the doctor's thoughts about his unique higher power; if he would be quick to mention schizophrenia or some other psychiatric condition. After listening, the therapist could come up with nothing but to simply remind his patient of the brain's natural ability to create delusions. Create movement and sounds in objects through heavy concentration, objects such as clouds or paintings. In Louis's case, wall/ceiling/floor characters.

Louis agreed. To a point.

There were moments, however, Louis was certain The Line People weren't just delusions. A contour head suddenly positioned differently, for example. The raise of a tile-face's brow, on other occasions. Grins and scowls he was positive weren't there before. He once heard a voice so real and life-like, he nearly fainted. Periodic gestures and nuances that encouraged his faith in them.

Lately, his love for his higher power was weakening. He now had to examine the walls within himself. Search inside, as would a surgeon carving into a cancer patient. Uncover whatever prowled the basement of his soul and hindered his surrender to them.

\* \* \*

Six-year-old Louis sat at the edge of his bed, in his Incredible Hulk T-shirt, waiting for The Boss. Trembling, like a skinny Chihuahua, drying sweaty palms on a Return of the Jedi bedspread. Tasting the morning's Cheerios from his stomach.

He stared at the beige wall across the room. Studied its plaster design, composed of assorted lines, streaks, stains and holes, manipulating them into bizarre images. One character had a gigantic square head – like Frankenstein's monster – with no face. Its body was undefined. Sketchy, rather, like a cartoonist's rough draft. Or a ghost-like silhouette of someone caught amid a beige sandstorm. A tall, lanky NBA player (though only one-foot tall) with apelike arms, one reaching up to shoot a basket.

The boy fixated on the figure, moving only to blink. As if seeing beyond the wall. Then, like a light shadow or a silent cartoon projected along the wall, the character's head moved, shifting soundlessly so that it faced Louis (though faceless). Louis grimaced with bulged eyes, the figure pulling its other lanky arm out of the "snowstorm". Shifted its baseball-shaped hand side-to-side, offering the boy a friendly wave. The character performed back flips, making the boy grin. No Face is what he called it.

Louis gazed at the ceiling. A white, acoustic popcorn ceiling, like a cottage cheese-snow storm, or a meteoroid. Louis concentrated on the ceiling. Then, amid the cottage cheese, appeared a face. A crude face, with small, round pitch-black eyes, nose and mouth. The character seemed to have a plank or pole stuck diagonally through its head. The face gave the child a friendly wink with one black round eye, and like the "silent film" projected along the wall, it yanked out the plank from its head, picking its nose with it. The child giggled.

Then, The Boss's voice. The boy jerked once hearing it.

"Knock, knock, little guy," she said in sort of song, standing halfway behind the door, her smile a ruby-red, ripe melon.

She was called The Boss because... that was what she wanted him to call her.

Her straight, long parted red hair draped half her face like a curtain, and The Boss tucked it behind her ear so she could fully view the boy. A tall, slender 16-year-old, The Boss wore a turquoise sweater and a dark blue knee-length skirt. The straight-A student/cheerlead captain/girlfriend of the football captain/daughter of proud parents knelt before Louis, who gave her his usual blank glare, badgered by her sweet/strong perfume.

The Boss looked down a moment, then at the child, her thin face almost skeletal up close. With a mild grin, she touched Louis's smooth-soft chin, gently, then rubbed his young cheek with the back of her cold, bony knuckles. In a calm, whispery voice, she said, "Baby-sitter wants you to smile more." She slightly lowered her head, placed one hand under Louis's chin to raise his head a tad so that their eyes met. "Kay?"

Louis nodded, feigning a smile, noticing how The Boss's red lashes sort of blended with her freckly, milky-white skin when she blinked.

As his shoes came off, Louis gazed at the beige wall across the room. Stared at No Face. Hoped the character would somehow, someway, climb out of the wall; turn seven feet tall; take The Boss away. Or take *him* away. It didn't. Didn't even move amongst the wall as before. Just watched Louis with that faceless face.

The boy was laid on his back, now looking at the ceiling.

Louis wished the ceiling character with the huge stick in its head would take it out and use it on The Boss. Stick it in *her* head. But like No Face, Stick-Head just stared. Did nothing.

When it was all over, The Boss slowly removed herself from the boy's bed. A lioness viewing the remains of its prey, leaving the carcass for vultures. She fixed herself, and without a word to the bare boy, left the pin-drop quiet room.

He again sat at the edge of the bed, now on his Mickey Mouse mattress cover, staring at both the wall and ceiling characters. The Line People is what he named them that day. There were more of them throughout that summer, to comfort him throughout the many more episodes with The Boss. A treachery too embarrassing to tell his hard-working, single mother.

Louis gazed at the green and dark brown carpet. Saw an image resembling a frog-like face. Sharp nose, enormous eyes, with what appeared to be eyeballs glancing up (not at him). Sort of smiled. He could hear it speak to him, though its lips didn't move. Sounded like someone with a bad strep throat, as it repeated the words, "We're right here beside you" over and over.

\* \* \*

34-year-old Louis rested a palm on the cold restaurant table, over the burgundy/white speckled face and its ample grin. Heard it say in a low, clear tone, “We’re right here beside you”. Attempting to comfort him. As the many other Line People who calm, teach and warn him.

But did nothing to stop The Boss.

Louis sat frozen a while, only blinking. Pondered his earlier question to Robert.

His lips tightened. Brows lowered. Hand clenched to a fist, and as he held it before the face, he witnessed something peculiar happening with the face’s right square eye. It closed, the face apparently winking at Louis, a red eyelid shutting momentarily over the burgundy-white eye, then re-opening.

Louis’s fist shook involuntarily, clenching tighter. Almost in reflex, the angered man pounded the table – pounded the grinning face – creating a terrific Bing. Coffee spewed over the face. Louis backhanded the wall beside him, knocking over condiments.

A few stares, Louis ignoring other patrons as he massaged his hands. He turned back up his mug and a saltshaker, sopping the coffee with a napkin. He noticed salt spread along the table, and emptied out more salt, over the face. With an index finger, he began writing within the layout of salt.

“Are you alright?” asked the young woman in the other booth.

Somewhat startled, Louis replied, “Uh, yea. Sure. Just a little shaken up.”

Something about the young woman made Louis want to invite her to his booth. As she joined him, he erased what he had written in the layout of salt, over the table face. An inscription that read, *no justice*.

\* \* \*

Louis reclined in his Toyota Echo, cluttered with magazines and take-out food trash, parked askew out front of an apartment building. He had on a black leather jacket, a wrinkled turquoise T-shirt, and dark muddy jeans. He smelled like dirty socks, and like his car, was badly in need of a bath.

He peered into his visor mirror, examined his face. Ran a dirty, long-nailed hand over unshaved, acne-covered cheeks. Opened his chapped mouth to observe yellow, coffee-stained teeth. Noticed dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes, purple marks streaked along the socket’s outer corners.

In his lap laid a medium sized notebook - his journal. He flipped through past entries, glossing over the past month.

*I'm fired from my job. I was hoping my supervisor wouldn't make a big deal out of that morning he saw the sites on my laptop, but he took it to management.*

*I'm going to the strip club tonight. Afterwards, I think I'll do nothing but watch porn the rest/night.*

He flipped over a few pages.

8/15

*I slept w/ a prostitute today. Feel like crap. What's happening to me? Never did the prostitute thing.*

*I gotta tell Robert. I can't right now, though. The scary thing is...I'm enjoying this.*

He flipped over a few pages.

8/21

*Today I molested a 15-year-old girl. Light-skinned Latina I met @ Samuel's a mth ago. Patty.*

*15 going on 30, that's how they usually are. I convinced her to come to my apartment. She was so frightened. But she couldn't say no.*

*When it was over, she left w/ tears. I can't say I'm sorry. I actually feel pretty good. I told her, "Don't be afraid - I'm gonna give you something you're gonna remember for the rest of your life."*

*I felt good saying that. I still do.*

Louis held his One-Year Chip, twirling it around and around. He flipped backward through the journal pages, toward the front of the book, backtracking a few months. He stopped on a page filled with drawings, sketches he had made of faces and bodies. The Line People. One character had small, round black eyes, nose and mouth, all the same size, with a plank or pole stuck diagonally through its head.

He thought about that one summer with The Boss.

About his rejection from the police department when he was 21 because of a bad shoulder, an injury playing high school football.

About Kim dumping him.

He thought about Robert, whom he missed. Then he remembered his question to Robert.

He began writing over the entire page, over all the drawings and characters, the words *No Existe*<sup>1</sup>[1]

He tore the page out, crumpled it, tossed it out the window. For a moment, Louis stared out that window. “Faces ... in tiles,” he muttered. “Jeez, what was I smokin’?”

Glancing at the silver One-Year Chip, he tossed it out the car. He flipped forward in the journal, to a fresh, blank page. Began writing.

9/5

*At Kim's. Tonight's the night. It'll be fast, but good.*

He put his journal and pen in the glove compartment. Exited the car, into the lush, brisk night.

Louis walked across the clean sidewalk and manicured lawn with an easy gait, weightless. He glanced around as he approached the building, noticing its front sign above that read, *The Woodland Hills Crescent*, though the moon was a full light bulb in the black valley sky peeking around slowly drifting clouds.

He stopped before the apartment, taking a few more peeks around, then slipped behind the shrubbery. Moved between the smooth-skinned, light-gray tree trunk and Kim's dining room window, its red curtain glowing from an inside light.

Louis noticed the cartoon-like face at the side of the window, its triangular eyes bulging from the white stucco wall, its thin horizontal mouth neither smiling nor frowning. He ignored it. Proceeded to the bathroom window.

As he expected, the small window was cracked open. It was a bit higher than the dining window, and as he slid it open, he stood tiptoed and peered into the dark room. A lawn nightlight helped the encroacher observe the general outline of the bathroom, allowed him to see that the dark, spacious room was unoccupied. Soundless as a mime, he grasped the ceil, hoisted himself up, and maneuvered through the window barely big enough for him. He was now totally inside. He stepped across the porcelain floor, to the door, slipping on a black mask and leather gloves. He withdrew a small handgun from his jacket. Placed his other hand on the doorknob.

He halted at the sound of a voice – a man's voice – just outside the bathroom, and twitched when he heard it.

“Kim, do you mind if I use your restroom before we go?”

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<sup>1</sup>[1] Spanish for “Don't Exist”

It was a thick English accent, reminding Louis of one of the Beatles. Of all the nights Louis watched her, Kim had to pick this one to have company.

Louis listened as the man approached the bathroom, gripping his weapon.

“No, bad idea,” Kim said from the kitchen. “Toilet’s messed up. Use the one in my bedroom.”

Louis regained his breath, the man passing the hall bathroom, proceeding to the end of the hallway.

Steven. Had to be.

From pictures he saw, Louis never thought of Steven as English. “Ringo” is what came to his mind.

Five minutes later, Louis listened as Steven reentered the hallway from Kim’s room. The intruder carefully positioned his head at the crack between the door and doorframe, able to see the end of the hallway that led to the front door, living room and kitchen. Watched as Steven joined Kim at the end of the hall. Steven appeared young, younger than Kim, perhaps in his late twenties. He was tall, fair skinned and wore a dark brown blazer with a blue buttoned shirt and dark jeans. Didn’t look like much of a high-end marketing manager to Louis.

As Steven helped Kim with her coat, his date suggested, “I was thinking we could be back here at nine. You down for a DVD?”

Steven sort of ignored the question, examining the elegant Black woman in her purple/lavender summer dress and white sandals.

“If you looked any more gorgeous, you’d be illegal,” said Steven.

Kim gave a whimsical laugh, gave Steven a light kiss, placed a hand on his chest.

Louis wanted to use his gun then and there.

The couple left, and for 10 minutes, Louis remained at the door, a mannequin.

Thoughts scrambled. Emotions zigzagged. He was in total flux, deciding what to do next. The masked man exited the bathroom, sauntered into the hallway. Entered Kim’s bedroom, flicking the light on. The room was quite purple – purple walls, purple carpet, purple bedspread – and smelled of apple-cherry candle fragrance. A collection of stuffed animals avalanched on her bed, and he wondered where the penguin doll was, the one he gave her.

Pulling off his mask, Louis walked to Kim’s desk, positioned in the corner.

Noticed her laptop on the table, turned on, though the screen was black. He moved her mouse, and her Facebook page appeared. He entered her photos page, which he had

not seen over a month, since she had seized being “friends” with him on FB. After she discovered how often Louis visited her page. 40 to 50 times per day, on average

He scrolled down Kim’s many rows of photos, mostly of her and Steven. But toward the bottom of the page were pictures of her during the time she dated Louis (all pictures of Louis had been deleted). He sat and stared and fixated a while on these photos, sliding an index finger slowly along the laptop screen, tracing the curves of her body. Studied her face: big eyes, long nose, large lips. ‘Pronounced features’, Louis called them when first meeting Kim. Almost made him toss her number. But it was these features that now allured him most.

He entered her message box. Scrolled down a lengthy list of names and blurbs, dating as far back as 5 months. He found old messages of her and him writing back and forth, mostly about Louis wanting to know why she dumped him. In the middle of these messages, he found one from one of her girlfriends, Denise. He clicked on this message.

Denise McCray

Is it because of his financial instability that you broke up with him, mamas?

Kim Myers

That’s part of it. But mostly because of his emotional instability.

Denise McCray

?

Kim Myers

When your insecure boyfriend secretly tries setting you up with men he *thinks* you’re interested in just to test your loyalty – there’s a problem.

Denise McCray

Uh, yea, g/f. Wuz definitely time to peace out.

Louis’s mouth clenched in rage as he grabbed the laptop with both hands, ready to throw it across the room. He paused as he held it up, then set it back on the desk. He let out a deep breath, peered at the table, regained his senses. He was unsure who he was angry at most – himself, or Kim. But he was certain he was acting childish.

He walked to her bed, sat at the foot, rested the gun on his lap. Thinking, reconfiguring his initial plans for Kim.

He would wait for her and Steven to return. Order them into the bedroom. Rape Kim in front of Steven. Then blow their brains out.

Yes, that’s what he would do.

\* \* \*

8:05pm. Louis lay on Kim’s bed with the lights off, stuffed animals knocked to the floor, his mask kept in his jacket pocket. Hands clasped behind his head, Louis gazed at the ceiling directly above him, a white acoustic popcorn ceiling paled gray from an outside street light. Like a close-up view of the moon.



For amusement, Louis sorted out an image along the cottage cheese-like material. Formed a round head mounted on a long skinny neck, shown down to its chest. Faced sideways, east, with puckered lips and a carrot nose. Resembled a distorted version of Abe Lincoln from the penny. Reminded him of the types of figures he saw as a kid. Of the figures he saw this past year, the ones he once sought help and comfort from whenever on his own bed or online, tempted with his addiction and fetishes. Characters he once called friends.

“What was I smokin’?” he muttered.

He half-grinned, expelled air from his nose in smirk. Louis closed his sleep-hungry eyes, nestling his head on Kim’s cloud-like pillow. Listened to the distant valley traffic of cars and freeways, reminiscent to the sounds of oceans and seashells.

He was aroused moments later by low-soft whispers. Fragmented words, as though searching for a radio frequency. Eyes still closed, he heard a calm, clear quiet voice.

*We’re right here beside you.*

The voice could have been a man or a woman’s, and sounded eerily distant and close.

There were noises from the ceiling straight above him, like bugs, scuttle-crawling. Louis opened his eyes. Looked at the ceiling, at Distorted Abe, where the noises were. His face tightened as he saw that the image was now faced west. Then, as though made of lines of black ants prancing along the ceiling, as if an invisible artist was somehow manipulating the image, the face began moving.

It turned toward Louis, slowly, like a 3-D clay-animated cartoon – without a screen. Turned until it completely faced him, its pitch black, doll-like eyes blinking, face colored and covered with the same white-grayed texture as the ceiling. Louis’s brows trenched and his eyes flashed with fear, the face fixating on the stunned man as though waiting on him to speak. His muscles had turned to water, all except for his heart, which was slamming into his throat. Fists and teeth clenched as sheer adrenaline pushed Louis forward and off the bed. Terror pounded Louis in unrelenting waves. He screamed, but nothing came out because his throat had frozen shut.

He flipped the light on, staggering as though drunk. He gazed at the ceiling, examined the character, finding it back the way it was before – head faced sideways – no longer moving.

Again, he heard a calm, quiet voice.

*We’re right here beside you.*

It seemed as if coming from all four corners of the room this time. He heard the voice again, then again, glancing over his shoulder each time as if zeroing in on an attacking wasp. Then another voice - louder and sharper – called to him.

*Louiss.*

It repeated a few times, each with different voices and tones. Some high pitch, others deep and gruff. Some sounding woman-like, others man-like. Louis stood in the center of the room, face knotted in total confusion, glancing sporadically wherever and whenever he heard “Louis” or “We’re right here beside you”.

The frantic intruder retreated into the hallway, fumbling through darkness as though blind, into the pitch black living room. He paused there, hearing nothing more from Kim’s bedroom. Seeing nothing before him except the dining table in the room’s far right corner, silhouetted by outside lights. Then noises in front of him, like bugs scuttle crawling along a wall, jarred his nerves. He felt a light switch before him, flicked it on, and the room lit like a hospital room. On a blue plaster wall just before his face stood a contour image more apparent than any other Line Person Louis had seen. Almost as if looking at a blue abstract painting of an oval shaped head, balding, “Einstein” hair waving behind it. Multiple lines formed what seemed like sagging skin along the face, as though a melting waxed figure. The mouth was a small crooked rectangle, cradling three squares resembling piano keys – its teeth. Its eyes stood out the most. Light blue, almost white, like two round hardboiled eggs with little yokes as pupils, staring at Louis as if someone under a spell.

The blue face suddenly jutted toward Louis, like a 3D movie, the wall plaster expanding behind its head in a dream-like, surrealistic stretch. Simulating an elastic band, or someone teeth pulling on a thick, chewy Taffy bar. The plastered face came inches from Louis’s, its round eyes gazing into his with its trance-like stare. The bottom of its square mouth lowered, and in a mixture of taunt and condescendence, said, Let’s talk, the sound of a distant underwater echo. Close up, the character reminded Louis of The Elephant Man, or a zombie shrouded in a shredded burlap scarecrow mask. Blood pounded through his head as if pumps had been shoved in his ears and were trying to suck him dry. Aghast, he couldn’t move other than to tremble.

Panic and pain resonated as he felt a vice-like grip on his ankle. Peering at the purple carpet below, he saw what looked like a flipper hand clutching him, purple-colored as the carpet, belonging to a bulgy arm extending from the floor. As it reached up, the carpet expanded with it, a surrealistic stretch just as the wall face.

Louis wailed, beastly, breaking free from the arm’s grasp below. He scurried into the dining area, to the window, not looking back. He quickly reached behind the red curtain, grasping the right end of the window, sliding it open with a thrust. Louis catapulted out of the apartment and onto the dirt ground outside, springing to his feet. He was ready to dart toward the sidewalk, to his car, anywhere that distanced him from this apartment. But he hesitated, standing still before the opened dining room window, its red curtain draped closed. Louis panted, as though a man barely escaping a fire, listening for whatever might still be inside. Might still be coming for him. But he heard nothing. Saw only the red curtain’s yellowish glow from the lighted living room inside.

His tongue cleaved to his mouth’s roof like Velcro. Sweat, dirt, spit and snot meshed as he wiped his face with a trembling backhand, tasting the mixture of salt and soil. He released a short hysterical laugh past sticky lips, caught somewhere between reason and outlandish romp. He slowly positioned a hand before the curtain, wanting like mad to see what might have lurked behind it. But he withdrew it.

Cleaning the last bit of gunk from the corners of his mouth, he turned to the wall face at the side of the window, its small triangular eyes and horizontal mouth making no movement. No trace of shifting, sliding or reaching. Just stayed where it was, where it should be.

But the man's brows arched as he noticed an alteration in the character's face: diagonal lines now at both ends of its horizontal mouth, aimed upward, simulating a smile.

Sounds from behind Louis, from the tree, caught his attention. A combination of rustle noises and whispery, raspy voices, saying We're right here beside you. When he turned, all he could do was widen his eyes, widen his mouth at what he saw. Couldn't even scream.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Steven reclined at the dining table, while Kim started the coffee maker. She played Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me" from her iPhone.

Kim stood at the sink, rinsing two mugs, when she heard the sound.

A low pitch moan, like a distant voice, somewhere outside. She paused, hearing it again, more clearly this time. It was a slow, soft continuous moan. As though someone far away were in agony or distress. Then it stopped. She remained still, listening for another.

Nothing.

She turned toward the dining room window, draped by a red curtain, where she was certain she heard the sound. Steven looked at his date curiously as the perplexed woman stepped past him, to the large window. Kim slid the curtain aside. Unveiled a smooth-skinned, light-gray tree trunk a few distances from the opened window (which Kim didn't remember opening).

Nothing else was outside, except cricket's chirps, and an elderly couple conversing over an evening stroll. Kim gazed at the tree before her, illuminated in the dining room light. She fixated on its thick, wide trunk. Noticed something new along its smooth, gray skin. Noticed thin contour lines and dark, round holes that formed an image not there before.

She focused - eyes narrowed - and found something strikingly familiar from this design.

But her heavy gaze was lifted by Steven's soft touch behind her, his hands resting on her hips. Kim turned, placed her arms around Steven's warm neck, offered him a sliced-apple smile. She glanced back at the tree once more, spotting a fat funnel-web spider treading along the trunk, along the image. She returned her attention back to Steven. They sort of swayed together to the music, locking glances, Kim's brown eyes sparkling like stars.

Then she forgot what she saw outside. Forgot about the lines and holes, the sharp image resembling a narrow-face man with wide eyes, an agape mouth, and a goatee, etched in the smooth, gray-skinned tree.

Where he will forever remain, watching.

End

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AYAME'S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

7.

The man Sean entered the gates of a town.  
There he would find tireless tasks for a small wage.  
Covering his face with a heavy brow  
he would spend the little money he made  
on food and a small bedroom that smelt sour  
and a little drink to help dull his pains.  
That was all he could ever hope for now  
and all he had learnt to expect with age.

His concerns were not those of a young man  
though that was the title he should have had;  
he never spoke in the bid for friendship  
as he felt he had little need for it.  
Few people made jokes at his ugliness  
as his silence was almost ferocious.

Who would challenge a man whose cheeks had lines  
like the string wrapping around uncooked ham  
and so obviously were the work of knives?

They questioned the history of the man  
only whenever he was out of sight.  
Out of fear that he might bare down his hands,  
though he showed no anger of any kind.  
Power behind silence often will stand.

The few who tried to lighten his mood  
had found him unresponsive though not rude.  
Talking broke the rhythm of the work day  
and he relied upon the rhythm's pace  
to shorten the drudging lowness of hours  
until he could sleep in a rotting house.

## A PICTURE FROM HARRIETT by John L Campbell

### Part Three

The dismissal bell rang at 2:40, and within minutes Jasper High students began streaming out of the big, two-story building, splitting into thirds; walkers, bus riders and those headed to cars in the student lot. Cecil Hamilton's cruiser sat across the street under the spreading limbs of an enormous elm tree, the sheriff behind the wheel sipping a coffee. His radar gun was on, and he was presumably clocking drivers in the 20 mph school zone, but the volume was turned all the way down and he paid little attention to the red, digital readout.

It was early January, the kids just back from Christmas break, and the entire school preparing for the state championship. The Spartans had finished the regular season undefeated, first in their division, had crushed the opposition in the playoffs, and were a week away from the biggest game of all. David had managed to not only play extremely well and break several records, but he had also avoided injury, something Cecil (and especially Patricia) worried about. There was increasing talk about teenage concussions and contact sports, and it was looking like the long term effects were potentially pretty severe. So far, thank the Lord, David hadn't taken any severe hits, and besides, the coach and the paramedics at every game kept good tabs on their boys, pulling them at the first sign of trouble.

Best of all, both an admissions recruiter and the offensive coach for the University of Mississippi had visited the house over the holiday break. It had been a very good meeting, and David was excited about the possibilities. Hamilton had to admit he wouldn't mind his son being a receiver for the Rebels, and after that, who could say? He'd rather see his son in the NFL (or even complete a college education) over pinning a county star to his chest, though there was no doubt he'd make a fine deputy.

The students were bundled up against what passed for a cold day in Mississippi, and the frequency of letterman's jackets was causing Cecil some frustration. Finally, he saw what he was looking for. Whom, to be precise. They exited the far right doors and strolled into the high school lot, two boys, both seniors, the bigger, dark-haired one wearing just such a letterman's jacket. Jeb Hutchins, son of Jeremiah Hutchins, owner of Cold River Mill and Lumber. He was a defensive tackle on David's team.

The boy with him, big but not as big as Jeb and not a football player, was Donny Maxwell, son of Earl Maxwell, Terrell County's First Selectman. Donny had a wild scruff of red hair that flew about in the January breeze. And he wore glasses.

The boys headed towards Donny's bright orange Dodge Challenger and piled in. Hamilton saw them each light a cigarette, and then they pulled out, gunning the muscle car's engine as it idled past a group of girls. Half the girls waved, half flipped them off, but all were laughing. Donny and Jeb came from well-off families, and both boys were popular.

The Challenger rumbled away, and Hamilton shook his head, turning up the volume on his radar gun. "What the hell are you doing, Cec?"

That night, just past 1:00 am, Hamilton woke from a fitful sleep, not knowing why. Had he heard someone running? He sat on the edge of the bed, groggy, rubbing at his eyes. Then it came again, the quick padding of feet, running down the stairs. He was suddenly alert, and quickly pulled a short barrel revolver from the nightstand drawer, checked to see that Patricia was still the usual, blanketed lump on her side of the bed, then slipped out into the hall.

David was supposed to be out with Ashley. Was he home? Ham eased down to his son's room and looked in. By the light of the window, he could see the bed was empty and still made. He crossed to the guest room and looked out that window, overlooking the driveway. No, David wasn't home yet. Then he went to the top of the stairs, expecting to look down into the darkness of the living room, but instead saw a spill of light falling in from the kitchen.

Patricia had gone to bed before him. He had turned out all the lights, except for the outside light at the front door. He descended quietly, saw the overhead kitchen light on, then made a tour of the house. Nobody home, and all the doors were locked. Lots of folks in Terrell County didn't bother locking their doors, but cops were different, and besides, David had a key.

Cecil shut off the kitchen light and returned to his bed, crawling back in beside his wife. Dreaming, was all, or wind, maybe the house settling. But after he fell asleep he dreamed again of Harriett LaCroix standing in his room.

Two days later, Sheriff Hamilton was at his desk reading an accident report Gary had submitted, frowning at the man's complete inability to spell. His eyes kept leaving the hand-written page, however, drawn to the window in his office that looked out at the cluster of desks that served as the bullpen for his sergeants. Jeff Hooper had taken over Maggie's desk, but he was still reluctant to reorganize and make it his own. A JC Penney portrait studio photo of a ten-year-old Harriett LaCroix was tacked to a bulletin board beside the desk, the little girl's simple face smiling with slightly distracted eyes. Next to it was a photo of the same little girl two years later. This one showed her face down next to a red rock.

Hamilton saw the pictures every day.

He should have taken them down, but he didn't.

Harriett LaCroix looked back at him. Every day.

He took a red Rebels windbreaker off the back of his door and walked to the dispatch station, where Kathleen Webster sat wearing her radio earpiece and reading a Twilight novel.

"Kathy, borrow your car for a bit?"

She looked over the top of her glasses. "Problem with your cruiser, Sheriff?"

"Got somethin' to do, undercover."

She tossed him the keys to her Toyota. “Don’t you get no bullet holes in my car, Cecil Hamilton, or I’ll skin you alive.”

“I promise. I’ll even fill the tank for you.”

“And be back by the time my shift ends. Got plans tonight.”

Cecil winked at her. “You got a date with Lammie Barnes, or you just gonna meet the girls for margaritas and cackle like a henhouse.”

She shooed him away with her book and a tisking sound.

Ten minutes later, he was cruising slowly through the Jasper High parking lot. It was only one in the afternoon, and the lot was empty of students. He moved up and down the rows until he found the orange Challenger, then stopped behind it. A moment later, he was making a quick walk around the car, looking at the ground. Nothing on the passenger side. But there on the asphalt near the driver’s door he found what he was looking for. He pulled a pair of long tweezers and a plastic baggie from his jacket pocket, picked up the crushed-out cigarette butt, sealed it in the bag, and then he was back in the Toyota, motoring away.

He remembered to gas up Kathleen’s car, and was back well before the end of her shift.

The following Saturday was the state championship, and Hamilton rode on the team bus to Lafayette, sitting up front with some of the other fathers and the assistants, while the coach stood rocking in the aisle, giving a no-nonsense speech about commitment and playing with heart. Forty seniors looked back at him with the intensity he was looking for.

Midway through the second quarter – the Spartans were leading 14-6 and the opposition had the ball – Hamilton slipped unnoticed from the sidelines and down into the locker area assigned to the visitors. He was alone in the room, and quickly moved to a spot he had seen earlier, when the team was dressing for the game. The lockers were open spaces, not the types with doors, and Jeb Hutchins’s clothes hung on metal hooks, his toiletries tossed onto an upper shelf. Hamilton’s tweezers came out again, and he removed a small cluster of dark hair from Jeb’s comb, sealing it in a baggie. From another location, he located and collected a couple of pubic hairs, which went into a separate bag. Then he returned to the game.

Lafayette ended up defeating the Spartans 24-21 and taking the state title. The boys were crushed, and the ride back to Jasper was long and quiet. Hamilton sat with David and reassured him that Ole Miss – their scouts had been at the game in force – didn’t base their opinions on a single game, and still wanted a hotshot receiver from Jasper.

On Monday, Sheriff Hamilton filled out the necessary forms, then placed the three baggies of “evidence” in a sealed envelope. He sent them to an independent forensics lab, which had never heard of Harriett LaCroix.

It was March 1st, and the colder days were behind them. Spring was making its appearance, bright green buds covering the trees and early flowers poking up through damp soil, blue skies and warmer days. Hamilton drove with the window down, arm cocked outside, enjoying the ride, his cruiser taking the curves and hills of a back road at a leisurely pace. He had just handled a minor theft at Chestnut Farms Mall, something he'd been able to settle with a summons instead of a full arrest, and was taking the long way back to Jasper.

"County Dispatch to Oh-One," his radio said.

"Oh-One's on, go County."

"Sheriff," said Kathy Webster, "Hooper and MacDonald have a T-A out on 17. They're reporting fatalities, fire and rescue are en-route."

"Copy that, County," Hamilton said, accelerating. "Give me a location on 17."

There was a long stretch of silence, and then Kathy's voice came across sounding strained. "Same place as that LaCroix business last year."

It was surreal. Gary was standing in the road near a flare, wearing a yellow safety vest, and beyond was the familiar sparkle of red and blue emergency lights. Hamilton didn't even pause to talk to his deputy, just drove past him and stopped when he reached the tail end of the firetruck. The air reeked of chemical foam and antifreeze as he trotted up to Jeff Hooper, who was writing on a clipboard near the open trunk of his car. An unused first aid kit sat on the asphalt nearby. Jeff looked up as the sheriff approached, and just shook his head.

The angry, high speed whine of a saw split the afternoon as a pair of firemen started in on what remained of a car door, throwing a shower of sparks high over their heads. Up on the road, two paramedics were busy putting away their gurney, and pulling out a simple canvas stretcher and some black plastic bags. Deputy MacDonald, twenty-one and newly hired in early February, was trying to be unnoticed on the other side of the firetruck, hands planted against the red metal while he vomited.

The Challenger was barely recognizable as a car anymore, and looked more like orange tinfoil someone had crumpled into a ball, which had then somehow grown from the trunk of a massive pine tree. Fire department foam dripped from its accordion remains, and shards of safety glass glittered in the weeds along the edge of the woods. Hamilton moved down the gentle embankment, ducking to avoid the spray of metal sparks from the saw, plastic crunching beneath his boots, and stepped to what had been the front of the car. From here, he could see that seat belts wouldn't have saved them, but one only had to look at the wreck, and know that the Challenger must have been doing over a hundred when it hit, to realize that.

The front seat passenger was a tangle of torn flesh in a red-soaked letterman's jacket. He had dark hair, and was hopelessly pinned against the remains of the dashboard and



the right front post, the rear of the car having come forward to ensure that physics had done a proper job.

The driver was equally pinned, the steering column buried in his chest as if he had been impaled by a knight's lance. He had been decapitated, the torn stump of his neck sagging forward. Hamilton looked at the tree, then at the ground all around. It took a moment to find it, but there it was, a good twenty feet beyond the impact, and he walked towards it.

Donny Maxwell's head had come to rest face-up at the base of another pine tree, his red hair matted with blood and drawing ants, the twisted frame of his glasses still clinging to his face. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open in mid scream, as if at the last second he had seen what was coming for him.

Hamilton made his way back to where Jeff Hooper was still working on his clipboard, and flagged down a fireman along the way, quietly telling his where to find the head. He leaned against the trunk of the cruiser next to his sergeant, who was making the first notes of his accident investigation. Hamilton could see he had begun sketching the road and the position of the Challenger. Measuring off the skid marks and taking photos would come soon.

Jeff set the clipboard in the trunk and folded his arms. "Driver of a log truck called it in. Didn't see it happen, came up on it from the other direction, stopped and checked the car, saw they was dead."

"He involved?"

"Doubt it," Hooper said, shaking his head. "No marks on the truck, driver ain't sleepy or been drinking. I think he's legit." He pointed at the road, where now a half dozen vehicles were parked. "I seen the skids when I first arrived. Them boys was really moving, hundred plus. Looks like they seen something in the road, locked it up, swerved... that was it. I'm figuring a deer."

Hamilton nodded. That fit. At that speed, any sudden correction would throw the muscle car out of control in a second, and there would be no recovery. He agreed with his deputy, Donny must have seen something and tried to avoid it. Then he looked towards the woods beyond the wreck. Not far back in there, at almost this exact spot, was Harriett's little clearing.

The boys had seen something in the road.

Cecil Hamilton made the notifications later that day. He met with the First Selectman at home, and Earl Maxwell crunched forward over his knees, fists buried in his eyes as he sobbed. Jeremiah Hutchins was in his office at the mill, and just sat there saying nothing, staring out the window with a lost look on his face.

The turnout for Jeb Hutchins's funeral was massive. In addition to family, most of the high school showed up, almost everyone from the mill and the lumberyard came, along with his daddy's business associates. Much of Jasper's population – the white

population, for the most part – and lots of folks from the surrounding towns attended, and of course the town and county officials, though not the first selectman. Johnny Lee and a couple of his troopers showed up, looking spit and polish, and the sheriff and any deputy not out on patrol were in their dress uniforms. David didn't sit with his parents, but instead took his place with the rest of the football team, all of them standing together and wearing their varsity jackets out of respect for their teammate and friend. There was plenty of sadness, and Cecil knew the entire event would be replayed in a couple of days for the Maxwell boy.

The minister was talking about how hard it was for folks to understand when such a wonderful young person, with a bright future and an entire life ahead of them, was called home by the Lord. He reminded them that God had a plan, and his works were mysterious indeed.

Hamilton didn't hear him. He was thinking about the accident. Doc Fulcrum ran a toxicology test on both boys, and it came back negative for alcohol or drugs of any kind. They hadn't been high when they left the road. He was also thinking about the phone call he had received from his dispatcher Kathleen just before the service, and the envelope she said was waiting for him in his office.

After the graveside, Hamilton told Patricia he had to make a quick stop at the office, and then he'd be home. This was met with a hard look.

“Cecil, David just lost two friends from school, and he and Jeb were close.”

Ham knew it, and he had liked the boy too. Jeb Hutchins and some of the other players had come out to their place on occasion for barbecue or just to hang out and throw the ball around.

“Your son doesn't want you to see it, but he's hurting, and he needs his daddy to let him know everything's going to be alright.”

Cecil promised that he would only be a moment and would be right home, giving his son an arm around the shoulder and a squeeze before making the short walk from the church to the sheriff's office. Kathleen immediately handed a brown envelope over the dispatch counter as he walked in. The return address was MedCo Laboratories in Jackson. Hamilton thanked her and went to his cruiser around back of the station, then headed home. The envelope sat on the seat beside him, unopened.

Cecil sat at his kitchen table, his dress uniform jacket hung on the back of his chair, drinking a beer Patricia had fetched for him. She was puttering near the sink, trying to stay busy, and Cecil could see David through the kitchen door, sitting in the living room, texting on his cell phone, probably with Ashley. They hadn't really spoken yet. He knew David wasn't ready, but he'd be there for him when he was.

He tapped his fingers lightly on the brown lab envelope.

What if he was right? It wouldn't bring Harriett back, and would only destroy the reputation of two dead boys. He considered just putting the envelope in the burn

barrel out back. Then he picked it up and tore it open, his hands shaking slightly at what he might find.

Inside was a cover letter from the lab, followed by a legal page detailing the chain of evidence and the handling procedures, should the results ever be needed in court. Then there was a section of technical jargon explaining how the DNA testing was conducted, what the defining points were, and how it may or may not compare to the crime scene samples provided. The final pages were the computer-generated color graphs and the results of the tests.

DNA obtained from saliva on the cigarette butt was a match for DNA recovered from Harriett LaCroix. Donny Maxwell was a match.

DNA obtained from the hair in Jeb Hutchins's comb was also a match.

Both boys had been there, had done this terrible thing.

Then Hamilton looked at the last page, at the results from the pubic hair he had collected from the locker room, and this too was a match. He looked out the kitchen window and wasn't even surprised to see Wisdom LaCroix walking up his driveway towards the house, cupping his twisted hands before him. He walked past David's truck.

David's green pickup truck.

Like the one in Harriett's picture.

Hamilton held the paper with the third match and looked through the doorway into the living room, looked at his son, as tears welled up in his eyes. There had been three suspects, and three white boys in Harriett's picture.

Wisdom pushed through the screen door and stepped inside. Patricia turned, holding a dishtowel, surprised and looking to her husband. Hamilton just stared at Wisdom, saying nothing, and the old man looked back with his yellow nicotine eyes, nodding and solemn. "We come for justice, Sheriff," he said.

Hamilton crumpled the piece of paper into a ball and dropped it on the table, then stood and drew the Glock from his patent leather dress holster, pointing it at the old man. "You're distraught, Wisdom, and you come at me in my home with a gun. I had no choice." Patricia didn't move, but looked from the pistol to the unwelcome visitor and back.

Although the day was mild and the room comfortable, the temperature suddenly plunged thirty degrees, making gooseflesh stand out on all their arms. Then the walls began to shake violently, as if an earthquake had suddenly come to Mississippi. Decorative plates and family pictures crashed to the floor, and a shelf of glassware broke free and shattered. The floor trembled and buckled with a loud crack of timber and tile.

“Daddy!” David called from the other room, and Patricia hung onto the sink and yelled for him to stay where he was. The light fixture over the table swung and broke free, exploding onto the table’s surface, and cabinet doors flung open, dishes and canned food cascading out onto the floor. Hamilton braced one hand on his chair, the Glock wavering. Wisdom simply stood hunched, riding it out on bowed legs, but his eyes went to the doorway.

“Hello, baby girl,” he said, smiling.

Hamilton looked too, for something was now there, standing about five feet tall, swirling smoke and shadow in the shape of a little girl, a dark thing. But not so dark that he couldn’t see through her to where his son stood in the living room, looking back. David could see it too, they all could. Harriett’s black, glittering eyes stared back at Sheriff Hamilton in accusation, and when she opened her mouth, a hate-filled hiss escaped.

Cecil cried out and swung the Glock at Harriett, firing once, then twice more at center mass. Patricia shrieked and covered her ears, and then as suddenly as it had started, the shaking stopped. Harriett’s eyes and face immediately lost their rage and darkness, softening into the features of a little girl, and she quickly faded from view with a gentle, audible sigh.

Hamilton was still staring at the doorway to the living room, and lowered his pistol as David walked towards him.

“Daddy?” he said, his eyes searching his father’s face in confusion. He had his hands planted against his letterman’s jacket, which now featured three small holes and spreading crimson. He sagged to his knees, still looking to his father for an answer.

Patricia screamed his name and ran for him, dropping to her knees and wrapping her arms around him even as he collapsed on his side. Wisdom lowered his head and pushed back out the screen door, shuffling back down the driveway, still cradling his hands as he started the long walk back to town. There were screams coming from the house behind him.

It was a man screaming.

#### A CHILD’S NIGHTMARE by Hollis Whitelock

Jeff is sitting silently in the backseat of a rumbling station wagon. Rain patters on the rooftop and runs in thick streams down the windows. His sister is whimpering in the seat beside him. He looks to his mother, but she is transfixed on the road ahead. The windshield wipers slosh back and forth. Dusk brings darkness and transforms color to shades of gray.

His mother breaks outside of an old single story home, in search of his father. Jeff and his sister slide forward in the unbelted seats.

“Wait in the car. I’ll only be gone for a moment,” his mother says. The wind slams the door shut. His mother hurries along the walkway toward the house. His sister’s whimpering becomes screams. The car shakes from gusts of wind. Jeff looks out the window, through the flowing rain, at the blurred landscape. He sees a surreal painting of trees, shrubs and houses. His mother knocks repeatedly before the door opens. She screams.

Jeff awakes in darkness to the cries of a child. He shakes, as he calls his sister’s name. She does not answer. Rhythmic moans resound from the wall behind him. Jeff sits up and peers around. Faint light seeps under the door. Footsteps and cries approach. The door opens. Bright yellow light pierces his eyes. Jeff winces, as a crying girl enters. *My sister and father*, he thinks before seeing five children, groaning and tossing.

“Go back to sleep. It’s still dark,” the man says, as he leads the girl to her sleeping bag.

Sunlight streams through the westerly window. Jeff awakens and looks for his sister. She is not there. Five strangers, ranging from the age of three to six, stare.

“Who are you?” Mike asks. The children look at Jeff and laugh. Introductions are made. Jeff is three and the smallest other than Sally.

A man dressed in a red robe opens the door and calls them into the kitchen. The children bustle to the table and sit. A woman of sixteen years and her nine-year-old sister are serving porridge with corn syrup and milk.

“After breakfast I’m going to teach you to play a game,” the man says smiling.

The robed stranger leads Jeff to a room. Jeff sits in front of an eight by eight board. The game is called the king of Scotland. It encompasses kings and queens, bishops and knights, great castles and pawns that reluctantly march forward trying to be queens. Jeff stares at the pieces, in silence, waiting for the game to begin. He feels the glares of strangers that are not present through the lens of an eye.

“Pawn to king four,” the man says, as his round flat face widens. Jeff is bewildered and unsure of what to do. “Do what I do,” the man says smiling. Jeff moves his king’s pawn forward.

“Pawn to king four,” Jeff says meekly.

“Pawn to king five,” the man says, with a tap of his hand upon Jeff’s. The man counters with knight to king’s bishop three. Jeff feels threatened and vulnerable. He places his knight to queen’s bishop six. “Relax, it’s just a game.” The man moves his bishop to queen’s knight five. Jeff stares at the pieces and then at the man. He pushes his queen’s pawn one space forward. The man pushes his queen’s pawn two spaces forward. Jeff grabs for his knight. The man taps the top of Jeff’s hand while shaking his head. Jeff’s knight is pinned and unable to move. Jeff moves his bishop one space diagonally.

“Pawn times pawn,” the man says.

“Pawn times pawn,” Jeff replies

“You are learning fast.” The man moves his bishop to queen’s bishop four. Jeff moves his bishop to queen’s bishop five. The man moves his knight to king’s knight five. “Are you enjoying the game?” Jeff shrugs his shoulders before moving his king’s knight to bishop six. The man picks up his king’s knight and removes a pawn on king’s bishop seven. Jeff’s head sinks until he is staring at the floor. “You can do this with your new friends tomorrow.” Jeff nods and helps place the pieces back to their original positions.

They enter the living room. The children are sitting around the television waiting for the next cartoon to start. Steve is absent. Moaning, from the bathroom, distracts Jeff. He looks to the door and giggles. Steve appears with the sixteen-year-old girl. His face is red. He laughs uncontrollably before sitting on the couch.

“Did you have fun?” Sally asks grinning.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going to do it again,” Steve replies. The children laugh and yell, as the cartoon’s title -The Granny from the Bronx - scrolls across the screen.

A gray rabbit walks along the crumbling sidewalks of Brooklyn dressed as an elderly black woman wearing a faded dress and gray wig. The rabbit protrudes his lips and neck forward while peering through a thick pair of spectacles. His eyes look excessively large. The children laugh. The screen changes to a black duck, and white and black cat standing in an alleyway smoking a cigarette and chatting with a New York accent.

A loud knock resonates off the front door. The man shuts the television off and tells the children to go to bed. They whine and complain while being escorted to the bedroom by the older girl. She turns the light off and closes the door behind her.

The children huddle around the door, peering through the keyhole, trying to see the visitor. Jeff hopes that it is his father, but he is unable to recognize the stranger’s face. The red robed man hands the stranger a package.

“You can pay me, when you get the money,” he says sternly.

“It won’t be long,” the stranger replies. Jeff listens, in silence, from his sleeping bag. The same moaning of the night before rings in his ears, as he succumbs to his nightmare.

His mother is slowly backing away from the house. Rain drips from her fingertips, to the concrete. She steps in a puddle and stumbles, as she turns to face the car. Her hair mats to her face. The wind animates the deciduous trees, creating the illusion of tormented specters writhing in agony. Jeff’s sister screams, as his mother’s complexion turns ghostly white. His mother opens the door and starts the engine. Jeff looks back at the house, through the doorway, and sees the color red, as his mother accelerates down the dead-end street, screaming his father’s name.

Jeff awakens to the shouts of the older girls. He crawls to the door and peers through the keyhole.

“Keep your mouth shut!” the older girl yells at her younger sister.

“I don’t want to do it!” the younger sister replies.

“This is our only hope! You better do it! And don’t tell anyone.” Jeff opens the door and strolls into the kitchen. Both older girls become silent. Jeff sits at the table. The children join him for pancakes. The man enters the room carrying a puppy and a caged cobra. The children yell and giggle.

“Today is the quest to be the King of Scotland. Jeff can play with Sally. You’re both three years old. It should be an even match,” he says. Sally looks at the floor and then at Jeff.

After eating, Jeff and Sally are led into an empty room. They sit on the floor in front of a board and stare at the pieces. “Go ahead, start playing.” Jeff looks at Sally. She turns her head to avoid his stare. “Jeff you go first.” Jeff looks at the board.

“Pawn to king four,” Jeff says.

“Do I have to? I don’t like this game,” Sally says.

“Yes, it’s your turn. Do as he does,” the man says. Sally moves her pawn to king five and then stares at the floor. Jeff forgot most of the previous day’s game, but he knows that the objective of the game is to mate your opponent. He places his queen on the king’s bishop three. Sally unenthusiastically moves her knight to queen’s bishop six. Jeff slides his king’s bishop to queen’s bishop four. Sally reddens and moves her pawn to queen three before turning around and staring at the floor. Jeff looks at the man. “Go ahead, Jeff.” Jeff plunges his queen to king’s bishop seven and removes Sally’s pawn. Sally stands with tears in her eyes and runs out the door. Jeff looks up. The man smiles a white toothy grin.

Jeff and the man return to the living room. The children are sitting on the chesterfield playing with the puppy. The cobra lies in a glass cage next to the television. Jeff sits on the couch next to the puppy and rubs its head. He looks at the television.

The granny from the Bronx strolls into the alley. Graffiti adorns the red brick walls. The two street thugs are smoking and chatting.

“What time is it, sonny?” Granny asks.

“It’s four twenty,” the cat says with a slur.

“Yeah, you got a couple dimes for us?” the duck asks, looking nervously in both directions.

“I sure do,” replies granny, reaching into her purse. The duck hands her a dime bag. Granny strolls to the street.

“Alright everyone, time for bed,” the man says, turning off the television. The children scurry into the bedroom and huddle against the keyhole hoping to see the late night events. Jeff lies in his sleeping bag next to the wall and listens. “The little ones put on quite the show today. Jeff really got into it.”

“Let me have a look. He’s the new one, isn’t he?” the older girl says.

“Yes, you can teach him some new moves tomorrow.”

“It will be my pleasure.” Jeff looks at Sally. She is weeping in the corner. Jeff closes his eyes and drifts to sleep.

Jeff is sitting, in the old car, next to his sobbing sister. His mother is frantically looking out the window for Jeff’s father.

“There he is, mom,” Jeff says, pointing to an outline stumbling towards them from the bushes. His mother brakes hard. Jeff and his sister slide forward.

“Oh my God,” his mother says. A red stream flows from the face of the staggering man and drips to the ground in swirls of orange.

Jeff awakes to the grinding brakes of a truck stopping outside the window of the bedroom. The children peer through the window into the street. The red robed man is carrying pizza and ice cream. The children yell and then scurry into the kitchen.

“Sit down at the table. We are having a tournament today to determine the true king of Scotland. The winner can have the puppy,” he says. The children raise their arms and shout. “To be the winner you must be on top. The losers will be at the bottom. This is how it is in life. I hope you all understand.” The children nod.

The man leads Gary and Mike into the room. Jeff stands outside and peers through the keyhole. The boys stare with an unwavering glare until charging with their king’s pawn. Their queens slide to the respective king’s bishop three and king’s bishop six positions. The battle ends quickly. Gary submits. He turns his back and cowers. Then he charges to the door in tears. Jeff steps from the keyhole. The door swings open.

“You were helping him, weren’t you?” Gary yells pushing Jeff to the floor.

“No, I wasn’t,” Jeff replies standing.

“Jeff, come in. You can play the winner,” the man says.

The game commences. Pieces are exchanged. After an hour of intense glares, Jeff is left with only his king. His opponent has a knight, a pawn and a king, but the pawn is left unprotected. Jeff grabs it off the board.

“That’s not going to make any difference,” Mike says.

“The game’s not over yet,” Jeff replies.



“Actually, it is, boys. There will be no mating in this one. It is a draw,” the man says.

“But he just has a king. He has to submit,” Mike says.

“You forgot the importance of the pawn. You needed to queen him.”

The boys are led into the living room. They sit around the television with the participating children and are served ice cream and pizza. Jeff is handed the puppy for finishing second. The winner admires the cobra in its cage.

The television screen illuminates in vivid colors of red, green and blue. Granny is shuffling along the street with her dime bags, periodically glancing to her left and right. When she walks around the corner, two men in suits approach. One has a long red mustache. The other is bald.

“You’re not going to get away with it, gwanny,” the bald man says, pushing her to the concrete.

“We know what you got there in that thar purse,” the man with the mustache says while handcuffing her.

“It’s my medicine!” Granny yells. The show ends.

Gary struts over to Jeff. He grabs the puppy around the neck. Jeff tries to intervene, but is too small. Gary twists until the puppy goes limp.

“You’re going to be a bottom too,” Gary says, handing Jeff the lifeless creature. The winner looks at Jeff.

“Yeah, I’m the king of Scotland. That runt of a puppy was worthless,” Mike says. Jeff clenches his fists and screams.

“Gary!”

Jeff runs to the glass cage and grabs the cobra below the head. He attempts to strangle it without success. He runs through the kitchen into the backyard carrying the snake. The man and the children pursue.

“Give me the snake, Jeff,” the man yells. The man grabs Jeff around the waist. Jeff tosses the snake onto the lawn. His arms and legs are flailing. Tears are streaming down his face. The man tosses Jeff to the ground and picks up the snake. Jeff runs into the house. The children are sent to the bedroom.

Jeff enters his repetitive nightmare. His staggering father falls face down in a puddle. Blood reddens the dark pool. His mother screams louder than his sister. Jeff opens the door and runs to his father. His mother follows and grabs Jeff by the hand. A man in a red robe approaches from the walkway.

“He had a debt to pay. I will take your son in exchange for payment,” the man says. His mother reluctantly lets go before falling to her knees sobbing.

Jeff awakes in darkness to the sobs of Sally. She is lying next to him in a sleeping bag. Jeff consoles her with a hug. She stops crying, but rhythmic moaning from the adjoining room attracts their attention. Jeff and Sally put their ears to the wall. The moaning becomes louder. Jeff and Sally creep from the bedroom into the living room.

“It’s coming from that room,” Sally says, pointing at the door.

Jeff closes one eye and peers through the keyhole. The younger sister is sitting at the table with the man in the robe. All of her pieces are gone, but her king. The man has his knights, bishops, pawns and castles. Her head hangs down. Tears drip. Sally pushes Jeff away and looks through the keyhole.

“He does that to me all the time,” Sally says. Footsteps approach from the rear.

“Get away from that door, you two,” the older sister says. Jeff and Sally stumble backwards. The older sister grabs them by the neck and drags them back to the bedroom.

The End

REACTORS by Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

The sentence is unspoken, but drifts above the head;  
Knowing what they must do before families die instead.  
Spartan batch of fifty, the last line of defence;  
To change an end that’s happening, amid reason and all sense.

A sacrifice is needed, but what’s left to recover?  
So, by mouth and text come messages for daughters, sons and mother.  
Death sits on reactor three, as karma finds ironic,  
Sacred lives of these fifty bees, to rectify leak chronic.

Limit, led atomic that the led could not withhold;  
A grounding found tectonic, to release our foolish gold,  
States they might not make week end, may not withstand the night,  
But each single day, a heroes born, immune to scythes swipe.

Their medals are being polished, names engraved to burn through wall,  
Of another side gone nuclear, that threatens to kill all.  
Kamikaze act is such bravely that no man will forget.  
Ingenuity of seaboard plan might save their number yet.

My prayers go out, of little use but hope to find next week;  
A paper printed headline of success through wiki leak.  
No matter how much money that we send to ease their pain,

It will not negate dark forces of a nature yet to tame.

## THE HOUSE OF SKULLS by Gavin Chappell

### 6 The Dark One

‘Beyond those trees is the Kikwenzi camp,’ Dogo whispered, pointing towards the collection of baobabs that clustered on the skyline. ‘I crept as close as I could. Their guards did not see me; the dull-witted fools. The spell that controls them makes them useless as sentries.

‘There is a palisade within which the Kikwenzi have pitched their tents. In the centre of the compound is a large tent, topped by the skull of a gazelle. That must be Chinja’s tent. Elsewhere the Kikwenzi loll about, or clean weapons, or go about menial tasks. From Chinja’s tent, I caught the sound of cruel laughter, and cries for mercy. They have captives.’

‘Good work,’ said Yeduza from her camel. ‘We shall...’

Assouad leaned forward. ‘I think this is where my men come in,’ he said. ‘We shall set about this like any slave raid. Approach rapidly, and begin shooting once we are among them. If what you say about this sorcerer is true, all we need do is reach the tent and kill him, and then the spell will be broken. Without him, his horde will be easy to round up.’

Yeduza frowned at the barbarian. ‘Remember that this is not a slave raid,’ she said firmly. ‘These people have laboured under Chinja’s spell. They may have committed terrible crimes. But they are Nago, and I will see them free -- from Chinja’s spell, or your slavery.’

Assouad tossed his head back in annoyance. ‘What profit will we see on this venture?’ he demanded.

‘Do not forget the treasure of Habesh,’ Dogo reminded him. Assouad looked down at the little man, and shrugged. He turned in his saddle and rapped out a string of orders to his men.

They all dismounted, leaving the camels in the care of two youths, loaded their muskets with gunpowder and shot, rammed it down, and began to advance towards the trees. Yeduza joined them, her loaded musket over her shoulder, Dogo trotting at her heels.

They passed through the trees and Yeduza saw the palisade rising before them, its stakes dark against the blue sky. Several Kikwenzi squatted in the entrance, beyond which a confusion of tents and figures was visible. Two Kikwenzi rose as the nomads marched towards them. Assouad and another barbarian opened fire.

The shots rang out loud and fierce, a roar of thunder that seemed to ram Yeduza's ears into her skull. Despite the training she had received during the journey, she was still not used to the sheer noise.

The two Kikwenzi collapsed to the red earth, like broken dolls. Fleeting, Yeduza remembered another time, an innocent time many years before, playing with her dolls in the earth outside her father's house. The remaining guards rose, their assegais at the ready. More Tiburi shot them down.

Assouad motioned to those of his men who had not yet fired. 'In!' he shouted. 'Into the compound!'

He began to reload his musket. Yeduza and Dogo joined the other barbarians as they flooded through the gateway, firing as they came. Kikwenzi fell to litter the compound in huddled heaps. The acrid tang of the gunpowder and its white clouds filled the air. Kikwenzi shambled back and forth.

Assouad and the rest rushed in as the first line reloaded. Assouad levelled his musket. Yeduza saw a Kikwenzi nearby with a throwing knife, poised to fling it at the nomad leader. She levelled her musket, not yet fired, pulled the trigger, and blew the man's chest away.

Shots cracked out from the barbarians. More Kikwenzi fell. Yeduza felt her gorge rise. It was a massacre, no better than a Kikwenzi attack. And these poor fools were under Chinja's spell.

'Wait!' she screamed at Assouad. 'We must press forward! Kill Chinja!'

Assouad shook his head. 'We've got to settle these wool-heads first!' he roared, his eyes alight with unholy glee. He put his musket to his shoulder and fired. An advancing Kikwenzi warrior dropped writhing to the earth.

Yeduza turned to Dogo urgently. 'Where is Chinja's tent?' she demanded. Dogo pointed. Through the pungent clouds of gunsmoke, Yeduza caught a glimpse of a large tent on the far side of the compound. She clapped the pygmy on the shoulder, and hurriedly loaded her musket. The barbarians were still firing into the crowd of Kikwenzi. Two barbarians had fallen to assegais or throwing knives. The moment that Yeduza rammed down her shot, she shouldered her musket and limped quickly forward.

'Where are you going?' Assouad shouted at her vanishing figure. Dogo trotted hurriedly after her.

Three Kikwenzi came forward to meet her, wicked-looking blades glinting in their hands. She swung the musket like a club, beat the warriors back, then raced on through the smoke and the noise. Then she came out into an open area. At the far end was Chinja's tent. Standing before it, watching the barbarian attack with cold eyes, was Chinja and a group of tall warriors, each one with his face daubed white.

Chinja's serpent eyes widened as he saw Yeduza step out into the open space. He pointed a trembling finger at her. 'Kill her!' he shouted. Two large Kikwenzi warriors lumbered towards her, assegais raised. Cursing, she tried to dodge aside. Dogo put his blowpipe to his lips and suddenly a dart was projecting from the left-hand warrior's neck. The Kikwenzi felt at it with annoyance, then brushed it away. Dogo turned to run, and the other Kikwenzi seized him, lifting him high to dash him to the ground. Yeduza turned, and opened fire.

The shot knocked the Kikwenzi against a nearby tent, which collapsed under his weight. Dogo rolled free, and looked up. Yeduza still held the smoking musket, but her face was pale. At a footfall, she hobbled round.

Chinja and his warriors stood before her. Yeduza's heart sank. She had no time to reload the musket. She reversed it to use it as a club again. Dogo crept to her side as the Kikwenzi encircled them.

'You return...,' Chinja boomed. 'With new knowledge, new weapons. You are dangerous, woman of the Nago. You will make an excellent warrior for my cause. My sorcery will rid your mind of these foolish thoughts of defending your empire, replace them with nothing but the desire to kill, kill, kill again -- in my name! To lay Nago waste, until this mighty, tottering empire is no more, and a dozen warring tribes squabbling over what little remains -- each spurred on by conflicting dreams of empire -- is all there will be to tell those who come after of what once was.'

His serpent eyes glittered as he held her in their spell. Her arms went limp, the musket that could have killed him dropped to the red earth. With an immense effort of will, she forced herself to speak.

'Why?' she moaned. 'Why do you wish to destroy us?' Even now, she could feel his mesmerising gaze at work; feel a desire to be nothing more than his slave. She dropped to her knees before him, looking up into his saturnine visage. 'Why?' she said again.

'Vengeance,' Chinja hissed. 'I -- the spirit that moves this feeble frame -- seek revenge upon Nago; upon Mtogo, for the woes he worked me. And you were his Amazon. But you shall bring about his death. You will work my revenge...'

A shot rang out. In the instant before Chinja's tall body collapsed, his chest holed by a bullet, Yeduza saw his serpent gaze gone entirely, replaced by frightened, wholly human eyes. Then a corpse thudded to the ground before her.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LVII.

THE LONELY WATCH, AND THE ADVENTURE IN THE DESERTED HOUSE.

It is now quite night, and so peculiar and solemn a stillness reigns in and about Bannerworth Hall and its surrounding grounds, that one might have supposed it a

place of the dead, deserted completely after sunset by all who would still hold kindred with the living. There was not a breath of air stirring, and this circumstance added greatly to the impression of profound repose which the whole scene exhibited.

The wind during the day had been rather of a squally character, but towards nightfall, as is often usual after a day of such a character, it had completely lulled, and the serenity of the scene was unbroken even by the faintest sigh from a wandering zephyr.

The moon rose late at that period, and as is always the case at that interval between sunset and the rising of that luminary which makes the night so beautiful, the darkness was of the most profound character.

It was one of those nights to produce melancholy reflections—a night on which a man would be apt to review his past life, and to look into the hidden recesses of his soul to see if conscience could make a coward of him in the loneliness and stillness that breathed around.

It was one of those nights in which wanderers in the solitude of nature feel that the eye of Heaven is upon them, and on which there seems to be a more visible connection between the world and its great Creator than upon ordinary occasions.

The solemn and melancholy appear places once instinct with life, when deserted by those familiar forms and faces that have long inhabited them. There is no desert, no uninhabited isle in the far ocean, no wild, barren, pathless tract of unmitigated sterility, which could for one moment compare in point of loneliness and desolation to a deserted city.

Strip London, mighty and majestic as it is, of the busy swarm of humanity that throng its streets, its suburbs, its temples, its public edifices, and its private dwellings, and how awful would be the walk of one solitary man throughout its noiseless thoroughfares.

If madness seized not upon him ere he had been long the sole survivor of a race, it would need be cast in no common mould.

And to descend from great things to smaller—from the huge leviathan city to one mansion far removed from the noise and bustle of conventional life, we may imagine the sort of desolation that reigned through Bannerworth Hall, when, for the first time, after nearly a hundred and fifty years of occupation, it was deserted by the representatives of that family, so many members of which had lived and died beneath its roof. The house, and everything within, without, and around it, seemed actually to sympathize with its own desolation and desertion.

It seemed as if twenty years of continued occupation could not have produced such an effect upon the ancient edifice as had those few hours of neglect and desertion.

And yet it was not as if it had been stripped of those time-worn and ancient relics of ornament and furnishing that so long had appertained to it. No, nothing but the absence of those forms which had been accustomed quietly to move from room to

room, and to be met here upon a staircase, there upon a corridor, and even in some of the ancient panelled apartments, which give it an air of dreary repose and listlessness. The shutters, too, were all closed, and that circumstance contributed largely to the production of that gloomy effect which otherwise could not have ensued.

In fact, what could be done without attracting very special observation was done to prove to any casual observer that the house was untenanted.

But such was not really the case. In that very room where the much dreaded Varney the vampyre had made one of his dreaded appearances to Flora Bannerworth and her mother, sat two men.

It was from that apartment that Flora had discharged the pistol, which had been left to her by her brother, and the shot from which it was believed by the whole family had most certainly taken effect upon the person of the vampyre.

It was a room peculiarly accessible from the gardens, for it had long French windows opening to the very ground, and but a stone step intervened between the flooring of the apartment and a broad gravel walk which wound round that entire portion of the house.

It was in this room, then, that two men sat in silence, and nearly in darkness.

Before them, and on a table, were several articles of refreshment, as well of defence and offence, according as their intentions might be.

There were a bottle and three glasses, and lying near the elbow of one of the men was a large pair of pistols, such as might have adorned the belt of some desperate character, who wished to instil an opinion of his prowess into his foes by the magnitude of his weapons.

Close at hand, by the same party, lay some more modern fire arms, as well as a long dirk, with a silver mounted handle.

The light they had consisted of a large lantern, so constructed with a slide, that it could be completely obscured at a moment's notice; but now as it was placed, the rays that were allowed to come from it were directed as much from the window of the apartment, as possible, and fell upon the faces of the two men, revealing them to be Admiral Bell and Dr. Chillingworth.

It might have been the effect of the particular light in which he sat, but the doctor looked extremely pale, and did not appear at all at his ease.

The admiral, on the contrary, appeared in as placable a state of mind as possible and had his arms folded across his breast, and his head shrunk down between his shoulders as if he had made up his mind to something that was to last a long time, and, therefore he was making the best of it.

“I do hope,” said Mr. Chillingworth, after a long pause, “that our efforts will be crowned with success—you know, my dear sir, that I have always been of your opinion, that there was a great deal more in this matter than met the eye.”

“To be sure,” said the admiral, “and as to our efforts being crowned with success, why, I’ll give you a toast, doctor, ‘may the morning’s reflection provide for the evening’s amusement.’”

“Ha! ha!” said Chillingworth, faintly; “I’d rather not drink any more, and you seem, admiral, to have transposed the toast in some way. I believe it runs, ‘may the evening’s amusement bear the morning’s reflection.’”

“Transpose the devil!” said the admiral; “what do I care how it runs? I gave you my toast, and as to that you mention, it’s another one altogether, and a sneaking, shore-going one too: but why don’t you drink?”

“Why, my dear sir, medically speaking, I am strongly of opinion that, when the human stomach is made to contain a large quantity of alcohol, it produces bad effects upon the system. Now, I’ve certainly taken one glass of this infernally strong Hollands, and it is now lying in my stomach like the red-hot heater of a tea-urn.”

“Is it? put it out with another, then.”

“Ay, I’m afraid that would not answer, but do you really think, admiral, that we shall effect anything by waiting here, and keeping watch and ward, not under the most comfortable circumstances, this first night of the Hall being empty.”

“Well, I don’t know that we shall,” said the admiral; “but when you really want to steal a march upon the enemy, there is nothing like beginning betimes. We are both of opinion that Varney’s great object throughout has been, by some means or another, to get possession of the house.”

“Yes; true, true.”

“We know that he has been unceasing in his endeavours to get the Bannerworth family out of it; that he has offered them their own price to become its tenant, and that the whole gist of his quiet and placid interview with Flora in the garden, was to supply her with a new set of reasons for urging her mother and brother to leave Bannerworth Hall, because the old ones were certainly not found sufficient.”

“True, true, most true,” said Mr. Chillingworth, emphatically. “You know, sir, that from the first time you broached that view of the subject to me, how entirely I coincided with you.”

“Of course you did, for you are a honest fellow, and a right-thinking fellow, though you are a doctor, and I don’t know that I like doctors much better than I like lawyers—they’re only humbugs in a different sort of way. But I wish to be liberal; there is such a thing as an honest lawyer, and, d——e, you’re an honest doctor!”



“Of course I’m much obliged, admiral, for your good opinion. I only wish it had struck me to bring something of a solid nature in the shape of food, to sustain the waste of the animal economy during the hours we shall have to wait here.”

“Don’t trouble yourself about that,” said the admiral. “Do you think I’m a donkey, and would set out on a cruise without victualling my ship? I should think not. Jack Pringle will be here soon, and he has my orders to bring in something to eat.”

“Well,” said the doctor, “that’s very provident of you, admiral, and I feel personally obliged; but tell me, how do you intend to conduct the watch?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, I mean, if we sit here with the window fastened so as to prevent our light from being seen, and the door closed, how are we by any possibility to know if the house is attacked or not?”

“Hark’ee, my friend,” said the admiral; “I’ve left a weak point for the enemy.”

“A what, admiral?”

“A weak point. I’ve taken good care to secure everything but one of the windows on the ground floor, and that I’ve left open, or so nearly open, that it will look like the most natural place in the world to get in at. Now, just inside that window, I’ve placed a lot of the family crockery. I’ll warrant, if anybody so much as puts his foot in, you’ll hear the smash;—and, d——e, there it is!”

There was a loud crash at this moment, followed by a succession of similar sounds, but of a lesser degree; and both the admiral and Mr. Chillingworth sprung to their feet.

“Come on,” cried the former; “here’ll be a precious row—take the lantern.”

Mr. Chillingworth did so, but he did not seem possessed of a great deal of presence of mind; for, before they got out of the room, he twice accidentally put on the dark slide, and produced a total darkness.

“D—n!” said the admiral; “don’t make it wink and wink in that way; hold it up, and run after me as hard as you can.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Mr. Chillingworth.

It was one of the windows of a long room, containing five, fronting the garden, which the admiral had left purposely unguarded; and it was not far from the apartment in which they had been sitting, so that, probably, not half a minute’s time elapsed between the moment of the first alarm, and their reaching the spot from whence it was presumed to arise.

The admiral had armed himself with one of the huge pistols, and he dashed forward, with all the vehemence of his character, towards the window, where he knew he had

placed the family crockery, and where he fully expected to meet the reward of his exertion by discovering some one lying amid its fragments.

In this, however, he was disappointed; for, although there was evidently a great smash amongst the plates and dishes, the window remained closed, and there was no indication whatever of the presence of any one.

“Well, that’s odd,” said the admiral; “I balanced them up amazingly careful, and two of ‘em edgeways—d—e, a fly would have knocked them down.”

“Mew,” said a great cat, emerging from under a chair.

“Curse you, there you are,” said the admiral. “Put out the light, put out the light; here we’re illuminating the whole house for nothing.”

With a click went the darkening slide over the lantern, and all was obscurity. At that instant a shrill, clear whistle came from the garden.

AFTER LONDON, or, Wild England by Richard Jefferies

## CHAPTER V. THE LAKE

There now only remains the geography of our country to be treated of before the history is commenced. Now the most striking difference between the country as we know it and as it was known to the ancients is the existence of the great Lake in the centre of the island. From the Red Rocks (by the Severn) hither, the most direct route a galley can follow is considered to be about 200 miles in length, and it is a journey which often takes a week even for a vessel well manned, because the course, as it turns round the islands, faces so many points of the compass, and therefore the oarsmen are sure to have to labour in the teeth of the wind, no matter which way it blows.

Many parts are still unexplored, and scarce anything known of their extent, even by repute. Until Felix Aquila's time, the greater portion, indeed, had not even a name. Each community was well acquainted with the bay before its own city, and with the route to the next, but beyond that they were ignorant, and had no desire to learn. Yet the Lake cannot really be so long and broad as it seems, for the country could not contain it. The length is increased, almost trebled, by the islands and shoals, which will not permit of navigation in a straight line. For the most part, too, they follow the southern shore of the mainland, which is protected by a fringe of islets and banks from the storms which sweep over the open waters.

Thus rowing along round the gulfs and promontories, their voyage is thrice prolonged, but rendered nearly safe from the waves, which rise with incredible celerity before the gales. The slow ships of commerce, indeed, are often days in traversing the distance between one port and another, for they wait for the wind to blow abaft, and being heavy, deeply laden, built broad and flat-bottomed for shallows, and bluff at the bows, they drift like logs of timber. In canoes the hunters, indeed, sometimes pass swiftly from one place to another, venturing farther out to sea than the ships. They could pass

yet more quickly were it not for the inquisition of the authorities at every city and port, who not only levy dues and fees for the treasury of the prince, and for their own rapacious desires, but demand whence the vessel comes, to whom she belongs, and whither she is bound, so that no ship can travel rapidly unless so armed as to shake off these inquisitors.

The canoes, therefore, travel at night and in calm weather many miles away from the shore, and thus escape, or slip by daylight among the reedy shallows, sheltered by the flags and willows from view. The ships of commerce haul up to the shore towards evening, and the crews, disembarking, light their fires and cook their food. There are, however, one or two gaps, as it were, in their usual course which they cannot pass in this leisurely manner; where the shore is exposed and rocky, or too shallow, and where they must reluctantly put forth, and sail from one horn of the land to the other.

The Lake is also divided into two unequal portions by the straits of White Horse, where vessels are often weather-bound, and cannot make way against the wind, which sets a current through the narrow channel. There is no tide; the sweet waters do not ebb and flow; but while I thus discourse, I have forgotten to state how they came to fill the middle of the country. Now, the philosopher Silvester, and those who seek after marvels, say that the passage of the dark body through space caused an immense volume of fresh water to fall in the shape of rain, and also that the growth of the forests distilled rain from the clouds. Let us leave these speculations to dreamers, and recount what is known to be.

For there is no tradition among the common people, who are extremely tenacious of such things, of any great rainfall, nor is there any mention of floods in the ancient manuscripts, nor is there any larger fall of rain now than was formerly the case. But the Lake itself tells us how it was formed, or as nearly as we shall ever know, and these facts were established by the expeditions lately sent out.

At the eastern extremity the Lake narrows, and finally is lost in the vast marshes which cover the site of the ancient London. Through these, no doubt, in the days of the old world there flowed the river Thames. By changes of the sea level and the sand that was brought up there must have grown great banks, which obstructed the stream. I have formerly mentioned the vast quantities of timber, the wreckage of towns and bridges which was carried down by the various rivers, and by none more so than by the Thames. These added to the accumulation, which increased the faster because the foundations of the ancient bridges held it like piles driven in for the purpose. And before this the river had become partially choked from the cloacae of the ancient city which poured into it through enormous subterranean aqueducts and drains.

After a time all these shallows and banks became well matted together by the growth of weeds, of willows, and flags, while the tide, ebbing lower at each drawing back, left still more mud and sand. Now it is believed that when this had gone on for a time, the waters of the river, unable to find a channel, began to overflow up into the deserted streets, and especially to fill the underground passages and drains, of which the number and extent was beyond all the power of words to describe. These, by the force of the water, were burst up, and the houses fell in.

For this marvellous city, of which such legends are related, was after all only of brick, and when the ivy grew over and trees and shrubs sprang up, and, lastly, the waters underneath burst in, this huge metropolis was soon overthrown. At this day all those parts which were built upon low ground are marshes and swamps. Those houses that were upon high ground were, of course, like the other towns, ransacked of all they contained by the remnant that was left; the iron, too, was extracted. Trees growing up by them in time cracked the walls, and they fell in. Trees and bushes covered them; ivy and nettles concealed the crumbling masses of brick.

The same was the case with the lesser cities and towns whose sites are known in the woods. For though many of our present towns bear the ancient names, they do not stand upon the ancient sites, but are two or three, and sometimes ten miles distant. The founders carried with them the name of their original residence.

Thus the low-lying parts of the mighty city of London became swamps, and the higher grounds were clad with bushes. The very largest of the buildings fell in, and there was nothing visible but trees and hawthorns on the upper lands, and willows, flags, reeds, and rushes on the lower. These crumbling ruins still more choked the stream, and almost, if not quite, turned it back. If any water ooze past, it is not perceptible, and there is no channel through to the salt ocean. It is a vast stagnant swamp, which no man dare enter, since death would be his inevitable fate.

There exhales from this oozy mass so fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it. The black water bears a greenish-brown floating scum, which for ever bubbles up from the putrid mud of the bottom. When the wind collects the miasma, and, as it were, presses it together, it becomes visible as a low cloud which hangs over the place. The cloud does not advance beyond the limit of the marsh, seeming to stay there by some constant attraction; and well it is for us that it does not, since at such times when the vapour is thickest, the very wildfowl leave the reeds, and fly from the poison. There are no fishes, neither can eels exist in the mud, nor even newts. It is dead.

The flags and reeds are coated with slime and noisome to the touch; there is one place where even these do not grow, and where there is nothing but an oily liquid, green and rank. It is plain there are no fishes in the water, for herons do not go thither, nor the kingfishers, not one of which approaches the spot. They say the sun is sometimes hidden by the vapour when it is thickest, but I do not see how any can tell this, since they could not enter the cloud, as to breathe it when collected by the wind is immediately fatal. For all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water, which has sunk down into and penetrated the earth, and floated up to the surface the contents of the buried cloacae.

Many scores of men have, I fear, perished in the attempt to enter this fearful place, carried on by their desire of gain. For it can scarcely be disputed that untold treasures lie hidden therein, but guarded by terrors greater than fiery serpents. These have usually made their endeavours to enter in severe and continued frost, or in the height of a drought. Frost diminishes the power of the vapour, and the marshes can then, too, be partially traversed, for there is no channel for a boat. But the moment anything be moved, whether it be a bush, or a willow, even a flag, if the ice be broken, the pestilence rises yet stronger. Besides which, there are portions which never freeze,

and which may be approached unawares, or a turn of the wind may drift the gas towards the explorer.

In the midst of summer, after long heat, the vapour rises, and is in a degree dissipated into the sky, and then by following devious ways an entrance may be effected, but always at the cost of illness. If the explorer be unable to quit the spot before night, whether in summer or winter, his death is certain. In the earlier times some bold and adventurous men did indeed succeed in getting a few jewels, but since then the marsh has become more dangerous, and its pestilent character, indeed, increases year by year, as the stagnant water penetrates deeper. So that now for very many years no such attempts have been made.

The extent of these foul swamps is not known with certainty, but it is generally believed that they are, at the widest, twenty miles across, and that they reach in a winding line for nearly forty. But the outside parts are much less fatal; it is only the interior which is avoided.

Towards the Lake the sand thrown up by the waves has long since formed a partial barrier between the sweet water and the stagnant, rising up to within a few feet of the surface. This barrier is overgrown with flags and reeds, where it is shallow. Here it is possible to sail along the sweet water within an arrow-shot of the swamp. Nor, indeed, would the stagnant mingle with the sweet, as is evident at other parts of the swamp, where streams flow side by side with the dark or reddish water; and there are pools, upon one side of which the deer drink, while the other is not frequented even by rats.

The common people aver that demons reside in these swamps; and, indeed, at night fiery shapes are seen, which, to the ignorant, are sufficient confirmation of such tales. The vapour, where it is most dense, takes fire, like the blue flame of spirits, and these flaming clouds float to and fro, and yet do not burn the reeds. The superstitious trace in them the forms of demons and winged fiery serpents, and say that white spectres haunt the margin of the marsh after dusk. In a lesser degree, the same thing has taken place with other ancient cities. It is true that there are not always swamps, but the sites are uninhabitable because of the emanations from the ruins. Therefore they are avoided. Even the spot where a single house has been known to have existed, is avoided by the hunters in the woods.

They say when they are stricken with ague or fever, that they must have unwittingly slept on the site of an ancient habitation. Nor can the ground be cultivated near the ancient towns, because it causes fever; and thus it is that, as I have already stated, the present places of the same name are often miles distant from the former locality. No sooner does the plough or the spade turn up an ancient site than those who work there are attacked with illness. And thus the cities of the old world, and their houses and habitations, are deserted and lost in the forest. If the hunters, about to pitch their camp for the night, should stumble on so much as a crumbling brick or a fragment of hewn stone, they at once remove at least a bowshot away.

The eastward flow of the Thames being at first checked, and finally almost or quite stopped by the formation of these banks, the water turned backwards as it were, and began to cover hitherto dry land. And this, with the other lesser rivers and brooks that

no longer had any ultimate outlet, accounts for the Lake, so far as this side of the country is concerned.

At the western extremity the waters also contract between the steep cliffs called the Red Rocks, near to which once existed the city of Bristol. Now the Welsh say, and the tradition of those who dwell in that part of the country bears them out, that in the time of the old world the River Severn flowed past the same spot, but not between these cliffs. The great river Severn coming down from the north, with England on one bank and Wales upon the other, entered the sea, widening out as it did so. Just before it reached the sea, another lesser river, called the Avon, the upper part of which is still there, joined it passing through this cleft in the rocks.

But when the days of the old world ended in the twilight of the ancients, as the salt ocean fell back and its level became lower, vast sandbanks were disclosed, which presently extended across the most part of the Severn river. Others, indeed, think that the salt ocean did not sink, but that the land instead was lifted higher. Then they say that the waves threw up an immense quantity of shingle and sand, and that thus these banks were formed. All that we know with certainty, however, is, that across the estuary of the Severn there rose a broad barrier of beach, which grew wider with the years, and still increases westwards. It is as if the ocean churned up its floor and cast it forth upon the strand.

Now when the Severn was thus stayed yet more effectually than the Thames, in the first place it also flowed backwards as it were, till its overflow mingled with the reflux of the Thames. Thus the inland sea of fresh water was formed; though Silvester hints (what is most improbable) that the level of the land sank and formed a basin. After a time, when the waters had risen high enough, since all water must have an outlet somewhere, the Lake, passing over the green country behind the Red Rocks, came pouring through the channel of the Avon.

Then, farther down, it rose over the banks which were lowest there, and thus found its way over a dam into the sea. Now when the tide of the ocean is at its ebb, the waters of the Lake rush over these banks with so furious a current that no vessel can either go down or come up. If they attempted to go down, they would be swamped by the meeting of the waves; if they attempted to come up, the strongest gale that blows could not force them against the stream. As the tide gradually returns, however, the level of the ocean rises to the level of the Lake, the outward flow of water ceases, and there is even a partial inward flow of the tide which, at its highest, reaches to the Red Rocks. At this state of the tide, which happens twice in a day and night, vessels can enter or go forth.

The Irish ships, of which I have spoken, thus come into the Lake, waiting outside the bar till the tide lifts them over. The Irish ships, being built to traverse the ocean from their country, are large and stout and well manned, carrying from thirty to fifty men. The Welsh ships, which come down from that inlet of the Lake which follows the ancient course of the Severn, are much smaller and lighter, as not being required to withstand the heavy seas. They carry but fifteen or twenty men each, but then they are more numerous. The Irish ships, on account of their size and draught, in sailing about the sweet waters, cannot always haul on shore at night, nor follow the course of the ships of burden between the fringe of islands and the strand.

They have often to stay in the outer and deeper waters; but the Welsh boats come in easily at all parts of the coast, so that no place is safe against them. The Welsh have ever been most jealous of the Severn, and will on no account permit so much as a canoe to enter it. So that whether it be a narrow creek, or whether there be wide reaches, or what the shores may be like, we are ignorant. And this is all that is with certainty known concerning the origin of the inland sea of sweet water, excluding all that superstition and speculation have advanced, and setting down nothing but ascertained facts.

A beautiful sea it is, clear as crystal, exquisite to drink, abounding with fishes of every kind, and adorned with green islands. There is nothing more lovely in the world than when, upon a calm evening, the sun goes down across the level and gleaming water, where it is so wide that the eye can but just distinguish a low and dark cloud, as it were, resting upon the horizon, or perhaps, looking lengthways, cannot distinguish any ending to the expanse. Sometimes it is blue, reflecting the noonday sky; sometimes white from the clouds; again green and dark as the wind rises and the waves roll.

Storms, indeed, come up with extraordinary swiftness, for which reason the ships, whenever possible, follow the trade route, as it is called, behind the islands, which shelter them like a protecting reef. They drop equally quickly, and thus it is not uncommon for the morning to be calm, the midday raging in waves dashing resistlessly upon the beach, and the evening still again. The Irish, who are accustomed to the salt ocean, say, in the suddenness of its storms and the shifting winds, it is more dangerous than the sea itself. But then there are almost always islands, behind which a vessel can be sheltered.

Beneath the surface of the Lake there must be concealed very many ancient towns and cities, of which the names are lost. Sometimes the anchors bring up even now fragments of rusty iron and old metal, or black beams of timber. It is said, and with probability, that when the remnant of the ancients found the water gradually encroaching (for it rose very slowly), as they were driven back year by year, they considered that in time they would be all swept away and drowned. But after extending to its present limits the Lake rose no farther, not even in the wettest seasons, but always remains the same. From the position of certain quays we know that it has thus remained for the last hundred years at least.

Never, as I observed before, was there so beautiful an expanse of water. How much must we sorrow that it has so often proved only the easiest mode of bringing the miseries of war to the doors of the unoffending! Yet men are never weary of sailing to and fro upon it, and most of the cities of the present time are upon its shore. And in the evening we walk by the beach, and from the rising grounds look over the waters, as if to gaze upon their loveliness were reward to us for the labour of the day.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK