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'Tash the inexorable, the irresistible'

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

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

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

This Edition

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

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[Super Duper](#) : Part Nine by [James Rhodes](#) – Smith discovers popularity

[Babbage Must Die](#) Part Six by [Gavin Chappell](#) – Brian takes the king's shilling

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance](#) Chapter Five by Rex Mundy – The battle of Bedegreaine begins...

Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Brigands of the Moon](#) (Part 6) by [Ray Cummings](#) – We searched him. A heat ray cylinder—that was legitimate. But we found a small battery and eavesdropping device similar to the one Venza had mentioned that Shac the gambler was carrying.

[Witches and Barbarians](#) Part Three by [Gavin Chappell](#) Osborne goes berserk....
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This Is Not a Test

HICKS WOKE slowly, wiping the crud from his eyes, his limbs leaden, and his brain slow and uncomprehending. Water ran in the distance and it took him a couple of minutes to recognise the sound. The shower. His eyes took in the rumpled sheets next to him, the depression in the pillow. He let the fan blow cooling air across his naked torso for a few moments. It helped him think. She had stayed the night again. That much was clear. He ran a hand across his stomach and chest, winced as he grazed the raw skin there. She had done more than stay the night. He laughed and allowed himself to doze away his hangover, sounds of traffic wafting in with the breeze.

He woke again as the smell of cooking bacon drifted through his apartment. For him. He knew she wouldn't eat it. She never would. Not now. The bitter aroma of coffee mingled with the bacon and it was enough to rouse him and make him join her in the kitchen.

'Good morning,' she said, as she saw him. She looked good this morning, really good, and Hicks, although he knew he would have to tell her soon, was content to keep quiet for one more day.

'Morning,' he replied, lifting a steaming coffee to his lips, burning away the last of his hangover. 'How were your dreams?'

It was a joke between the two of them. She dreamt often and vividly, remembering the minutiae for days, treating them like they were prophetic. She had dreamt him into being, she said, and had dreamt their life together. She had told him this after their second night together. *What life?* he had asked. *You'll see*, she had answered. He had been disturbed and flattered in equal measure and told her so. She had laughed at him and his insecurities.

'Good,' she replied now, looking over her shoulder at him. 'As always.'

As he looked at her smile, and the way her buttocks swelled against the cotton of his shirt that she always wore after showering, he thought to himself, *Damn but it's going be tough to tell her.*

He ate the bacon and fried mushrooms that she heaped onto his plate.

'Are you having some?' he asked, knowing her reply before she did. The fact that he had time to phrase the reply in his head before hearing it from her worried him.

'I just don't feel hungry.' This, accompanied with another smile that looked forced, with a slight frowning of her brow, as if she knew she should have some other response for him, but just couldn't phrase it.

He took a second cup of coffee out to the balcony that overlooked the city to the south. The sun was high by now, beating a sweltering path down through the high trees that flanked his apartment. In the distance, where the sky met the horizon, there

was sufficient gap in the buildings to see the ocean. He wasn't near enough to hear it, but could imagine the insistent, soothing, lapping on the beach, fancied he could smell the salt in the air and the faint tang of fish scales and sweat from the fishing boats. He *was* near enough, however, to see the hordes of looters that raided the beachfront houses, left vacant and desolate by the outbreak.

Most of these looters moved with speed, but there were a number, more each day, Hicks noticed, that paraded the slow lolling shamble that generalised those infected. They still had their wits however, and more than once he had seen fights break out among the infected and the clean, with equal winners in both camps. Of course, the infected were far more successful at their recruiting, and in the last few days, Hicks had seen a marked increase in the distance kept between the two camps. Both sides were getting smarter, it seemed. The fact that there were any sides at all worried Hicks, but not so much that he lost sight of his aim. Remain on the winning side, *become* the winning side. Be there when the infected were no more. It would be his biggest challenge, his greatest victory. He could be a hero.

He felt that he was being tested, had felt it all his life. This was yet another test for him. Ride out this infection, do not succumb to it, protect those he cared about. He had no idea who was setting these tests for him, but he knew one thing. When he succeeded, he would be among the elite. One in a thousand. One in a million, perhaps.

The news channels and the papers all spewed hyperbole, reassuring readers and watchers alike that the infected were non threatening, that there were medical stations located no more than fifty miles from any citizen that would be able to deal with anything the outbreak had to offer. The fact that the numbers of infected seemed to be increasing either meant that these claims were false, or that the infected had neither the wits nor the inclination to visit them. They played down the reports coming in that the infected were violent, uncontrolled criminals, intent on nothing more than causing damage and finding stuff to eat and steal. They made no mention whatsoever of the report that had been played on a local radio station that purported to detail an infected killing a reporter and then eating him. He looked over at the looters in the distance, and wondered just how gullible the papers and the TV people really thought he was. No matter, it was just another demand among the thousands already placed upon him.

Hicks scratched his stubble and swallowed the dregs of his coffee. He rose and turned to enter the house. He stopped when he saw her in the kitchen, head bowed, swaying slightly as if on unsteady legs. He saw her raise a hand to her mouth and swipe it across angrily as if she were wiping drool. She heard his footsteps and turned to him. The smile on her face broke his heart. She was trying so hard, and it made the hairs on his arms prickle. It would have to be today. He would have to tell her.

'I need a shower,' she said, and he mentioned nothing of the shower she had already taken. He nodded slowly, and smiled at her.

'I'll join you,' he said, walking towards her, holding his hands to her. She grasped at them, grateful for their strength, and kissed him on the lips. Her lips were cool and dry, as they had always been, and she smelled of shampoo and sunlight. They showered and loved and slept the day away as the warm breeze explored his apartment.

The dusk came with fitful unease. It came with the sounds of crashing glass and car horns and they woke to the ever encroaching sound of shuffling feet. Hicks stood on the balcony, coffee in hand, his memories with the afternoon. His thoughts now, however, were fully fixed on the scene in front of him. There were crowds of people milling across the main road in front of his building. They stretched right back to the ocean, although Hicks could not be sure whether they were filling up from the ocean side, or just accumulating and swelling in numbers at this side. He was too far up to see, but there seemed to be no clean among them as far as he could tell. Even now, however, fully two weeks into the infections, they were moving deliberately, with thought and without too much noise. They were nothing like the stories you heard. Yet. The noises that could be heard, Hicks presumed, were from the panicking clean population making their escape. He was fine for them to be there as long as none turned their gaze his way. He trusted in his government when it told him there was help coming for those affected and so he was mildly content to drink his coffee and watched the crowd increase like a Petri dish of magnified bacteria.

She came up behind him and clasped her arms about his waist. She spoke, but he understood not a word of it. Alarmed, he turned to her and was shocked by the look in her eyes. It was vacant. He dropped his coffee and the sharp crack seemed to rouse her. She blinked rapidly and pressed her face into his bare chest. ‘Hi,’ she whispered.

‘You OK?’ he asked, his voice dry and cracked. He felt her nod against him.

Are you really? was the question he didn’t ask.

‘There is something I want to tell you,’ he started, keeping her pressed to him, unable or unwilling to see her face as he spoke. ‘I think you are...’ Here he stopped, the words catching in his throat like a fish bone. She caught his eye, and held his gaze, testing him, challenging him, daring him to finish. He failed this test. ‘Beautiful,’ he finished. His head dropped to rest on hers, and she tightened her grip on him.

The infected. One day they were fully sentient but mindless scavengers, wanting nothing more than to find food and shelter. Crowding like animals on the African plain. Shuffling like the machines they were, but essentially harmless.

And now. He steeled himself now as he looked down onto the crowd. The night had wrought a devastating change. Half of those he had seen from the previous day lay dismembered and destroyed on the ground. The remainder feasted upon them, sounds of tearing and sucking flesh mingling with their growls and senseless yammering. Even from this distance, Hicks could see the rot that infested their bodies, skin turned grey, eyes and ears leaking fluids, flesh sloughing from their bodies like the pulp from a ripe fruit.

‘Ride it out, Hicks,’ he whispered. ‘This is the final test. Ride it out.’

He turned on the TV and there was nothing but static. The radio hissed at him. It

seemed the newscasters had got it all horribly wrong. A noise behind him flushed him with cold fear and he turned to face it, eyes shut. He drew a deep breath, bringing with it the smells of rot and despair that flooded the air. He reached behind the TV and brought out the gun. A small thing, but no less deadly for that.

‘Ride it out,’ he said to himself. And opened his eyes.

‘*Dah linnn, dor.*’ the thing said.

‘Ahhh,’ he moaned, dropping to his knees. ‘Why didn’t I tell you? I should have told you, baby. We could have beaten this thing.’

She cocked her head, and a portion of loose skin slid down her cheek. She batted it away. With her arms held out in front of her, she edged toward him, the shirt that she still wore riding high on her thighs. Her legs were blue and grey and running with black fluid. Her feet dragged as she walked, loose jointed and turned to pulp. A sickening trail of ichor fanned out behind her.

He backed off, shaking his head. It couldn’t end here. He couldn’t let this thing win. He pointed the gun shakily, and then lowered it. God, but she had gone quickly! He moaned, a sound not unlike the mewling currently issuing from her ruined maw. He rushed at her suddenly, stopping as she tore the shirt open, revealing her naked torso. A bone showed through her chest. Skin and flesh lay ruined upon her. His mind betrayed him horribly as he imagined running his hands over that torso, tweaking the blackening nipples, wondering how her breasts would feel under his palms. He screamed and renewed his charge. He hit her at full speed and knocked her off her feet. She emitted a wail that was like nothing he had ever heard. He backed off, clamping his ears shut against the sound. She fell backwards and her head burst as it hit the ground. The wailing stopped, and the floor behind her was disguised with acres of greying brain and blood and skull fragments. He was sick suddenly, the acrid bile adding to the stench in the apartment. Tears flooded down his cheeks. He sank to his knees again, crawled slowly towards her corpse.

‘Not a test, not a test, not a test,’ he murmured, beating his palms against the sides of his head. ‘This is the real thing, Hicks. Oh, God, what have I done?’

It was only then, as he reached the body and saw past it, that he saw the door to the apartment stood open.

Dah linnn, dor .

Had she opened the door? Was she offering him escape, was that what she trying to tell him? It mattered little, for the door was open and the wailing, muttering insanities that edged closer down the corridor outside were the only reality.

He stood to face his end, smiling as he prepared to meet the one who he felt had forever challenged him. As the first grasping hands clamped wetly on him, he saw his life boiled down intimately to this one final test. He would not give in. He would not. He brought the gun up and fired. Five explosive crashes in his apartment loud enough to deafen him. Five wet smacks as the bullets found a home among rot and despair

and insensible hunger. He smiled as the hands tightened their grip on him, as he knew they would. He felt a soft nuzzling against his cheek and then intense raw agony as a swatch of skin was bitten loose. Hot blood soaked his face and neck, and he felt a wriggling inside his flesh, as if maggots were loose there.

Infected so quickly, he marvelled.

He raised the gun to his temple, batting away the pawing fingers that explored him. There was a muffled cry of indignation from the thing, and Hicks tightened his trigger finger.

The final test then was that extra squeeze on the trigger. It was the giving up but also the victory. The pain in his cheek passed. The wriggling maggoty infection had reached his elbows, his wrists, was creeping down his fingers. *It is now*, he thought. *Now or never*.

Hicks shut his eyes, knowing he had passed.

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Super Duper

Chapter Nine

Smith had a terrible night's sleep. No sooner had he slipped away to rest after his long day than he began to hear them crawling through the corridors like rats in wall cavity. They laughed and chatted and ran up and down. He was just nodding off too; they kept on running and laughing for the better part of two hours. Smith kept expecting Nicola or The Don to come and tell them to settle down and go to bed but neither of them did. Bastards, thought Smith, about the adults who had abandoned him. Then he thought it again about the children in the corridor.

His eyes dropped but his body refused to let him relax. Every bump, every bang and every giggle made him more and more jittery. Smith was not used to having more than two people around him. The rawness of the children's humanity made him remember why he had stopped spending time amongst the living.

Directly outside of his door, a small boy was making fart noises by squeezing his palm against his armpit. By the fifth repetition, Smith felt defeated. He was going to have to get up and deal with them. He opened the door to his room and peered wearily down the corridor. He hoped that his bloodshot eyes and his weary voice would lend credence to his words because he had absolutely no backup plan.

"Listen kids," he said. "I am very, very sleepy. Aren't you tired? Don't you want to go to bed?"

The children said nothing for about two seconds. It was just long enough to give Smith the vague hope that they might be paying attention to him.

"Come and play with us, mate."

A boy threw a ball at Smith. It was a football of the thin plastic variety that is utterly impractical for outside play except in the windless valleys of Timbuktu. It hit Smith on the nose. Smith had not been hit on the nose by a football since he had left secondary school (where he was hit on the nose by footballs rather more than he would have liked to admit). Smith raised his voice an octave.

"Listen, I am the only adult here, apparently. I've not been further than the Co-Op around the corner in two years but today, today I have travelled fifty odd miles in a car, nearly been arrested, climbed over dead bodies, and forced to make dinner and wash clothes. That being the case, all of you better go to sleep..."

Smith paused to take a breath. he was amazed that all the children were still listening to him. He couldn't believe his luck.

"Because, should the noise that you are currently making lead me to a total nervous breakdown, there is nobody around to restrain me from killing you all."

The kids laughed. Smith hadn't meant it as a punchline but he wasn't about to reveal that to them. He spoke a bit more softly.

"Come on, off to bed now."

The children looked reticent.

"Go on."

A little girl spoke up for her friends.

"If we put on our pyjamas and brush our teeth, will you tell us another story?"

Smith thought about the idea. He wasn't thrilled by it.

"Go on, a quick one."

The children took less than four minutes to get ready. Smith racked his brain for a story and unable to think of one. He told them his favourite variant of Little Red Riding Hood, the one in which the wolf arrives at Granny's house to discover she is

an anthropologist.

“What big ears you have, said the anthropologist. All the better to hear you with, said the wolf.”

“But, said the anthropologist, is that really the reason?”

By the time her granddaughter arrived, the wolf had been domesticated and had evolved into a poodle.

“That was brilliant,” said the boy who had hit Smith with a football.

“Good, now go to bed.”

Much to Smith’s amazement, the children did as they were told. As soon as he was sure that they had settled down, Smith set out to find Nicola and The Don to chastise them for their shoddy child management. It wasn’t often that Smith felt disgruntled about anything but he felt like he had been well and truly screwed over by his friend and his friend’s friend. He stormed out of the Travel Inn without even putting his shoes back on.

Smith had forgotten how uncomfortable it was to walk on concrete in bare feet but it didn’t take him long to make the assessment that it was very uncomfortable. He was already twenty steps out of the door by that point and going back for his shoes seemed like a waste of effort.

Smith entered the service station with very sensitive soles indeed. The soles of his feet could have winced on a toothpaste commercial, they were that sensitive. He looked around the hall of the service station.

“Hello,” he bellowed. “Are you two in here?”

“Sssh,” came a voice from inside the Little Chef.

Smith followed the noise to its origin. The Don was sat on one of the benches that were provided to give customers somewhere to wait when the restaurant was full. Nicola was lying on the bench next to him, her head in his lap.

“She just passed out,” explained The Don. “I think she has exhaustion. I don’t want to move her in case she wakes up.”

“How long ago did she fall asleep?”

“About two hours, I think.”

“OK,” said Smith. “I’ll go get some blankets and a pillow.”

“Are the children asleep?”

“Only just.”

“OK, can you support her head for a second; I’ll carry her to one of the beds.”

The next morning, Smith’s effort to sleep in was disturbed by The Don.

“Can you help me out? I don’t want to wake up Nicola.”

Smith stared at him. He used the eyes that he would use on Corrine whenever she had asked him to apply for a job or to open his curtains. It didn’t work on The Don.

“Please, man, they’re all asking for you.”

“What?”

“The kids, I don’t know why. They keep asking where the other guy is.”

“Did you tell them we’re not planning on staying here?”

“No, but can you get up and help me anyway – I’m out of my depth.”

Smith reluctantly crawled out of bed. His first action of the day was normally to take a shower. without it he spent the rest of the day feeling like crap. The only day that Smith didn’t take a shower was on a Sunday because it was his day of rest. It wasn’t a Sunday but with The Don staring at him so frantically, Smith decided to skip his shower anyway. He put on his clothes with red and sleep-filled eyes.

The children were all sat at tables in the Little Chef. When Smith walked through the

door, they all cheered. Smith rubbed his weary eyes and yawned.

“Anyone want a cup of tea?”

They all cheered again.

“Me too. Who thinks The Don should make a pot?”

“YAY!” They all cheered.

Smith looked at his friend.

“I’m not going to argue with them.”

Smith sat down at one of the tables.

“What do you have for breakfast normally?”

The football throwing boy answered.

“We used to have cereal but all the milk went bad.”

“No milk? Disaster.”

“Then we had toast but we ran out bread.”

“OK.”

“Then eggs. Now, we just have cereal but with water.”

“Yugh,” said Smith.

All of the eyes that stared at him had something in them that Smith was not used to. Was it expectation or admiration? Smith couldn’t work it out. Whatever it was, it made him feel uncomfortable.

“I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Smith walked into the kitchen.

“There’s no milk,” said The Don.

“Have you tried mixing flour and water?”

“That wouldn’t taste like milk, Smith.”

“OK, we need to make some breakfast.”

“Sausages again.”

“Too soon. Is there any beans?”

“You kidding? There’s two boxes of the big industrialised tins in the pantry.”

“Great, let’s crack open two tins and put them in bowls.”

“Is that OK for children to eat for breakfast?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

“So shall we give it to them?”

“Of course.”

Breakfast was a success. Smith even convinced the children to do all the dishes whilst The Don took a bowl of beans to the Travel Inn for Nicola. When everything was washed and put away Nicola was still not awake.

“Is she dead?”

The Don shook his head.

“I told her we could take the children for the rest of the day.”

“You did what?”

“Sorry.”

Smith wanted to pretend to be angry but he was surprised at how little he cared.

“Let’s play rounders again,” he suggested.

It was about two o’clock before Nicola surfaced. Smith and The Don noticed that she had two babies with her.

“Have they been with you all the time?” asked Smith. “How did you get any rest?”

Nicola just smiled.

Smith had one of the best days he had ever had. He arranged a bunch of old cardboard boxes from the service station and filled them with coins so that he could

play Sonic the Hedgehog with the children. He leant back on the wall shouting commands as one by one they tried to make it through the makeshift obstacle course. Only one child could run the course at a time so the others were filling in as robotised animals. The Sonic child leapfrogged them to emancipate them from robotic enthrallment.

“Jump, jump,” shouted Smith.

A child who was being a robot rabbit wrapped her arms around the girl who was playing Sonic.

“Damn, I lost a life.”

The only thing that marred the day for Smith was the absence of milk in his tea.

He lay in bed worrying about the children all night. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear a police siren.

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Six

A boom reverberated through the lockup and dust rose in swirling clouds as the tree

trunk collided with the door at high speed. Brian and Ada exchanged bewildered looks.

‘What’s going on?’ Brian wanted to know.

‘They’re trying to break the door down,’ Ada replied, as the oak panels banged again. Brian heard a thunder of feet and the boom came a third time. The door itself shuddered under the impact but showed no sign of breaking. He heard shouting in rough voices and after a moment of silence, the noise of running men was followed by an even louder bang from the door. It seemed to drive Brian’s ears ten feet into his skull. In the confined space of the lockup, the noise was deafening. His ears sang and he clapped his hands over them as the men slammed their battering ram into the solid oak door yet another time.

This time, although the wood panels showed no sign of breaking, the metal lock gave a twanging sound as if it was under severe stress. Brian sympathised with it. In a short space, he had travelled backwards in time by two hundred years, been accused of being French, locked up with a man who thought he was a computer and now there was a bunch of lunatics outside, trying to bash the door down with a tree trunk.

‘Get away from the door, Brian,’ Ada shouted. ‘I think it’s going to...’

She broke off as the bang came yet again and the lock suddenly shattered. The door sprang open violently, catching Brian on the shin so he fell back against the far wall, and suddenly a tree trunk propelled by several burly, sweaty men was taking up most of the enclosed space.

With a lot of groaning and cursing, the men dragged the tree trunk back outside the lockup and flung it to the cobbles. Other men came forward and helped Ada out of the shattered door. More tried to grab Brian. He gagged at their stench and waved them away.

‘I can walk,’ he told them. ‘What’s all this about?’

A slimmer figure, a tall thin man in his early thirties, who wore a jacket and striped trousers, dodged round the burly toughs and bowed low to Ada, then vigorously shook Brian by the hand.

‘Is that you, Will?’ Ada asked, wonderingly.

‘Of course, you’ve only seen me in the dark!’ the man said with a laugh. ‘This is the first time I’ve seen so much of you, either. I had not realised how much of a beauty you were!’

Brian bristled. His shin was in agony but he wasn’t going to put up with some nineteenth century goon getting fresh with Ada. But before he could say anything, a big man in his fifties, to whom all the other toughs seemed to defer, stepped forward.

‘Alreet, Will, tha’s enough,’ he said, speaking with a Midlands accent. ‘Don’t forget thee’s married to my little sister. Reckon us’d better scatter before the constable calls

out the militia. Us'll meet up with thee in Chester, Sign of the Red Lion.'

'Come with me, both of you,' Will told Brian and Ada. As the rest of the men hurried away in several directions, he took them up a passageway that led between two houses and out into a country lane.

'Who was that?' Brian asked as they left the village. It was certainly a lot nicer than it was in his day; this bit would be the grey, dreary council estate in the 21st century, where Brian had his flat. Open fields, meadows, and copses made a welcome improvement. 'Who were all those people? Why do they want us to meet in Chester?'

'That was Edward Ludlam, my brother in law,' Will told them. 'The other fellows were his... his associates. You're lucky they're in the area. Most of them come from Nottingham, but they're up in Cheshire now to meet like-minded workers.'

'I take it they don't have jobs to go to,' Ada commented wryly, hurrying along on the other side.

Will gave her a thin smile. 'Indeed they don't. As soon as the constable let me go, I hurried to their camp on Rudheath and told them about you. It took no time for my brother in law to rouse them, though it's the stocking looms that worry them most of all. When I told them that you knew of a man who was working on a machine to put my trade out of a job...'

'They came along like rent-a-mob,' Brian said. 'Not that I'm complaining, mind,' he added, 'but I can tell they're the kind of people the Riot Act was written for.'

'Shut up, Brian,' Ada said as they walked briskly down the lane. 'Don't you see – it's people like Ludlam that we need? How are we going to stand a chance of getting to Cambridge and fulfilling our mission without his support? This is a golden opportunity!'

'My brother in law was certainly very interested in what I told him,' Will said. 'He wants to discuss it with you in more detail when we get to the alehouse.'

Brian brightened. 'Now that sounds like a good idea,' he said.

They were speeded on their way when they reached a larger highway and hitched a lift on a farmer's cart. Soon they were nearing the outskirts of Chester.

Although Brian had always thought the city an ancient place that had kept most of its historical buildings, he was surprised to find that, apart from the walls that surrounded the centre, the place was nothing like he remembered it from his own time. The Northgate was completely different; it was a large, castle-like structure that Will told them was the town gaol – where they would have ended up if Pagnell had had his way.

Inside the walls half-timbered houses leaned over either side of a cobbled street that was strewn with straw and horse manure and worse things. On either side of the street were covered walkways that were built into the houses themselves, but Brian vaguely

remembered something like this remaining in his own time, in the case of one or two buildings. These tunnels were whitewashed but filthy with grime, and they were crowded with citizens dressed in tawdry finery. A middle aged woman reeking of gin made beckoning gestures at Brian, lifting her skirts invitingly. Brian gave her a horrified glance and she grinned at him, showing that she had hardly a tooth in her head.

The place stank of unwashed bodies, pipesmoke, and untreated sewage. Half the people seemed as toothless as the old whore, even the richer citizens did. Will led them into an alehouse a few hundred yards down the street from the Northgate, and as Brian ducked his head due to the low ceiling, he realised that the smoky interior was even worse.

Groups of rough-looking men in homespun clothes sat at equally rough-looking tables, drinking ale from tankards. Others sat in private booths off from the main bar. It seemed like everyone was smoking, and they all had clay pipes. A lot of them were eyeing Ada as she entered. Brian felt he ought to do something to warn them off but these guys all looked tough, even if most of them were pretty small by 21st century standards.

Will led them to a table in the corner and sat down on the other side of the stained, pitted surface. He was all apologies to Ada, but didn't seem to think he owed Brian any.

'Not a place to take a refined young lady,' he told her, 'but this is where my brother in law arranged to meet. They'll all have split up across the surrounding country to deter pursuit before heading this way.'

A tavern wench wearing a mob cap and a low-cut dress sauntered up to them. She grinned in the same toothless way as the old whore outside.

'What can I get you, gentlemen?' She eyed Ada derisively.

'A tankard of brown ale for me,' Will said, then looked uncertainly at Brian and Ada. 'Ale, for the young gentleman... And what would you like, my dear?'

Ada stuck her chin out determinedly. 'I'll have what everyone else is having,' she said, and scowled as the tavern wench scuttled off tittering.

Brian opened his mouth to say something and immediately started coughing as the smoky air irritated his lungs. Hadn't anyone heard of the smoking ban here?

'When do you suppose your friends will get here?' Ada asked as Brian wheezed. 'I take it they are Luddites?'

Will looked around him frantically. 'Don't mention that name!' he hissed. 'You don't know who could be listening! Machine wrecking has been made a capital offence!'

'A what?' Brian asked.

‘They hang you for it,’ said Ada.

‘Oh!’ said Brian. He was starting to find Ada’s know-it-all tendency quite comforting now, and found her presence reassuring amidst this strange world of people with no notion of personal hygiene or dentistry. ‘Isn’t that a bit much? I get it that people don’t want their machines broken, but hanging!’ At least they didn’t have that law in the 21st century, or he’d have been for the chop. He remembered the job centre robot he’d attacked in a moment of righteous anger.

At that moment, a group of men entered the alehouse. The tavern wench had returned carrying three tankards on a tray and she ran her cloth over the table in a desultory way before handing them to Will, Brian and – tittering helplessly to herself – to Ada. As the wench turned to leave, the men came over. Brian recognised the tallest of them as Ludlam.

The wench curtsied, took their orders, and hurried away. Ludlam smiled at Ada.

‘May I?’ he asked with rough courtesy. Ada blushed self consciously.

‘Of course you can,’ she said, budging up to let him sit down. The other men sat Will’s side of the table.

‘Rest’ll be on their way soon,’ Ludlam added. ‘‘Appen there’ll be a few new faces. I’ve taken the liberty to invite some of our brothers from Lancashire to the meetin’. They ‘ave their own grievances. They be ‘andloom weavers, and they’s worried ‘bout the new power looms...’

He went on at some length, and Brian sipped gingerly at his pint, which reminded him partly of Newcastle Brown, mostly of his dad’s foul-tasting homebrew. Ludlam talked about the price of wheat, which apparently was soaring astronomically, the recent Frame Breaking Act, which had been passed by the government the previous month, shearing frames, stocking frames, food riots... It was as depressing as the six o’clock news, the bits Brian could follow.

‘And now, brothers, I learns from Will Yates, what married my little sister, that an inventor down South plans to put his own trade to an end,’ Ludlam added. More men had joined them, most of them with Lancashire accents, and they were sitting on stools in the space adjacent to the table. The locals and regulars were looking on at the gathering meeting grudgingly.

‘Yates ‘ere be a skilled man, not even an artisan like us,’ Ludlam went on. ‘Tha parson learned him his letters and his numbers and he took a job as a computer. But now it turns out that this inventor Babbage will put him out o’ work! Who will ‘ave a job if these inventors and owners aren’t stopped?’

The men roared angrily at the injustice. Brian sighed to himself. Maybe Ada was right, maybe rent-a-mob would help them. But the moment he could get out of this smoky, grimy, stinking, noisy hole he would be happy.

Over the drone of Ludlam’s voice, he heard a distant sound of drumming, coming

from outside. Drumming and the defiant shrilling of whistles and the tramp of feet. He turned in his place, intrigued, and saw a group of men enter. These newcomers began sauntering along between the tables.

They came alongside the table where Ludlam and his mob were gathered. Brian put down his tankard. He'd almost finished his drink, but he was more interested by the newcomers.

'Here's a likely looking bunch,' said one of the men, a short man with a cast eye and a fringe of beard. He had a nasal, Liverpudlian voice. 'Mariners, any of you fellows? Spent any time at sea?'

The gathered men looked up at them with hostile expressions.

'Get thee back to Liverpool, man,' Ludlam said commandingly. 'Thee knows Chester has no welcome for thee's sort.' The sound of drums and marching feet was growing louder outside. As Ludlam spoke, one of the other newcomers dropped a coin in Brian's tankard. Brian looked up at him, and took it out, puzzled.

'Hey, mate,' he said. 'You dropped this in my drink.'

Ada lunged forward. 'No, Brian!' she cried. 'This is the press gang!'

Suddenly, everything happened at once. Two men grabbed Brian from behind and he tried to pull away. The man with the cast eye crowed loudly.

'He's taken the king's shilling! You can't deny it, me hearties! He's volunteered! He wants to be pressed!'

Brian stood up and tried to push the two men away from him. Ludlam and the others were on their feet, shouting loudly. Ada had her head in her hands. Brian pulled away from his would-be captors and collided with the table, sending tankards clattering to the uneven flagstones.

'I don't know what all this is about...' he began. One of Ludlam's friends lunged forward to grapple a newcomer. Fighting broke out between Ludlam's men and the newcomers – the press gang, Ada had called them. What were they, journalists?

Brian broke free and turned to the man with the cast eye, still holding the shilling from his drink.

'Hey, look, I don't know why everyone's fighting,' he said. 'But your mate dropped this in my drink. I wanted to give it him back, but it looks like he's a bit busy...' Ludlam himself had the man on the floor while one of the others was kicking him in the stomach. Then there was a blur of movement behind Brian and not for the first time in recent days, he knew no more.

Ada watched in horror as one of the press gang whacked Brian over the head with a

cosh. All around her, the fight was turning into a riot. It seemed to have spilled out into the street: through the bottle glass windows, she could see a press gang procession under attack from local citizens.

Will had taken no part in the fighting but had sat at her side, watching in horror. 'They must be getting desperate,' he observed. 'Usually the press gang knows better than to come to Chester. But your friend was imprudent, taking the king's shilling like that.'

Ada rose. She had sat there in a state of shock at Brian's stupidity in taking the coin. What did he think he was doing? Now the man with the cast eye and his companion were dragging Brian's unconscious form through the struggling figures and out into the street.

'Can't you do anything?' she demanded. 'Oh, he's such an idiot!'

What had she been thinking of, burdening herself with a know-nothing dole scrounger like Brian on this vital mission? The uneducated moron! Everyone knew you didn't take the king's shilling! Now look at the trouble he'd got himself into! But as the alehouse rang with the clamour of the riot and the press men dragged Brian through the door, she felt wretched.

With him went her only link to her own time.

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The Dark Place

Chapter 3

Isobel was up at 6.30am on Monday morning and at the Liverpool branch of her shop by 7.45am. Before she showered, she looked out of window at the rain, but even

pouring rain on a Monday morning hadn't dampened her spirits at all. She was excited about the coming week; she had the new pieces coming on Thursday or Friday, both her shops were doing well and she had met Martin.

Karen arrived at the shop just after 8.30am and by then Isobel had already rearranged the window display and moved some of the larger pieces to make access in the shop easier. As Karen backed through the front door, she shook the rain from her umbrella.

'Hi, Isobel,' she said over her shoulder as she tried to get as much water off her umbrella as possible. Karen went into the staff room at the rear of the shop and left her umbrella and coat before coming back into the shop.

'You've been busy,' Karen said to Isobel as she smoothed creases from her long black skirt. 'What time did you get here?'

'I was here for about a quarter to eight,' replied Isobel.

'Well, I would have been here earlier but as soon as it rains everything just seems to slow down, doesn't it?' said Karen. 'The bus was packed and there just seemed to be even more cars on the road than normal. Anyway, would you like a cup of tea before we open up?'

'That would be nice,' said Isobel.

As Karen disappeared into the rear of the shop to make the tea, Isobel surveyed the changes she had made to the displays. The larger pieces were now arranged across the side wall with the smaller tables towards the centre of the floor space. This left space around the tables for customers to browse while still allowing them access to the large pieces. Isobel made a final adjustment to a lamp on an oak Georgian occasional table. The red wooden base and red toile shade of the lamp contrasted well with the dark oak of the table.

Isobel checked the prices on the items and decided that while the lamp was a modern copy, at £60 it wasn't overpriced, but the table was authentic and at £600 was competitively priced for something that was well over two hundred years old. The window display looked neat and inviting with the reproduction brass lamp cases towards the outside and the Grade 1 authentic pieces at the centre. The reproduction lights and their cases were all handmade but at £300, they were a third of the price of the authentic ones. Many of the pieces in Isobel's shop went to large houses in Woolton and Allerton, as well as the renovations of large Georgian houses close to the Anglican Cathedral and the Philharmonic Hall in the city centre.

Isobel had always been interested in history, especially the Georgian and Victorian periods in UK history. She loved the beginnings of the British Empire and the romance of statesmen and explorers such as Clive of India and Captain Cook. The era was marked by cultural vibrancy with the founding of the British Museum, novels by Jane Austen and Mary Shelly, the romantic poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Byron and the paintings of Gainsborough, Turner and Constable. The Georgian era was also a time of immense social change with the founding of hospitals, Sunday Schools, and orphanages. There were also the social reforms of politicians like Robert Peel, the

abolition of slavery and a revival of Christianity. The Napoleonic wars dragged on for nearly a quarter of a century and made heroes of The Duke of Wellington and Admiral Lord Nelson. There was also the loss of the American colonies and the American Revolution, which were regarded as national disasters. The Georgian era sowed the seeds of the world-wide British Empire and of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, which were to follow. The Victorian era contrasted the huge wealth of the British Empire and the development of an educated middle class with child labour and the poverty of the lower classes because of mass urbanization and the industrial revolution. There were also huge advances in engineering, the development of photography and the introduction of the postage stamp with the price set regardless of distance sent. Medicine also progressed with the introduction of anaesthetic and antiseptics, which allowed painless dentistry and reduction in infection following medical procedures. There were also the great moral crusades against street prostitution and brothels, double standard divorce laws that allowed a man to divorce his wife for adultery, but a woman could only divorce if adultery were accompanied by cruelty, a focus on public decency and morality, and the introduction of bank holidays. Isobel had concentrated on Georgian and Victorian history and business at university and following her graduation had worked hard gaining experience working for various antique dealers before opening her own shop. Now she had her second shop in Chester and was turning over a healthy profit each year.

Karen returned with two mugs of tea, handed one to Isobel then looked at her expectantly.

‘Am I missing something?’ said Isobel.

‘Yesterday,’ prompted Karen. ‘How was your day with Martin?’

‘Oh,’ said Isobel. ‘The day was great. We had a nice afternoon shopping and then he took me to a lovely Japanese restaurant for something to eat.’

‘Japanese,’ said Karen pulling a face. ‘Isn’t that all raw fish and seaweed?’

‘Well, we had some sushi,’ replied Isobel, ‘but we also had some pork and vegetable dumplings and some fresh tuna cooked with a teriyaki sauce and rice, so it wasn’t all raw fish,’ she said laughing.

‘Well, at least he fed you, so that’s something,’ Karen replied smiling, ‘but what about the important stuff?’

‘What important stuff?’ said Isobel looking puzzled.

‘You know, what does he do for a job, where does he live, what car does he drive, when are you seeing him again,’ said Karen laughing, ‘the important stuff.’

‘Oh, the important stuff,’ said Isobel raising her eyebrows and laughing along with Karen.

‘Well, he’s a doctor, he lives in West Derby, he drives a Mercedes, and I’m seeing him either Thursday or Friday. Does that answer your question?’

‘Yes it does,’ answered Karen, looking serious. ‘I’m glad it went OK, and you know I’m only asking because I care about you.’

‘I know,’ said Isobel, ‘and I’m very grateful you care enough to ask.’

Karen Small had worked for Isobel for nearly five years. She had answered a small two line advert for an assistant with a love of antiques and she and Isobel had become close friends. Isobel sometimes wondered how she would manage without Karen. She knew she could trust her and without Karen to manage the Liverpool shop, she would never have had the courage to branch out and open another shop in Chester. Isobel put her mug down on the shop counter and gave Karen a hug.

‘Thank you,’ she said, meaning it.

Karen blushed, started getting flustered, so she picked up Isobel’s mug, and moved towards the rear of the shop saying, ‘I’ll just give these a rinse. Don’t want the customers thinking this is some sort of café, do we?’ Isobel watched as Karen took the mugs out to the sink in the back room. She struggled to think of Karen as an employee and thought how lucky she was to have Karen working at the shop.

The shop was busy for a Monday and the time passed quickly for both women. Between them, they sold two of the reproduction brass lamp cases and somebody was interested in the oak occasional table but couldn’t make their mind up about it.

‘Do you think she’ll come back?’ Karen asked.

‘You never know, do you? She might decide to buy something from one of the department stores instead,’ replied Isobel.

Karen laughed and said, ‘She’ll never get anything as nice or with as much history from a department store, will she?’

‘Maybe not,’ said Isobel, ‘but she may not want to spend £600 on a table either.’ As the day wore on, the number of customers gradually dwindled and by 4.30, both women began to think they’d probably seen the last of the day’s sales.

‘Have you got any plans for tonight?’ Isobel asked Karen.

‘Nothing definite,’ she replied. ‘I think Tom wants us to go over and visit his mother because she hasn’t been too well over the weekend.’

Karen and Tom had been married for six years and Isobel knew that things had been strained between them for the last few months.

‘How are things at home?’ asked Isobel. Karen’s face looked troubled as she replied.

‘I don’t know, to be honest. We’re talking but I just feel as though something’s wrong all the time and I don’t know what it is. All Tom wants to do when he comes in from work is watch the television. We hardly ever go out and I can’t remember the last

time we, you know.’ Karen raised both her eyebrows suggestively as she said *you know* and Isobel realised she was talking about having sex.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Have you tried talking to Tom about how you feel?’

‘I’ve tried,’ said Karen, ‘but he just seems to get withdrawn and moody so I’m letting things be for now and hoping they work themselves out.’

Karen mentioning her lovelife made Isobel consider her own situation. There had been a few men in Isobel’s life but only one that had ever been serious. ‘My God,’ she thought to herself. ‘I’ll be 32 next year and I haven’t had a man in my life for nearly three years.’

‘Isobel, Isobel,’ Karen’s insistent voice registered with Isobel and she snapped back out of her inner thoughts. Karen was making exaggerated eye movements towards the door. The well dressed woman who had expressed an interest in the occasional table earlier in the day was standing there. This time a tall grey haired man wearing a long black overcoat accompanied her. Isobel was wracking her brain trying to remember the woman’s name as she walked towards the couple. She smiled as she extended her hand.

‘Mrs McGuire, so nice to see you again,’ she said, wondering how she had remembered the name.

‘Hello, Isobel,’ said Mrs McGuire, taking Isobel’s hand. ‘Please call me Anne. This is my husband Tony.’

‘Nice to meet you, Tony,’ said Isobel releasing Anne’s hand and shaking hands with Tony.

‘Anne tells me you have a lovely Georgian occasional table in stock and she’d like me to see it,’ said Tony.

Isobel was surprised that Anne had returned with her husband but lost no time in showing the couple the table. Tony was impressed with the table and commented on how nice the lamp looked on it.

‘If you take the table I’ll let you have the lamp at a 50% discount,’ said Isobel.

Tony looked at his wife for a second then said, ‘OK, done. We’ll take it,’ before reaching into his coat pocket, drawing out a large black wallet and extracting a Visa credit card. ‘Is Visa OK?’ he asked Isobel.

‘Certainly,’ replied Isobel. ‘Will you be taking the table with you or would you like us to deliver it?’

‘We’ll take it with us,’ said Tony. ‘I’ve got the car so I’ll just bring it to the front. If you could wrap it in something I’m sure it will be fine.’

As Isobel put the credit card sale through, Karen wrapped the lamp base in bubble

wrap and carefully covered the shade in tissue before doing the same with it. As Tony keyed his number into the remote terminal, Karen placed a large piece of bubble wrap over the top of the table before she turned it over and wrapped the legs in the same material. The card was accepted and Isobel completed the transaction and returned the credit card to Tony.

‘Right, I’ll go and get the car,’ he said, replacing the credit card in his wallet and putting the wallet back into his coat. Two minutes later a large black Range Rover sport drew up outside the shop and Tony came in to help load the table in the back. Once the table and the lamp were securely placed in the car, Anne and Tony thanked Isobel and Karen for all their help and left.

‘Did you see the inside of that car?’ said Karen as she and Isobel went back into the shop. ‘It was all tan leather and it smelt lovely.’

Isobel smiled as she replied, ‘Yes, it was nice. Did you notice the registration was TM1? I wonder what he does for a living to have such a nice car and a personalised registration.’

‘I’ll bet you could have some fun in the back of one of them,’ said Karen laughing, ‘and leather seats as well. I wonder if they’re heated,’ she said lifting one eyebrow suggestively.

Isobel laughed and said, ‘Come on, let’s sort out the money and then we can go home.’ They had taken nearly £1400 and Isobel was really pleased. It wasn’t very often they took that much on a Monday.

‘Do you want me to give you a lift home?’ she asked Karen.

‘That would be nice but I don’t want to take you out of your way,’ Karen replied.

‘It’s no bother,’ said Isobel. ‘Let’s lock up and go.’ Isobel set the alarm before she locked the front door, pulled down the security gate, and inserted the two brass locks into the steel frame.

The window shutters were electric and were closed by a switch from inside the shop. Isobel checked the gate was locked and she and Karen walked round the corner to where Isobel had parked her car.

‘It’s a shame we have to have so much security,’ said Karen as they walked.

‘I know,’ replied Isobel, ‘but we need it for the insurance and without it we’d be an easy target.’

The two women got into Isobel’s BMW and headed towards the Croxteth Park estate where Karen lived. Twenty five minutes later Isobel parked the car outside Karen’s neat three bed roomed semi.

‘Looks like Tom’s home,’ said Karen, inclining her head towards the car parked on the driveway.

‘I’m sure everything will be OK,’ said Isobel. ‘You need to talk about things and tell him how you feel.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ said Karen as she got out of the car. ‘Thanks for the lift, Isobel. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘OK,’ said Isobel, ‘but don’t forget I’m going over to Chester first thing so I probably won’t be in until lunchtime.’

‘Alright. I’ll see you around lunchtime,’ then said Karen. As Isobel drove away Karen waved then went into her house.

Isobel headed towards West Derby village, as she wanted to stop at the shops and pick up a pint of milk and the evening paper. She pulled over into the small car park in front of St Mary’s Church at the entrance to Croxteth Park. The church had opened in 1856 and was a fine example of a church built in the Victorian era but based on a 14th century Gothic design. Isobel knew the church was a grade 2 listed building designed by Gilbert Scott, an architect who had originally designed and built workhouses before joining the Gothic revival.

Scott also designed the ‘Midland Grand Hotel’ at London’s St Pancras Station and the Albert Memorial, constructed in Hyde Park on behalf of Queen Victoria in memory of her husband, Prince Albert. Isobel looked up at the 160 foot tall turrets and shivered. The church looked like something out of a Hammer Horror film with the dark clouds scudding across the sky behind it as the daylight faded. Isobel crossed the road to the small grocery store and bought some milk and a small loaf before going next door to buy a copy of the Liverpool Echo. Isobel returned to her car and after placing her purchases on the passenger seat made her way home.

Isobel arrived home at just after 6.45 pm. She parked her car in the garage before crossing the gravel drive and entering her house. The heating was on and she shrugged off her coat, took off her shoes, and pulled on her slippers Isobel was glad she had put it on the timer as. She took the milk into the kitchen and boiled the kettle as she made herself a sandwich from some ham and the loaf she had bought. Isobel sat at the kitchen table with a mug of steaming tea and her sandwich and opened the paper.

She was flicking through the pages, not really taking much notice, when she spotted the headline Local Doctor Fights For Girl’s Life At Horror Smash and saw Martin’s face looking at her from the photograph on the page. Isobel’s stomach turned over as she read the story and she wondered if Martin was OK. Isobel went through into the lounge, picked up the phone, and dialled Martin’s home number. She knew he would still be at work but hoped she could leave him a message. Martin had recorded his own voice message and the recording told her that he wasn’t available now but to leave a message and he would ring back when he could. Isobel left her message and hung up.

Isobel went back into the kitchen and decided she wasn’t hungry anymore so she threw the remains of her sandwich into the rubbish bin. She finished the last of her tea

and decided to have a shower then watch a bit of TV or listen to some music before having an early night. Isobel showered, put on her pyjamas and her dressing gown, and returned to the lounge. She closed the curtains, switched on the two small table lamps at either end of the settee, lit the gas fire, and sat with her legs curled under her in the centre of the large settee. Isobel started to watch the TV but after a short time, she became bored with reality shows, cooking or home improvements so decided to listen to some music. She switched on the hi-fi and started to flick through the radio channels as she searched for something to listen to. She eventually found a station playing relaxed adult music rather than the frenetic beat driven dance music favoured by some stations.

Isobel started to relax and let the lyrics and the music wash over her. As she listened to the music, she thought about the men who had passed through her life. There had been one man who she thought she had loved. When she found the discarded woman's underwear at his flat when she called round unexpectedly she knew it was over between them. That had been eight years ago, just after her parents had died. At the time, she wondered what else could go wrong in her life. Her parents had died within months of each other and then she had found out the man she thought she was going to spend the rest of her life with was sleeping with someone else. He had denied it at first but in the end it had all come out and the relationship had ended with him telling her that she was frigid, so it was no wonder he had found someone else. It had taken Isobel a couple of years to get over the end of the relationship and rebuild her confidence.

She had thrown herself into her work and her business and the rewards hadn't been slow in coming. Her first shop had started showing a profit almost immediately and as her reputation grew so had the turnover at the shop. The second shop had been open for almost eighteen months now and the decision to open in Chester had proved a good one. The town was a huge draw to tourists and the yearly influx of American and Japanese visitors to Chester were amongst her best customers. She wondered if concentrating on her business so much was just a coping mechanism and she was shutting herself off from the outside world and numbing her feelings.

'Am I ready for another relationship and do I want to risk being hurt again?'

Isobel wondered how things would turn out with Martin. 'He seems nice enough,' she thought. 'I wonder why he isn't married.' Isobel's stomach turned over as she suddenly thought, 'Maybe he is.' A song on the radio caught Isobel's attention and she concentrated on the lyrics. The singer sang about how you shouldn't pretend to be something you're not because ultimately you're just lying to yourself. You should believe in what you are rather than what you think others want you to be.

'That sums me up, doesn't it?' thought Isobel sadly. 'Always thinking I haven't done anything or achieved anything when I'm obviously successful and I must be good at what I do otherwise I wouldn't have two shops and nearly fifty thousand pounds in the bank.' Isobel started to get angry with herself for the way she was thinking. 'This is stupid,' she told herself as she got up and walked into the kitchen to get a glass of wine. She returned to the lounge with her wine and as she sat down, she promised herself she wouldn't let her feelings get on top of her like that again.

As she sipped her wine and listened to the music, Isobel let her mind wander over some of the things that had happened in her life. She had left school with grade As in most of her 'A' levels and had had her pick of universities around the country. She had decided on Edinburgh, partly because she wanted to spread her wings a little, partly because of the reputation of the history department at the university and because they offered a degree in history and business. She had spent three wonderful years in Edinburgh and had graduated with a distinction.

Of course, there had been relationships with other students at the university and Isobel fondly remembered some of the good times she had while she was a student. During the three years she was there, Isobel dated but never seriously. She didn't want to spoil her chances of a first class degree by getting too involved with anyone.

'There was Ben, though,' she thought. Isobel had been seeing Ben for around four months as her final exams approached but once the graduation ceremony and end of year ball were over, she didn't think she'd see much more of him, no matter what he said to convince her otherwise. He would be returning to his home in Inverness while she would be going back to Liverpool and the 300 mile distance between the two towns would certainly hamper any relationship.

The final two weeks of the term were a mad rush to get ready for the move back to Liverpool while still preparing for the graduation ball. Isobel had picked what she planned to wear a month or two earlier and the striking red dress was now hanging in her room. She had wondered about the colour but finally decided that as it was probably the last time she would see many of her classmates she might as well go out with a bang. The ball had been fantastic and at the end there had been tears shed as people hugged and kissed, many realising that things were about to change dramatically for them. Isobel and Ben were among the last to leave and as they walked back to Isobel's shared house she asked him what he thought was going to happen to them now.

'I don't know,' Ben had replied. 'I suppose I'll go back home and work for my Dad.'

Ben's father had a distribution company in Inverness. Ben had studied business and he and Isobel had met at a tutorial group during their second year. They'd seen each other at different times after that but nothing had happened between them until about four months ago when Ben had asked her out.

They got back to the house and went upstairs to Isobel's room. 'Where's all your stuff?' said Ben as he looked round the bare room.

'It's all gone back to Liverpool,' Isobel replied as she took off her shoes.

'So when are you going back then?' said Ben disappointedly.

'I'm on the lunchtime train tomorrow,' replied Isobel. 'I was trying to tell you before but I just couldn't do it.'

'I suppose this is goodbye then,' said Ben, looking dejected.

‘It wouldn’t have worked, Ben,’ said Isobel gently. ‘I’m not moving to Inverness and you have your career in your father’s business, so let’s just end it tonight.’

Isobel put her arms around Ben, pulled him close, and kissed him. As they held each other tightly, Isobel felt Ben’s erection pushing against her and she came to a decision. She stepped away from Ben, reached behind her back, and unzipped her dress. As the dress slithered to the floor, Isobel walked towards the bed removing her bra as she went. Ben stood transfixed by the sight of Isobel’s breasts and her black panties and stockings as she turned towards him.

‘What are you waiting for, Ben?’ said Isobel as she climbed into bed.

Ben quickly stripped off his clothes and joined Isobel in bed. The sex was urgent and passionate with both of them eager to experience each other. When it was over and they lay together, Isobel was glad she had decided to sleep with Ben and lose her virginity that night. When Ben woke up the next morning Isobel was gone and all there was to remind him of her was the smell of her perfume. Ben dressed, locked the bedsit door behind him, and pushed the key into the room’s mail box next to the front door of the house. Ben let himself out of the house and walked back to his own bedsit, heedless of the rain that soaked his dinner suit and masked his tears.

As Karen watched Isobel drive away, she wondered what kind of mood Tom would be in tonight. She didn’t feel like going over to see Tom’s Mum either. She was tired and she wanted to sit down with something to eat and a nice glass of wine.

‘You never know,’ she thought to herself, ‘we might even have a proper conversation, which would make a change.’

Karen opened the front door and as she let herself into the house, she was greeted by the smell of food cooking. She was puzzled as Tom very rarely cooked and the way things had been going the past couple of months, cooking was the last thing she expected him to do. Karen walked into the kitchen and Tom was busy stirring a pan of something on the stove.

‘Something smells nice,’ said Karen.

‘I’ve got roast chicken in the oven and mashed potatoes and peas,’ said Tom. ‘Is that OK?’

‘It sounds great,’ said Karen, ‘but I thought you wanted to go over and see your Mum.’

‘I went earlier on the way home,’ said Tom. ‘She was OK. I think it’s just a cold or something. I went and got some shopping for her so at least she’s got some food in the house to eat.’

Tom put his arms around Karen and kissed her on the forehead. He looked into her eyes and said, ‘I haven’t been very good company recently, have I?’

‘Well, you have been a bit distant. I was beginning to think you didn’t want to be here

or something,' replied Karen.

'I can only say I'm sorry,' continued Tom. 'I've been getting myself all knotted up with being 30 and feeling as though I'd crossed some line into old age or something.'

'You're just being silly,' said Karen. '30 isn't old. You didn't feel old when you were 29, did you? So what difference does it make now you're 30?'

'I know I'm being stupid,' said Tom, 'but it was getting me down, for some reason.'

'Well, you need to stop it,' said Karen strongly. 'There's nothing wrong with you. I love you and you had me really worried that there was something wrong with us.'

'I'm sorry,' said Tom, holding Karen close. 'I love you too and I didn't mean to worry you or upset you. Why don't you go and have a shower while I finish the cooking?'

As Karen went upstairs, she wondered what had cheered Tom up. The last couple of months had been hard for her, as she had no idea what was wrong with him. He hadn't spoken much and didn't seem to want to do anything except get up in the morning and go to work, then come home at night and watch TV. He never seemed to want to go out and had seemed to lose all interest in sex.

'Well, I didn't,' thought Karen as she made her way into the bedroom. Karen quickly undressed and headed into the bathroom. She showered and made sure she used her expensive shower crème, the one she usually used when she was going out.

'I haven't used this in a while,' she thought as she smoothed the shower crème over her breasts. Karen finished in the shower and as she dried herself, the rough feeling of the towel on her nipples caused them to erect and sent a shiver down her back. Returning to the bedroom Karen took a dusky pink bra and matching thong from her underwear drawer. She slipped the thong and bra on then pulled a pink t-shirt with a plunging neckline over her head. As she pulled the t-shirt down over her stomach, she wondered if she should wear her leggings but then decided on a short black skirt instead.

As she brushed her auburn hair, Karen looked at herself in the mirror.

'Those lines are getting worse,' thought Karen as she inspected the fine lines that were starting to appear at the corners of her eyes. She smiled as she thought, 'I'm getting as bad as Tom, worrying about getting old.'

At 29, Karen felt she was still good looking; she still had her figure and she certainly didn't feel old. Karen put on some lipstick and gave herself a squirt of her favourite perfume before checking how she looked in the mirrored doors of the fitted wardrobe. She picked a small piece of white fluff from the front of her black skirt and slipped on a pair of sandals. Karen gave herself a final look in the mirror then made her way downstairs to the kitchen and Tom.

As Karen walked into the kitchen, Tom was just taking the chicken out of the oven.

‘That was good timing,’ he said as he placed the chicken on a plate to cool. ‘You look lovely,’ he said as he kissed Karen on the cheek, ‘and you smell lovely too.’ Tom turned back to the stove and busied himself with the pans and Karen slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head against his back. ‘How was work today?’ asked Tom. ‘Was the shop busy?’

‘It was, actually,’ Karen replied. ‘We sold quite a bit of stuff and we sold a small occasional table for £600.’

‘Who’s got that kind of money to spend on a table like that?’ said Tom. Karen told him the story of Anne McGuire visiting the shop in the morning and then returning with her husband late in the afternoon to buy the table.

‘Isobel was great,’ said Karen. ‘She sold them a reproduction lamp stand and shade to go with the table as well. She said they could have the lamp at half price if they bought the table, so they took them both.’ Karen went on to describe the black Range Rover and its tan leather interior to Tom. She didn’t mention the suggestive comments she had made to Isobel about what might happen on the back seat of such a car.

Between them Karen and Tom served the food, Tom carved the chicken and Karen put mashed potatoes and peas on the plates.

‘Would you like a glass of wine?’ Tom asked Karen.

‘I’d love one,’ said Karen. As Tom opened the wine, Karen went into the lounge and cleared the magazines off the low coffee table before putting two place mats and cutlery on the table. Tom brought the two plates of food from the kitchen as Karen was switching on the TV. ‘Look at the time,’ Karen said. ‘It’s half past seven already.’

‘I know. Where do the evenings go?’ said Tom as he headed back into the kitchen to get the wine. When he came back into the lounge Karen was holding the telephone to her ear and looking at the TV with a shocked expression.

The telephone rang startling Isobel out of her reverie. She considered ignoring it but decided it might be important. ‘Hello,’ she said as she picked up the phone. ‘Isobel, it’s Karen. Have you got the TV on?’

‘No,’ said Isobel. ‘Why, what’s the matter?’

‘Switch it on, quick,’ said Karen hurriedly. ‘Put the news on.’ Isobel switched the TV on just in time to hear the regional news reporter saying, ‘both the passengers are feared dead and at the moment the police have no idea how the accident happened.’ The camera cut away to reveal a grassy slope at the side of a motorway harshly lit by police arc lights and the image of the front of a four by four that had been severely damaged by a collision with a tree. The camera cut back to the news reporter as he continued his report. In the background, Isobel could see the rear of the four by four.

‘Look at the registration,’ said Karen.

Isobel felt sick as she realised it was TM1.

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Varney the Vampire: Part Twelve

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VISIT OF FLORA TO THE VAMPYRE.—THE OFFER.—THE SOLEMN

ASSEVERATION.

Admiral Bell had, of course, nothing particular to communicate to Flora in the walk he induced her to take with him in the gardens of Bannerworth Hall, but he could talk to her upon a subject which was sure to be a welcome one, namely, of Charles Holland.

And not only could he talk to her of Charles, but he was willing to talk of him in the style of enthusiastic commendation which assimilated best with her own feelings. No one but the honest old admiral, who was as violent in his likes and his dislikes as any one could possibly be, could just then have conversed with Flora Bannerworth to her satisfaction of Charles Holland.

He expressed no doubts whatever concerning Charles's faith, and to his mind, now that he had got that opinion firmly fixed in his mind, everybody that held a contrary one he at once denounced as a fool or a rogue.

"Never you mind, Miss Flora," he said; "you will find, I dare say, that all will come right eventually. D—n me! the only thing that provokes me in the whole business is, that I should have been such an old fool as for a moment to doubt Charles."

"You should have known him better, sir."

"I should, my dear, but I was taken by surprise, you see, and that was wrong, too, for a man who has held a responsible command."

"But the circumstances, dear sir, were of a nature to take every one by surprise."

"They were, they were. But now, candidly speaking, and I know I can speak candidly to you; do you really think this Varney is the vampyre?"

"I do."

"You do? Well, then, somebody must tackle him, that's quite clear; we can't put up with his fancies always."

"What can be done?"

"Ah, that I don't know, but something must be done, you know. He wants this place; Heaven only knows why or wherefore he has taken such a fancy to it; but he has done so, that is quite clear. If it had a good sea view, I should not be so much surprised; but there's nothing of the sort, so it's no way at all better than any other shore-going stupid sort of house, that you can see nothing but land from."

"Oh, if my brother would but make some compromise with him to restore Charles to us and take the house, we might yet be happy."

"D—n it! then you still think that he has a hand in spiriting away Charles?"

“Who else could do so?”

“I’ll be hanged if I know. I do feel tolerably sure, and I have good deal of reliance upon your opinion, my dear; I say, I do feel tolerably sure: but, if I was d——d sure, now, I’d soon have it out of him.”

“For my sake, Admiral Bell, I wish now to extract one promise from you.”

“Say your say, my dear, and I’ll promise you.”

“You will not then expose yourself to the danger of any personal conflict with that most dreadful man, whose powers of mischief we do not know, and therefore cannot well meet or appreciate.”

“Whew! is that what you mean?”

“Yes; you will, I am sure, promise me so much.”

“Why, my dear, you see the case is this. In affairs of fighting, the less ladies interfere the better.”

“Nay, why so?”

“Because—because, you see, a lady has no reputation for courage to keep up. Indeed, it’s rather the other way, for we dislike a bold woman as much as we hold in contempt a cowardly man.”

“But if you grant to us females that in consequence of our affections, we are not courageous, you must likewise grant how much we are doomed to suffer from the dangers of those whom we esteem.”

“You would be the last person in the world to esteem a coward.”

“Certainly. But there is more true courage often in not fighting than in entering into a contest.”

“You are right enough there, my dear.”

“Under ordinary circumstances, I should not oppose your carrying out the dictates of your honour, but now, let me entreat you not to meet this dreadful man, if man he can be called, when you know not how unfair the contest may be.”

“Unfair?”

“Yes. May he not have some means of preventing you from injuring him, and of overcoming you, which no mortal possesses?”

“He may.”

“Then the supposition of such a case ought to be sufficient ground for at once

inducing you to abandon all idea of meeting with him.”

“My dear, I’ll consider of this matter.”

“Do so.”

“There is another thing, however, which now you will permit me to ask of you as a favour.”

“It is granted ere it is spoken.”

“Very good. Now you must not be offended with what I am going to say, because, however it may touch that very proper pride which you, and such as you, are always sure to possess, you are fortunately at all times able to call sufficient judgment to your aid to enable you to see what is really offensive and what is not.”

“You alarm me by such a preface.”

“Do I? then here goes at once. Your brother Henry, poor fellow, has enough to do, has he not, to make all ends meet.”

A flush of excitement came over Flora’s cheek as the old admiral thus bluntly broached a subject of which she already knew the bitterness to such a spirit as her brother’s.

“You are silent,” continued the old man; “by that I guess I am not wrong in my I supposition; indeed it is hardly a supposition at all, for Master Charles told me as much, and no doubt he had it from a correct quarter.”

“I cannot deny it, sir.”

“Then don’t. It ain’t worth denying, my dear. Poverty is no crime, but, like being born a Frenchman, it’s a d——d misfortune.”

Flora could scarcely refuse a smile, as the nationality of the old admiral peeped out even in the midst of his most liberal and best feelings.

“Well,” he continued, “I don’t intend that he shall have so much trouble as he has had. The enemies of his king and his country shall free him from his embarrassments.”

“The enemies?”

“Yes; who else?”

“You speak in riddles, sir.”

“Do I? Then I’ll soon make the riddles plain. When I went to sea I was worth nothing—as poor as a ship’s cat after the crew had been paid off for a month. Well, I began fighting away as hard and fast as I could, and the more I fought, and the more

hard knocks I gave and took, the more money I got.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes; prize after prize we hauled into port, and at last the French vessels wouldn’t come out of their harbours.”

“What did you do then?”

“What did we do then? Why what was the most natural thing in the whole world for us to do, we did.”

“I cannot guess.”

“Well, I am surprised at that. Try again.”

“Oh, yes; I can guess now. How could I have been so dull? You went and took them out.”

“To be sure we did—to be sure we did, my dear; that’s how we managed them. And, do you see, at the end of the war I found myself with lots of prize money, all wrung from old England’s enemies, and I intend that some of it shall find it’s way to your brother’s pocket; and you see that will bear out just what I said, that the enemies of his king and his country shall free him from his difficulties—don’t you see?”

“I see your noble generosity, admiral.”

“Noble fiddlestick! Now I have mentioned this matter to you, my dear, and I don’t so much mind talking to you about such matters as I should to your brother, I want you to do me the favour of managing it all for me.”

“How, sir?”

“Why, just this way. You must find out how much money will free your brother just now from a parcel of botherations that beset him, and then I will give it to you, and you can hand it to him, you see, so I need not say anything about it; and if he speaks to me on the subject at all, I can put him down at once by saying, ‘avast there, it’s no business of mine.’“

“And can you, dear admiral, imagine that I could conceal the generous source from where so much assistance came?”

“Of course; it will come from you. I take a fancy to make you a present of a sum of money; you do with it what you please—it’s yours, and I have no right and no inclination to ask you what use you put it to.”

Tears gushed from the eyes of Flora as she tried to utter some word, but could not. The admiral swore rather fearfully, and pretended to wonder much what on earth she could be crying for. At length, after the first gush of feeling was over, she said,—

“I cannot accept of so much generosity, sir—I dare not”

“Dare not!”

“No; I should think meanly of myself were I to take advantage of the boundless munificence of your nature.”

“Take advantage! I should like to see anybody take advantage of me, that’s all.”

“I ought not to take the money of you. I will speak to my brother, and well I know how much he will appreciate the noble, generous offer, my dear sir.”

“Well, settle it your own way, only remember I have a right to do what I like with my own money.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Very good. Then as that is undoubted, whatever I lend to him, mind I give to you, so it’s as broad as it’s long, as the Dutchman said, when he looked at the new ship that was built for him, and you may as well take it yourself you see, and make no more fuss about it.”

“I will consider,” said Flora, with much emotion—“between this time and the same hour to-morrow I will consider, sir, and if you can find any words more expressive of heartfelt gratitude than others, pray imagine that I have used them with reference to my own feelings towards you for such an unexampled offer of friendship.”

“Oh, bother—stuff.”

The admiral now at once changed the subject, and began to talk of Charles—a most grateful theme to Flora, as may well be supposed. He related to her many little particulars connected with him which all tended to place his character in a most amiable light, and as her ears drank in the words of commendation of him she loved, what sweeter music could there be to her than the voice of that old weather-beaten rough-spoken man.

“The idea,” he added, to a warm eulogium he had uttered concerning Charles—“the idea that he could write those letters my dear, is quite absurd.”

“It is, indeed. Oh, that we could know what had become of him!”

“We shall know. I don’t think but what he’s alive. Something seems to assure me that we shall some of these days look upon his face again.”

“I am rejoiced to hear you say so.”

“We will stir heaven and earth to find him. If he were killed, do you see, there would have been some traces of him now at hand; besides, he would have been left lying where the rascals attacked him.”

Flora shuddered.

“But don’t you fret yourself. You may depend that the sweet little cherub that sits up aloft has looked after him.”

“I will hope so.”

“And now, my dear, Master Henry will soon be home, I am thinking, and as he has quite enough disagreeables on his own mind to be able to spare a few of them, you will take the earliest opportunity, I am sure, of acquainting him with the little matter we have been talking about, and let me know what he says.”

“I will—I will.”

“That’s right. Now, go in doors, for there’s a cold air blowing here, and you are a delicate plant rather just now—go in and make yourself comfortable and easy. The worst storm must blow over at last.”

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Five: Bedegraine

‘We have no option but to fight,’ Merlin said decisively.

‘We could make peace,’ Arthur argued. ‘Come to terms with Lot.’

Merlin shook his head. ‘Lot won’t accept peace with you,’ he replied. ‘Not unless he sees there’s no other way. To do that we have to defeat him.’

‘A lot of lives will be lost before we do that,’ Arthur replied. ‘And they outnumber us. How can we succeed against their superior numbers?’

Merlin brooded. ‘We need to halt their advance,’ he said at last. ‘No use meeting them in the open field. Give them something to batter themselves against until we can find more support. Send an advance force forwards, Arthur. Have them dig in in the Bedegraine area. Block the roads, establish trenches and artillery posts. Give the enemy something to think about. Then advance with the rest of the army and try to flank them.’

Arthur chewed his lip dubiously, then turned away to give the orders.

An advance force was despatched to the Forest of Bedegraine with orders to entrench themselves in the vicinity of the M1. Arthur and his main army continued to advance at their current speed. Reports were coming in that Lot’s main force had been sighted in the Vale of York. Battle was coming.

Arthur could see towns and fields, woods and hills, beneath him. The countryside seemed to be almost deserted; no doubt the inhabitants had fled as soon as rumours of war reached them. Britain was no stranger to conflict, and the people knew what to do when war threatened. Arthur wished he could find a better way to bring peace to his country; the irony of fighting for peace did not escape him.

His thoughts turned to Kay and Bedivere. Had they got through to Vannes? Or had Claudas now conquered even Brittany? If so, the consequences for Britain would be terrible. And without Leodegrance it was even worse.

As night was falling, the column entered Castle Bedegraine, and Arthur disembarked from his chopper after it had landed in the town square. Castle Bedegraine, a small town with pleasant, tree-lined main streets and an imposing Victorian Gothic town hall, seemed entirely deserted as the troops took control.

‘Everyone moved out as they saw us coming,’ Brastias concluded, as Arthur and his commanders took the town hall as their base of operations. Merlin laid an OS map on the cluttered table of the deputy mayor’s office and indicated their position.

‘We’re about twelve miles from the edge of Bedegraine Forest,’ he said, ‘where the advance guard will now be establishing fortified positions.’

‘We can use Castle Bedegraine as our base,’ Arthur said. ‘Then advance on Lot when he’s busy attacking our advance guard.’

‘Any word from Cameliard?’ asked Ulfin, entering the office and flinging his helmet casually on a chair.

Arthur shook his head. 'We can't rely on Leodegrance right now,' he replied. 'Rience's forces are keeping him occupied. He has to protect his own.'

'Unusual for Rience to attack anywhere in force,' Ulfin remarked. 'He's little more than a sky pirate. Attack quickly, grab what he can, get out quick. That's Rience's motto. Why's he changed tactics all of a sudden?'

'He's in league with our enemies, of course,' Merlin replied. 'They include Lord Carnarvon. Something of an understanding is rumoured to exist between him and Rience.'

'Which suggests that Lot is aware that Leodegrance can't help us,' Arthur said slowly. 'That means...'

There was a distant thunder of artillery, from the north. They rushed to the window to see the night sky lit up by explosions. Lot's forces had reached Bedegraine Forest.

Merlin was shouting over a walkie-talkie. 'Report, report! What's the situation there? How many attacking? Over.'

A voice crackled back: 'Lord Lothian's forces attacking en masse, sir,' it replied. 'Massive artillery barrage on our position. We're having trouble holding them... They've torn a hole in our defences! They're sending infantry in...'

Arthur snatched the radio from Merlin's hand. 'Stop their advance!' he said. 'We must hold them there as long as possible! Over.'

'We need reinforcements, sir,' the voice said faintly. 'We can't hold them...' The voice was drowned out by a rising roar of static, which coincided with a massive boom from the north.

'Say again, say again,' Arthur cried desperately. 'You're breaking up... Over...'

There was no reply. Scowling, he flung the radio back to Merlin who took it in grim silence.

'It looks like the fortifications have been breached,' Arthur said. 'We need to send reinforcements.'

'Despatch a division of tanks to the Forest, and some ground forces with them,' Brastias suggested. 'We need to counter their infantry push.'

'Very well,' said Arthur, looking round at his men. 'I'll lead them myself.'

'Don't be a fool, Arthur,' said Merlin. Arthur looked askance at his adviser.

'I don't intend to stay here for the whole battle,' Arthur said angrily. 'Men are risking their lives for me. I must be seen not to be a coward.'

'If you're killed, they will have fought for nothing,' said Merlin. 'All their efforts, all

my efforts, will be wasted. If you go into the battle with those tanks the chances are high that you will die, whether you hit a mine or an anti-tank rocket hits you.'

Arthur pounded the table. 'For God's sake, Merlin,' he raged. 'You want me to be king. You say I'm commander-in-chief. Am I to be nothing more than a figurehead?'

Merlin shrugged. 'Remember, we're fighting for democracy, Arthur. We're fighting to defeat the insurgents who oppose that democracy. Would you be a dictator like Vortigern? Like the Lord Protector?'

Arthur grunted in frustration. Of course he didn't want to be a dictator, but right now democracy was nothing more than a dream.

'I won't live through others! I want to win my people's support,' he said. 'If I show that I'm willing to risk my own life, not just those of my supporters, more people will join us, and we can have a democracy. I want to lead the attack.'

'There's something in what you're saying,' Merlin conceded. 'You're starting to get the hang of politics. My suggestion, however, is that you send the tank division forward under Ulfin and Brastias, who have greater experience of these matters. While he is reinforcing the advance guard, scramble a group of choppers, fly over the battlefield, and make a surprise attack on Lot's base. We've had a report that he has established himself on the northern edge of Bedegraine Forest. Swoop down on them and give Lot something to think about.'

Half an hour later, ten helicopter gunships were flying north from Castle Bedegraine as a division of tanks and trucks rumbled up the road below them. Due north was the black bulk of the Forest, fitfully illuminated by flares and explosions as the battle went on.

The choppers left the tanks far behind and soon they were flying over the forest itself, a hundred and sixty five square miles of birch and oak forest. Arthur held on to a stanchion, pondering his hotheadedness. Merlin was right, if he was killed it would not only be a tragedy for his nearest and dearest, it would affect the entire country, and its chances of escaping the tyranny of the warlords.

Explosions lit up the night beneath them, and suddenly Arthur saw black dots hurtling through the night sky towards them. Lot's forces had seen their approach and had sent out a counter attack!

The next few minutes was a nightmare of gunfire and explosions as the enemy aircraft swooped down upon them. Arthur was flung forward across the cabin where he clung for dear life while the battle raged outside.

As suddenly as it had begun, the fight was over; they were through the lines. Arthur staggered across to Merlin.

'We survived!' he shouted.

Merlin pursed his lips. 'Three gunships down,' he replied. 'We managed to break

through their cordon but they'll be after us soon.'

Arthur's face fell. 'Where is Lot's base from here?' he cried.

Merlin's reply was drowned out by a boom from close by as an artillery shell took out one of the surviving gunships. Arthur realised that they were close to the edge of Bedegraine Forest, and Lot's camp was directly below them. And they had been spotted.

'Down!' Merlin shouted to the pilot. 'Sweep the camp, then head back to base! Don't forget you have the king on board!'

The surviving gunships swooped down on the camp. Arthur got a confused impression of long lines of tents, trucks and jeeps, troops scurrying back and forth. Then the gunners opened up on the camp and the deafening chatter of the machine guns drove every thought from Arthur's mind.

They swept across the camp, raking the trampled grass and the canvas tents with gunfire. Troops fell in windrows while artillery belched shell after shell at the gunships. Two more choppers were blown out of the skies. Arthur saw them pass right over the command tent, which collapsed as bullet after bullet tore through its canvas walls.

Then they had passed over and they were wheeling round, ascending as they did so. The sky was full of fire. Arthur saw enemy helicopters thundering straight for them. His stomach lurched and his blood ran cold. Was he to die here as the result of his rash impulse to join the fight? They had hit Lot's own command tent; with luck they had killed the man, and the insurgents would surrender. But was Arthur himself going to survive? The choppers flew straight at them, gunports blazing.

At the last moment, at desperately shouted orders from Merlin, the pilot put the chopper into a dive, and they flew under the attackers. Arthur gasped as they seemed to plunge straight towards the treetops. With another last second correction, the pilot brought them level and they flew across the forest, their surviving companions on either side in a crescent formation. The enemy gunships turned and came after them. Arthur saw the helicopter directly next to him go down in a ball of flame that plunged into the depths of Bedegraine Forest, setting part of it alight. He found himself anxious about the fire, how far it would rage, how much of this primordial woodland would be damaged. Then he shook his head. The fate of his country was at stake, never mind that of a few hectares of forest.

The enemy was still on their tail as the lights of Castle Bedegraine appeared ahead.

'Radio ahead,' Arthur shouted to the co-pilot. 'Tell them we're coming in but we have Lord Lothian's gunships coming after us. Suggest they open fire but try to avoid bringing us down.'

'Remind them his majesty is aboard, as well,' Merlin snapped.

As Arthur's helicopters came into land in the town square, the night sky behind them

lit up with anti-aircraft fire and one after one the pursuing choppers were shot down or turned tail and flew back to base.

Arthur stepped gingerly out of the helicopter and staggered across the grass away from the whirl of the propellers. He realised that he could also hear the distant thunder of the main battle, down on the M1.

‘Now you’ve had your first taste of real war,’ Merlin said, joining him as he stood there, ‘what do you feel?’

Arthur turned to look wide eyed at the old man.

‘Glad to be out of it,’ he replied frankly. ‘And yet... in some ways I wish I was back.’

Merlin looked at him levelly. ‘You’re getting the battle bug,’ he said. ‘Your father had it too.’

Arthur looked at him strangely. He was about to query this statement when without warning his legs gave under him and he fell to the ground.

He awoke to find himself lying on a camp bed in a darkened room. The roar of battle was still audible. Someone had thrown a coverlet of some kind over him, but he was still fully dressed. So this was war. It certainly wasn’t the Ritz.

He rose, and made his way to the door he could dimly see in one wall. Opening it, he stepped out into a plush-carpeted corridor with rococo decorations. Glancing back, he realised that room he’d been sleeping in was an office in another part of Castle Bedegraine town hall. By the light, he could tell it was early morning. He heard talking coming from down the passage.

Opening a door he found himself back in the deputy mayor’s office. Ulfin and Brastias were in there, with a few other officers. They turned and saluted at Arthur’s appearance.

‘I hope you slept well,’ Ulfin said with a slight smile. ‘Our attack on Lord Lothian’s forces drove them back to the roadblock, but the fighting isn’t over yet. We came back to report to find you sleeping and Merlin gone. I’ve been running things in the meantime.’

‘I was exhausted,’ Arthur said, not wanting to admit that he had fainted. ‘But you should have woken me if you needed me.’ He paused. ‘What do you mean, Merlin’s gone?’

Ulfin looked at Brastias, who shrugged.

‘Seems he flew off in a chopper hurry shortly after you returned,’ Ulfin said. ‘No one seems to know where he’s gone.’

Arthur looked at them both in bewilderment.

Sweating, Lot awoke from uneasy dreams where hurricanes battered his towns and cities, and a tsunami washed away what remained. He was in a small tent some way from the middle of the camp. He had narrowly escaped being shot down in the gunship raid the night before; luckily, none of the insurgent Lords had been in the command tent when Arthur's forces attacked.

Insurgents, he thought to himself derisively. He'd been listening to too much propaganda. How could he regard himself as an insurgent? This little brat, Merlin's protégé, was the real rebel: an old-time usurper. The lad couldn't claim to be king on the basis of a cheap party trick cooked up by Merlin. It was clear that he, Lot of Lothian, Lord Protector, had the support of almost all the House of Lords, particularly those with substantial private armies; his was the better claim.

After a hasty breakfast prepared by his personal attendant, Lot strode from the tent followed by the two soldiers who'd been stationed on guard outside it. Near the centre of camp he encountered Lord Urien, who stood amongst his men, gazing in the direction of the distant battle.

'We're meeting substantial resistance,' Urien said without preamble. 'I wouldn't have expected this battle to have lasted so long.'

'How can this boy put up such a fight?' Lot demanded, punching his palm. 'He's a spotty teenager, little older than my son Gawain. At that age I was more interested in chasing local girls and avoiding my tutor. It's Merlin's doing, I'm sure, but what's the old devil up to? We had the heathen under control, brought an end to immigration ...'

Urien shook his head dourly. 'That's just the problem,' he said. 'No external threat, and the people of Britain fall to quarrelling amongst themselves. But this Arthur laddie, he can't prevail against our might. He might have support from the Commons, but his forces are small, and with young Leodegrance occupied by our friend Rience he can't hope to last.'

'He's still got London,' Lot said. 'As long as he controls the media, he'll be able to turn the people against us. Brand us insurgents. Insurgents! Pah!' He didn't tell Lord Urien that he'd caught himself doing the same.

'Enough talk,' said Urien. 'Time we heard the latest reports. We need to work out a way to crush this lad once and for all.'

'Since Merlin chooses the heat of battle to do a disappearing act,' Arthur was saying, 'it looks like we'll have to do without him.'

Inwardly, he was furious at the old man for abandoning them at this point. It was bad for general morale – or his own specific morale, for that matter. Merlin had got him

into this situation, one way or another. Leaving him to fight the war on his own was hardly helpful. He was only fifteen, for God's sake!

'Your majesty,' Brastias said, 'might I make a few suggestions?'

Arthur felt himself sweating. They saw him as a child, a figurehead. Providence had chosen him, hadn't it? Then he would make the decisions. Still, he'd appreciate advice from any source.

'Yes, Brastias,' he said. 'What do you want to say?'

'The original plan was to crush the insurgents with a pincer movement,' Brastias said, approaching the table where Merlin's OS map still lay. He jabbed a finger at the Bedegraine area.

'Lord Lothian's forces are mainly concentrated in this bottleneck, where the M1 passes through the western edge of the forest. The trees make effective cover for light infantry, or even for artillery. We've managed to hold the main position, which includes the motorway itself, with the roadblocks we established prior to Lot's advance, and the unwooded areas to either side. Despite Lord Lothian's superior forces, we've succeeded in maintaining our position.'

'Apart from a few forays with aircraft, Lord Lothian has yet to make any flanking attack. He is besieging our troops on the frontline, and seems determined to crush them there...'

'Are you suggesting we flank him with an infantry attack from the woods?' Arthur asked.

'Surely Lord Lothian has troops guarding his flanks?' Ulfin asked.

Brastias shook his head. 'Not many,' he said. 'He's concentrating his attack on the roadblock across the motorway. He also has troops stationed guarding a forest access road on the western side. We could get a division of tanks up this access road; were we to use infantry to clear the troops guarding the track we could bring the tanks out of the trees and down on Lord Lothian's flank.'

'Good thinking,' said Arthur. 'I'll join the tank attack.'

Two hours later, Arthur was regretting his choice. He was sitting in the dark interior of a poorly-maintained tank, which stank of petrol and sweat. With him was the tank crew, who all seemed awed to have the boy-king amongst them. Not for the first time, Arthur wondered what exactly he was trying to prove.

He climbed up into the top section of the tank and looked out at the ranks of trees that were passing on either side. Up ahead, several troops of infantry in armoured land rovers were advancing their way cautiously along the unmetalled access road. They had been travelling through the forest for half an hour, and their objective – the open space between the edge of this section of forest and the banks of the motorway cutting lay beyond the next rise, where even now Arthur's ground troops were approaching.

According to Brastias' intelligence, Lot's own troops would be waiting on the far side. He waited, anticipating gunfire breaking the silence of the woods, as the tanks and armoured land rovers continued their slow advance.

Next second, the land rover at the head of the column hit a mine and blew up.

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Brigands of the Moon

VI

Captain Carter was grim. "So they've bought him off, have they? Go bring him in here, Gregg. We'll have it out with him now."

Snap, Dr. Frank, Balch, our first officer, and I were in the Captain's chart room. It

was four p.m. Earth time. We were sixteen hours upon our voyage.

I found Johnson in his office in the lounge. “Captain wants to see you. Close up.”

He closed his window upon an American woman passenger who was demanding the details of Martian currency, and followed me forward. “What is it, Gregg?”

“I don’t know.”

Captain Carter banged the slide upon us. The chart room was insulated. The hum of the current was obvious. Johnson noticed it. He stared at the hostile faces of the surgeon and Balch. And he tried to bluster.

“What’s this? Something wrong?”

Carter wasted no words. “We have information, Johnson, that there’s some undercover plot aboard. I want to know what it is. Suppose you tell us.”

The purser looked blank. “What do you mean? We’ve gamblers aboard, if that’s—”

“To hell with that,” growled Balch. “You had a secret interview with that Martian, Set Miko, and with George Prince!”

Johnson scowled from under his heavy brows, and then raised them in surprise. “Did I? You mean changing their money? I don’t like your tone, Balch. I’m not your under-officer!”

“But you’re under me!” roared the Captain. “By God, I’m master here!”

“Well, I’m not disputing that,” said the purser mildly. “This fellow—”

“We’re in no mood for argument,” Dr. Frank cut in. “Clouding the issue....”

“I won’t let it be clouded,” the Captain exclaimed.

I had never seen Carter so choleric. He added:

“Johnson, you’ve been acting suspiciously. I don’t give a damn whether I’ve proof of it or not. Did you or did you not meet George Prince and that Martian, last night?”

“No, I did not. And I don’t mind telling you, Captain Carter, that your tone also is offensive!”

“Is it?” Carter seized him. They were both big men. Johnson’s heavy face went purplish red.

“Take your hands—!” They were struggling. Carter’s hands were fumbling at the purser’s pockets. I leaped, flung an arm around Johnson’s neck, pinning him.

“Easy there! We’ve got you, Johnson!”

Snap tried to help me. “Go on! Bang him on the head, Gregg. Now’s your chance!”

We searched him. A heat ray cylinder—that was legitimate. But we found a small battery and eavesdropping device similar to the one Venza had mentioned that Shac the gambler was carrying.

“What are you doing with that?” the Captain demanded.

“None of your business! Is it criminal? Carter, I’ll have the line officials dismiss you for this! Take your hands off me—all of you!”

“Look at this!” exclaimed Dr. Frank.

From Johnson’s breast pocket the surgeon drew a folded document. It was a scale drawing of the Planetara interior corridors, the lower control rooms and mechanisms. It was always kept in Johnson’s safe. And with it, another document: the ship’s clearance papers—the secret code passwords for this voyage, to be used if we should be challenged by any Interplanetary Police ship.

Snap gasped, “My God, that was in my radio room strong box! I’m the only one on this vessel except the Captain who’s entitled to know those passwords!”

Out of the silence, Balch demanded, “Well, what about it, Johnson?”

The purser was still defiant. “I won’t answer your questions, Balch. At the proper time, I’ll explain—Gregg Haljan, you’re choking me!”

I eased up. But I shook him. “You’d better talk.”

He was exasperatingly silent.

“Enough!” exploded Carter. “He can explain when we get to port. Meanwhile I’ll put him where he’ll do no more harm. Gregg, lock him in the cage.”

We ignored his violent protestations. The cage—in the old days of sea vessels on Earth, they called it the brig—was the ship’s jail. A steel-lined, windowless room located under the deck in the peak of the bow. I dragged the struggling Johnson there, with the amazed watcher looking down from the observatory window at our lunging starlit forms.

“Shut up, Johnson! If you know what’s good for you—”

He was making a fearful commotion. Behind us, where the deck narrowed at the superstructure, half a dozen passengers were gazing in surprise.

“I’ll have you thrown out of the service, Gregg Haljan!”

I shut him up finally. And flung him down the ladder into the cage and sealed the

deck trap door upon him. I was headed back for the chart room when from the observatory came the lookout's voice:

"An asteroid, Haljan! Officer Blackstone wants you."

I hurried to the turret bridge. An asteroid was in sight. We had nearly attained our maximum speed now. An asteroid was approaching, so dangerously close that our trajectory would have to be altered. I heard Blackstone's signals ringing in the control rooms; and met Carter as he ran to the bridge with me.

"That scoundrel! We'll get more out of him, Gregg. By God, I'll put the chemicals on him—torture him—illegal or not!"

We had no time for further discussion. The asteroid was rapidly approaching. Already, under the glass, it was a magnificent sight. I had never seen this tiny world before—asteroids are not numerous between the Earth and Mars, or in toward Venus.

At a speed of nearly a hundred miles a second the asteroid swept into view. With the naked eye, at first it was a tiny speck of star-dust unnoticeable in the gem-strewn black velvet of space. A speck. Then a gleaming dot, silver white, with the light of our Sun upon it.

I stood with Carter and Blackstone on the turret bridge. It was obvious, that unless we altered our course, the asteroid would pass too close for safety. Already we were feeling its attraction; from the control rooms came the report that our trajectory was disturbed by this new mass so near.

"Better make your calculations now, Gregg," Blackstone urged.

I cast up the rough elements from the observational instruments in the turret. When I had us upon our new course, with the attractive and repulsive plates in the Planetara's hull set in their altered combinations, I went to the bridge again.

The asteroid hung over our bow quarter. No more than twenty or thirty thousand miles away. A giant ball now, filling all that quadrant of the heavens. The configurations of its mountains, its land and water areas, were plainly visible.

"Perfectly habitable," Blackstone said. "But I've searched all over the hemisphere with the glass. No sign of human life—certainly nothing civilized—nothing in the fashion of cities."

A fair little world, by the look of it. A tiny globe, come from the region beyond Neptune. We swept past the asteroid. The passengers were all gathered to view the passing little world. I saw, not far from me, Anita, standing with her brother; and the giant figure of Miko with them. Half an hour since this wandering little world had showed itself, it swiftly passed, began to dwindle behind us. A huge half moon. A thinner, smaller quadrant. A tiny crescent, like a silver barpin to adorn some lady's breast. And then it was a dot, a point of light indistinguishable among the myriad others hovering in this great black void.

The incident of the passing of the asteroid was over. I turned from the deck window. My heart leaped. The moment for which all day I had been subconsciously longing was at hand. Anita was sitting in a deck chair, momentarily alone. Her gaze was on me as I glanced her way, and she smiled an invitation for me to join her.

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Witches and Barbarians

Part Three

Osborne was slumped in front of the TV when the travellers came round.

The previous night had left him bone-weary and all he wanted to do this morning was vegetate. The rest of the gang were still in bed anyway, sleeping off the piss-up they'd

been having while he investigated their mate's disappearance. It took a lot to motivate them and at the moment he felt equally unwilling to do anything. But it was a pleasant surprise when Eloise called.

He opened the door of their rented house to find her on the doorstep with her two friends from last night, the crustie and the skinhead. He didn't much care for skinheads and crusties pissed him off, but he grinned in a welcoming manner at Eloise.

'Come in, come in,' he said, ushering them in and leading them down the smelly hallway and into the front room. They sat down on the sofa, the crustie and the skinhead on either side of Eloise, like they were security guards or something. Osborne flopped down in an armchair.

'Och, nice place ye've got here,' the skinhead rumbled in a Scots accent.

'Don't be sarcastic, Hamish,' Eloise snapped. She turned to Osborne and her face softened.

'Aren't you going to introduce me?' asked Osborne, after a few seconds. Eloise looked flustered.

'Oh, sorry,' she murmured. 'Yes. This is Hamish and this is Nick. Nick, Hamish - this is Osborne.'

'Och, we've met,' Hamish said.

'Aye.' Osborne grinned. 'But only briefly. You managed to escape, then?'

'No thanks to you,' Nick said.

Osborne frowned. 'I'm a bit surprised to see a skinhead hanging round with a white witch,' he said curiously. 'All the witches I've ever known were fuckin' left wing and skinheads are all Nazis, aren't they?'

'Ah'm no' a Nazi,' Hamish growled. 'Och, Ah'm just proud of ma nationality. Aren't you?'

Before he could reply, one of Osborne's fellow bikers wandered in, scratching himself.

'Osborne!' he said. 'What happened to you last night, man? Did you find out what happened to Karl?'

'Not really, Eric,' Osborne replied. He decided not to mention the party. 'But I bumped into this lot. They're interested in the place as well.'

Eric glanced at Eloise, Nick and Hamish. They returned his gaze, seeing a stocky man in his mid-twenties, much the same age as Osborne, but shorter and with a scantier

beard.

He burped reflectively.

‘There’s definitely something up in this place,’ he said. ‘Just like it was a thousand years ago.’

‘What d’you mean?’ asked Nick. ‘A thousand years ago?’

Osborne grinned again. ‘Oh, Eric’s our historian,’ he explained. ‘It was him who read the saga that mentions this place.’

‘Aye,’ replied Eric, sitting down. ‘Ingunns saga hinn rauði. Y’see, there was a woman named Ingunn the Red and she was a Viking leader in Ireland, in the tenth century, right...’

‘Cool,’ said Eloise. ‘One for the sisters.’

Eric nodded. ‘The Vikings weren’t sexist, not like fucking Christians, okay?’ he replied. ‘Aye, anyway - she raided Ireland most of the time, though some of her raids took her as far afield as the Hebrides and the Orkneys and once she found herself wrecked on the English coast, with no one with her except three or four warriors. They decided to hire themselves out to the local king and he sent them to a place the saga called Vestcastir, which I reckon must be Westchester, right? The people there were still pagan and the king wanted them to be converted or killed...’

‘What’s wrong with being Pagan?’ demanded Eloise. ‘I thought you lot were all Pagans!’ She glanced at Osborne, looking betrayed.

‘Aye, we are pagan,’ Eric replied, ‘though we prefer to call ourselves heathens. We follow Odin, Thor, all the Gods of Asgard. And so did Ingunn the Red. But she was a mercenary and fought for whoever paid her well, right? Anyway, these pagans weren’t like you or me, they were demon-worshippers who sacrificed unwary travellers to the river-goddess Sacalasta. They’d claimed to accept Christianity, but they continued to worship their dark goddess in secret. Ingunn slew the high priestess and imprisoned the goddess in a cavern under a huge rock using a spear she’d been given by an old man with one eye.... We decided to come here and perform a ritual in honour of Ingunn the Red this Imbolc, in the old Roman temple beneath the castle. But the authorities wouldn’t give us permission, right? Still, we hope to do it somehow.’

‘But what about the massage parlour?’ asked Nick.

Osborne shook his head. ‘Well, I’ve been thinking,’ he said slowly. ‘Maybe there’s some connection between the disappearances there and what happened here in the Dark Ages.’

‘You mean someone’s carrying on the old sacrifices?’ asked Eloise, her eyes wide. ‘It is on Castle Hill.’

‘We cannie know that until we’ve seen it for certain,’ said Hamish. ‘Mebbe if we went back there again, but secretly and found some way of spying on them, find out where they take the people who disappear...’

Osborne shook his head.

‘It would be too dangerous,’ he replied. ‘They’ll be expecting it this time. Unless you can work out some way of getting in without being seen.’

Nick smiled. ‘Oh, that’ll be easy,’ he said. ‘I could get us in, no problem. Well, a few of us...’

Osborne glanced at Eloise, then looked at her two companions.

‘How about you and Hamish?’ he suggested. ‘You know where you’re going and it sounds like you’ve had some experience of this kind of thing...’

Hamish glowered.

‘And what are you gonna be up to in the meantime?’

Osborne raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s best if only the bare minimum of people go,’ he said, shrugging.

‘Yes,’ said Eloise. ‘He’s right. You go with Nick, Hamish. I know we can rely on you.’ Her gaze flickered back to Osborne.

‘We’ll do it tonight, then,’ said Eric. ‘Find out what really is going on.’

Eloise turned to him.

‘Do you agree with Osborne?’ she asked. ‘You think that the people of Westchester are still sacrificing people?’

Eric shrugged. ‘Could be,’ he replied. ‘There were a lot of things that survived Christianity by going underground. witchcraft was one. Maybe the city fathers sacrifice unsuspecting patrons of this brothel. After all, Westchester’s so small most people know each other. They can tell when an outsider comes here. Maybe they sacrifice outsiders.’

Eloise shivered. ‘Worse than Sussex,’ she said, remembering the close-knit isolation of Wych Cross.

Nick and Hamish stood in the shadows across the street and stared at the massage parlour. Night had fallen by the time they reached it and there was nothing to suggest that anyone was inside. Nick glanced at Hamish.

‘Do you believe this idea of Eric’s?’ he asked, looking sceptical. The Glaswegian shrugged.

‘Sounds pretty far-fetched,’ he replied. ‘And if anyone’s likely to be sacrificing people, surely it’s these bikers!’

Nick laughed. ‘Hey, bikers aren’t like they are in the films, you know,’ he said. ‘I’ve known a few. They’re a bit weird, but they’re nothing like the media makes them out to be.’

Hamish shook his head. ‘Och, Ah’ve known a few bikers maself,’ he said, not wanting Nick to get one up on him. ‘But these ones aren’t normal bikers, they’re fucking devil-worshippers or something.’

Nick shook his head. ‘Pagans,’ he replied. ‘Not devil-worshippers, they’re Pagans, like Eloise is. Only they don’t worship the Goddess, they worship the Norse Gods.’

‘The only god Ah have any time for is Esus the Mighty, who gave me the Spear of Lugus,’ Hamish said, referring to the events of a previous adventure. ‘But Ah’ll tell you another thing. Ah don’t like the way that Osborne bawbag keeps looking at Eloise.’

‘Quiet!’ Nick hissed, looking up suddenly. Hamish turned to follow his gaze.

Someone was parking a Mercedes in front of the massage parlour. A tall man in a pinstripe suit got out and glanced up and down the street. Once he had assured himself that no one was watching, he darted down the nearby alley way and vanished from sight.

‘Looks like someone’s gaun there tonight,’ said Hamish. ‘But how’re we gonna get in?’

Nick scratched his nose. ‘Follow me,’ he said and they walked across the street.

‘Doon here?’ asked Hamish, indicating the alley. Nick nodded.

They came out in the small street at the back. Nick led Hamish towards the wall.

‘Give me a bunk-up,’ he whispered. Hamish helped him up to the top of the wall. Avoiding the broken glass jutting along the top, Nick heaved himself over, then turned to help Hamish after him. The Scot followed, puffing and panting with exertion. They leapt down into the yard beyond.

To the right was the door through which they had entered the previous night. Ahead of them was a window. Nick scuttled towards this and Hamish followed him.

A few seconds work and the window was open. Beyond it lay a darkened room. Nick clambered over the sill and Hamish followed. Nick cast around for a door, but froze at a clatter from ahead of them.

‘Would you like a drink, Eloise?’ Osborne asked. Eloise shrugged.

‘What’ve you got?’ she inquired.

‘Only ale,’ said Roald from the other side of the room, where he was lounging on the settee. ‘Nothing a lady like you would want.’

Osborne scowled at him. ‘Shut it, Roald,’ he snapped.

It hadn’t taken Eloise long to realise that Roald was the sexist of the gang. She shook her head.

‘I like ale,’ she said bravely. She didn’t; she’d tried it and hated the taste, but she wasn’t going to let Roald get away with making out she was weaker than any of them. Silently, Osborne handed her a bottle and she sat down with the others.

‘When do you think Hamish and Nick will be back?’ she asked, looking round at the bikers, feeling shy. She had been introduced to all of them, but could only remember a few of their names. Eric was sitting next to her. He was drunk already - the bikers seemed to spend every night abusing their livers. Eloise wasn’t sure she liked them too much. But Osborne was quite nice.

‘Not bored with us already, are you?’ he asked. Eloise laughed nervously.

‘No, of course not,’ she replied. ‘I’m just a bit worried about them, that’s all.’

Osborne put an arm around her and squeezed. ‘Don’t worry, I’m sure they can look after themselves.’ He caught her gaze with his dark blue eyes and held it. She wriggled uncomfortably and took a long swig of Newcastle Brown. Osborne’s arm was still around her.

Tentatively, she moved closer.

Nick sighed with relief as a rat ran across the moonlit floor ahead of them. Seemed like this area of the shop wasn’t in use. Which was a good thing.

‘Through here,’ said Hamish. Nick followed him through a doorway into a well-appointed passage. Glancing up and down it, Nick caught a glimpse of a half-open door leading into the room they’d been in last time. It seemed to be deserted, although the light was on.

‘This way,’ Nick hissed, indicating the room. Hamish scowled and shook his head.

‘Ah’ve got a bad feeling about this,’ he said.

‘You’re not in Star Wars now, Hamish,’ Nick hissed, irritated. He pushed past the

skinhead and crept towards the door. Hamish strode after him and grabbed his shoulder.

‘It could be a trap,’ he said. Nick frowned at him again.

‘This is real life, Hamish,’ he replied. ‘Not a fucking film. Look, if we just have a root around in those booths and see where they lead, then we can go. There’s no one around.’

‘What about the bauchle in the Merc before?’ Hamish whispered.

‘He must have gone somewhere else,’ Nick shrugged. ‘There’s no one here.’ He pushed open the door and strode into the room.

It was deserted. Hamish trailed after Nick and glanced worriedly around. Nick nodded towards the booths.

‘Come on,’ he urged. He hurried across the room. Just as he was about to pull open the curtain, he heard a gasp from Hamish. As he began to turn, the curtain billowed open.

Eloise was never quite sure when she first succumbed to Osborne’s advances; she didn’t normally drink beer and it must have gone straight to her head. Before she knew what was going on, she was staggering upstairs, arm in arm with the biker, ignoring the catcalls of the others. She stopped in her tracks, giggling nervously.

‘What are we doing, why did we leave the others?’ she said in a panicked voice.

Osborne turned to her.

‘You know what we’re doing,’ he replied in a flat voice. ‘You were leading me on before!’

Eloise suddenly went sober.

‘No, no, I’m sorry!’ she cried. ‘I didn’t mean to!’ Why was she apologising? she screamed inside her head. ‘No, look, I like you - but I’m not ready...’

Osborne’s face fell. ‘Oh, Frigg ‘n’ Hell,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to... Look, I’m sorry as well. Let’s go back downstairs.’

Eloise swallowed.

‘Oh, look, I don’t want you to think... Could we just have a little talk? I mean, I like you...I...’ She was shaking.

Osborne reached forward and took hold of her, with surprising gentleness. ‘It’s alright,’ he whispered. ‘Come on. Come in here.’ He led her to the top of the stairs

and into one of the rooms.

Nick turned to see Hamish confronting a group of policemen in the doorway. At their head stood a plain-clothes officer who Nick recognised as the man from the Mercedes. As he was about to step forward, a strong pair of arms reached out from the curtain behind and grabbed hold of him. With an involuntary action, he twisted in their grasp and sent his assailant flying to the floor.

It was another policeman, like the three who were coming through the curtain after him.

As Nick's attacker fell to the floor, the next one tripped and stumbled over the fallen body. His two companions also went flying as they cannoned into the tangle of limbs.

Nick turned quickly to find Hamish fighting off the other policemen, sending the plainclothes man flying after smashing him in the face with a chair.

'Quick, this way!' Nick shouted. 'Before the Keystone Cops recover!'

Hamish knocked another policeman to the ground with a swing of his chair, lashing out to his right with his foot as he did so, briefly disabling another attacker with a kick to the groin. He broke away to glance at Nick. When he saw Nick's own piece of the action, he disengaged completely and sped across the brothel towards him.

They pushed aside the curtain and ran into the darkness beyond.

The passage led the pair of them forward for a long way and Nick found himself stumbling along an unsteady floor alongside Hamish. He couldn't see the Scot, but could hear him panting in the blackness beside him. Behind, far off, the sound of pursuit was barely audible.

'Where the fuck is this leading us?' Hamish gasped from the nearby darkness.

'Fuck knows,' Nick said. 'I...Oh shit!' He slammed into something hard and solid and felt himself spinning to the uneven floor with stars wheeling and exploding around his head.

Seconds later, though it seemed like dark aeons of plunging infinity, he felt Hamish tugging at his shirt.

'Nick, what happened?'

'Ohh, shit,' Nick repeated, dully. He struggled up into a sitting position. 'I ran into something.' He heard Hamish scraping against something in the dark. 'What is it?'

'Feels like... a stone column. Awe worn, really auld...' Hamish said. He felt along the wall further. 'And here's an archway...shit! Here's a stairway!'

Shouts and flashing torchlights burst suddenly from the far side of the dark expanse. Nick realised that wherever they were, it must be a large area. He'd thought they were still in a passage.

'Let's get up this stairway then,' said Nick, staggering to his feet. Hamish grabbed his arm and helped him towards the steps. Hurriedly, they began to ascend.

After a few steps, Nick took one last glance back. He caught a glimpse of a wide cavern. In one corner rose a giant statue of a naked woman with claws for hands and feet; a deep, circular, stone-rimmed pit in the centre; and a group of policemen on the far side of the cavern shining their torches around, beams flickering off mouldering stone columns, hideous carvings and arching, cyclopean vaults. He turned and ran on.

The steps led to another passage, the passage to a barred metal gateway. Once again, Nick put into practice the best a Liverpudlian upbringing had taught him. He took out a piece of wire and fiddled rapidly with the padlock. In almost as short a time as it takes in the films, he picked the padlock and the bars swung open. The fugitives sped out through the archway and found themselves standing in the inner bailey of Westchester Castle.

Hamish shook his head.

'Weird,' he said.

'Come on!' cried Nick. They ran towards the dark, tumbledown shadows of the inner gatehouse and the law court buildings beyond.

Afterwards, Eloise locked herself in the toilet and cried. She didn't know why she was crying; it hadn't hurt, not after the first few seconds. But she supposed it had just been a kind of reaction. She'd lost something and that loss pained her. She wasn't sure whether she mourned it, though she wished the experience had been better; Osborne was an attentive lover and although she hadn't had an orgasm she had still enjoyed herself. But she had spent most of the time lying rigid beneath him and she had a feeling that it might have been less disappointing if she'd responded better... Oh, she didn't know.

She got a grip on herself and dried her eyes. She straightened Osborne's shirt around her - she was wearing it as a nightie - and got up to go back to the bedroom.

As she closed the bathroom door behind her, she heard a loud banging at the front door.

Osborne appeared from the bedroom, half-dressed. Eloise smiled weakly at him, then looked down the stairs.

Eric had answered the door and Eloise could see Hamish and Nick on the doorstep. They looked flustered and she felt a sharp stab of guilt; they'd been investigating

Mary's brother's disappearance while she'd been losing her virginity to a biker.

'What happened, man? Did you find out where they take the guys?' Eric demanded.

'Yeah, ' said Nick. 'Where's Eloise?'

'Eloise?' shouted Hamish, pushing forward to stare at her as she stood at the top of the stairs. 'What the fuck are you up to?'

'Hey, hold on Hamish...' Nick said weakly, coming forward.

'Fuck off!' shouted the skinhead. He rushed up the steps, his face a picture of wrath. Eloise staggered backwards as he surged towards her.

Osborne stepped forward and caught Hamish. The Scot broke free and swung a vicious punch at his jaw. Osborne dropped back into a fighting posture.

'I don't want to hurt you, like,' he said slowly. 'But if you touch Eloise...'

'If Ah touch her?' Hamish snarled. 'You mauchit sweaty keech!' He launched himself at Osborne in a frenzy.

The biker ducked Hamish's first blow, then brought his fist up to collide with Hamish's stomach. The Scot stumbled backwards, tripped over the top steps and went plunging backwards into Nick, who was hurrying up the staircase after him. They went tumbling down the steps in a tangle of limbs.

'Leave him alone!' Eloise screamed at Osborne. The biker gave her a startled, hurt look, then hurried downstairs to where Hamish and Nick were being helped to their feet by Eric, Roald and the other bikers who had hurried out of the front room.

Hamish rose unsteadily and turned towards Osborne.

Osborne raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. 'Here, lad, I don't want to fight over Eloise, but look, she came to me of her own free will. If there was anything going on between the two of you, it's over now...'

Hamish swung a punch and sent Osborne flying back against the banister. Eric leapt forward to grab Hamish's wrist, but the skinhead flung him to one side.

Osborne leapt up and flung himself at Hamish. It was clear that the biker's patience had come to an end. He laid into Hamish, forcing the Scot down the passage towards the front door. Hamish swung wild, angry punches at his assailant but Osborne seemed not to notice them. At last, another punch from the biker sent Hamish stumbling over the threshold of the door and out into the street.

Cold air hit him in the face with even more power than Osborne's punches and cooled his wrath. He staggered to his feet to see the biker lumbering towards him. Then his eyes narrowed, as he caught sight of a group of silent figures standing in the shadows.

Osborne attacked him and Hamish put up his fists to fend off the berserk attack.

‘Pigs!’ he gasped, but Osborne was paying no attention to anything other than the battle-frenzy.

Eloise and Nick watched in horror from the doorway as the biker and the skinhead scuffled on the pavement. Lights were going on in the houses all along the street.

‘What’s got into Osborne?’ Eloise demanded. She had recovered her composure, but she was still angry with Hamish and Osborne, fighting over her like a piece of meat. ‘I’d expect it from Hamish. But I thought Osborne had a brain in his head.’

Eric shrugged. ‘He’s a berserker, like all of us,’ he said. ‘When someone gets him in a fighting mood, he lays into them and there’s no stopping him.’

Eloise moved away slightly. ‘You say you’re all like this?’

Eric nodded. ‘It’s in our blood,’ he explained, as Hamish and Osborne continued fighting. ‘The gift of Odin. We use his powers to make ourselves immune to pain.’

Eloise frowned and bit her lip. All the Pagans she had met had been peaceful, law-abiding hippies and Goths. They might fight the police during road-protests, but they weren’t thugs... Her thoughts broke off as two groups of policemen came running out of the shadows at either end of the street.

‘I was wondering when they’d turn up,’ said Eric. ‘The idiots have brought it on themselves.’

‘Hey,’ said Nick, ‘it’s the fuckers who attacked us at the brothel! They must have followed us and been waiting all along!’

Eloise shouted; ‘Hamish! Osborne! Run!’

Hamish broke away from the fight and saw the police as they stepped into the sodium orange light of the nearby streetlamp.

‘Fuck!’ he shouted and ran down a side alley.

‘Stop him!’ yelled a plain-clothes man in a pinstripe suit. Two constables broke off from the main group and dashed after the skinhead. The rest charged towards Osborne. The biker made a brief attempt to run, but two constables grabbed him by his unbuttoned shirt while a third bore him savagely to the ground. Eloise watched sickened, as they used rather more than moderate force to keep him in that position.

‘Stop that!’ she screamed.

The plainclothes man stepped away from the fracas and marched up to them.

‘Are you connected with this affray?’ he demanded, arrogantly flashing an identity

card at them.

Eric shrugged. 'We know them,' he admitted.

'And would you mind answering a few questions?' the policeman asked.

The two constables sent after Hamish returned. The plainclothes man raised an inquiring eyebrow and they shook their heads.

'Got away, sir,' one of them said. 'Vanished into thin air,' elaborated the second.

The plainclothes detective shook his head angrily.

'Right, take the other one down to the station,' he ordered. He stood on the step, watching them drag Osborne into a Black Maria. Then he turned to the people in the house.

'I am Detective Inspector McCavity, currently of Westcheshire Police,' he said. 'And I'd like you all to answer a few questions.'

Half an hour later, Eric closed the door behind DI McCavity and his laconic sergeant.

'Let's go into the back room,' he said. 'We've got to discuss this.'

They filed down the passage.

The inspector's questions had been long-winded but easy to answer. What had caused the fight, how long had they known the combatants, what was the name of the fighter who had evaded capture... With characteristic distrust of authority, the bikers had answered him as evasively as possible, but they had been forced to give away the basic details.

Eloise sat on the sofa beside Nick, now fully-clad. Her face was pale, but she raised her voice in a businesslike manner over the bikers' chatter.

'Right. Time for a bit of order and method here,' she said determinedly. 'One, what are we going to do about Osborne?'

'Not much we can do,' said a woman called Thora. 'The Pigs have got him now. It's not the first time. But they'll just keep him in the custody suite for a bit, I expect. It's not such a serious offence...'

Nick put up a hand.

'Er, I'm not too sure about that,' he said. 'When Hamish and me went to the brothel again, the police were waiting for us. It seems like they're in with the woman at the brothel. We managed to escape, but only by running down a passage that led us into a cavern beneath the castle...'

‘The Roman temple?’ Eric demanded excitedly. Nick shrugged.

‘I dunno what it was, but what about the bizzies? They’re mixed up with what’s going on in the brothel, whatever that is. And the headmistress of the public school is running the brothel...’

‘But don’t you see?’ Eric demanded. ‘The brothel leads to the old temple of Sacalasta. The people they abduct are taken there! I was right, they do sacrifice people, the police, the public school - they’re all in on it.’

Nick nodded. ‘That’s what I’m thinking. Makes me wonder if Osborne hasn’t got himself in deep shit.’

‘We don’t have any real proof of this,’ Eloise broke in, ‘though I have to admit, it does look a mite suspicious. But Osborne? If the police are in on this conspiracy, what’s going to happen to him?’

‘The inspector was at the brothel, waiting for us,’ said Nick slowly. ‘And it looks like he followed us back here and sprang on us as soon as he could find an excuse. We’re lucky we didn’t all end up in the back of a Black Maria as well. But it seems for some reason they only want one or two prisoners.’

Eric shook his head. ‘You mean... he was on to us? He did ask some pretty probing questions. But he couldn’t have arrested us, he didn’t have any evidence against us.’

‘I got the impression he knew more about us than he was letting on,’ Thora said slowly.

‘I think if Eric’s right about the people of Westchester keeping up their old traditions,’ Eloise said, ‘it’s quite likely that... that we won’t be seeing Osborne again.’

There was a long silence. Nick finally broke it.

‘But we’re not going to let that happen, right?’

Thora swallowed. ‘Bust him out?’

Eloise said determinedly; ‘We’re going to put an end to this whole evil cult!’

‘But if the Pigs are onto us and the whole town is implicated, or at least all the establishment figures, how can we?’ Eric demanded. ‘For all we know, they could be spying on us even now!’

There was a noise from outside the window. Footsteps. Everyone froze. Eloise turned her head slowly to look out. A figure was standing in the darkness of the backyard.

It moved forward into the light. Eloise gasped.

‘Hamish!’ she cried.

The Scot leaned against the window sill. Nick ran to the back door.

‘Let me in, ya keeches,’ Hamish growled. Nick grinned with relief and held the door open.

‘What happened to you?’ Eloise demanded. ‘We thought the police must have got you!’

Hamish shrugged. ‘They’ve never got me before,’ he replied. ‘They’ll never get me at awe! Ah climbed up onto the city wall and doubled back. Left them bewildered. Fuckwits.’ The walls loomed directly over the backyard of the house.

‘But what about Osborne?’ Eloise murmured. Hamish favoured her with a dark scowl. ‘Hamish!’ she cried. ‘Don’t be so jealous! Look, we think there’s something going on in this town...’

Eric shook his head again after Eloise had explained their suspicions to the Scot.

‘We don’t know for definite if any of this is true,’ he said. ‘If we’re going to bust Osborne out of the nick because we think they’re going to sacrifice him to Sacalasta, we’ll need more proof of this. I mean, what are we going on? One Icelandic saga about a tenth-century shieldmaiden? I know I suggested the idea, but I think we should do more research before we make a move.’

‘We’d better get it done very soon,’ said Thora. ‘If they’re going to sacrifice him, it’ll be this Imbolc. And that’s fucking soon.’

‘Professor Higgins!’ exclaimed Eloise. ‘We could ask him what he knows.’

‘Who?’ frowned Eric. ‘Not the archaeologist? At the university? But why would he help us?’

‘Och, we met him a few months ago, in the North Sea. He’s a friend of ours.’ Hamish turned to Eloise. ‘We’ll go an’ ask him tomorrow morning. But you and me need a little talk.’

Eloise returned his bleak gaze steadfastly. ‘I don’t think we have anything to talk about,’ she replied. Hamish scowled.

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Carmilla

IV

Her Habits--A Saunter

I told you that I was charmed with her in most particulars.

There were some that did not please me so well.

She was above the middle height of women. I shall begin by describing her.

She was slender, and wonderfully graceful. Except that her movements were languid--very languid--indeed, there was nothing in her appearance to indicate an invalid. Her complexion was rich and brilliant; her features were small and beautifully formed; her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; her hair was quite wonderful, I never saw hair so magnificently thick and long when it was down about her shoulders; I have often placed my hands under it, and laughed with wonder at its weight. It was exquisitely fine and soft, and in color a rich very dark brown, with something of gold. I loved to let it down, tumbling with its own weight, as, in her room, she lay back in her chair talking in her sweet low voice, I used to fold and braid it, and spread it out and play with it. Heavens! If I had but known all!

I said there were particulars which did not please me. I have told you that her confidence won me the first night I saw her; but I found that she exercised with respect to herself, her mother, her history, everything in fact connected with her life, plans, and people, an ever wakeful reserve. I dare say I was unreasonable, perhaps I was wrong; I dare say I ought to have respected the solemn injunction laid upon my father by the stately lady in black velvet. But curiosity is a restless and unscrupulous passion, and no one girl can endure, with patience, that hers should be baffled by another. What harm could it do anyone to tell me what I so ardently desired to know? Had she no trust in my good sense or honor? Why would she not believe me when I assured her, so solemnly, that I would not divulge one syllable of what she told me to any mortal breathing.

There was a coldness, it seemed to me, beyond her years, in her smiling melancholy persistent refusal to afford me the least ray of light.

I cannot say we quarreled upon this point, for she would not quarrel upon any. It was, of course, very unfair of me to press her, very ill-bred, but I really could not help it; and I might just as well have let it alone.

What she did tell me amounted, in my unconscionable estimation--to nothing.

It was all summed up in three very vague disclosures:

First--Her name was Carmilla.

Second--Her family was very ancient and noble.

Third--Her home lay in the direction of the west.

She would not tell me the name of her family, nor their armorial bearings, nor the name of their estate, nor even that of the country they lived in.

You are not to suppose that I worried her incessantly on these subjects. I watched opportunity, and rather insinuated than urged my inquiries. Once or twice, indeed, I did attack her more directly. But no matter what my tactics, utter failure was

invariably the result. Reproaches and caresses were all lost upon her. But I must add this, that her evasion was conducted with so pretty a melancholy and deprecation, with so many, and even passionate declarations of her liking for me, and trust in my honor, and with so many promises that I should at last know all, that I could not find it in my heart long to be offended with her.

She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear, "Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die--die, sweetly die--into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love; so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit."

And when she had spoken such a rhapsody, she would press me more closely in her trembling embrace, and her lips in soft kisses gently glow upon my cheek.

Her agitations and her language were unintelligible to me.

From these foolish embraces, which were not of very frequent occurrence, I must allow, I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me. Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms.

In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling.

I now write, after an interval of more than ten years, with a trembling hand, with a confused and horrible recollection of certain occurrences and situations, in the ordeal through which I was unconsciously passing; though with a vivid and very sharp remembrance of the main current of my story.

But, I suspect, in all lives there are certain emotional scenes, those in which our passions have been most wildly and terribly roused, that are of all others the most vaguely and dimly remembered.

Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever." Then she had thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling.

“Are we related,” I used to ask; “what can you mean by all this? I remind you perhaps of someone whom you love; but you must not, I hate it; I don’t know you--I don’t know myself when you look so and talk so.”

She used to sigh at my vehemence, then turn away and drop my hand.

Respecting these very extraordinary manifestations I strove in vain to form any satisfactory theory--I could not refer them to affectation or trick. It was unmistakably the momentary breaking out of suppressed instinct and emotion. Was she, notwithstanding her mother’s volunteered denial, subject to brief visitations of insanity; or was there here a disguise and a romance? I had read in old storybooks of such things. What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with the assistance of a clever old adventuress. But there were many things against this hypothesis, highly interesting as it was to my vanity.

I could boast of no little attentions such as masculine gallantry delights to offer. Between these passionate moments there were long intervals of commonplace, of gaiety, of brooding melancholy, during which, except that I detected her eyes so full of melancholy fire, following me, at times I might have been as nothing to her. Except in these brief periods of mysterious excitement her ways were girlish; and there was always a languor about her, quite incompatible with a masculine system in a state of health.

In some respects her habits were odd. Perhaps not so singular in the opinion of a town lady like you, as they appeared to us rustic people. She used to come down very late, generally not till one o’clock, she would then take a cup of chocolate, but eat nothing; we then went out for a walk, which was a mere saunter, and she seemed, almost immediately, exhausted, and either returned to the schloss or sat on one of the benches that were placed, here and there, among the trees. This was a bodily languor in which her mind did not sympathize. She was always an animated talker, and very intelligent.

She sometimes alluded for a moment to her own home, or mentioned an adventure or situation, or an early recollection, which indicated a people of strange manners, and described customs of which we knew nothing. I gathered from these chance hints that her native country was much more remote than I had at first fancied.

As we sat thus one afternoon under the trees a funeral passed us by. It was that of a pretty young girl, whom I had often seen, the daughter of one of the rangers of the forest. The poor man was walking behind the coffin of his darling; she was his only child, and he looked quite heartbroken.

Peasants walking two-and-two came behind, they were singing a funeral hymn.

I rose to mark my respect as they passed, and joined in the hymn they were very sweetly singing.

My companion shook me a little roughly, and I turned surprised.

She said brusquely, "Don't you perceive how discordant that is?"

"I think it very sweet, on the contrary," I answered, vexed at the interruption, and very uncomfortable, lest the people who composed the little procession should observe and resent what was passing.

I resumed, therefore, instantly, and was again interrupted. "You pierce my ears," said Carmilla, almost angrily, and stopping her ears with her tiny fingers. "Besides, how can you tell that your religion and mine are the same; your forms wound me, and I hate funerals. What a fuss! Why you must die--everyone must die; and all are happier when they do. Come home."

"My father has gone on with the clergyman to the churchyard. I thought you knew she was to be buried today."

"She? I don't trouble my head about peasants. I don't know who she is," answered Carmilla, with a flash from her fine eyes.

"She is the poor girl who fancied she saw a ghost a fortnight ago, and has been dying ever since, till yesterday, when she expired."

"Tell me nothing about ghosts. I shan't sleep tonight if you do."

"I hope there is no plague or fever coming; all this looks very like it," I continued. "The swineherd's young wife died only a week ago, and she thought something seized her by the throat as she lay in her bed, and nearly strangled her. Papa says such horrible fancies do accompany some forms of fever. She was quite well the day before. She sank afterwards, and died before a week."

"Well, her funeral is over, I hope, and her hymn sung; and our ears shan't be tortured with that discord and jargon. It has made me nervous. Sit down here, beside me; sit close; hold my hand; press it hard-hard-harder."

We had moved a little back, and had come to another seat.

She sat down. Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepensible as ague. All her energies seemed strained to suppress a fit, with which she was then breathlessly tugging; and at length a low convulsive cry of suffering broke from her, and gradually the hysteria subsided. "There! That comes of strangling people with hymns!" she said at last. "Hold me, hold me still. It is passing away."

And so gradually it did; and perhaps to dissipate the somber impression which the spectacle had left upon me, she became unusually animated and chatty; and so we got home.

This was the first time I had seen her exhibit any definable symptoms of that delicacy of health which her mother had spoken of. It was the first time, also, I had seen her

exhibit anything like temper.

Both passed away like a summer cloud; and never but once afterwards did I witness on her part a momentary sign of anger. I will tell you how it happened.

She and I were looking out of one of the long drawing room windows, when there entered the courtyard, over the drawbridge, a figure of a wanderer whom I knew very well. He used to visit the schloss generally twice a year.

It was the figure of a hunchback, with the sharp lean features that generally accompany deformity. He wore a pointed black beard, and he was smiling from ear to ear, showing his white fangs. He was dressed in buff, black, and scarlet, and crossed with more straps and belts than I could count, from which hung all manner of things. Behind, he carried a magic lantern, and two boxes, which I well knew, in one of which was a salamander, and in the other a mandrake. These monsters used to make my father laugh. They were compounded of parts of monkeys, parrots, squirrels, fish, and hedgehogs, dried and stitched together with great neatness and startling effect. He had a fiddle, a box of conjuring apparatus, a pair of foils and masks attached to his belt, several other mysterious cases dangling about him, and a black staff with copper ferrules in his hand. His companion was a rough spare dog, that followed at his heels, but stopped short, suspiciously at the drawbridge, and in a little while began to howl dismally.

In the meantime, the mountebank, standing in the midst of the courtyard, raised his grotesque hat, and made us a very ceremonious bow, paying his compliments very volubly in execrable French, and German not much better.

Then, disengaging his fiddle, he began to scrape a lively air to which he sang with a merry discord, dancing with ludicrous airs and activity, that made me laugh, in spite of the dog's howling.

Then he advanced to the window with many smiles and salutations, and his hat in his left hand, his fiddle under his arm, and with a fluency that never took breath, he gabbed a long advertisement of all his accomplishments, and the resources of the various arts which he placed at our service, and the curiosities and entertainments which it was in his power, at our bidding, to display.

“Will your ladyships be pleased to buy an amulet against the oupire, which is going like the wolf, I hear, through these woods,” he said dropping his hat on the pavement. “They are dying of it right and left and here is a charm that never fails; only pinned to the pillow, and you may laugh in his face.”

These charms consisted of oblong slips of vellum, with cabalistic ciphers and diagrams upon them.

Carmilla instantly purchased one, and so did I.

He was looking up, and we were smiling down upon him, amused; at least, I can answer for myself. His piercing black eye, as he looked up in our faces, seemed to

detect something that fixed for a moment his curiosity,

In an instant he unrolled a leather case, full of all manner of odd little steel instruments.

“See here, my lady,” he said, displaying it, and addressing me, “I profess, among other things less useful, the art of dentistry. Plague take the dog!” he interpolated. “Silence, beast! He howls so that your ladyships can scarcely hear a word. Your noble friend, the young lady at your right, has the sharpest tooth,--long, thin, pointed, like an awl, like a needle; ha, ha! With my sharp and long sight, as I look up, I have seen it distinctly; now if it happens to hurt the young lady, and I think it must, here am I, here are my file, my punch, my nippers; I will make it round and blunt, if her ladyship pleases; no longer the tooth of a fish, but of a beautiful young lady as she is. Hey? Is the young lady displeased? Have I been too bold? Have I offended her?”

The young lady, indeed, looked very angry as she drew back from the window.

“How dares that mountebank insult us so? Where is your father? I shall demand redress from him. My father would have had the wretch tied up to the pump, and flogged with a cart whip, and burnt to the bones with the cattle brand!”

She retired from the window a step or two, and sat down, and had hardly lost sight of the offender, when her wrath subsided as suddenly as it had risen, and she gradually recovered her usual tone, and seemed to forget the little hunchback and his follies.

My father was out of spirits that evening. On coming in he told us that there had been another case very similar to the two fatal ones which had lately occurred. The sister of a young peasant on his estate, only a mile away, was very ill, had been, as she described it, attacked very nearly in the same way, and was now slowly but steadily sinking.

“All this,” said my father, “is strictly referable to natural causes. These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbors.”

“But that very circumstance frightens one horribly,” said Carmilla.

“How so?” inquired my father.

“I am so afraid of fancying I see such things; I think it would be as bad as reality.”

“We are in God’s hands: nothing can happen without his permission, and all will end well for those who love him. He is our faithful creator; He has made us all, and will take care of us.”

“Creator! Nature!” said the young lady in answer to my gentle father. “And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature--don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so.”

“The doctor said he would come here today,” said my father, after a silence. “I want to know what he thinks about it, and what he thinks we had better do.”

“Doctors never did me any good,” said Carmilla.

“Then you have been ill?” I asked.

“More ill than ever you were,” she answered.

“Long ago?”

“Yes, a long time. I suffered from this very illness; but I forget all but my pain and weakness, and they were not so bad as are suffered in other diseases.”

“You were very young then?”

“I dare say, let us talk no more of it. You would not wound a friend?”

She looked languidly in my eyes, and passed her arm round my waist lovingly, and led me out of the room. My father was busy over some papers near the window.

“Why does your papa like to frighten us?” said the pretty girl with a sigh and a little shudder.

“He doesn’t, dear Carmilla, it is the very furthest thing from his mind.”

“Are you afraid, dearest?”

“I should be very much if I fancied there was any real danger of my being attacked as those poor people were.”

“You are afraid to die?”

“Yes, every one is.”

“But to die as lovers may--to die together, so that they may live together.

Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes; but in the meantime there are grubs and larvae, don’t you see--each with their peculiar propensities, necessities and structure. So says Monsieur Buffon, in his big book, in the next room.”

Later in the day the doctor came, and was closeted with papa for some time.

He was a skilful man, of sixty and upwards, he wore powder, and shaved his pale face as smooth as a pumpkin. He and papa emerged from the room together, and I heard papa laugh, and say as they came out:

“Well, I do wonder at a wise man like you. What do you say to hippogriffs and

dragons?”

The doctor was smiling, and made answer, shaking his head--

“Nevertheless life and death are mysterious states, and we know little of the resources of either.”

And so they walked on, and I heard no more. I did not then know what the doctor had been broaching, but I think I guess it now.

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