

Schlock! webzine

schlock.co.uk

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

Issue 1, Volume 4

1 May 2011

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!

To read previous editions, please go to the Archive.

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

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

The stories, articles and illustrations contained on this website are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.

Schlock! Publishing

This Edition

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

[Super Duper: Part One](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - first installment of an apocalyptic tale in which the meek inherit the Earth.

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

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

[The Wizard's Revenge](#) by Millicent 'Mad Dog' McGuire - farcical comic fantasy featuring highland rogue Dougal the Wanderer.

Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Edison's Conquest of Mars \(Part 4\)](#) by [Garrett P. Serviss](#) - *The airships of the Martians were destroyed by the score, but yet they flocked upon us thicker and faster.*

[Masquerade](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways encounter a group of vampire cultists. *Second in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

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

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

Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Herbert West: Reanimator - Part One](#) by HP Lovecraft - Herbert West begins his quest to successfully reanimate the dead!

Super Duper

How blest are those of gentle spirit, they shall have the Earth for their possession.

- Jesus H. Christ.

(Trans. M. Python)

Chapter One

Every morning in Canterbury, three of the most exclusive female masseurs in Europe stepped into one of the stateliest bedrooms in one of the most stately homes in Britain. These maestros of biology were arranged with two of them massaging a foot each on a supine gentleman in an oversize, ancient and impossibly comfortable four poster bed. As for the third masseuse, well, gentlemen do have their morning problems. The three ladies in question did not relish the third of the three tasks that was asked of their employer (which, of course, he requested be performed simultaneously) and so they rotated the task between the three of them.

Not a one of the three masseuses belonged to the “happy ending” school of massage and getting them to perform the task in question had required a little persuasion on the part of their employer’s personal assistant. As it transpired, eight thousand pounds a week went a long way towards convincing the three ladies that rubbing one part of the body is very much the same as rubbing another.

The masseuse who had been given the task on Tuesday, April the 16th - on that infamous year in British history - was the youngest of the three women, argued by many to be the most technically accomplished masseuse in Britain (though she was by far the least experienced of the three in the room). She had thin dark hair and a face that most people would kindly describe as forgettable. Her physique was toned and slender but somehow managed to entirely avoid the modern notion that slender is sexy. Her hands, however, could unfold the human muscular system with an accuracy to detail that few anatomists could even diagram.

The first three times that Jane Nichols had been given the third duty to perform, she had managed to successfully induce an orgasm in the sleeping Mr. Christopher Augustus using only Reiki techniques and had therefore avoided physical contact with the least attractive part of an otherwise hideous and bloated physique. Unfortunately for Jane, using Reiki made the matter rather long winded and the other two masseuses (largely through jealousy) had bitterly complained about the fact at length. Therefore, on her fourth attempt she had been forced to subscribe to the more functional method.

Now, a hand job from the above mentioned Jane Nichols was not an experience to be taken lightly. The term, “hand job” is in fact an entirely insufficient manner in which to describe what in sexual terms could easily be compared to the great accomplishments of the Italian Renaissance artists. It was quite simply insurmountable. Jane was completely intouch with the flow of the universe and when she touched a person that person too became temporally and (only in the spot she was touching), a conscious part of the greater whole. That was what happened to Mr. Augustus’ penis every third morning. If anyone but the three masseuses knew about his morning habit they would have noticed that he seemed melancholy only on the days when he had woken to this explosive joy.

However, Mr. Augustus had not got where he was by giving out his secrets. He was the CEO of a company called Mannington’s that had an office in the centre

of London marked only by a small placard on a door that was even less memorable than Jane Nichols' face. But a company that nevertheless owned the controlling stock in twenty seven percent of the other businesses in London. Augustus was a man of routine; a petulant man who had little time for fools and even less time for the intelligent. Performance and obedience were the two yardsticks by which he measured his fellow species, and he found most people to be lacking in both.

Except, interestingly enough, on every third day whereupon he found himself noticing beggars and thinking that a very tiny amount of his money would help them immeasurably. But, as he wasn't the sort of person to listen to nonsense (even from himself) he found the strength of character to pass them by without so much as a visible glance.

Christopher Augustus went into his office in London without fail on every day that he spent in England and if he was out of the country he would phone his secretary obsessively to make sure that everything was running smoothly. He was a big man, a valuable man, a man of ruthless acumen, a man who got things done, who got people to do things and a man who never failed to perform. Performance was everything, he was bastard-well Christopher Augustus!

"I can't get it up."

Jane's pleading eyes stared into those of her colleagues as her adept fingers uselessly tumbled over Christopher's flaccid member.

"You mean, he can't get it up," Mary responded in a stern Lancastrian accent. She was a heavy set woman in her late forties who made little secret of the fact that she felt nothing but disappointment and sympathy for the opposite sex. And it was not an especially kind-spirited sympathy either, more the sort of sympathy that you feel towards someone who has public soiled themselves.

"You ought to try spitting on it; that normally gets the dirty buggers riled up."

"Mary, please! He's sleeping, he's not dead."

"You hope. Check his pulse, Sandra."

Sandra, who was, relatively speaking, the beauty of the bunch, had started her career as a nail technician and had originally only taken up massage to save up for a holiday in Spain. She leaned over Mr. Augustus' sleeping bulk. As usual he wore both a blindfold and earplugs so that he could achieve the optimum level of sleep. But before she could reach his pulse he rendered the matter academic by releasing a large snore and rolling over on to his side.

"What shall we do?"

The two younger women looked to Mary's pragmatism for a solution.

"We'll each give him fifteen solid minutes, which I know is longer than normal but then at least he can't say we haven't done our job."

The three of them set off at their allotted tasks. For practical reasons Mary and Sandra had already been massaging Mr. Augustus' feet for ten minutes before Jane had even started so, it wasn't a great plan for any of them. But it was a sensible plan and Christopher Augustus had been known to dispose of inefficient workers quickly and without consideration for industrial tribunals or labour laws.

"I'd rather pay the damages than suffer the damage."

This he boldly declared to every new employee that he took on. Then once he got to know them a bit better he would take them out for drinks and wait until they were comfortable before delivering the follow-up line.

"If you ever cross me, I will fuck up your life in ways you can't even

imagine.”

He spoke with a terrifying arrogance that only aristocratic entitlement could hone and the greater part of his new employees took the matter seriously, which was just as well because he would see to it that London’s glass ceiling dropped incredibly low for those who didn’t.

Therefore, when the three masseuses had finished their first unsuccessful morning’s work they elected Sandra to raise the matter with Lydia, Mr. Augustus’ live-in PA. Sandra seemed the obvious choice because she was the only one of the three flighty enough to make the matter appear trivial.

“Mr. Augustus is having a very sleepy morning today.” Sandra made her eyes as wide and innocent looking as she could get them. “He barely moved a muscle in there.”

“He’s not awake?”

“No, just snoring away on his side.” Sandra switched to a more maternal tone of voice. “He works very hard doesn’t he? He must be tired.”

Lydia was well aware of her employer’s work load because she took responsibility for the greater share of it. Since her inaugural first year in the office Lydia had not been a day away from the man. Indeed, he would often state firmly that she was the only member of staff qualified to run the business should anything happen to him. But in seventeen years of employment she had never known Christopher to sleep in, not even for ten minutes, and although it seemed it seemed like a perfectly normal and reasonable occurrence it was dramatically out of character.

The three masseuses left before Lydia had a chance to fly into action. It was a rare opportunity for her to oversee Augustus’ operations. She phoned the City and made sure that everyone was moving in the right direction there and then she called the household chef and had him prepare a full English breakfast, a continental breakfast and a plate of the pancakes that Mr. Augustus had discovered on a trip to the States.

A set of ornamental tables were lain out at the side of his bed and stocked with various modes of delectation by the most attractive servants in the house. Once everything was settled Lydia made a move that almost certainly no other of Mr. Augustus’ employees would ever have made. She shook him firmly but carefully by the shoulders and as his eyelids peeled unwillingly open, she delivered the shocking news to him.

“Christopher, it’s ten past seven!”

Augustus pulled his chin back in revulsion at the smell that greeted his nostrils.

“Get all this shit out of my room!” he barked. “The stink of it is making me ill.”

“Absolutely. Perhaps a lighter breakfast?”

Mr. Augustus had fallen back into a firm and belligerent snooze. Lydia made the decision that Mr. Augustus could decide for himself whether or not he wanted to wake up, but nevertheless arranged for a servant to enter the room hourly to replace the glass of water at the bedside. He slept all through the day and when Jane, Mary and Sandra arrived the next morning they discovered that he had still not left the bed, not even to use his en-suite toilet.

By Friday, Lydia had placed their contract with Mr. Augustus on temporary hiatus due to his sickness and had called for a physician and a psychologist. In addition two private nurses were given the dubious chore of keeping the linen from becoming soiled and changing the IV drip that prevented him from starving himself

to death. When both of the medical experts had failed to reach a satisfactory diagnosis, Lydia began to feel that she was justified to begin throwing serious money at the problem.

It was a troublesome business for the exceptionally well paid team of doctors that moved into Mr. Augustus' bedroom. Physically there was no sign of any defect and neurologically he seemed in every way competent; his brain waves were normal, his reflexes fine. Everything was as it should be but for the fact that he wouldn't stand up, leave his bed or speak more than a sentence. Eventually they gave up on trying to develop an accurate diagnosis and simply put it down to being "a new form of M.E."

His business ran on successfully under the supervision of Lynda and he continued to live on in his house. By the time May arrived, even his children had found out about him and arranged to meet up at his house to express their concern.

On the occasion of seeing his collected offspring (most of whom he had not seen since he had their mother dealt with) Charles Augustus finally began to speak.

"I suppose you bastards are here to try and get power of attorney, so that you can write yourselves back into my will."

Everyone in the room (who wasn't related to the man) stirred immediately into action. Doctors were already on their way by the time he spoke his second sentence.

"Well, you can forget it. I'm not sick; I'm just fed up of everything. I can't be bothered doing anything and that does include talking to you. So, please do me a favour and kindly piss the fuck off!"

With that Charles rolled over to stare at his favourite blemish on the original Georgian wallpaper, the one that looked like an elephant riding a horse. Every time one of his multiple unwelcome guests entered his room he couldn't help but marvel at the fact that they didn't notice it. He started going to the toilet by himself again, just because it seemed like less work. But, he still couldn't be bothered to eat.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

The Jackal

Part IV

Thornville could not shake an uncharacteristic feeling of dread as he rode towards Tobias Day's home. As he drew level with the front of the town house, the feeling grew. The front door was hanging open and scuffmarks led from the porch out into the street. Thornville drew one of his pistols. The weight in his fist made him a little bolder.

"Bit of a do last night, eh?"

Thornville turned to see a heavily moustachioed gentleman stepping out of a house from across the street. "It was a young gentleman and lady, making a terrible racket," he said as he approached Thornville. "That young Day fellow, he does keep odd company. What with that noisy pair waking the street and then those ruffians turning up. Owes money, I suppose?" The man stopped short when he saw the extent of the damage. His gaze fell to the pistol in Thornville's hand "Oh! My, I've such a busy day ahead of me! Must be going." With that he scurried off down the street.

Thornville dismounted and tied his horse to a piece of jutting door frame. He tucked his spare pistol into his belt and stepped through the ruined doorway. As he entered the hallway, the stench of blood was overpowering. Thornville stopped and steadied himself on the banister, peering about in the gloom, trying to fight off this feeling of dread. Something crashed in the front room. Jumping, he pointed his pistol at the open doorway. It was then that he saw the blood.

Thornville felt the strength drain from his legs. He swallowed, steadied himself, then moved towards the room. Tobias Day lay in the middle of the floor in a pool of drying blood. His throat had been slashed wide open. Thornville, his mind numbed, stared at the scene before him. This was not what he had expected; this was not right. He was about to open the curtains when something coughed in the shadows. Thornville's head snapped round, anger flaring. A ragged bloody mess, lying in the corner of the room tried to rise. Smashed porcelain lay strewn around it. It appeared to Thornville, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, to be a man.

Thornville leapt forward. He grabbed the bloody figure by the front of his ragged shirt. "Where is my daughter?" Thornville hissed. The young man parted his swollen, split lips to speak but only managed a weak cough.

"Tell me where Charlotte is, or by all that is holy I will end you, right now," said Thornville as he tightened his grip on the man's shirt.

"...Charlotte..." croaked the figure. Thornville stared at him, recognition dawning. It was that bloody painter, one of Day's cronies! He lifted the man a short distance from the floor, then slammed him back down. The painter cried out in pain and tried to crawl away from his tormenter. "...There were men...they...Where is Charlotte... and Tobias?"

All rational thought left Thornville. With a snarl he flung Louis to the floor and dashed upstairs. He tore through the house but Charlotte was nowhere to be seen.

Thornville stopped finally at the foot of the staircase. He was panting. Sweat ran down his face and his hair was awry. A cold calm came over him. "Cole," he whispered. *If that bastard has done anything to Charlotte I'll have his head*, he thought as he strode down the hall. As he walked past the front room he noticed the painter crawling across the floor towards Tobias' corpse. Thornville stepped out into the morning light a thin, cracked cry of despair followed him. Without hesitation he mounted his horse and set off for Soapers Hole, a natural bay where the *Jackal* made

berth.

~o0o~

Charlotte lay upon a rough floor, staring, yet seeing nothing. She was numb and cold inside. Her thighs were stained with dried blood and her clothes little more than rags. Once Tobias had been killed everything else seemed as if a blur. She had been dragged through the streets, coarse hands pawing at her and harsh laughter filling her ears. Then the smell and sounds of the docks followed and she had been bundled into a small boat. She had passed out but woke to find herself on the deck of a larger ship. Leering brutish men were all around and standing in front of her was the tattooed man who had killed Tobias.

He had laughed while he raped her, while the others leered at her. She stopped fighting after the first few, and then lay still as the other pirates took their turns. Now she was abandoned and bloody somewhere below deck, staring at the hard wood floor, waiting to die.

Time passed and sounds began to filter through her deadened senses: the creaking of the ship; skittering noises as rats skulked in the darkness. Slowly, she became aware of a barely audible, high pitched keening. Charlotte rolled onto her side and put her hands over her ears in an attempt to muffle the uncomfortable sound. She jerked into a sitting position as the noise increased in volume, her hands clamped to the side of her head. As she sat up, waves of nausea threatened to overwhelm her. She reached out to steady herself.

The keening stopped. Surprised, Charlotte glanced at what was supporting her, then at the rest of her surroundings. She was resting against an old stone box in what appeared to be the hold of a ship. Charlotte could not tell for how long she had been down here. She became aware of faint voices in the distance. Panic gripped her. What if they come for her again? Charlotte tried to stand.

Intense pain crippled her and she fell to the floor. She rolled into a foetal position, tears streaming through the grime on her face. The temptation simply to lie there and die was strong. It would be easy to give up and close her eyes. But what if they did come for her again? Angry with herself, Charlotte clawed her way back into a sitting position. She would be damned if she was going to give up and die! Peering into the gloom of the hold she looked for anything that might be of use. There must be some means of escape. Or a weapon, something she could use to defend herself.

She cast around, panic and desperation rising once more. The box! There might be something there. Charlotte grasped the lid and heaved. As the stone box opened, the air around her became charged; her skin tingled with every movement. Inside the box was a single foot long carved piece of volcanic glass.

As Charlotte gazed at the carving, the hairs stood up on her arm and her heart fluttered within her breast. The noises of the ship and the shouts of the crew had become faint. Her attention was held entirely by the strange carving. It was vaguely humanoid in form, yet no matter how Charlotte peered at it, its shape could not be completely discerned. It was as if it shifted subtly, confusing the eye.

In the grip of some somnambulist-like fugue, Charlotte reached out a finger and touched the carving.

~o0o~

Even when drunk, as he was now, Captain Cole was not a man prone to introspection.

Yet he found himself contemplating his actions of late. He sat in his cabin, shoulders hunched, peering at a sheet of paper through an alcoholic haze.

Written upon the paper were the details of the well-stocked, poorly defended ship that was to be the *Jackal's* next target. There was something Cole did not like about the arrangement with Thornville. He might not, at this stage of his inebriation, be able to define exactly what vexed him, but he knew he didn't like it, whatever it was.

"... 'm not sure I trust that Thornville," he mumbled, half to himself.

Mr. Clench, the bear-like first mate, snorted and lurched upright, regarding Cole with bloodshot eyes. "What? Oh...s'been good. I mean..." Clench paused, belched and then continued. "We've got a lot of... loot... out of it, ain't we?"

"Aye, we have. I'm just thinkin' that... it's time to move on. Don't like Thornville tellin' us what to do... is all." Cole lapsed into silence, glaring at the sheet of paper.

Mr. Clench eyed Captain Cole. The skipper hadn't been himself since that last ship, the *Morning Star*. If Cole carried on like this, he'd likely find himself on the wrong end of a cutlass. The crew would not stand for any weakness from their captain. "Right... I'll get the boys ready... then." Clench heaved his bulk out of the chair, swayed then gripped the table's edge and waited for the cabin to stop spinning.

"No... no, not... yet. Got a... plan, see," Cole paused, a haunted look momentarily passed over his face. "We take th' next ship an', when... Thornville comes to collect; we kill 'im... and get far away from here, an' this ship."

"Where we goin', in this new ship... after you kill Thornville?"

"Don' care. South." With that Cole threw the sheet of paper away from him and lapsed into silence once more.

Mr. Clench picked up the bottle of rum that lay between them, still eyeing Cole, then made for the door.

"Kill her."

"What's that, captain?" said Clench, pausing at the open doorway.

"The poet's whore, kill her," said Cole, his head down.

Despite his inebriated state, Mr. Clench noticed the plaintive, begging tone that crept into Cole's voice. He stopped in the doorway and stared at the captain. *I don't think I'll be doin' that*, thought Mr. Clench. *That one ain't broke; still some fun can be had with her yet*. He closed the door on the captain and went to find some more lively company; the sort of company with whom he could discuss the possibility of a change in command.

Captain Cole barely noticed his first mate leave. His thoughts turned to the nightmares that had plagued him these last few nights. Ever since they had boarded the *Morning Star*, Cole had barely slept. He could not remember the dreams, only the nebulous dread that would follow him from restless sleep into haunted awakening.

Since they had brought the girl on board, the dread had worsened. It now had form, a horrible shape that would become the author of his doom. Now he remembered something of his dreams. That girl. In each dream she was at the head of a terrible host crewing the *Morning Star*. A host that pursued him, drawing ever closer, threatening to consume him, to enslave him in some demoniacal purpose.

Cole knew he should kill the girl, but he was powerless to avert the doom that followed him. He could do nothing but wait, feeling like a prisoner aboard his own ship.

Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN FROM THE VAULT.—THE ALARM, AND THE SEARCH AROUND THE HALL.

It so happened that George and Henry Bannerworth, along with Mr. Marchdale, had just reached the gate which conducted into the garden of the mansion when they all were alarmed by the report of a pistol. Amid the stillness of the night, it came upon them with so sudden a shock, that they involuntarily paused, and there came from the lips of each an expression of alarm.

“Good heavens!” cried George, “can that be Flora firing at any intruder?”

“It must be,” cried Henry; “she has in her possession the only weapons in the house.”

Mr. Marchdale turned very pale, and trembled slightly, but he did not speak.

“On, on,” cried Henry; “for God’s sake, let us hasten on.”

As he spoke, he cleared the gate at a bound, and at a terrific pace he made towards the house, passing over beds, and plantations, and flowers heedlessly, so that he went the most direct way to it.

Before, however, it was possible for any human speed to accomplish even half of the distance, the report of the other shot came upon his ears, and he even fancied he heard the bullet whistle past his head in tolerably close proximity. This supposition gave him a clue to the direction at all events from whence the shots proceeded, otherwise he knew not from which window they were fired, because it had not occurred to him, previous to leaving home, to inquire in which room Flora and his mother were likely to be seated waiting his return.

He was right as regarded the bullet. It was that winged messenger of death which had passed his head in such very dangerous proximity, and consequently he made with tolerable accuracy towards the open window from whence the shots had been fired.

The night was not near so dark as it had been, although even yet it was very far from being a light one, and he was soon enabled to see that there was a room, the window of which was wide open, and lights burning on the table within. He made towards it in a moment, and entered it. To his astonishment, the first objects he beheld were Flora and a stranger, who was now supporting her in his arms. To grapple him by the throat was the work of a moment, but the stranger cried aloud in a voice which sounded familiar to Harry,—

“Good God, are you all mad?”

Henry relaxed his hold, and looked in his face.

“Gracious heavens, it is Mr. Holland!” he said.

“Yes; did you not know me?”

Henry was bewildered. He staggered to a seat, and, in doing so, he saw his mother, stretched apparently lifeless upon the floor. To raise her was the work of a moment, and then Marchdale and George, who had followed him as fast as they could, appeared at the open window.

Such a strange scene as that small room now exhibited had never been equalled in Bannerworth Hall. There was young Mr. Holland, of whom mention has already been made, as the affianced lover of Flora, supporting her fainting form. There was Henry doing equal service to his mother; and on the floor lay the two pistols, and one of the candles which had been upset in the confusion; while the terrified attitudes of George and Mr. Marchdale at the window completed the strange-looking picture.

“What is this—oh! what has happened?” cried George.

“I know not—I know not,” said Henry. “Some one summon the servants; I am nearly mad.”

Mr. Marchdale at once rung the bell, for George looked so faint and ill as to be incapable of doing so; and he rung it so loudly and so effectually, that the two servants who had been employed suddenly upon the others leaving came with much speed to know what was the matter.

“See to your mistress,” said Henry. “She is dead, or has fainted. For God’s sake, let who can give me some account of what has caused all this confusion here.”

“Are you aware, Henry,” said Marchdale, “that a stranger is present in the room?”

He pointed to Mr. Holland as he spoke, who, before Henry could reply, said,—

“Sir, I may be a stranger to you, as you are to me, and yet no stranger to those whose home this is.”

“No, no,” said Henry, “you are no stranger to us, Mr. Holland, but are thrice welcome—none can be more welcome. Mr. Marchdale, this is Mr Holland, of whom you have heard me speak.”

“I am proud to know you, sir,” said Marchdale.

“Sir, I thank you,” replied Holland, coldly.

It will so happen; but, at first sight, it appeared as if those two persons had some sort of antagonistic feeling towards each other, which threatened to prevent effectually their ever becoming intimate friends.

The appeal of Henry to the servants to know if they could tell him what had occurred

was answered in the negative. All they knew was that they had heard two shots fired, and that, since then, they had remained where they were, in a great fright, until the bell was rung violently. This was no news at all and, therefore, the only chance was, to wait patiently for the recovery of the mother, or of Flora, from one or the other of whom surely some information could be at once then procured.

Mrs. Bannerworth was removed to her own room, and so would Flora have been; but Mr. Holland, who was supporting her in his arms, said,—

“I think the air from the open window is recovering her, and it is likely to do so. Oh, do not now take her from me, after so long an absence. Flora, Flora, look up; do you not know me? You have not yet given me one look of acknowledgment. Flora, dear Flora!”

The sound of his voice seemed to act as the most potent of charms in restoring her to consciousness; it broke through the death-like trance in which she lay, and, opening her beautiful eyes, she fixed them upon his face, saying,—

“Yes, yes; it is Charles—it is Charles.”

She burst into a hysterical flood of tears, and clung to him like some terrified child to its only friend in the whole wide world.

“Oh, my dear friends,” cried Charles Holland, “do not deceive me; has Flora been ill?”

“We have all been ill,” said George.

“All ill?”

“Ay, and nearly mad,” exclaimed Harry.

Holland looked from one to the other in surprise, as well he might, nor was that surprise at all lessened when Flora made an effort to extricate herself from his embrace, as she exclaimed,—

“You must leave me—you must leave me, Charles, for ever! Oh! never, never look upon my face again!”

“I—I am bewildered,” said Charles.

“Leave me, now,” continued Flora; “think me unworthy; think what you will, Charles, but I cannot, I dare not, now be yours.”

“Is this a dream?”

“Oh, would it were. Charles, if we had never met, you would be happier—I could not be more wretched.”

“Flora, Flora, do you say these words of so great cruelty to try my love?”

“No, as Heaven is my judge, I do not.”

“Gracious Heaven, then, what do they mean?”

Flora shuddered, and Henry, coming up to her, took her hand in his tenderly, as he said,—

“Has it been again?”

“It has.”

“You shot it?”

“I fired full upon it, Henry, but it fled.”

“It did—fly?”

“It did, Henry, but it will come again—it will be sure to come again.”

“You—you hit it with the bullet?” interposed Mr. Marchdale. “Perhaps you killed it?”

“I think I must have hit it, unless I am mad.”

Charles Holland looked from one to the other with such a look of intense surprise, that George remarked it, and said at once to him,—

“Mr. Holland, a full explanation is due to you, and you shall have it.”

“You seem the only rational person here,” said Charles. “Pray what is it that everybody calls ‘it?’”

“Hush—hush!” said Henry; “you shall hear soon, but not at present.”

“Hear me, Charles,” said Flora. “From this moment mind, I do release you from every vow, from every promise made to me of constancy and love; and if you are wise, Charles, and will be advised, you will now this moment leave this house never to return to it.”

“No,” said Charles—“no; by Heaven I love you, Flora! I have come to say again all that in another clime I said with joy to you. When I forget you, let what trouble may oppress you, may God forget me, and my own right hand forget to do me honest service.”

“Oh! no more—no more!” sobbed Flora.

“Yes, much more, if you will tell me of words which shall be stronger than others in which to paint my love, my faith, and my constancy.”

“Be prudent,” said Henry. “Say no more.”

“Nay, upon such a theme I could speak for ever. You may cast me off, Flora; but until you tell me you love another, I am yours till the death, and then with a sanguine hope at my heart that we shall meet again, never, dearest, to part.”

Flora sobbed bitterly.

“Oh!” she said, “this is the unkindest blow of all—this is worse than all.”

“Unkind!” echoed Holland.

“Heed her not,” said Henry; “she means not you.”

“Oh, no—no!” she cried. “Farewell, Charles—dear Charles.”

“Oh, say that word again!” he exclaimed, with animation. “It is the first time such music has met my ears.”

“It must be the last.”

“No, no—oh, no.”

“For your own sake I shall be able now, Charles, to show you that I really loved you.”

“Not by casting me from you?”

“Yes, even so. That will be the way to show you that I love you.”

She held up her hands wildly, as she added, in an excited voice,—

“The curse of destiny is upon me! I am singled out as one lost and accursed. Oh, horror—horror! would that I were dead!”

Charles staggered back a pace or two until he came to the table, at which he clutched for support. He turned very pale as he said, in a faint voice,—

“Is—is she mad, or am I?”

“Tell him I am mad, Henry,” cried Flora. “Do not, oh, do not make his lonely thoughts terrible with more than that. Tell him I am mad.”

“Come with me,” whispered Henry to Holland. “I pray you come with me at once, and you shall know all.”

“I—will.”

“George, stay with Flora for a time. Come, come, Mr. Holland, you ought, and you shall know all; then you can come to a judgment for yourself. This way, sir. You cannot, in the wildest freak of your imagination, guess that which I have now to tell you.”

Never was mortal man so utterly bewildered by the events of the last hour of his existence as was now Charles Holland, and truly he might well be so. He had arrived in England, and made what speed he could to the house of a family whom he admired for their intelligence, their high culture, and in one member of which his whole thoughts of domestic happiness in this world were centered, and he found nothing but confusion, incoherence, mystery, and the wildest dismay.

Well might he doubt if he were sleeping or waking—well might he ask if he or they were mad.

And now, as, after a long, lingering look of affection upon the pale, suffering face of Flora, he followed Henry from the room, his thoughts were busy in fancying a thousand vague and wild imaginations with respect to the communication which was promised to be made to him.

But, as Henry had truly said to him, not in the wildest freak of his imagination could he conceive of any thing near the terrible strangeness and horror of that which he had to tell him, and consequently he found himself closeted with Henry in a small private room, removed from the domestic part of the hall, to the full in as bewildered a state as he had been from the first.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMMUNICATIONS TO THE LOVER.—THE HEART'S DESPAIR.

Consternation is sympathetic, and any one who had looked upon the features of Charles Holland, now that he was seated with Henry Bannerworth, in expectation of a communication which his fears told him was to blast all his dearest and most fondly cherished hopes for ever, would scarce have recognised in him the same young man who, one short hour before, had knocked so loudly, and so full of joyful hope and expectation, at the door of the hall.

But so it was. He knew Henry Bannerworth too well to suppose that any unreal cause could blanch his cheek. He knew Flora too well to imagine for one moment that caprice had dictated the, to him, fearful words of dismissal she had uttered to him.

Happier would it at that time have been for Charles Holland had she acted capriciously towards him, and convinced him that his true heart's devotion had been cast at the feet of one unworthy of so really noble a gift. Pride would then have enabled him, no doubt, successfully to resist the blow. A feeling of honest and proper indignation at having his feelings trifled with, would, no doubt, have sustained him, but, alas! the case seemed widely different.

True, she implored him to think of her no more—no longer to cherish in his breast the fond dream of affection which had been its guest so long; but the manner in which she did so brought along with it an irresistible conviction, that she was making a noble sacrifice of her own feelings for him, from some cause which was involved in the profoundest mystery.

But now he was to hear all. Henry had promised to tell him, and as he looked into his pale, but handsomely intellectual face, he half dreaded the disclosure he yet panted to hear.

“Tell me all, Henry—tell me all,” he said. “Upon the words that come from your lips I know I can rely.”

“I will have no reservations with you,” said Henry, sadly. “You ought to know all, and you shall. Prepare yourself for the strangest revelation you ever heard.”

“Indeed!”

“Ay. One which in hearing you may well doubt; and one which, I hope, you will never find an opportunity of verifying.”

“You speak in riddles.”

“And yet speak truly, Charles. You heard with what a frantic vehemence Flora desired you to think no more of her?”

“I did—I did.”

“She was right. She is a noble-hearted girl for uttering those words. A dreadful incident in our family has occurred, which might well induce you to pause before uniting your fate with that of any member of it.”

“Impossible. Nothing can possibly subdue the feelings of affection I entertain for Flora. She is worthy of any one, and, as such, amid all changes—all mutations of fortune, she shall be mine.”

“Do not suppose that any change of fortune has produced the scene you were witness to.”

“Then, what else?”

“I will tell you, Holland. In all your travels, and in all your reading, did you ever come across anything about vampyres?”

“About what?” cried Charles, drawing his chair forward a little. “About what?”

“You may well doubt the evidence of your own ears, Charles Holland, and wish me to repeat what I said. I say, do you know anything about vampyres?”

Charles Holland looked curiously in Henry’s face, and the latter immediately added,—

“I can guess what is passing in your mind at present, and I do not wonder at it. You think I must be mad.”

“Well, really, Henry, your extraordinary question—”

“I knew it. Were I you, I should hesitate to believe the tale; but the fact is, we have every reason to believe that one member of our own family is one of those horrible preternatural beings called vampyres.”

“Good God, Henry, can you allow your judgment for a moment to stoop to such a supposition?”

“That is what I have asked myself a hundred times; but, Charles Holland, the judgment, the feelings, and all the prejudices, natural and acquired, must succumb to actual ocular demonstration. Listen to me, and do not interrupt me. You shall know all, and you shall know it circumstantially.”

Henry then related to the astonished Charles Holland all that had occurred, from the first alarm of Flora, up to that period when he, Holland, caught her in his arms as she was about to leave the room.

“And now,” he said, in conclusion, “I cannot tell what opinion you may come to as regards these most singular events. You will recollect that here is the unbiassed evidence of four or five people to the facts, and, beyond that, the servants, who have seen something of the horrible visitor.”

“You bewilder me, utterly,” said Charles Holland.

“As we are all bewildered.”

“But—but, gracious Heaven! it cannot be.”

“It is.”

“No—no. There is—there must be yet some dreadful mistake.”

“Can you start any supposition by which we can otherwise explain any of the phenomena I have described to you? If you can, for Heaven’s sake do so, and you will find no one who will cling to it with more tenacity than I.”

“Any other species or kind of supernatural appearance might admit of argument; but this, to my perception, is too wildly improbable—too much at variance with all we see and know of the operations of nature.”

“It is so. All that we have told ourselves repeatedly, and yet is all human reason at once struck down by the few brief words of—’We have seen it.’”

“I would doubt my eyesight.”

“One might; but many cannot be labouring under the same delusion.”

“My friend, I pray you, do not make me shudder at the supposition that such a dreadful thing as this is at all possible.”

“I am, believe me, Charles, most unwilling to oppress anyone with the knowledge of these evils; but you are so situated with us, that you ought to know, and you will clearly understand that you may, with perfect honour, now consider yourself free from all engagements you have entered into with Flora.”

“No, no! By Heaven, no!”

“Yes, Charles. Reflect upon the consequences now of a union with such a family.”

“Oh, Henry Bannerworth, can you suppose me so dead to all good feeling, so utterly lost to honourable impulses, as to eject from my heart her who has possession of it entirely, on such a ground as this?”

“You would be justified.”

“Coldly justified in prudence I might be. There are a thousand circumstances in which a man may be justified in a particular course of action, and that course yet may be neither honourable nor just. I love Flora; and were she tormented by the whole of the supernatural world, I should still love her. Nay, it becomes, then, a higher and a nobler duty on my part to stand between her and those evils, if possible.”

“Charles—Charles,” said Henry, “I cannot of course refuse to you my meed of praise and admiration for your generosity of feeling; but, remember, if we are compelled, despite all our feelings and all our predilections to the contrary, to give in to a belief in the existence of vampyres, why may we not at once receive as the truth all that is recorded of them?”

“To what do you allude?”

“To this. That one who has been visited by a vampyre, and whose blood has formed a horrible repast for such a being, becomes, after death, one of the dreadful race, and visits others in the same way.”

“Now this must be insanity,” cried Charles.

“It bears the aspect of it, indeed,” said Henry; “oh, that you could by some means satisfy yourself that I am mad.”

“There may be insanity in this family,” thought Charles, with such an exquisite pang of misery, that he groaned aloud.

“Already,” added Henry, mournfully, “already the blighting influence of the dreadful tale is upon you, Charles. Oh, let me add my advice to Flora’s entreaties. She loves you, and we all esteem you; fly, then, from us, and leave us to encounter our miseries alone. Fly from us, Charles Holland, and take with you our best wishes for happiness which you cannot know here.”

“Never,” cried Charles; “I devote my existence to Flora. I will not play the coward, and fly from one whom I love, on such grounds. I devote my life to her.”

Henry could not speak for emotion for several minutes, and when at length, in a faltering voice, he could utter some words, he said,—

“God of heaven, what happiness is marred by these horrible events? What have we all done to be the victims of such a dreadful act of vengeance?”

“Henry, do not talk in that way,” cried Charles. “Rather let us bend all our energies to overcoming the evil, than spend any time in useless lamentations. I cannot even yet give in to a belief in the existence of such a being as you say visited Flora.”

“But the evidences.”

“Look you here, Henry: until I am convinced that some things have happened which it is totally impossible could happen by any human means whatever, I will not ascribe them to supernatural influence.”

“But what human means, Charles, could produce what I have now narrated to you?”

“I do not know, just at present, but I will give the subject the most attentive consideration. Will you accommodate me here for a time?”

“You know you are as welcome here as if the house were your own, and all that it contains.”

“I believe so, most truly. You have no objection, I presume, to my conversing with Flora upon this strange subject?”

“Certainly not. Of course you will be careful to say nothing which can add to her fears.”

“I shall be most guarded, believe me. You say that your brother George, Mr. Chillingworth, yourself, and this Mr. Marchdale, have all been cognisant of the circumstances.”

“Yes—yes.”

“Then with the whole of them you permit me to hold free communication upon the subject?”

“Most certainly.”

“I will do so then. Keep up good heart, Henry, and this affair, which looks so full of terror at first sight, may yet be divested of some of its hideous aspect.”

“I am rejoiced, if anything can rejoice me now,” said Henry, “to see you view the subject with so much philosophy.”

“Why,” said Charles, “you made a remark of your own, which enabled me, viewing the matter in its very worst and most hideous aspect, to gather hope.”

“What was that?”

“You said, properly and naturally enough, that if ever we felt that there was such a weight of evidence in favour of a belief in the existence of vampyres that we are compelled to succumb to it, we might as well receive all the popular feelings and superstitions concerning them likewise.”

“I did. Where is the mind to pause, when once we open it to the reception of such things?”

“Well, then, if that be the case, we will watch this vampyre and catch it.”

“Catch it?”

“Yes; surely it can be caught; as I understand, this species of being is not like an apparition, that may be composed of thin air, and utterly impalpable to the human touch, but it consists of a revived corpse.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Then it is tangible and destructible. By Heaven! if ever I catch a glimpse of any such thing, it shall drag me to its home, be that where it may, or I will make it prisoner.”

“Oh, Charles! you know not the feeling of horror that will come across you when you do. You have no idea of how the warm blood will seem to curdle in your veins, and how you will be paralysed in every limb.”

“Did you feel so?”

“I did.”

“I will endeavour to make head against such feelings. The love of Flora shall enable me to vanquish them. Think you it will come again to-morrow?”

“I can have no thought the one way or the other.”

“It may. We must arrange among us all, Henry, some plan of watching which, without completely prostrating our health and strength, will always provide that one shall be up all night and on the alert.”

“It must be done.”

“Flora ought to sleep with the consciousness now that she has ever at hand some intrepid and well-armed protector, who is not only himself prepared to defend her, but who can in a moment give an alarm to us all, in case of necessity requiring it.”

“It would be a dreadful capture to make to seize a vampyre,” said Henry.

“Not at all; it would be a very desirable one. Being a corpse revived, it is capable of complete destruction, so as to render it no longer a scourge to any one.”

“Charles, Charles, are you jesting with me, or do you really give any credence to the story?”

“My dear friend, I always make it a rule to take things at their worst, and then I cannot be disappointed. I am content to reason upon this matter as if the fact of the existence of a vampyre were thoroughly established, and then to think upon what is best to be done about it.”

“You are right.”

“If it should turn out then that there is an error in the fact, well and good—we are all the better off; but if otherwise, we are prepared, and armed at all points.”

“Let it be so, then. It strikes me, Charles, that you will be the coolest and the calmest among us all on this emergency; but the hour now waxes late, I will get them to prepare a chamber for you, and at least to-night, after what has occurred already, I should think we can be under no apprehension.”

“Probably not. But, Henry, if you would allow me to sleep in that room where the portrait hangs of him whom you suppose to be the vampyre, I should prefer it.”

“Prefer it!”

“Yes; I am not one who courts danger for danger’s sake, but I would rather occupy that room, to see if the vampyre, who perhaps has a partiality for it, will pay me a visit.”

“As you please, Charles. You can have the apartment. It is in the same state as when occupied by Flora. Nothing has been, I believe, removed from it.”

“You will let me, then, while I remain here, call it my room?”

“Assuredly.”

This arrangement was accordingly made to the surprise of all the household, not one of whom would, indeed, have slept, or attempted to sleep there for any amount of reward. But Charles Holland had his own reasons for preferring that chamber, and he was conducted to it in the course of half an hour by Henry, who looked around it with a shudder, as he bade his young friend good night.

CHAPTER XII.

CHARLES HOLLAND’S SAD FEELINGS.—THE PORTRAIT.—THE OCCURRENCE OF THE NIGHT AT THE HALL.

Charles Holland wished to be alone, if ever any human being had wished fervently to be so. His thoughts were most fearfully oppressive.

The communication that had been made to him by Henry Bannerworth, had about it

too many strange, confirmatory circumstances to enable him to treat it, in his own mind, with the disrespect that some mere freak of a distracted and weak imagination would, most probably, have received from him.

He had found Flora in a state of excitement which could arise only from some such terrible cause as had been mentioned by her brother, and then he was, from an occurrence which certainly never could have entered into his calculations, asked to forego the bright dream of happiness which he had held so long and so rapturously to his heart.

How truly he found that the course of true love ran not smooth; and yet how little would any one have suspected that from such a cause as that which now oppressed his mind, any obstruction would arise.

Flora might have been fickle and false; he might have seen some other fairer face, which might have enchained his fancy, and woven for him a new heart's chain; death might have stepped between him and the realization of his fondest hopes; loss of fortune might have made the love cruel which would have yoked to its distresses a young and beautiful girl, reared in the lap of luxury, and who was not, even by those who loved her, suffered to feel, even in later years, any of the pinching necessities of the family.

All these things were possible—some of them were probable; and yet none of them had occurred. She loved him still; and he, although he had looked on many a fair face, and basked in the sunny smiles of beauty, had never for a moment forgotten her faith, or lost his devotion to his own dear English girl.

Fortune he had enough for both; death had not even threatened to rob him of the prize of such a noble and faithful heart which he had won. But a horrible superstition had arisen, which seemed to place at once an impassable abyss between them, and to say to him, in a voice of thundering denunciation,—

“Charles Holland, will you have a vampyre for your bride?”

The thought was terrific. He paced the gloomy chamber to and fro with rapid strides, until the idea came across his mind that by so doing he might not only be proclaiming to his kind entertainers how much he was mentally distracted, but he likewise might be seriously distracting them.

The moment this occurred to him he sat down, and was profoundly still for some time. He then glanced at the light which had been given to him, and he found himself almost unconsciously engaged in a mental calculation as to how long it would last him in the night.

Half ashamed, then, of such terrors, as such a consideration would seem to indicate, he was on the point of hastily extinguishing it, when he happened to cast his eyes on the now mysterious and highly interesting portrait in the panel.

The picture, as a picture, was well done, whether it was a correct likeness or not of the party whom it represented. It was one of those kind of portraits that seem so life-like,

that, as you look at them, they seem to return your gaze fully, and even to follow you with their eyes from place to place.

By candle-light such an effect is more likely to become striking and remarkable than by daylight; and now, as Charles Holland shaded his own eyes from the light, so as to cast its full radiance upon the portrait, he felt wonderfully interested in its life-like appearance.

“Here is true skill,” he said; “such as I have not before seen. How strangely this likeness of a man whom I never saw seems to gaze upon me.”

Unconsciously, too, he aided the effect, which he justly enough called life-like, by a slight movement of the candle, such as any one not blessed with nerves of iron would be sure to make, and such a movement made the face look as if it was inspired with vitality.

Charles remained looking at the portrait for a considerable period of time. He found a kind of fascination in it which prevented him from drawing his eyes away from it. It was not fear which induced him to continue gazing on it, but the circumstance that it was a likeness of the man who, after death, was supposed to have borrowed so new and so hideous an existence, combined with its artistic merits, chained him to the spot.

“I shall now,” he said, “know that face again, let me see it where I may, or under what circumstances I may. Each feature is now indelibly fixed upon my memory—I never can mistake it.”

He turned aside as he uttered these words, and as he did so his eyes fell upon a part of the ornamental frame which composed the edge of the panel, and which seemed to him to be of a different colour from the surrounding portion.

Curiosity and increased interest prompted him at once to make a closer inquiry into the matter; and, by a careful and diligent scrutiny, he was almost induced to come to the positive opinion, that in no very distant period in time past, the portrait had been removed from the place it occupied.

When once this idea, even vague and indistinct as it was, in consequence of the slight grounds he formed it on, had got possession of his mind, he felt most anxious to prove its verification or its fallacy.

He held the candle in a variety of situations, so that its light fell in different ways on the picture; and the more he examined it, the more he felt convinced that it must have been moved lately.

It would appear as if, in its removal, a piece of the old oaken carved framework of the panel had been accidentally broken off, which caused the new look of the fracture, and that this accident, from the nature of the broken bit of framing, could have occurred in any other way than from an actual or attempted removal of the picture, he felt was extremely unlikely.

He set down the candle on a chair near at hand, and tried if the panel was fast in its

place. Upon the very first touch, he felt convinced it was not so, and that it easily moved. How to get it out, though, presented a difficulty, and to get it out was tempting.

“Who knows,” he said to himself, “what may be behind it? This is an old baronial sort of hall, and the greater portion of it was, no doubt, built at a time when the construction of such places as hidden chambers and intricate staircases were, in all buildings of importance, considered a *disiderata*.”

That he should make some discovery behind the portrait, now became an idea that possessed him strongly, although he certainly had no definite grounds for really supposing that he should do so.

Perhaps the wish was more father to the thought than he, in the partial state of excitement he was in, really imagined; but so it was. He felt convinced that he should not be satisfied until he had removed that panel from the wall, and seen what was immediately behind it.

After the panel containing the picture had been placed where it was, it appeared that pieces of moulding had been inserted all around, which had had the effect of keeping it in its place, and it was a fracture of one of these pieces which had first called Charles Holland’s attention to the probability of the picture having been removed. That he should have to get two, at least, of the pieces of moulding away, before he could hope to remove the picture, was to him quite apparent, and he was considering how he should accomplish such a result, when he was suddenly startled by a knock at his chamber door.

Until that sudden demand for admission at his door came, he scarcely knew to what a nervous state he had worked himself up. It was an odd sort of tap—one only—a single tap, as if some one demanded admittance, and wished to awaken his attention with the least possible chance of disturbing any one else.

“Come in,” said Charles, for he knew he had not fastened his door; “come in.”

There was no reply, but after a moment’s pause, the same sort of low tap came again.

Again he cried “come in,” but, whoever it was, seemed determined that the door should be opened for him, and no movement was made from the outside. A third time the tap came, and Charles was very close to the door when he heard it, for with a noiseless step he had approached it intending to open it. The instant this third mysterious demand for admission came, he did open it wide. There was no one there! In an instant he crossed the threshold into the corridor, which ran right and left. A window at one end of it now sent in the moon’s rays, so that it was tolerably light, but he could see no one. Indeed, to look for any one, he felt sure was needless, for he had opened his chamber-door almost simultaneously with the last knock for admission.

“It is strange,” he said, as he lingered on the threshold of his room door for some moments; “my imagination could not so completely deceive me. There was most certainly a demand for admission.”

Slowly, then, he returned to his room again, and closed the door behind him.

“One thing is evident,” he said, “that if I am in this apartment to be subjected to these annoyances, I shall get no rest, which will soon exhaust me.”

This thought was a very provoking one, and the more he thought that he should ultimately find a necessity for giving up that chamber he had himself asked as a special favour to be allowed to occupy, the more vexed he became to think what construction might be put upon his conduct for so doing.

“They will all fancy me a coward,” he thought, “and that I dare not sleep here. They may not, of course, say so, but they will think that my appearing so bold was one of those acts of bravado which I have not courage to carry fairly out.”

Taking this view of the matter was just the way to enlist a young man’s pride in staying, under all circumstances, where he was, and, with a slight accession of colour, which, even although he was alone, would visit his cheeks, Charles Holland said aloud,—

“I will remain the occupant of this room come what may, happen what may. No terrors, real or unsubstantial, shall drive me from it: I will brave them all, and remain here to brave them.”

Tap came the knock at the door again, and now, with more an air of vexation than fear, Charles turned again towards it, and listened. Tap in another minute again succeeded, and much annoyed, he walked close to the door, and laid his hand upon the lock, ready to open it at the precise moment of another demand for admission being made.

He had not to wait long. In about half a minute it came again, and, simultaneously with the sound, the door flew open. There was no one to be seen; but, as he opened the door, he heard a strange sound in the corridor—a sound which scarcely could be called a groan, and scarcely a sigh, but seemed a compound of both, having the agony of the one combined with the sadness of the other. From what direction it came he could not at the moment decide, but he called out,—

“Who’s there? who’s there?”

The echo of his own voice alone answered him for a few moments, and then he heard a door open, and a voice, which he knew to be Henry’s, cried,—

“What is it? who speaks?”

“Henry,” said Charles.

“Yes—yes—yes.”

“I fear I have disturbed you.”

“You have been disturbed yourself, or you would not have done so. I shall be with

you in a moment.”

Henry closed his door before Charles Holland could tell him not to come to him, as he intended to do, for he felt ashamed to have, in a manner of speaking, summoned assistance for so trifling a cause of alarm as that to which he had been subjected. However, he could not go to Henry’s chamber to forbid him from coming to his, and, more vexed than before, he retired to his room again to await his coming.

He left the door open now, so that Henry Bannerworth, when he had got on some articles of dress, walked in at once, saying,—

“What has happened, Charles?”

“A mere trifle, Henry, concerning which I am ashamed you should have been at all disturbed.”

“Never mind that, I was wakeful.”

“I heard a door open, which kept me listening, but I could not decide which door it was till I heard your voice in the corridor.”

“Well, it was this door; and I opened it twice in consequence of the repeated taps for admission that came to it; some one has been knocking at it, and, when I go to it, lo! I can see nobody.”

“Indeed!”

“Such is the case.”

“You surprise me.”

“I am very sorry to have disturbed you, because, upon such a ground, I do not feel that I ought to have done so; and, when I called out in the corridor, I assure you it was with no such intention.”

“Do not regret it for a moment,” said Henry; “you were quite justified in making an alarm on such an occasion.”

“It’s strange enough, but still it may arise from some accidental cause; admitting, if we did but know it, of some ready enough explanation.”

“It may, certainly, but, after what has happened already, we may well suppose a mysterious connexion between any unusual sight or sound, and the fearful ones we have already seen.”

“Certainly we may.”

“How earnestly that strange portrait seems to look upon us, Charles.”

“It does, and I have been examining it carefully. It seems to have been removed

lately.”

“Removed!”

“Yes, I think, as far as I can judge, that it has been taken from its frame; I mean, that the panel on which it is painted has been taken out.”

“Indeed!”

“If you touch it you will find it loose, and, upon a close examination, you will perceive that a piece of the moulding which holds it in its place has been chipped off, which is done in such a place that I think it could only have arisen during the removal of the picture.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“I cannot, of course, take upon myself, Henry, to say precisely such is the case,” said Charles.

“But there is no one here to do so.”

“That I cannot say. Will you permit me and assist me to remove it? I have a great curiosity to know what is behind it.”

“If you have, I certainly will do so. We thought of taking it away altogether, but when Flora left this room the idea was given up as useless. Remain here a few moments, and I will endeavour to find something which shall assist us in its removal.”

Henry left the mysterious chamber in order to search in his own for some means of removing the frame-work of the picture, so that the panel would slip easily out, and while he was gone, Charles Holland continued gazing upon it with greater interest, if possible, than before.

In a few minutes Henry returned, and although what he had succeeded in finding were very inefficient implements for the purpose, yet with this aid the two young men set about the task.

It is said, and said truly enough, that “where there is a will there is a way,” and although the young men had no tools at all adapted for the purpose, they did succeed in removing the moulding from the sides of the panel, and then by a little tapping at one end of it, and using a knife as a lever at the other end of the panel, they got it fairly out.

Disappointment was all they got for their pains. On the other side there was nothing but a rough wooden wall, against which the finer and more nicely finished oak panelling of the chamber rested.

“There is no mystery here,” said Henry.

“None whatever,” said Charles, as he tapped the wall with his knuckles, and found it

all hard and sound. "We are foiled."

"We are indeed."

"I had a strange presentiment, now," added Charles, "that we should make some discovery that would repay us for our trouble. It appears, however, that such is not to be the case; for you see nothing presents itself to us but the most ordinary appearances."

"I perceive as much; and the panel itself, although of more than ordinary thickness, is, after all, but a bit of planed oak, and apparently fashioned for no other object than to paint the portrait on."

"True. Shall we replace it?"

Charles reluctantly assented, and the picture was replaced in its original position. We say Charles reluctantly assented, because, although he had now had ocular demonstration that there was really nothing behind the panel but the ordinary woodwork which might have been expected from the construction of the old house, yet he could not, even with such a fact staring him in the face, get rid entirely of the feeling that had come across him, to the effect that the picture had some mystery or another.

"You are not yet satisfied," said Henry, as he observed the doubtful look of Charles Holland's face.

"My dear friend," said Charles, "I will not deceive you. I am much disappointed that we have made no discovery behind that picture."

"Heaven knows we have mysteries enough in our family," said Henry.

Even as he spoke they were both startled by a strange clattering noise at the window, which was accompanied by a shrill, odd kind of shriek, which sounded fearful and preternatural on the night air.

"What is that?" said Charles.

"God only knows," said Henry.

The two young men naturally turned their earnest gaze in the direction of the window, which we have before remarked was one unprovided with shutters, and there, to their intense surprise, they saw, slowly rising up from the lower part of it, what appeared to be a human form. Henry would have dashed forward, but Charles restrained him, and drawing quickly from its case a large holster pistol, he levelled it carefully at the figure, saying in a whisper,—

"Henry, if I don't hit it, I will consent to forfeit my head."

He pulled the trigger—a loud report followed—the room was filled with smoke, and then all was still. A circumstance, however, had occurred, as a consequence of the

concussion of air produced by the discharge of the pistol, which neither of the young men had for the moment calculated upon, and that was the putting out of the only light they there had.

In spite of this circumstance, Charles, the moment he had discharged the pistol, dropped it and sprung forward to the window. But here he was perplexed, for he could not find the old fashioned, intricate fastening which held it shut, and he had to call to Henry,—

“Henry! For God’s sake open the window for me, Henry! The fastening of the window is known to you, but not to me. Open it for me.”

Thus called upon, Henry sprung forward, and by this time the report of the pistol had effectually alarmed the whole household. The flashing of lights from the corridor came into the room, and in another minute, just as Henry succeeded in getting the window wide open, and Charles Holland had made his way on to the balcony, both George Bannerworth and Mr. Marchdale entered the chamber, eager to know what had occurred. To their eager questions Henry replied,—

“Ask me not now;” and then calling to Charles, he said,—”Remain where you are, Charles, while I run down to the garden immediately beneath the balcony.”

“Yes—yes,” said Charles.

Henry made prodigious haste, and was in the garden immediately below the bay window in a wonderfully short space of time. He spoke to Charles, saying,—

“Will you now descend? I can see nothing here; but we will both make a search.”

George and Mr. Marchdale were both now in the balcony, and they would have descended likewise, but Henry said,—

“Do not all leave the house. God only knows, now, situated as we are, what might happen.”

“I will remain, then,” said George. “I have been sitting up to-night as the guard, and, therefore, may as well continue to do so.”

Marchdale and Charles Holland clambered over the balcony, and easily, from its insignificant height, dropped into the garden. The night was beautiful, and profoundly still. There was not a breath of air sufficient to stir a leaf on a tree, and the very flame of the candle which Charles had left burning in the balcony burnt clearly and steadily, being perfectly unruffled by any wind.

It cast a sufficient light close to the window to make everything very plainly visible, and it was evident at a glance that no object was there, although had that figure, which Charles shot at, and no doubt hit, been flesh and blood, it must have dropped immediately below.

As they looked up for a moment after a cursory examination of the ground, Charles

exclaimed,—

“Look at the window! As the light is now situated, you can see the hole made in one of the panes of glass by the passage of the bullet from my pistol.”

They did look, and there the clear, round hole, without any starring, which a bullet discharged close to a pane of glass will make in it, was clearly and plainly discernible.

“You must have hit him,” said Henry.

“One would think so,” said Charles; “for that was the exact place where the figure was.”

“And there is nothing here,” added Marchdale. “What can we think of these events—what resource has the mind against the most dreadful suppositions concerning them?”

Charles and Henry were both silent; in truth, they knew not what to think, and the words uttered by Marchdale were too strikingly true to dispute for a moment. They were lost in wonder.

“Human means against such an appearance as we saw to-night,” said Charles, “are evidently useless.”

“My dear young friend,” said Marchdale, with much emotion, as he grasped Henry Bannerworth’s hand, and the tears stood in his eyes as he did so,—“my dear young friend, these constant alarms will kill you. They will drive you, and all whose happiness you hold dear, distracted. You must control these dreadful feelings, and there is but one chance that I can see of getting now the better of these.”

“What is that?”

“By leaving this place for ever.”

“Alas! am I to be driven from the home of my ancestors from such a cause as this? And whither am I to fly? Where are we to find a refuge? To leave here will be at once to break up the establishment which is now held together, certainly upon the sufferance of creditors, but still to their advantage, inasmuch as I am doing what no one else would do, namely, paying away to within the scantiest pittance the whole proceeds of the estate that spreads around me.”

“Heed nothing but an escape from such horrors as seem to be accumulating now around you.”

“If I were sure that such a removal would bring with it such a corresponding advantage, I might, indeed, be induced to risk all to accomplish it.”

“As regards poor dear Flora,” said Mr. Marchdale, “I know not what to say, or what to think; she has been attacked by a vampyre, and after this mortal life shall have ended, it is dreadful to think there may be a possibility that she, with all her beauty, all her excellence and purity of mind, and all those virtues and qualities which should make

her the beloved of all, and which do, indeed, attach all hearts towards her, should become one of that dreadful tribe of beings who cling to existence by feeding, in the most dreadful manner, upon the life blood of others—oh, it is too dreadful to contemplate! Too horrible—too horrible!”

“Then wherefore speak of it?” said Charles, with some asperity. “Now, by the great God of Heaven, who sees all our hearts, I will not give in to such a horrible doctrine! I will not believe it; and were death itself my portion for my want of faith, I would this moment die in my disbelief of anything so truly fearful!”

“Oh, my young friend,” added Marchdale, “if anything could add to the pangs which all who love, and admire, and respect Flora Bannerworth must feel at the unhappy condition in which she is placed, it would be the noble nature of you, who, under happier auspices, would have been her guide through life, and the happy partner of her destiny.”

“As I will be still.”

“May Heaven forbid it! We are now among ourselves, and can talk freely upon such a subject. Mr. Charles Holland, if you wed, you would look forward to being blessed with children—those sweet ties which bind the sternest hearts to life with so exquisite a bondage. Oh, fancy, then, for a moment, the mother of your babes coming at the still hour of midnight to drain from their veins the very life blood she gave to them. To drive you and them mad with the expected horror of such visitations—to make your nights hideous—your days but so many hours of melancholy retrospection. Oh, you know not the world of terror, on the awful brink of which you stand, when you talk of making Flora Bannerworth a wife.”

“Peace! oh, peace!” said Henry.

“Nay, I know my words are unwelcome,” continued Mr. Marchdale. “It happens, unfortunately for human nature, that truth and some of our best and holiest feelings are too often at variance, and hold a sad contest—”

“I will hear no more of this,” cried Charles Holland.—“I will hear no more.”

“I have done,” said Mr. Marchdale.

“And ‘twere well you had not begun.”

“Nay, say not so. I have but done what I considered was a solemn duty.”

“Under that assumption of doing duty—a solemn duty—heedless of the feelings and the opinions of others,” said Charles, sarcastically, “more mischief is produced—more heart-burnings and anxieties caused, than by any other two causes of such mischievous results combined. I wish to hear no more of this.”

“Do not be angered with Mr. Marchdale, Charles,” said Henry. “He can have no motive but our welfare in what he says. We should not condemn a speaker because his words may not sound pleasant to our ears.”

“By Heaven!” said Charles, with animation, “I meant not to be illiberal; but I will not because I cannot see a man’s motives for active interference in the affairs of others, always be ready, merely on account of such ignorance, to jump to a conclusion that they must be estimable.”

“To-morrow, I leave this house,” said Marchdale.

“Leave us?” exclaimed Henry.

“Ay, for ever.”

“Nay, now, Mr. Marchdale, is this generous?”

“Am I treated generously by one who is your own guest, and towards whom I was willing to hold out the honest right hand of friendship?”

Henry turned to Charles Holland, saying,—

“Charles, I know your generous nature. Say you meant no offence to my mother’s old friend.”

“If to say I meant no offence,” said Charles, “is to say I meant no insult, I say it freely.”

“Enough,” cried Marchdale; “I am satisfied.”

“But do not,” added Charles, “draw me any more such pictures as the one you have already presented to my imagination, I beg of you. From the storehouse of my own fancy I can find quite enough to make me wretched, if I choose to be so; but again and again do I say I will not allow this monstrous superstition to tread me down, like the tread of a giant on a broken reed. I will contend against it while I have life to do so.”

“Bravely spoken.”

“And when I desert Flora Bannerworth, may Heaven, from that moment, desert me!”

“Charles!” cried Henry, with emotion, “dear Charles, my more than friend—brother of my heart—noble Charles!”

“Nay, Henry, I am not entitled to your praises. I were base indeed to be other than that which I purpose to be. Come weal or woe—come what may, I am the affianced husband of your sister, and she, and she only, can break asunder the tie that binds me to her.”

The Wizard's Revenge

It was not long after he was ousted from the papal throne that Shawtarz the Dwarf celebrated his wedding.

Precisely how he attained the post of supreme pontiff is something that has never yet been coherently or indeed convincingly explained. Many chroniclers suggest that the shadowy presence of his companions Dougal the Wanderer and Rumblebum the Wizard may in some way explain this unlikely turn of events. But it is known that after being forcibly ejected from the Vatican by an angry mob and sent into exile in remote western lands, Shawtarz bartered certain valuable items (procured from the papal palace during the final hours of his inglorious reign) to purchase for himself the estate of Startlyng Manor, from which he acquired the title "Lord Startlyng-Grope", and a most decorative young wife known as Callipygia.

But even those whose ill-gotten gains have provided contentment in their latter years may find themselves shamed, cuckolded and ultimately made to look an undignified old fool. The dwarf's attractive young wife, though happy to look forward to an adventurous future as a merry widow, found the waiting tiresome. Despite her husband's repeated attempts, on many nights, to alleviate her evident boredom, she regarded his approach as more than a little lame, and soon set out to find more stimulating and sustained sources of entertainment. Enter Dougal and Rumblebum.

So to speak.

Shawtarz the Dwarf's devoted companions - the blue eyed, flame-haired, rough-mannered highlander Dougal the Wanderer, a former freebooter, warrior, buccaneer, political opportunist and peripatetic rogue, and the pedantic, pederastic, discredited and indeed defrocked wizard known commonly as Rumblebum (for reasons obvious to even the most passing acquaintance) - soon took it upon themselves (entirely independently and with gallantry above and beyond the call of duty) to explore new and varied ways of entertaining their old comrade's sultry young spouse. Dougal's rude, crude and frequently lewd methods gained the most favour. Rumblebum's clumsy and conceited bumbling was hardly what Callipygia sought in a lover, but then again, Dougal himself had countless repulsive habits that frankly turned her stomach. Still, when stuck out in the sticks, a girl has to find some way to keep herself busy. Besides, anything was an improvement on the permanently muttering, scowling and rather smelly (but rich) old dwarf who officially shared her bed.

And so the illicit romances continued, with each of Callipygia's gallants smugly assured of her steadfast devotion to their infinitely superior charms. The muttering old dwarf strode the muddy streets of the village with his young wife in tow, feigning to ignore the gazes and whispers of passing farmhands and fishwives, attributing them merely to rumours of his immense wealth and fortune, rather than common knowledge of his multiple cuckoldry. Dougal the Wanderer, content at long last to put aside his picaresque habits for a life of ease and minor misadventure, gleefully abused his long-standing friendship with Shawtarz, pleasuring his wife in the dwarf's own bed whenever suitable occasion arose, failing to suspect that whenever his itchy feet took him off into the wilderness, Callipygia would resort to sharing her bed with the

tall, thin, fussy wizard.

The three comrades-in-arms were soon more content than ever they had been in a long life of desperate wandering and adventuring, each happy that they had finally got one over on the other two. Shawtarz revelled in his lordly status, Dougal spent much of his spare time smugly reflecting on his exceptional cunning, while Rumblebum felt glad that at least he was occasionally getting his end away.

But Dougal got greedy. One afternoon Lord Startlyng-Grope was away inspecting his business interests in the nearby small town. Dougal lay in bed with the voluptuous young Callipygia, sighing morosely.

‘What’s up with you now?’ she snapped finally. ‘Believe me; all men have that problem from time to time - except my husband, who has it constantly. Leave off with your sighing and find other ways to satisfy me. You’re a good man with your hands, aren’t you?’

‘Och, Callipygia ma love,’ Dougal said in what he regarded as romantic tones, ‘it’s not that. It’s just that I’m sick of all this having ta hide in wardrobes and such, whenever Shawtarz comes back early. Can we no’ find some way of keeping him busy so we can really get it on without worrying? I’m sure I wouldn’t have ma wee problems if I didna worry so much,’ he added.

Callipygia looked thoughtful.

‘These snatched kisses and brief beddings have a certain spice to them,’ she reflected. ‘But it would be nice to spend a long afternoon or evening together without fear of the old fool bursting in on us unannounced. We need some way of ensuring he’s kept tied up...’

‘Och, I’ve got some bandit friends up in the hills,’ Dougal confessed, ‘and they would gladly keep him tied up long enough. Except they’d probably insist on some kind of ransom to set him free again.’

‘I’m paying no ransoms, highlander,’ Callipygia said fiercely. ‘I want this place to be worth as much as possible when the little old bastard pops off to join the little old bastard in the sky. No, we need to think of something that will keep him out of the way, but nothing so drastic.’

She stared up at the rafters, and looked thoughtful.

‘I’ve got it!’ she exclaimed after a while. Dougal scowled.

‘Och, not again,’ he groaned. ‘We’ll both have ta visit the apothecary this time, and you know how folk will talk...’

‘Shut up,’ she rapped impatiently. ‘I mean I’ve got an idea. Listen to me.’

As she explained the audacious scheme, Dougal’s cold blue eyes grew wider and wider with wonder.

One evening, a week or two later, Shawtarz was sitting down to supper when a clamour from the street made him raise his grizzled head in irritation.

‘What’s all that racket?’ he muttered at his wife. ‘Go and see, go and see my dear. I can’t eat my supper with some fool shouting his felching head off out in the street. Go and see what it is, and set Dougal on him if he looks like he’s got anything to do with the Vatican.’

Demurely, Callipygia rose and gracefully crossed the floor to the window. She looked out at the narrow cobbled street, and smiled a secret smile. Before the house stood a figure in the garb of a wandering friar.

‘It’s a friar!’ she exclaimed.

‘Oh fuckin’ hell,’ Shawtarz muttered, eyes wide with paranoia. ‘Those choirboy-bugging cardinals are after me again. It’s the Vatican Assassination Squad! They’ve tracked me down! I’ll have to move to another town. Go and find that highlander. I don’t know where he is today. Must be off after the sheep again...’

‘I don’t think the friar has anything to do with the new Pope,’ Callipygia said soothingly, cursing her stupidity for choosing an ecclesiastical cover for Dougal. ‘From the way he’s talking I’m sure he’s from one of those new heretical sects who spend all their time protesting about things. Listen!’

She opened the mullion-glazed window, and the voice from the street grew clearer.

‘Doom! Doom is upon us! As prophesied in the Good Book! The Flood is upon us once more!’

‘The Flood?’ Shawtarz yelped. ‘What is this rubbish?’ His eyes were darting back and forth in a way Callipygia knew signified extreme terror. She smiled to herself. Yes, she knew her husband and his superstitious fears well. She might have made a mistake having Dougal dress up as a friar, but the story she’d given him was perfect.

‘Oh, my husband!’ she exclaimed, rushing to his side. ‘The Flood! God must have sent it to punish us for our sins! I’m sure he’ll spare those without sin, but all the sinners in the world will be swept away and drowned! All those who buy and sell religious dignities, all those prone to sexual perversion...’

‘Oh bugger,’ Shawtarz gulped. Both sins were ones he practiced quite frequently when he had the chance. ‘Just when I was getting to like life, too!’

‘Only one solution exists!’ came the voice from the street. ‘Only I know how the Flood may be escaped.’

Shawtarz sat up. He flailed desperately at his wife.

‘Quick, out into the street,’ he said. ‘Go get that friar and bring him here! Hurry, woman!’

Thrusting her shoulders back, Callipygia flounced to the street door. She flung it open, and called;

‘Oh, friar! Friar, please enter our house!’

The “friar” was almost unrecognisable, even to Callipygia, who had designed the disguise. He wore a long robe of sackcloth, and a fairly-convincing false beard

covered much of his face. At Callipygia's cry, he approached.

'Och, I'll gladly enter something else,' Dougal said, dropping his assumed accent. Callipygia cuffed him and pushed him towards the house.

'Keep up the act, you fool,' she hissed. 'You've already got him half-believing you. Now come in and do as I told you.'

'Aye..., er, I mean, yes,' the friar was saying a little later. 'I got the message in a dream, as I slept in a cave in the hills wearing only my hair shirt. I heard an angelic voice that said unto me, Go! and spread the word! The Flood will come again, this very evening, for God once more looks with displeasure upon the sinfulness of Mankind and wishes to wipe it out entirely. Find those who would escape his wrath and tell them...' He paused dramatically.

'Tell them what?' Shawtarz leered impatiently, 'go on, tell them what?'

'Well,' said the friar slowly. 'What the angel told me to say was that if you want to escape the Flood, get a wooden vessel big enough to lie in comfortably, such as this basket here' - he indicated a large bread-basket, big enough to fit the little old man - 'attach a rope to it, and have yourself winched up to the rafters. Then, when the Flood comes, all you need do is free the rope, and you'll float outside, alive and well.'

The dwarf stared at him like a shrew that has just spotted an impending barn-owl. He leapt up suddenly.

'This evening? Well, what are we waiting for?' he shouted. 'Where's that oaf Dougal? He should be here to help. Go your way, friar, with my thanks,' - he thrust a small coin into the hand of the "friar", who stared at it in disgust - 'Wife! You must help me. Get a rope from the stables!'

Callipygia and Dougal rushed from the room. As they parted in the hallway, Callipygia whispered;

'Wait outside for a quarter of an hour, then come back in. I'll leave the window open.'

'Aye!' Dougal replied eagerly, and he rushed out, slamming the front door audibly.

'Good!' shouted Shawtarz. 'Now tie it to the basket. Get your arse moving, woman!'

Gracefully, storing up his insults for later retribution, Callipygia did as she was directed, tying one end of the rope to the handle of the basket, and slinging the other over the main rafter. Lord Startlyng-Grope jumped in.

'Go on, then!' he barked. 'The Flood could come any time. This evening, the friar said!'

Smiling blandly, his wife heaved on the rope, winching the dwarf up to the level of the rafters.

'Now tie the rope to the beam, dear,' she called. 'And don't undo it until you know that the Flood has come.'

Shawtarz peered grumpily over the edge, and blanched at the height. His face

disappeared from view. A hand came out and grabbed the rope, then tied it hurriedly round the beam.

Smiling once more, his wife let go of the rope, and hurried to the nearby bed. Dougal was just climbing in through the nearby window. She grinned lazily like a cat, and slipped off her kirtle.

Rumblebum the Wizard was feeling in a most jolly mood that evening. He'd spent much of the day poring over musty old books detailing the occult activities of certain succubae and incubi, and the imaginative infernal punishments reserved for those guilty of willing congress with such demons. It had put him very much in the mood for a visit to his young ladyfriend and, ahem! wife of his old adventuring companion Shawtarz the Dwarf. It so happened that, rather cleverly, he had employed his not inconsiderable charms to secure a rather sizeable place in the gel's affections. Rather more sizeable than her husband, who - ho, ho - was apparently still pretty small when it came to the most vital of his vital statistics. Rumblebum, being something of a gentleman, had realised the poor lass required some well-deserved attention from a handsome devil with a wide knowledge of the world and an extensive understanding of the arcane arts. And of course, hung like a bull elephant. Not that he wanted to brag unduly.

As it happened, his habitual post-prandial stroll round the village chanced to bring him into the close proximity of the abode of Mr. Shawtarz the former Pope and all-round small person. Indeed, purely by coincidence, he found himself passing the window of a certain young lady's boudoir. Well, it would have been ungallant to pass without stopping to see if she was in, and perhaps requiring some expert attention from a genuine wizard who might not be as young as he used to be, but could still keep a woman happy.

The room within was dark, and he could see nothing.

'Oh, darling!' he said in a trilling whisper. 'Oh, darling! Are you there? Your favourite wizard is passing!'

'Oh, fie!' Callipygia hissed, lying in the bed with Dougal's hirsute arms around her. 'What's he doing here?'

'Och, I dunno,' rumbled Dougal with annoyance and suspicion. 'Hey, you're not shagging him as well, are you?'

'No, of course not,' Callipygia said innocently.

'Oh, darling!' Rumblebum carolled again.

'Fuckin' wanker,' Dougal muttered. 'Get rid of him, can't you?'

Callipygia giggled suddenly as an idea struck her. She prodded Dougal.

'I'll get rid of him,' she sniggered. 'You just stay there.'

She slipped out of bed, and padded across the dark room to the window. Rumblebum's silhouetted form was barely visible in the dark yard beyond.

'Here I am, dear,' she said loudly. 'Give a girl a kiss!'

Lazing in bed, Dougal watched her pale form as she turned round and thrust her rear towards the fuzzy shape of Rumblebum.

'Oh, darling!' he said in myopic adoration. He leaned forward.

Dougal heard a squishy, squelching sound, which cut off abruptly.

Rumblebum was furious at such horseplay, but he was man enough to hide it.

'Oh, darling,' he said icily. 'You seem to have grown a beard!'

From within, all he could hear was peals of giggles followed by a loud, highland guffaw. His face twitched. So that was it, was it? She'd deserted him for that hairy oaf, Dougal. Well, he'd get his own back, never you mind. He was cleverer than these fools!

With a pompous expression, the wizard strutted off towards the nearby smithy.

Dougal and Callipygia sniggered together helpless.

'Och, you've grown a beard!' Dougal mimicked. 'Aboot time you started shaving, wench!'

'Ooh, but hush!' Callipygia hissed urgently. 'I think my husband's nodding off up there,' - she indicated the rafters, where Shawtarz's basket still hung - 'but we don't want him to know what's going on, do we?'

'Och, you're right,' Dougal said, and went some way towards stopping her mouth.

Less than a minute had passed, however, before they were interrupted again.

'Oh, darling!' came Rumblebum's voice from the window, 'I'm back for more kisses!'

Callipygia sat up, and snorted.

'What, is the idiot a glutton for punishment?' she muttered. 'He can use his tongue this time!'

Dougal laughed, and seized her wrist as she went to get up.

'No, let me do it this time!' he chortled. 'It's my go!'

Callipygia shrugged, and lay back as Dougal hurried over to the window, grinning.

'Oh, darling!' Rumblebum carolled another time. He glanced anxiously at the red-hot ploughshare he was holding on the end of a pair of tongs. He'd snatched it hurriedly from the smithy over the road, but now he was beginning to feel silly. Was his trick

not going to work? He'd feel a right jessie if he didn't get his due revenge.

'Oh darling!' he called insistently. A dim white oval appeared in the window. Rumblebum sneered. He wouldn't get fooled again! It might be dark, but he could tell a hawk from a handsaw or an arse from an elbow - or even from a face.

Vindictively, he thrust the red-hot ploughshare into the proffered pair of buttocks.

It was later rumoured that Dougal's stentorian bellow caused earthquakes and tidal waves on the hitherto unsuspected far side of the world, and transformed hordes of inscrutable steppe nomads into quivering jelly. In Rome, the new Pope turned uneasily in his opulent bed, muttering in his sleep. It was a shout to strike fear into the hearts of all but the fearless, but their suffering was as nothing to that of the highlander.

Callipygia watched in bewilderment as Dougal's silhouetted shape hopped up and down before the window. What was the matter with him? Did the oaf want to give the game away?

Sure enough, she heard her husband's quavering, panic-filled voice from above.

'What is it, my dear?' he cried. 'Is it the Flood come at last?'

Before Callipygia could speak, Dougal gave an agonised shout.

'Water!' he bellowed as smoke billowed from his scorched arse. 'Water!!!'

'Water?' Shawtarz echoed. He quickly untied the rope.

Edison's Conquest of Mars - Part Four

Chapter X.

At first we rose to a still greater height, in order more effectually to escape the watchful eyes of our enemies, and then, after having moved rapidly several hundred miles toward the west, we dropped down again within easy eyeshot of the surface of the planet, and commenced our inspection.

When we originally reached Mars, as I have related, it was at a point in its southern hemisphere, in latitude 45 degrees south, and longitude 75 degrees east, that we first closely approached its surface. Underneath us was the land called "Hellas," and it was over this land of Hellas that the Martian air fleet had suddenly made its appearance.

Our westward motion, while at a great height above the planet, had brought us over another oval-shaped land called "Noachia," surrounded by the dark ocean, the "Mare Erytraeum." Now approaching nearer the surface our course was changed so as to carry us toward the equator of Mars.

We passed over the curious, half-drowned continent known to terrestrial astronomers as the Region of Deucalion, then across another sea, or gulf, until we found ourselves floating, at a height of perhaps five miles, above a great continental land, at least three thousand miles broad from east to west, and which I immediately recognized as that to which astronomers had given the various names of "Aeria," "Edom," "Arabia," and "Eden."

Here the spectacle became of breathless interest.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!"

"Who could have believed it!"

Such were the exclamations heard on all sides.

When at first we were suspended above Hellas, looking toward the north, the northeast and the northwest, we had seen at a distance some of these great red regions, and had perceived the curious network of canals by which they were intersected. But that was a far-off and imperfect view.

Now, when we were near at hand and straight above one of these singular lands, the magnificence of the panorama surpassed belief.

From the earth about a dozen of the principal canals crossing the continent beneath us had been perceived, but we saw hundreds, nay, thousands of them!

It was a double system, intended both for irrigation and for protection, and far more marvellous in its completeness than the boldest speculative minds among our

astronomers had ever dared to imagine.

“Ha! that’s what I always said,” exclaimed a veteran from one of our great observatories. “Mars is red because its soil and vegetation are red.”

And certainly appearances indicated that he was right.

There were no green trees, and there was no green grass. Both were red, not of a uniform red tint, but presenting an immense variety of shades which produced a most brilliant effect, fairly dazzling our eyes.

But what trees! And what grass! And what flowers!

Gigantic Vegetation.

Our telescopes showed that even the smaller trees must be 200 or 300 feet in height, and there were forests of giants, whose average height was evidently at least 1,000 feet.

“That’s all right,” exclaimed the enthusiast I have just quoted. “I knew it would be so. The trees are big, for the same reason that the men are, because the planet is small, and they can grow big without becoming too heavy to stand.”

Flashing in the sun on all sides were the roofs of metallic buildings, which were evidently the only kind of edifices that Mars possessed. At any rate, if stone or wood were employed in their construction both were completely covered with metallic plates.

This added immensely to the warlike aspect of the planet. For warlike it was. Everywhere we recognized fortified stations, glittering with an array of the polished knobs of the lightning machines, such as we had seen in the land of Hellas.

From the land of Edom, directly over the equator of the planet, we turned our faces westward, and, skirting the Mare Erytraeum, arrived above the place where the broad canal known as the Indus empties into the sea.

Before us, and stretching away toward the northwest, now lay the continent of Chryse, a vast red land, oval in outline, and surrounded and crossed by innumerable canals. Chryse was not less than 1,600 miles across, and it, too, evidently swarmed with giant inhabitants.

But the shadow of night lay upon the greater portion of the land of Chryse. In our rapid motion westward we had out-stripped the sun and had now arrived at a point where day and night met upon the surface of the planet beneath us.

Behind all was brilliant with sunshine, but before us the face of Mars gradually disappeared in the deepening gloom. Through the darkness, far away, we could behold magnificent beams of electric light darting across the curtain of night, and evidently serving to illuminate towns and cities that lay beneath.

We pushed on into the night for two or three hundred miles over that part of the continent of Chryse whose inhabitants were doubtless enjoying the deep sleep that accompanies the dark hours immediately preceding the dawn. Still everywhere splendid clusters of light lay like fallen constellations upon the ground, indicating the sites of great towns, which, like those of the earth, never sleep.

But this scene, although weird and beautiful, could give us little of the kind of information we were in search of.

Accordingly it was resolved to turn back eastward until we had arrived in the twilight space separating day and night, and then hover over the planet at that point, allowing it to turn beneath us so that, as we looked down, we should see in succession the entire circuit of the globe of Mars while it rolled under our eyes.

The rotation of Mars on its axis is performed in a period very little longer than that of the earth's rotation, so that the length of the day and night in the world of Mars is only some forty minutes longer than their length upon the earth.

In thus remaining suspended over the planet, on the line of daybreak, so to speak, we believed that we should be peculiarly safe from detection by the eyes of the inhabitants. Even astronomers are not likely to be wide awake just at the peep of dawn. Almost all of the inhabitants, we confidently believed, would still be sound asleep upon that part of the planet passing directly beneath us, and those who were awake would not be likely to watch for unexpected appearances in the sky.

Besides, our height was so great that notwithstanding the numbers of the squadron, we could not easily be seen from the surface of the planet, and if seen at all we might be mistaken for high-flying birds.

Mars Passes Below Us.

Here we remained then through the entire course of twenty-four hours and saw in succession as they passed from night into day beneath our feet the land of Chryse, the great continent of Tharsis, the curious region of intersecting canals which puzzled astronomers on the earth had named the "Gordian Knot," the continental lands of Memnonia, Amazonia and Aeolia, the mysterious centre where hundreds of vast canals came together from every direction, called the Trivium Charontis; the vast circle of Elysium, a thousand miles across, and completely surrounded by a broad green canal; the continent of Libya, which, as I remembered, had been half covered by a tremendous inundation whose effects were visible from the earth in the year 1889, and finally the long, dark sea of the Syrtis Major, lying directly south of the land of Hellas.

The excitement and interest which we all experienced were so great that not one of us took a wink of sleep during the entire twenty-four hours of our marvellous watch.

There are one or two things of special interest amid the multitude of wonderful observations that we made which I must mention here on account of their connection with the important events that followed soon after.

Just west of the land of Chryse we saw the smaller land of Ophir, in the midst of which is a singular spot called the Juventae Fons, and this Fountain of Youth, as our astronomers, by a sort of prophetic inspiration, had named it, proved later to be one of the most incredible marvels on the planet Mars.

Further to the west, and north from the great continent of Tharsis, we beheld the immense oval-shaped land of Thaumasia containing in its centre the celebrated "Lake of the Sun," a circular body of water not less than 500 miles in diameter, with dozens of great canals running away from it like the spokes of a wheel in every direction, thus connecting it with the ocean which surrounds it on the south and east, and with the still larger canals that encircle it toward the north and west.

This Lake of the Sun came to play a great part in our subsequent adventures. It was evident to us from the beginning that it was the chief centre of population on the planet. It lies in latitude 25 degrees South and longitude about 90 degrees west.

Completing the Circuit.

Having completed the circuit of the Martian globe, we were moved by the same feeling which every discoverer of new lands experiences, and immediately returned to our original place above the land of Hellas, because since that was the first part of Mars that we had seen, we felt a greater degree of familiarity with it than with any other portion of the planet, and there, in a certain sense, we felt "at home."

But, as it proved, our enemies were on the watch for us there. We had almost forgotten them, so absorbed were we by the great spectacles that had been unrolling themselves beneath our feet.

We ought, of course, to have been a little more cautious in approaching the place where they first caught sight of us, since we might have known that they would remain on the watch near that spot.

But at any rate they had seen us, and it was now too late to think of taking them again by surprise.

They on their part had a surprise in store for us, which was greater than any we had yet experienced.

We saw their ships assembling once more far down in the atmosphere beneath us, and we thought we could detect evidences of something unusual going on upon the surface of the planet.

Suddenly from the ships, and from various points on the ground beneath, there rose high in the air, and carried by invisible currents in every direction, immense volumes of black smoke, or vapor, which blotted out of sight everything below them!

The All-Powerful War-Cloud of the Martians.

South, north, west and east, the curtain of blackness rapidly spread, until the whole face of the planet as far as our eyes could reach, and the airships thronging under us,

were all concealed from sight!

Mars had played the game of the cuttlefish, which, when pursued by its enemies, darkens the water behind it by a sudden outgush of inky fluid, and thus escapes the eye of its foe.

The Great Smoke Cloud.

Our Warriors Find the Martians to Be Foes Worth Fearing.

The eyes of man had never beheld such a spectacle!

Where a few minutes before the sunny face of a beautiful and populous planet had been shining beneath us, there was now to be seen nothing but black, billowing clouds, swelling up everywhere like the mouse-colored smoke that pours from a great transatlantic liner when fresh coal has just been heaped upon her fires.

In some places the smoke spouted upward in huge jets to the height of several miles; elsewhere it eddied in vast whirlpools of inky blackness.

Not a glimpse of the hidden world beneath was anywhere to be seen.

Mars Wears Its War Mask.

Mars had put on its war mask, and fearful indeed was the aspect of it!

After the first pause of surprise the squadron quickly backed away into the sky, rising rapidly, because, from one of the swirling eddies beneath us the smoke began suddenly to pile itself up in an enormous aerial mountain, whose peaks shot higher and higher, with apparently increasing velocity, until they seemed about to engulf us with their tumbling ebon masses.

Unaware what the nature of this mysterious smoke might be, and fearing it was something more than a shield for the planet, and might be destructive to life, we fled before it, as before the onward sweep of a pestilence.

Directly underneath the flagship, one of the aspiring smoke peaks grew with most portentous swiftness, and, notwithstanding all our efforts, in a little while it had enveloped us.

The Stifling Smoke.

Several of us were standing on the deck of the electrical ship. We were almost stifled by the smoke, and were compelled to take refuge within the car, where, until the electric lights had been turned on, darkness so black that it oppressed the strained eyeballs prevailed.

But in this brief experience, terrifying though it was, we had learned one thing. The smoke would kill by strangulation, but evidently there was nothing especially

poisonous in its nature. This fact might be of use to us in our subsequent proceedings.

“This spoils our plans,” said the commander. “There is no use of remaining here for the present; let us see how far this thing extends.”

At first we rose straight away to a height of 200 or 300 miles, thus passing entirely beyond the sensible limits of the atmosphere, and far above the highest point that the smoke could reach.

From this commanding point of view our line of sight extended to an immense distance over the surface of Mars in all directions. Everywhere the same appearance; the whole planet was evidently covered with the smoke.

A Wonderful System.

A complete telegraphic system evidently connected all the strategic points upon Mars, so that, at a signal from the central station, the wonderful curtain could be instantaneously drawn over the entire face of the planet.

In order to make certain that no part of Mars remained uncovered, we dropped down again nearer to the upper level of the smoke clouds, and then completely circumnavigated the planet. It was thought possible that on the night side no smoke would be found and that it would be practicable for us to make a descent there.

But when we had arrived on that side of Mars which was turned away from the sun, we no longer saw beneath us, as we had done on our previous visit to the night hemisphere of the planet, brilliant groups and clusters of electric lights beneath us. All was dark.

In fact, so completely did the great shell of smoke conceal the planet that the place occupied by the latter seemed to be simply a vast black hole in the firmament.

The sun was hidden behind it, and so dense was the smoke that even the solar rays were unable to penetrate it, and consequently there was no atmospheric halo visible around the concealed planet.

All the sky around was filled with stars, but their countless host suddenly disappeared when our eyes turned in the direction of Mars. The great black globe blotted them out without being visible itself.

Attempts to Attack Baffled.

“Apparently we can do nothing here,” said Mr. Edison. “Let us return to the daylight side.”

When we had arrived near the point where we had been when the wonderful phenomenon first made its appearance, we paused, and then, at the suggestion of one of the chemists, dropped close to the surface of the smoke curtain which had now settled down into comparative quiescence, in order that we might examine it a little

more critically.

The flagship was driven into the smoke cloud so deeply that for a minute we were again enveloped in night. A quantity of the smoke was entrapped in a glass jar.

Examining the Smoke.

Rising again into the sunlight, the chemists began an examination of the constitution of the smoke. They were unable to determine its precise character, but they found that its density was astonishingly slight. This accounted for the rapidity with which it had risen, and the great height which it had attained in the comparatively light atmosphere of Mars.

“It is evident,” said one of the chemists, “that this smoke does not extend down to the surface of the planet. From what the astronomers say as to the density of the air on Mars, it is probable that a clear space of at least a mile in height exists between the surface of Mars and the lower limit of the smoke curtain. Just how deep the latter is we can only determine by experiment, but it would not be surprising if the thickness of this great blanket which Mars has thrown around itself should prove to be a quarter or half a mile.”

“Anyhow,” said one of the United States army officers, “they have dodged out of sight, and I don’t see why we should not dodge in and get at them. If there is clear air under the smoke, as you think, why couldn’t the ships dart down through the curtain and come to a close tackle with the Martians?”

“It would not do at all,” said the commander. “We might simply run ourselves into an ambush. No; we must stay outside, and if possible fight them from here.”

Strategic Measures Employed.

“They can’t keep this thing up forever,” said the officer. “Perhaps the smoke will clear off after a while, and then we will have a chance.”

“Not much hope of that, I am afraid,” said the chemist who had originally spoken. “This smoke could remain floating in the atmosphere for weeks, and the only wonder to me is how they ever expect to get rid of it, when they think their enemies have gone and they want some sunshine again.”

“All that is mere speculation,” said Mr. Edison; “let us get at something practical. We must do one of two things: either attack them shielded as they are, or wait until the smoke has cleared away. The only other alternative, that of plunging blindly down through the curtain, is at present not to be thought of.”

“I am afraid we couldn’t stand a very long siege ourselves,” suddenly remarked the chief commissary of the expedition, who was one of the members of the flagship’s company.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Mr. Edison sharply, turning to him.

“Well, sir, you see,” said the commissary, stammering, “our provisions wouldn’t hold out.”

“Wouldn’t hold out?” exclaimed Mr. Edison, in astonishment, “why, we have compressed and prepared provisions enough to last this squadron for three years.”

“We had, sir, when we left the earth,” said the commissary, in apparent distress, “but I am sorry to say that something has happened.”

“Something has happened! Explain yourself!”

Accident to the Stores.

“I don’t know what it is, but on inspecting some of the compressed stores, a short time ago, I found that a large number of them were destroyed, whether through leakage of air, or what, I am unable to say. I sent to inquire as to the condition of the stores in the other ships in the squadron and I found that a similar condition of things prevailed there.”

“The fact is,” continued the commissary, “we have only provisions enough, in proper condition, for about ten days’ consumption.”

“After that we shall have to forage on the country, then,” said the army officer.

“Why did you not report this before?” demanded Mr. Edison.

“Because, sir,” was the reply, “the discovery was not made until after we arrived close to Mars, and since then there has been so much excitement that I have hardly had time to make an investigation and find out what the precise condition of affairs is; besides, I thought we should land upon the planet and then we would be able to renew our supplies.”

I closely watched Mr. Edison’s expression in order to see how this most alarming news would affect him. Although he fully comprehended its fearful significance, he did not lose his self-command.

We Must Act Quickly.

“Well, well,” he said, “then it will become necessary for us to act quickly. Evidently we cannot wait for the smoke to clear off, even if there were any hope of its clearing. We must get down on Mars now, having conquered it first if possible, but anyway we must get down there, in order to avoid starvation.”

“It is very lucky,” he continued, “that we have ten days’ supply left. A great deal can be done in ten days.”

A few hours after this the commander called me aside, and said:

“I have thought it all out. I am going to reconstruct some of our disintegrators, so as to increase their range and their power. Then I am going to have some of the

astronomers of the expedition locate for me the most vulnerable points upon the planet, where the population is densest and a hard blow would have the most effect, and I am going to pound away at them, through the smoke, and see whether we cannot draw them out of their shell.”

A Plan Arranged.

With his expert assistants Mr. Edison set to work at once to transform a number of the disintegrators into still more formidable engines of the same description. One of these new weapons having been distributed to each of the members of the squadron, the next problem was to decide where to strike.

When we first examined the surface of the planet it will be remembered that we had regarded the Lake of the Sun and its environs as being the very focus of the planet. While it might also be a strong point of defence, yet an effective blow struck there would go to the enemy's heart and be more likely to bring the Martians promptly to terms than anything else.

The first thing, then, was to locate the Lake of the Sun on the smoke-hidden surface of the planet beneath us. This was a problem that the astronomers could readily solve.

Fortunately, in the flagship itself there was one of the star-gazing gentlemen who had made a specialty of the study of Mars. That planet, as I have already explained, was now in opposition to the earth. The astronomer had records in his pocket which enabled him, by a brief calculation, to say just when the Lake of the Sun would be on the meridian of Mars as seen from the earth. Our chronometers still kept terrestrial time; we knew the exact number of days and hours that had elapsed since we had departed, and so it was possible by placing ourselves in a line between the earth and Mars to be practically in the situation of an astronomer in his observatory at home.

Then it was only necessary to wait for the hour when the Lake of the Sun would be upon the meridian of Mars in order to be certain what the true direction of the latter from the flagship was.

Having thus located the heart of our foe behind its shield of darkness, we prepared to strike.

The Smoke Must Be Shattered.

“I have ascertained,” said Mr. Edison, “the vibration period of the smoke, so that it will be easy for us to shatter it into invisible atoms. You will see that every stroke of the disintegrators will open a hole through the black curtain. If their field of destruction could be made wide enough, we might in that manner clear away the entire covering of smoke, but all that we shall really be able to do will be to puncture it with holes, which will, perhaps, enable us to catch glimpses of the surface beneath. In that manner we may be able more effectually to concentrate our fire upon the most vulnerable points.”

The Blow—And Its Effect.

Everything being prepared, and the entire squadron having assembled to watch the effect of the opening blow and be ready to follow it up, Mr. Edison himself poised one of the new disintegrators, which was too large to be carried in the hand, and, following the direction indicated by the calculations of the astronomers, launched the vibratory discharge into the ocean of blackness beneath.

A Terrible Encounter.

The Martians and Our Warriors Fight a Battle to the Death.

Instantly there opened beneath us a huge well-shaped hole, from which the black clouds rolled violently back in every direction.

Through this opening we saw the gleam of brilliant lights beneath.

We had made a hit.

“It is the Lake of the Sun!” shouted the astronomer who furnished the calculation by means of which its position had been discovered.

And, indeed, it was the Lake of the Sun. While the opening in the clouds made by the discharge was not wide, yet it sufficed to give us a view of a portion of the curving shore of the lake, which was ablaze with electric lights.

Whether our shot had done any damage, beyond making the circular opening in the cloud curtain, we could not tell, for almost immediately the surrounding black smoke masses billowed in to fill up the hole.

But in the brief glimpse we had caught sight of two or three large air ships hovering in space above that part of the Lake of the Sun and its bordering city which we had beheld. It seemed to me in the brief glance I had that one ship had been touched by the discharge and was wandering in an erratic manner. But the clouds closed in so rapidly that I not be certain.

Penetrating the Cloud.

Anyhow, we had demonstrated one thing, and that was that we could penetrate the cloud shield and reach the Martians in their hiding place.

It had been prearranged that the first discharge from the flagship should be a signal for the concentration of the fire of all the other ships upon the same spot.

A little hesitation, however, occurred, and a half a minute had elapsed before the disintegrators from the other members of the squadron were got into play.

The Martians' Artificial Day.

Then, suddenly we saw an immense commotion in the cloud beneath us. It seemed to be beaten and hurled in every direction and punctured like a sieve with nearly a hundred great circular holes. Through these gaps we could see clearly a large region

of the planet's surface, with many airships floating above it, and the blaze of innumerable electric lights illuminating it. The Martians had created an artificial day under the curtain.

This time there was no question that the blow had been effective. Four or five of the airships, partially destroyed, tumbled headlong toward the ground, while even from our great distance there was unmistakable evidence that fearful execution had been done among the crowded structures along the shore of the Lake.

Our Disintegrator Does Awful Damage.

As each of our ships possessed but one of the new disintegrators, and since a minute or so was required to adjust them for a fresh discharge, we remained for a little while inactive after delivering the blow. Meanwhile the cloud curtain, though rent to shreds by the concentrated discharge of the disintegrators, quickly became a uniform black sheet again, hiding everything.

We had just had time to congratulate ourselves on the successful opening of our bombardment, and the disintegrator of the flagship was poised for another discharge, when suddenly out of the black expanse beneath, quivered immense electric beams, clear cut and straight as bars of steel, but dazzling our eyes with unendurable brilliance.

It was the reply of the Martians to our attack.

Devastating Our Army.

Three or four of the electrical ships were seriously damaged, and one, close beside the flagship, changed color, withered and collapsed, with the same sickening phenomena that had made our hearts shudder when the first disaster of this kind occurred during our brief battle over the asteroid.

Another score of our comrades were gone, and yet we had hardly begun the fight.

Glancing at the other ships, which had been injured, I saw that the damage to them was not so serious, although they were evidently hors de combat for the present.

Our fighting blood was now boiling and we did not stop long to count our losses.

“Into the smoke!” was the signal, and the ninety and more electric ships which still remained in condition for action immediately shot downward.

Chapter XI.

A Dash Into the Smoke.

It was a wild plunge. We kept off the decks while rushing through the blinding smoke, but the instant we emerged below, where we found ourselves still a mile above the ground, we were out again, ready to strike.

I have simply a confused recollection of flashing lights beneath, and a great, dark arch

of clouds above, out of which our ships seemed dropping on all sides, and then the fray burst upon and around us, and no man could see or notice anything except by half-comprehended glances.

Almost in an instant, it seemed, a swarm of airships surrounded us, while from what, for lack of a more descriptive name, I shall call the forts about the Lake of the Sun, leaped tongues of electric fire, before which some of our ships were driven like bits of flaming paper in a high wind, gleaming for a moment, then curling up and gone forever!

Never Was Such a Conflict.

It was an awful sight; but the battle fever was raging in us, and we, on our part, were not idle.

Every man carried a disintegrator, and these hand instruments, together with those of heavier calibre on the ships poured their resistless vibrations in every direction through the quivering air.

The airships of the Martians were destroyed by the score, but yet they flocked upon us thicker and faster.

We dropped lower and our blows fell upon the forts, and upon the wide-spread city bordering the Lake of the Sun. We almost entirely silenced the fire of one of the forts; but there were forty more in full action within reach of our eyes!

Some of the metallic buildings were partly unroofed by the disintegrators and some had their walls riddled and fell with thundering crashes, whose sound rose to our ears above the hellish din of battle. I caught glimpses of giant forms struggling in the ruins and rushing wildly through the streets, but there was no time to see anything clearly.

The Flagship Charmed!

Our flagship seemed charmed. A crowd of airships hung upon it like a swarm of angry bees, and, at times, one could not see for the lightning strokes—yet we escaped destruction, while ourselves dealing death on every hand.

It was a glorious fight, but it was not war; no, it was not war. We really had no more chance of ultimate success amid that multitude of enemies than a prisoner running the gauntlet in a crowd of savages has of escape.

A conviction of the hopelessness of the contest finally forced itself upon our minds, and the shattered squadron, which had kept well together amid the storm of death, was signalled to retreat.

Shaking off their pursuers, as a hunted bear shakes off the dogs, sixty of the electrical ships rose up through the clouds where more than ninety had gone down!

Madly we rushed upward through the vast curtain and continued our flight to a great

elevation, far beyond the reach of the awful artillery of the enemy.

Forced to Retreat.

Looking back it seemed the very mouth of hell that we had escaped from.

The Martians did not for an instant cease their fire, even when we were far beyond their reach. With furious persistence they blazed away through the cloud curtains, and the vivid spikes of lightning shuddered so swiftly on one another's track that they were like a flaming halo of electric lances around the frowning helmet of the War Planet.

But after a while they stopped their terrific sparring, and once more the immense globe assumed the appearance of a vast ball of black smoke, still wildly agitated by the recent disturbance, but exhibiting no opening through which we could discern what was going on beneath.

Evidently the Martians believed they had finished us.

Despair Seizes Us.

At no time since the beginning of our adventure had it appeared to me quite so hopeless, reckless and mad as it seemed at present.

We had suffered fearful losses, and yet what had we accomplished? We had won two fights on the asteroid, it is true, but then we had overwhelming numbers on our side.

Now we were facing millions on their own ground, and our very first assault had resulted in a disastrous repulse, with the loss of at least thirty electric ships and 600 men!

Evidently we could not endure this sort of thing. We must find some other means of assailing Mars or else give up the attempt.

But the latter was not to be thought of. It was no mere question of self-pride, however, and no consideration of the tremendous interests at stake, which would compel us to continue our apparently vain attempt.

No Hope in Sight.

Our provisions could last only a few days longer. The supply would not carry us one-quarter of the way back to the earth, and we must therefore remain here and literally conquer or die.

In this extremity a consultation of the principal officers was called upon the deck of the flagship.

Here the suggestion was made that we should attempt to effect by strategy what we had failed to do by force.

An old army officer who had served in many wars against the cunning Indians of the West, Colonel Alonzo Jefferson Smith, was the author of this suggestion.

“Let us circumvent them,” he said. “We can do it in this way. The chances are that all of the available fighting force of the planet Mars is now concentrated on this side and in the neighborhood of the Lake of the Sun.”

Formulating a “Last Hope.”

“Possibly, by some kind of X-ray business, they can only see us dimly through the clouds, and if we get a little further away they will not be able to see us at all.”

“Now, I suggest that a certain number of the electrical ships be withdrawn from the squadron to a great distance, while the remainder stay here; or, better still, approach to a point just beyond the reach of those streaks of lightning, and begin a bombardment of the clouds without paying any attention to whether the strokes reach through the clouds and do any damage or not.”

“This will induce the Martians to believe that we are determined to press our attack at this point.”

“In the meantime, while these ships are raising a hullabaloo on this side of the planet, and drawing their fire, as much as possible, without running into any actual danger, let the others which have been selected for the purpose, sail rapidly around to the other side of Mars and take them in the rear.”

It was not perfectly clear what Colonel Smith intended to do after the landing had been effected in the rear of the Martians, but still there seemed a good deal to be said for his suggestion, and it would, at any rate, if carried out, enable us to learn something about the condition of things on the planet, and perhaps furnish us with a hint as to how we could best proceed in the further prosecution of the siege.

Accordingly it was resolved that about twenty ships should be told off for this movement, and Colonel Smith himself was placed in command.

At my desire I accompanied the new commander in his flagship.

Flank Movements.

Rising to a considerable elevation in order that there might be no risk of being seen, we began our flank movement while the remaining ships, in accordance with the understanding, dropped nearer the curtain of cloud and commenced a bombardment with the disintegrators, which caused a tremendous commotion in the clouds, opening vast gaps in them, and occasionally revealing a glimpse of the electric lights on the planet, although it was evident that the vibratory currents did not reach the ground. The Martians immediately replied to this renewed attack, and again the cloud-covered globe bristled with lightning, which flashed so fiercely out of the blackness below that the stoutest hearts among us quailed, although we were situated well beyond the danger.

But this sublime spectacle rapidly vanished from our eyes when, having attained a proper elevation, we began our course toward the opposite hemisphere of the planet.

We guided our flight by the stars, and from our knowledge of the rotation period of Mars, and the position which the principal points on its surface must occupy at certain hours, we were able to tell what part of the planet lay beneath us.

Having completed our semi-circuit, we found ourselves on the night side of Mars, and determined to lose no time in executing our coup. But it was deemed best that an exploration should first be made by a single electrical ship, and Colonel Smith naturally wished to undertake the adventure with his own vessel.

Dropping to the Planet.

We dropped rapidly through the black cloud curtain, which proved to be at least half a mile in thickness, and then suddenly emerged, as if suspended at the apex of an enormous dome, arching above the surface of the planet a mile beneath us, which sparkled on all sides with innumerable lights.

These lights were so numerous and so brilliant as to produce a faint imitation of daylight, even at our immense height above the ground, and the dome of cloud out of which we had emerged assumed a soft fawn color that produced an indescribably beautiful effect.

For a moment we recoiled from our undertaking, and arrested the motion of the electric ship.

But on closely examining the surface beneath us we found that there was a broad region, where comparatively few bright lights were to be seen. From my knowledge of the geography of Mars I knew that this was a part of the Land of Ausonia, situated a few hundred miles northeast of Hellas, where we had first seen the planet.

Evidently it was not so thickly populated as some of the other parts of Mars, and its comparative darkness was an attraction to us. We determined to approach within a few hundred feet of the ground with the electric ship, and then, in case no enemies appeared, to visit the soil itself.

“Perhaps we shall see or hear something that will be of use to us,” said Colonel Smith, “and for the purposes of this first reconnaissance it is better that we should be few in number. The other ships will await our return, and at any rate we shall not be gone long.”

As our car approached the ground we found ourselves near the tops of some lofty trees.

“This will do,” said Colonel Smith, to the electrical steersman. “Stay right here.”

He and I then lowered ourselves into the branches of the trees, each carrying a small disintegrator, and cautiously clambered down to the ground.

Landing On Mars.

The Great Planet Exhibits Its Wonders to Our Warriors.

At first we suffered somewhat from the effects of the rare atmosphere. It was so lacking in density that it resembled the air on the summits of the loftiest terrestrial mountains.

Having reached the foot of the tree in safety, we lay down for a moment on the ground to recover ourselves and to become accustomed to our new surroundings.

A thrill, born half of wonder, half of incredulity, ran through me at the touch of the soil of Mars. Here was I, actually on that planet, which had seemed so far away, so inaccessible, and so full of mysteries when viewed from the earth. And yet, surrounding me, were things—gigantic, it is true—but still resembling and recalling the familiar sights of my own world.

After a little while our lungs became accustomed to the rarity of the atmosphere and we experienced a certain stimulation in breathing.

Starting on our Travels.

We then got upon our feet and stepped out from under the shadow of the gigantic tree. High above we could faintly see our electrical ship, gently swaying in the air close to the treetop.

There were no electric lights in our immediate neighborhood, but we noticed that the whole surface of the planet around us was gleaming with them, producing an effect like the glow of a great city seen from a distance at night. The glare was faintly reflected from the vast dome of clouds above, producing the general impression of a moonlight night upon the earth.

It was a wonderfully quiet and beautiful spot where we had come down. The air had a delicate feel and a bracing temperature, while a soft breeze souged through the leaves of the tree above our heads.

Not far away was the bank of a canal, bordered by a magnificent avenue shaded by a double row of immense umbrageous trees.

We approached the canal, and, getting upon the road, turned to the left to make an exploration in that direction. The shadow of the trees falling upon the roadway produced a dense gloom, in the midst of which we felt that we should be safe, unless the Martians had eyes like those of cats.

An Alarming Encounter.

As we pushed along, our hearts, I confess, beating a little quickly, a shadow stirred in front of us.

Something darker than the night itself approached.

As it drew near it assumed the appearance of an enormous dog, as tall as an ox, which ran swiftly our way with a threatening motion of its head. But before it could even utter a snarl the whirr of Colonel Smith's disintegrator was heard and the creature vanished in the shadow.

"Gracious, did you ever see such a beast?" said the Colonel. "Why, he was as big as a grizzly."

"The people he belonged to must be near by," I said. "Very likely he was a watch on guard."

"But I see no signs of a habitation."

"True, but you observe there is a thick hedge on the side of the road opposite the canal. If we get through that perhaps we shall catch sight of something."

A Palace in View.

Cautiously we pushed our way through the hedge, which was composed of shrubs as large as small trees, and very thick at the bottom, and, having traversed it, found ourselves in a great meadow-like expanse which might have been a lawn. At a considerable distance, in the midst of a clump of trees, a large building towered skyward, its walls of some red metal, gleaming like polished copper in the soft light that fell from the cloud dome.

There were no lights around the building itself, and we saw nothing corresponding to windows on that side which faced us, but toward the right a door was evidently open, and out of this streamed a brilliant shaft of illumination, which lay bright upon the lawn, then crossed the highway through an opening in the hedge, and gleamed on the water of the canal beyond.

Where we stood the ground had evidently been recently cleared, and there was no obstruction, but as we crept closer to the house—for our curiosity had now become irresistible—we found ourselves crawling through grass so tall that if we had stood erect it would have risen well above our heads.

Taking Precautions.

"This affords good protection," said Colonel Smith, recalling his adventures on the Western plains. "We can get close in to the Indians—I beg pardon, I mean the Martians—without being seen."

Heavens, what an adventure was this! To be crawling about in the night on the face of another world and venturing, perhaps, into the jaws of a danger which human experience could not measure!

But on we went, and in a little while we had emerged from the tall grass and were

somewhat startled by the discovery that we had got close to the wall of the building.

Carefully we crept around toward the open door.

As we neared it we suddenly stopped as if we had been stricken with instantaneous paralysis.

Out of the door floated, on the soft night air, the sweetest music I have ever listened to.

A Monstrous Surprise.

It carried me back in an instant to my own world. It was the music of the earth. It was the melodious expression of a human soul. It thrilled us both to the heart's core.

"My God!" exclaimed Colonel Smith. "What can that be? Are we dreaming, or where in heaven's name are we?"

Still the enchanting harmony floated out upon the air.

What the instrument was I could not tell; but the sound seemed more nearly to resemble that of a violin than of anything else I could think of.

Magnificent Music.

When we first heard it the strains were gentle, sweet, caressing and full of an infinite depth of feeling, but in a little while its tone changed, and it became a magnificent march, throbbing upon the air in stirring notes that set our hearts beating in unison with its stride and inspiring in us a courage that we had not felt before.

Then it drifted into a wild fantasia, still inexpressibly sweet, and from that changed again into a requiem or lament, whose mellifluous tide of harmony swept our thoughts back again to the earth.

"I can endure this no longer," I said. "I must see who it is that makes that music. It is the product of a human heart and must come from the touch of human fingers."

We carefully shifted our position until we stood in the blaze of light that poured out of the door.

The doorway was an immense arched opening, magnificently ornamented, rising to a height of, I should say, not less than twenty or twenty-five feet and broad in proportion. The door itself stood widely open and it, together with all of its fittings and surroundings, was composed of the same beautiful red metal.

A Beautiful Girl!

Stepping out a little way into the light I could see within the door an immense apartment, glittering on all sides with metallic ornaments and gems and lighted from

the centre by a great chandelier of electric candles.

In the middle of the great floor, holding the instrument delicately poised, and still awaking its ravishing voice, stood a figure, the sight of which almost stopped my breath.

It was a slender sylph of a girl!

A girl of my own race: a human being here upon the planet Mars!

In the middle of the great floor, holding the instrument delicately poised, and still awaking its ravishing voice, stood a figure, the sight of which almost stopped my breath! It was a slender sylph of a girl! A girl of my own race; a human being here on Mars!

Her hair was loosely coiled and she was attired in graceful white drapery.

“By ——!” cried Colonel Smith, “she’s human!”

Chapter XII.

Still the bewildering strains of the music came to our ears, and yet we stood there unperceived, though in the full glare of the chandelier.

The girl’s face was presented in profile. It was exquisite in beauty, pale, delicate with a certain pleading sadness which stirred us to the heart.

An element of romance and a touch of personal interest such as we had not looked for suddenly entered into our adventure.

Colonel Smith’s mind still ran back to the perils of the plains.

A Human Prisoner.

“She is a prisoner,” he said, “and by the Seven Devils of Dona Ana we’ll not leave her here. But where are the hellhounds themselves?”

Our attention had been so absorbed by the sight of the girl that we had scarcely thought of looking to see if there was any one else in the room.

Glancing beyond her, I now perceived sitting in richly decorated chairs three or four gigantic Martians. They were listening to the music as if charmed.

The whole story told itself. This girl, if not their slave, was at any rate under their control, and she was furnishing entertainment for them by her musical skill. The fact that they could find pleasure in music so beautiful was, perhaps, an indication that they were not really as savage as they seemed.

Yet our hearts went out to the girl, and were turned against them with an

uncontrollable hatred.

They were of the same remorseless race with those who so lately had lain waste our fair earth and who would have completed its destruction had not Providence interfered in our behalf.

Singularly enough, although we stood full in the light, they had not yet seen us.

Martians Guarding Her.

Suddenly the girl, moved by what impulse I know not, turned her face in our direction. Her eyes fell upon us. She paused abruptly in her playing, and her instrument dropped to the floor. Then she uttered a cry, and with extended arms ran toward us.

But when she was near she stopped abruptly, the glad look fading from her face, and started back with terror-stricken eyes, as if, after all, she had found us not what she expected.

Then for an instant she looked more intently at us, her countenance cleared once more, and, overcome by some strange emotion, her eyes filled with tears, and, drawing a little nearer, she stretched forth her hands to us appealingly.

Meanwhile the Martians had started to their feet. They looked down upon us in astonishment. We were like pigmies to them; like little gnomes which had sprung out of the ground at their feet.

One of the giants seized some kind of a weapon and started forward with a threatening gesture.

The Girl Appeals to Us.

The girl sprang to my side and grasped my arm with a cry of fear.

This seemed to throw the Martian into a sudden frenzy, and he raised his arms to strike.

But the disintegrator was in my hand.

My rage was equal to his.

I felt the concentrated vengeance of the earth quivering through me as I pressed the button of the disintegrator and, sweeping it rapidly up and down, saw the gigantic form that confronted me melt into nothingness.

There were three other giants in the room, and they had been on the point of following up the attack of their comrade. But when he disappeared from before their eyes, they paused, staring in amazement at the place where, but a moment before, he had stood, but where now only the metal weapon he had wielded lay on the floor.

At first they started back, and seemed on the point of fleeing; then, with a second glance, perceiving again how small and insignificant we were, all three together advanced upon us.

The girl sank trembling on her knees.

In the meantime I had readjusted my disintegrator for another discharge, and Colonel Smith stood by me with the light of battle upon his face.

“Sweep the discharge across the three,” I exclaimed. “Otherwise there will be one left and before we can fire again he will crush us.”

The Martians Are Killed.

The whirr of the two instruments sounded simultaneously, and with a quick, horizontal motion we swept the lines of force around in such a manner that all three of the Martians were caught by the vibratory streams and actually cut in two.

Long gaps were opened in the wall of the room behind them, where the destroying currents had passed, for with wrathful fierceness, we had run the vibrations through half a gamut on the index.

The victory was ours. There were no other enemies, that we could see, in the house.

Yet at any moment others might make their appearance, and what more we did must be done quickly.

The girl evidently was as much amazed as the Martians had been by the effects which we had produced. Still she was not terrified, and continued to cling to us and to glance beseechingly into our faces, expressing in her every look and gesture the fact that she knew we were of her own race.

But clearly she could not speak our tongue, for the words she uttered were unintelligible.

Colonel Smith, whose long experience in Indian warfare had made him intensely practical, did not lose his military instincts, even in the midst of events so strange.

“It occurs to me,” he said, “that we have got a chance at the enemies’ supplies. Suppose we begin foraging right here. Let’s see if this girl can’t show us the commissary department.”

He immediately began to make signs to the girl to indicate that he was hungry.

The Girl Understands Us.

A look of comprehension flitted over her features, and, seizing our hands, she led us into an adjoining apartment and pointed to a number of metallic boxes. One of these she opened, taking out of it a kind of cake, which she placed between her teeth, breaking off a very small portion and then handing it to us, motioning that we should

eat, but at the same time showing us that we ought to take only a small quantity.

“Thank God! It’s compressed food,” said Colonel Smith. “I thought these Martians with their wonderful civilization would be up to that. And it’s mighty lucky for us, because, without overburdening ourselves, if we can find one or two more caches like this we shall be able to reprovision the entire fleet. But we must get reinforcements before we can take possession of the fodder.”

The Prisoner Is Rescued.

Accordingly we hurried out into the night, passed into the roadway, and, taking the girl with us, ran as rapidly as possible to the foot of the tree where we had made our descent. Then we signalled to the electric ship to drop down to the level of the ground.

This was quickly done, the girl was taken aboard, and a dozen men, under our guidance, hastened back to the house, where we loaded ourselves with the compressed provisions and conveyed them to the ship.

Beautiful Girl Prisoner.

Establishing the Identity of the Martians’ Captive.

On this second trip to the mysterious house we had discovered another apartment containing a very large number of the metallic boxes, filled with compressed food.

“By Jove, it is a store house,” said Colonel Smith. “We must get more force and carry it all off. Gracious, but this is a lucky night. We can reprovision the whole fleet from this room.”

“I thought it singular,” I said, “that with the exception of the girl whom we have rescued no women were seen in the house. Evidently the lights over yonder indicate the location of a considerable town, and it is quite probable that this building, without windows, and so strongly constructed, is the common storehouse, where the provisions for the town are kept. The fellows we killed must have been the watchmen in charge of the storehouse, and they were treating themselves to a little music from the slave girl when we happened to come upon them.”

A New Food Supply.

With the utmost haste several of the other electrical ships, waiting above the cloud curtain, were summoned to descend, and, with more than a hundred men, we returned to the building, and this time almost entirely exhausted its stores, each man carrying as much as he could stagger under.

Fortunately our proceedings had been conducted without much noise, and the storehouse being situated at a considerable distance from other buildings, none of the Martians, except those who would never tell the story, had known of our arrival or of our doings on the planet.

“Now, we’ll return and surprise Edison with the news,” said Colonel Smith.

Our ship was the last to pass up through the clouds, and it was a strange sight to watch the others as one after another they rose toward the great dome, entered it, though from below it resembled a solid vault of grayish-pink marble, and disappeared.

Sunshine Again.

We quickly followed them, and having penetrated the enormous curtain, were considerably surprised on emerging at the upper side to find that the sun was shining brilliantly upon us. It will be remembered that it was night on this side of Mars when we went down, but our adventure had occupied several hours, and now Mars had so far turned upon its axis that the portion of its surface over which we were had come around into the sunlight.

We knew that the squadron which we had left besieging the Lake of the Sun must also have been carried around in a similar manner, passing into the night while the side of the planet where we were was emerging into day.

Our shortest way back would be by travelling westward, because then we should be moving in a direction opposite to that in which the planet rotated, and the main squadron, sharing that rotation, would be continually moving in our direction.

But to travel westward was to penetrate once more into the night side of the planet.

The prows, if I may so call them, of our ships were accordingly turned in the direction of the vast shadow which Mars was invisibly projecting into space behind it, and on entering that shadow the sun disappeared from our eyes, and once more the huge hidden globe beneath us became a black chasm among the stars.

Now that we were in the neighborhood of a globe capable of imparting considerable weight to all things under the influence of its attraction that peculiar condition which I have before described as existing in the midst of space, where there was neither up nor down for us, had ceased. Here where we had weight “up” and “down” had resumed their old meanings. “Down” was toward the centre of Mars, and “up” was away from that centre.

The Two Moons of Mars.

Standing on the deck, and looking overhead as we swiftly ploughed our smooth way at a great height through the now imperceptible atmosphere of the planet, I saw the two moons of Mars meeting in the sky exactly above us.

Before our arrival at Mars, there had been considerable discussion among the learned men as to the advisability of touching at one of their moons, and when the discovery was made that our provisions were nearly exhausted, it had been suggested that the Martian satellites might furnish us with an additional supply.

But it had appeared a sufficient reply to this suggestion that the moons of Mars are both insignificant bodies, not much larger than the asteroid we had fallen in with, and

that there could not possibly be any form of vegetation or other edible products upon them.

This view having prevailed, we had ceased to take an interest in the satellites, further than to regard them as objects of great curiosity on account of their motions.

The nearer of these moons, Phobos, is only 3,700 miles from the surface of Mars, and we watched it travelling around the planet three times in the course of every day. The more distant one, Deimos, 12,500 miles away, required considerably more than one day to make its circuit.

It now happened that the two had come into conjunction, as I have said, just over our heads, and, throwing myself down on my back on the deck of the electrical ship, for a long time I watched the race between the two satellites, until Phobos, rapidly gaining upon the other, had left its rival far behind.

Suddenly Colonel Smith, who took very little interest in these astronomical curiosities, touched me, and pointing ahead, said:

“There they are.”

Rejoining the Fleet.

I looked, and sure enough there were the signal lights of the principal squadron, and as we gazed we occasionally saw, darting up from the vast cloud mass beneath, an electric bayonet, fiercely thrust into the sky, which showed that the siege was still actively going on, and that the Martians were jabbing away at their invisible enemies outside the curtain.

In a short time the two fleets had joined, and Colonel Smith and I immediately transferred ourselves to the flagship.

“Well, what have you done?” asked Mr. Edison, while others crowded around with eager attention.

“If we have not captured their provision train,” said Colonel Smith, “we have done something just about as good. We have foraged on the country, and have collected a supply that I reckon will last this fleet for at least a month.”

“What’s that? What’s that?”

“It’s just what I say,” and Colonel Smith brought out of his pocket one of the square cakes of compressed food. “Set your teeth in that, and see what you think of it, but don’t take too much, for it’s powerful strong.”

“I say,” he continued, “we have got enough of that stuff to last us all for a month, but we’ve done more than that; we have got a surprise for you that will make you open your eyes. Just wait a minute.”

Caring for the Rescued Girl.

Colonel Smith made a signal to the electrical ship which we had just quitted to draw near. It came alongside, so that one could step from its deck onto the flagship. Colonel Smith disappeared for a minute in the interior of his ship, then re-emerged, leading the girl whom we had found upon the planet.

“Take her inside, quick,” he said, “for she is not used to this thin air.”

In fact, we were at so great an elevation that the rarity of the atmosphere now compelled us all to wear our air-tight suits, and the girl, not being thus attired, would have fallen unconscious on the deck if we had not instantly removed her to the interior of the car.

There she quickly recovered from the effects of the deprivation of air and looked about her, pale, astonished, but yet apparently without fear.

Every motion of this girl convinced me that she not only recognized us as members of her own race, but that she felt that her only hope lay in our aid. Therefore, strange as we were to her in many respects, nevertheless she did not think that she was in danger while among us.

The circumstances under which we had found her were quickly explained. Her beauty, her strange fate and the impenetrable mystery which surrounded her excited universal admiration and wonder.

How Came She on Mars?

“How did she get on Mars?” was the question that everybody asked, and that nobody could answer.

But while all were crowding around and overwhelming the poor girl with their staring, suddenly she burst into tears, and then, with arms outstretched in the same appealing manner which had so stirred our sympathies when we first saw her in the house of the Martians, she broke forth in a wild recitation, which was half a song and half a wail.

As she went on I noticed that a learned professor of languages from the University of Heidelberg was listening to her with intense attention. Several times he appeared to be on the point of breaking in with an exclamation. I could plainly see that he was becoming more and more excited as the words poured from the girl’s lips. Occasionally he nodded and muttered, smiling to himself. Her song finished, the girl sank half-exhausted upon the floor. She was lifted and placed in a reclining position at the side of the car.

Then the Heidelberg professor stepped to the centre of the car, in the sight of all, and in a most impressive manner said:

“Gentlemen, our sister.”

“I have her tongue recognized! The language that she speaks, the roots of the great Indo-European, or Aryan stock, contains.”

“This girl, gentlemen, to the oldest family of the human race belongs. Her language every tongue that now upon the earth is spoken antedates. Convinced am I that it that great original speech is from which have all the languages of the civilized world sprung.”

“How she here came, so many millions of miles from the earth, a great mystery is. But it shall be penetrated, and it is from her own lips that we the truth shall learn, because not difficult to us shall it be the language that she speaks to acquire since to our own it is akin.”

The Professor’s Astonishing Statement.

This announcement of the Heidelberg professor stirred us all most profoundly. It not only deepened our interest in the beautiful girl whom we had rescued, but, in a dim way, it gave us reason to hope that we should yet discover some means of mastering the Martians by dealing them a blow from within.

It had been expected, the reader will remember, that the Martian whom we had made prisoner on the asteroid, might be of use to us in a similar way, and for that reason great efforts had been made to acquire his language, and considerable progress had been effected in that direction.

But from the moment of our arrival at Mars itself, and especially after the battles began, the prisoner had resumed his savage and uncommunicative disposition, and had seemed continually to be expecting that we would fall victims to the prowess of his fellow beings, and that he would be released. How an outlaw, such as he evidently was, who had been caught in the act of robbing the Martian gold mines, could expect to escape punishment on returning to his native planet it was difficult to see. Nevertheless, so strong are the ties of race we could plainly perceive that all his sympathies were for his own people.

In fact, in consequence of his surly manner, and his attempts to escape, he had been more strictly bound than before and to get him out of the way had been removed from the flagship, which was already overcrowded, and placed in one of the other electric ships, and this ship—as it happened—was one of those which were lost in the great battle beneath the clouds. So after all, the Martian had perished, by a vengeful stroke launched from his native globe.

But Providence had placed in our hands a far better interpreter than he could ever have been. This girl of our own race would need no urging, or coercion, on our part in order to induce her to reveal any secrets of the Martians that might be useful in our further proceedings.

But one thing was first necessary to be done.

We must learn to talk with her.

Learning Her Language.

But for the discovery of the store of provisions it would have been impossible for us to spare the time needed to acquire the language of the girl, but now that we had been saved from the danger of starvation, we could prolong the siege for several weeks, employing the intervening time to the best advantage.

The terrible disaster which we had suffered in the great battle above the Lake of the Sun, wherein we had lost nearly a third of our entire force, had been quite sufficient to convince us that our only hope of victory lay in dealing the Martians some paralyzing stroke that at one blow would deprive them of the power of resistance. A victory that cost us the loss of a single ship would be too dearly purchased now.

How to deal that blow, and first of all, how to discover the means of dealing it, were at present the uppermost problems in our minds.

The only hope for us lay in the girl.

If, as there was every reason to believe, she was familiar with the ways and secrets of the Martians, then she might be able to direct our efforts in such a manner as to render them effective.

“We can spare two weeks for this,” said Mr. Edison. “Can you fellows of many tongues learn to talk with the girl in that time?”

“We’ll try it,” said several.

“It shall we do,” cried the Heidelberg professor more confidently.

“Then there is no use of staying here,” continued the commander. “If we withdraw the Martians will think that we have either given up the contest or been destroyed. Perhaps they will then pull off their blanket and let us see their face once more. That will give us a better opportunity to strike effectively when we are again ready.”

Preparing a Rendezvous.

“Why not rendezvous at one of the moons?” said an astronomer. “Neither of the two moons is of much consequence, as far as size goes, but still it would serve as a sort of anchorage ground, and while there, if we were careful to keep on the side away from Mars, we should escape detection.”

This suggestion was immediately accepted, and the squadron having been signalled to assemble quickly bore off in the direction of the more distant moon of Mars, Deimos. We knew that it was slightly smaller than Phobos but its greater distance gave promise that it would better serve our purpose of temporary concealment. The moons of Mars, like the earth’s moon, always keep the same face toward their master. By hiding behind Deimos we should escape the prying eyes of the Martians, even when they employed telescopes, and thus be able to remain comparatively close at hand, ready to pounce down upon them again after we had obtained, as we now had good hope of doing, information that would make us masters of the situation.

Masquerade

Hamish awoke with a start. Darkness and dead white faces, loud noise and cloying, exotic scents assailed him from all sides: a scene rivalling Dante's *Inferno*. For a moment, he didn't know where he was.

But as he gazed around groggily, the black-painted walls, the black-clad, white-faced crowd, the rank stench of beer, sex and cigarettes, the epileptic flashing of disco-lights and the throbbing groan of The Sisters of Mercy singing *Temple of Love* jogged his memory. He was still in that Goth club where Eloise had dragged them, looking for her sister.

The young Glaswegian skinhead glanced at his current companion, a loveable kleptomaniac from Liverpool called Nick. The Scouser turned away from his bored perusal of a passing fetishist couple and grinned. He swept back his dreadlocked hair and leaned over to shout in Hamish's ear:

'You falling asleep again?'

'Ah'm gey bored,' Hamish yelled back. 'We've been in this dive since it opened and Eloise hasn't found her sister yet. Where is she, anyway?'

'Eloise? I think she found one of her old friends. She went off with some girls into the toilets before.'

Hamish shook his head.

'Ah'm gey bored,' he reiterated. Nick shrugged and grinned again.

'Watch the show,' he suggested, indicating the group of semi-naked fetishists and glum-looking Goths on the dance floor. Hamish scowled, disgusted.

'Och, these people make me fucking ill,' he shouted. He turned away and glanced at the girls sitting talking nearby and his eyes flickered over their black clothes and elaborate make-up. One of them smiled at something her friend had said and Hamish was shocked to see her parted lips reveal a pair of fangs.

He turned back to Nick.

'Did you see that?' he demanded. 'That mauchit girl's got fangs like a vampire!' His eyes were wide.

Inexplicably, Nick laughed.

'What's so funny?' the skinhead snarled. 'We're in a fucking room full of vampires or something.'

Nick shook his head.

'They're false,' he shouted back. 'All the Goths wear them. They like to pretend they're vampires. Make up for the fact that they're sad fuckwits.'

Hamish shook his head. He sipped his pint. He glanced at his watch:

11:58.

‘Ah’m glad Eloise doesn’t do anything so daft,’ he said. He’d known the girl for a fair while now; he’d met her the same time he’d met Nick, when he’d come south, on the run from the police and in search of excitements that Glasgow couldn’t offer. Like most runaways, he’d ended up with the New Age Traveller; an unwilling hippie, forced by fate to hang around with a bunch of poncey lefties, liberals, Greens and commies.

Nick wasn’t too bad; he was a thieving Scouse keech, but at least he wasn’t political like Eloise. She, on the other hand, managed to combine being an eco-terrorist with being a feminist, an anarchist and a neo-pagan. Not surprising, considering the spineless, limp-wristed, bourgeois Sussex background she came from. She hadn’t had the same pressures as Nick or Hamish when she ran away from her family.

That was why they were back in Brighton, in fact. Seven months after her disappearance, Eloise’s parents had gone on national television, begging their daughter to come back to them. When she heard about this, she’d been deeply embarrassed and had decided to get the matter sorted out as soon as possible. She didn’t want a confrontation with her parents, so she’d come to this club on a Friday night in hopes of finding her sister Rebecca here and to get her to pass on the message that she was safe and sound, but not coming back.

Silly bitch, Hamish thought sourly to himself. If his dad ever got off his arse to ask after him - ha, fat chance! - Hamish would just ignore the keech. But Eloise’s upbringing had been much nicer. He sipped his pint again.

He spotted her weaving her way towards them through ranks of Goths. She was pretty attractive, despite her background: although he didn’t much care for her makeup and sombre clothes, something in her eyes and the elegantly sculptured curves of her face, awoke a deep and primal longing in the angry young Scot. He tried to tell himself he didn’t fancy her, or if he did then that was as far as it went; but the more he got to know her, the more he found himself bewildered by the feelings she stirred in him.

‘Can’t find her anywhere,’ Eloise began grumpily, as she sat down across the battered table from them. Hamish knocked back the rest of his pint and glowered at her.

‘We gonna stay in this shithole much longer?’ he demanded.

Eloise looked hurt. ‘I love this place,’ she replied defensively. ‘I spent most of the best summer of my life here.’

Nick leaned forward.

‘Did you find anyone who’d seen your sister?’

Eloise frowned and looked perturbed. She glanced at her black-painted fingernails.

‘I did,’ she admitted. ‘A girl I used to know from school, in the year below me. In the same class as Rebecca. I bumped into her. She was on speed or something and I

couldn't work out half of what she was going on about. But she said something about Becky hanging around with Vlad again.'

'Vlad?' sneered Hamish. 'Is he one of these faggots with the teeth?'

Eloise smiled slightly.

'It's his nickname. He's a vampire nerd, yes,' she replied. 'I went out with him for a bit. He got me into Goth, actually. He was going out with my sister to start with, then he decided he preferred me. But he wanted to do all kinds of things I wouldn't do...'

'Things you wouldn't do?' gaped Nick. Since Eloise was deeply involved with the occult and not just tarot cards either, he found it startling that there was anything she balked at. But Eloise ignored him and continued.

'Me and my sister had a bit of a row about it, actually. One of the reasons I left home. But it seems like she's hanging round with them these days and they get up to some weird stuff. She won't even talk to her old friends anymore. Walks around in a dream.'

'Probably on drugs,' Hamish growled. Being of the considered opinion that drugs were a Zionist plot to sap the will of the white man, he rarely touched anything heavier than speed. And these Goths had to be on something more powerful than that.

'I don't know,' said Eloise uncertainly. 'Vlad's got a strong personality. Even I came briefly under his spell...'

'What's he look like?' asked Nick, interrupting suddenly.

'Dressed like Lestat in "Interview with the Vampire",' Eloise said. 'Bit sad, really. Why? Have you seen him?'

'Well, there's a big-massive crowd of Goths going by, fangs and everything and the tallest one sounds like your man.'

Eloise turned and stared at the group of eleven or twelve Goths behind her. She could see they were heavily into the vampire scene; all of them had the expensive fake fangs she remembered Vlad wearing and most of them wore period costume, Victorian or Regency. All of it black, of course. Most of them were girls, but in the centre, a tall male figure stood watching the dance floor. Eloise felt a thrill of recognition as he turned briefly to sneer something at one of his companions. It was Vlad himself.

She gazed in fascination at him, her heart pounding in a way it hadn't since the last time she'd been with him. A cravat and a high-winged collar framed his darkly handsome face, while a frock coat, waistcoat and trows completed the ensemble. Of course, he had to wear black eye shadow that was more redolent of Rocky Horror than Hammer, but Vlad had never had any problems when it came to going too far.

Eloise's gaze moved on. Standing on the other side of Vlad was a blank-faced, dull-eyed figure she recognised suddenly as her own sister. She stared at her in sick horror. The girl looked as if she'd become a smackhead since they'd parted - either that or she had a killer hangover; her skin was white and pasty, her eyes red-rimmed and

bloodshot. And she stood among the other Goths as if she hadn't the faintest idea where she was.

'Is your sister with them?' Nick asked loudly. Eloise darted him a horrified glance, then got up without speaking and forced her way through the Goths. As she did so, two turned and bared their fangs at her, hissing eerily.

'Piss off,' she snarled determinedly and strode over to Rebecca. 'Becky, what's the matter with you?' she demanded, full of sisterly concern. 'You look awful.'

The girl failed to respond. Eloise tugged at her arm, pulling her round. Rebecca stared vacantly at her sister, no sign of recognition in her eyes.

Then firm hands were pulling Eloise away. She struggled and turned round to see that Vlad had grabbed her.

'Rebecca's with us,' he said firmly, then checked himself. 'Eloise?' he asked.

'Yes!' she hissed, as the other Goths surrounded her menacingly. 'What've you done with my sister?'

'Everything she has done has been of her own free will,' Vlad replied airily. 'Get out of my sight.'

All the resentment that had been simmering within her since he'd dumped her boiled over. She stepped up on tiptoes and slapped him across his smug, suave face. He coloured with anger.

'Bitch!' he said, his affected voice degenerating into an Estuarine accent. He retaliated swiftly.

Hamish and Nick had been watching the confrontation with increasing uninterest. But when Vlad returned Eloise's slap with a blow that sent her staggering to the floor, Hamish's expression became one of wrath. He shot up, pulling at his sock, whipping out a long knife that glittered ominously in the flashing disco lights - and flung himself over the table into the Goths.

As he appeared, the majority of them drew back, their faces paler than ever. But Vlad himself stood motionless over Eloise. As Hamish approached, the Goth pulled a Kukri dagger out of his jacket and waited, poised and ready to fight. The circle of Goths stood watchful, their jaded eyes bright with unaccustomed excitement.

Eloise tried to get to her feet. Keeping his eyes level with Hamish's, Vlad raised a foot and pushed her back down. Hamish snarled.

'Get off her, you twat,' he shouted and leapt in, gashing at the Goth's stomach. His blade came away bloodied and he looked up, expecting to see Vlad fall. But the Goth merely sneered painfully.

'Takes a stake to deal with me,' Vlad boasted, his eyes wide. A chill ran down Hamish's spine as he tried to tell himself that this was impossible. But as Vlad attacked, the Scot realised with some relief that he had only caused a flesh wound.

Hamish grabbed the Goth's knife-arm at the wrist and stabbed at him again. But Vlad caught hold of Hamish's wrist and the two of them stood there, straining.

Suddenly the crowd parted as two heavily built figures forced their way through. The bouncers approached the knife-wielding youths uncertainly.

'Alright, alright, put the weapons down,' said the first bouncer, a bulky man with a surprisingly sensitive face. Hamish broke away from Vlad and seemed ready to attack these interlopers. He stopped, as a soft touch on his arm told him Eloise had regained her feet.

'Don't be stupid, Hamish!' she shouted. The first bouncer had disarmed Vlad and was leading him and his cohorts - including Eloise's sister - towards the exit. The other man headed for the skinhead.

Hamish pushed Eloise away and turned towards the approaching bouncer.

'No mauchit ape throws me oota anywhere,' he snarled, as the man grabbed at him. He weaved, ducked, lunged - and the bouncer fell back, blood spreading rapidly across his white T-shirt. Someone in the crowd screamed, loud enough and piercing enough to be audible over the music. The effete strains of The Cure ended abruptly and a frightened voice over the PA informed them that the police had been called and would be at the club any minute.

'Oh no,' Eloise said, turning towards Hamish, who was cleaning his blade on a piece of rag. 'You idiot,' she hissed.

'What are we going to do?' demanded Nick, eyes wide with fear. He glanced around at the watchful crowd. No way out. Around them stood silent Goths, shocked out of their usual languor by this bloodshed in their midst. Behind the trio were the girls who had been sitting near them. Nick had been eyeing one of them up, earlier, not expecting a second glance from her. But now they all stared silently at him and his friends. He glanced at Hamish and Eloise.

'Looks like this is the end of a lovely night out,' Eloise said grimly, as the wail of police sirens became audible from outside. Then she heard a hiss behind her. She turned. It was one of the girls from the table near them.

'Quick, this way,' she urged them, indicating the fire-exit in the nearest wall. One of the other girls had opened it. The first girl gazed at Eloise, with bright eyes feverish in a dead face. She looked singularly unwholesome, but Eloise felt in no position to turn down her offer. She turned to Hamish and Nick.

'Come on,' she said. They glanced at her, shrugged and sped after the Goths, out into the dark night.

'We can stop here, I think,' called the dead-faced girl as they ducked down an alleyway about half a mile from the club. They had run the gauntlet of the dingy Brighton backstreets, losing their police pursuers somewhere near the Kemp Town road.

The three fugitives stood before their rescuers. Hamish folded his arms.

'What the fuck's gaun on?' he demanded.

Eloise sighed. 'Shut up, Hamish, you've done enough harm tonight.' She turned to the girls. 'Ignore him, he's just a rude Scottish oik. All the same, I'm a bit curious myself. Why did you help us get away?'

The first girl shrugged dully.

'We couldn't leave a fellow sister to the Pigs,' she said, fixing Eloise with her fevered gaze. 'Besides, we saw the trouble you were in was Vlad's doing.'

'You know Vlad?' asked Nick.

'We try not to,' said one of the other girls, baring her fangs in a grin. 'We hate sad Goths who think they're vampires - the ones who say they're undead and seem to think that it means they don't need to get a life.'

'But you wear the teeth and everything,' Nick said curiously. 'Don't you think you're a vampire?'

The girls all looked self-conscious for a second. Then the first one did a creditable vampire hiss.

'Ve don't think ve're vampires,' she said in a Transylvanian accent, 'Ve know ve are.' She grinned. 'I vant to bite your finger,' she added for good measure.

Eloise laughed. 'You know, it's so nice to see some Goths still have a sense of humour these days,' she said. 'Shame my sister hasn't. She's on the crest of the Dark Wave.'

'Is she that silent girl who's been trailing Vlad around all the time?' asked the first girl. 'Looks like Neil Gaiman's Death warmed up.'

'That's Becky. Last time I saw her, I told her Vlad was bad news. Now he's got her under his spell.'

The girl nodded. 'Do you want to get her back?' she asked. The others nodded in unison. 'We know where she'll be,' one of them added.

'You do?' said Eloise in surprise.

'Where are they?' Hamish broke in. 'Ah've got a score to settle with that prick.' He scowled. 'Ah wouldn't have knifed that bouncer if that Goth keech hadn't slapped you, Eloise.'

'Never mind that, Hamish,' Eloise replied, ignoring his attention-seeking plea. 'We've got to get my sister away from these vampire wannabes.' She turned to the girl. 'Where will we find them?'

'There's an old house in Hangleton, near the main road. It's been abandoned for years and most of it's in ruins. But that's where Vlad's got his squat. Could you do us a favour, by the way? It's where we used to squat, but they took over and we haven't been able to get it back. If you could turf them out when you get your sister out?'

Eloise frowned.

‘You mean all those Goths with Vlad?’ she asked.

‘No, no.’ The girl frowned. ‘Most of them are just hangers-on. There’s a hard core who squat there - Vlad and three girls, Miriam, Maria and Diana. Your sister sleeps there more often than not.’

‘No wonder my parents were so keen to get me to come home,’ Eloise reflected. ‘All their beloved children are leaving them.’

‘But you’ll do it?’ the girl asked urgently.

Eloise glanced at Nick and Hamish. They nodded. She turned back to the girl.

‘We’ve done more difficult things in our time.’ She shrugged. ‘And we’re in your debt.’ She nodded. ‘We’ll do it.’

The house loomed out of its grounds like a tooth gone rotten in a festering gum. It was the shell of a respectable thirties family house, surrounded on either side by similar buildings, mainly in better repair; but much of the street seemed rundown, more so than Eloise was accustomed to in this part of Brighton. She came from Wych Cross, in the midst of Ashdown Forest and she was unfamiliar with the suburbs, but this decrepitude still seemed odd, even bearing the recession in mind: out of place, even sinister.

‘Not a bad place for a squat,’ said Nick with a connoisseur’s expertise.

Eloise glanced at him. ‘Think we’ll be able to get in?’

‘Of course we can get in,’ Nick said, his voice full of the self-importance he assumed in these situations. ‘You can get in anywhere. It’s getting away with it that counts.’

Eloise shuffled impatiently. ‘Do you think we can get in there without another brush with the police?’ she demanded.

Nick grinned at her.

‘Easy,’ he said and took them quickly across the street and up an alley that led along the right hand side of the house. Halfway along it, Nick found the break in the fence that he was looking for.

‘In here,’ he said and they followed him into the overgrown garden at the back of the derelict house.

In the cellar beneath the house, the ceremony was almost complete. Vlad stood at the centre of the candlelit space as his three devoted followers, Miriam, Diana and Maria, prepared the sacrifice for the final ritual. He gazed around the cellar with satisfaction and ignored the nagging doubts that always troubled him.

He stared abstractedly at the mural of Cain, Father of All Vampires, which he had daubed onto the far wall, above the four coffins that lay on shelves closer to the floor. Technically, he wasn’t a vampire - he wasn’t dead, for one thing. But people who

thought only the undead drank blood were deluded. There were times when he doubted that there had ever been vampires; even if there had, in these latter days it was left to mortals to continue the old ways. The true vampires were sleeping and the Golden Age of blood sucking was long gone.

He watched as Miriam, Maria and Diana dressed Rebecca in a long white gown that stood out among the blacks and purples of the cellar like a virgin in a brothel. His three devotees were all from abusive backgrounds and had presumably joined Vlad (or Robert Jones, as the electoral roll knew him) because he never veiled his abuse in hypocrisy: he never told them what he did was for their own good and they knew it was just to satisfy his jaded need for a new kick.

Indeed, most of his teenage life had been spent looking for kicks, but nothing had ever satisfied him. drink, drugs, sex, violence, the occult... Becoming a Goth was inevitable, but had only led to his estrangement from a domineering mother, homelessness and finally his drifting down to Brighton. Here he'd heard of this house - haunted, supposedly, by four girls who'd hanged themselves in an upstairs room, all four, sometime during the Depression. He'd felt some sympathy for the girls, had hoped they'd come to him, tell him if the ultimate kick wasn't on the other side. But it was all lies. There were no ghosts.

He turned to the others.

'Take her to the altar,' he commanded.

Upstairs, in what had once been the kitchen of the house, a loud crack came from the exterior door. It swung open to let in a shaft of moonlight, followed by a mop of dreadlocks and a thin face.

Nick glanced briefly round the kitchen, then turned and beckoned to his companions. He tiptoed into the grimy room, followed by Hamish and Eloise. As the Scot crossed the threshold, he stumbled over a piece of debris and cursed. His voice was loud in the silence.

'Sssh!' hissed Nick.

'Don't tell me to "ssh", you twat,' Hamish grumbled.

'Keep quiet,' Eloise said from behind him. He turned.

'Ah'mno doing what he says...' he began.

'The pair of you, shut up!' Nick snapped. They went quiet. 'Good. Now follow me.' He turned and headed for the interior door. Scowling at the crustie's back, Hamish followed. Eloise flitted after them.

They came out into the hall. Paint was peeling from the walls and an unpleasant smell hung in the air. A staircase led up the left wall and beneath it stood the door to the cellar. The house was silent. Nick turned to the others.

'Well, I've got you in...' he started.

‘Yes, good work,’ said Eloise.

Nick preened himself. ‘Well, if you want any thieving done, or breaking and entering, just ask someone from Liverpool,’ he replied.

‘Yes, thanks, Nick,’ Eloise said hurriedly. ‘Now then, what I suggest we do is split up and search the place. Shouldn’t take too long. You take this floor, Hamish; you look for them upstairs, Nick; and I’ll check the cellar. When you’ve finished looking, come back here, whether you’ve found them or not.’

‘Okay,’ Nick said. He headed for the stairs. As he started up them, he looked back and saw Hamish reaching for the door to the front room and Eloise opening the cellar door.

He hurried up the steps.

Upstairs, the rooms were in much the same state as below. Nick could tell that the place had once been pretty pleasant: large enough for a family as big as his own and no need to cram all the kids into one room. He’d had no privacy back home in Garston and he was a very private kind of person; it had been that as much as anything that had prompted him to leave home. Well, being thrown out for not getting his hair cut had helped, of course...

He wandered around, glancing enviously into the rooms, wondering why people left a house like this deserted when in other parts of the country kids were growing up like he had: when the streets were full of the homeless...

His inner monologue came to an abrupt end as he forced open the door to the final room.

Four corpses dangled at the end of ropes suspended from the ceiling. Paralysed with fright, he stared at the scene as one of the swinging corpses gyrated unsteadily towards him. He gaped in shock at the throttled face. He recognised it! Though she had the hairstyle and clothes of fifty years ago, her face was unmistakable.

It was the dead-faced Gothic girl who had helped them escape the police. Nick stared in horror. All he could hear was a pounding in his ears, faster and faster...

Then the corpse smiled and he blacked out.

Rebecca stood by the altar, silent and expressionless. Around her stood the other three girls, their high-collared black cloaks enveloping her white robes. On the far side of the altar stood Vlad, in the process of completing the main incantation of the rite. He fell silent and reached for the small chalice and knife on the altar. Then he nodded to Miriam.

She reached out towards Rebecca’s robe and slid it down to her shoulders, baring her breasts. Vlad gazed at them dispassionately and leaned forward. Placing the chalice beneath Rebecca’s bosom, he held the blade of the knife against her left breast and quickly sliced across it. Blood began to trickle down her creamy skin. It reached her nipples and dribbled off into the chalice like ensanguined milk. He did the same to the other breast and soon the chalice was filling with blood.

Throughout the operation, Rebecca made not a sound.

Stepping back, Vlad silently raised the chalice towards the mural of Cain, then put it to his lips. He reflected bitterly on the ignorant masses' belief that vampires sucked blood from their victims' jugular veins - a myth invented by sexually repressed Victorians who had been incapable of facing the truth, chronicled as it was in Slavic legend. Once he had drunk his fill, he passed it to Miriam, who sipped it and handed it on to Maria. She did the same and passed it on to Diana.

When they had drained it, they turned to Rebecca's unresisting figure. Their eyes wild, they bent towards the oozing gashes in her chest and greedily began to lap up the sluggish blood.

Vlad heard a gasp from the cellar steps and turned suddenly.

Another empty room. Hamish glanced around the dingy backroom with its old-fashioned, broken down furniture and shook his head. Not even Goths would squat here. Well, that was that: he'd explored the ground floor and now he'd have to go and wait for the others. He pushed the door open and stepped out into the hall.

He glanced upstairs and listened. Not a sound. What was Nick doing, he wondered. Not a lot by the sound of it. He turned to the cellar door. Surely, it didn't take even Eloise this long to check out a cellar? He opened the door to a crack. It creaked as it did so, but the noise failed to mask a low chanting sound from below, which ended as Hamish cocked his head to listen. He paused briefly, then began to pick his way down the steps.

Flickering candlelight was visible at the bottom of the steps, but it failed to illuminate his advance. He reached the bottom and put his foot down on something soft and mobile. Eloise gasped in the gloom before him.

He'd stepped on her.

'Nick? Is that you?' she hissed, as he stumbled back.

'Och, it's me,' the skinhead grunted. He peered down at her. She was looking up from the floor, where she had been crouched at the crack of the door. Through the crack, candlelight was flickering. 'What are you doing down there?'

Eloise drew herself up. In the faint light, Hamish could see that her eyes were wide and her face pale.

'What's up?' he asked, an uncharacteristic note of concern in his voice.

But before she could speak, the door behind her swung open and Hamish saw a dark figure silhouetted against the dim light within. Over its shoulder, Hamish caught a confused impression of coffins, robed figures and an altar. Then the figure spoke.

'Ah! Two more innocent victims come to join the bloodletting.' It was Vlad.

Hamish grinned wolfishly.

'It's blood you want, is it?' he growled. 'There's a matter between the two of us that

needs sorting out.’ He pulled out his knife.

‘Hamish, no,’ cried Eloise, as candlelight glinted from the naked blade. But the skinhead ignored her and leapt to the attack.

Vlad stumbled backwards into the cellar, tripping over his dark robes and scrabbling desperately for his own weapon. As he did so, Eloise glimpsed her sister, standing unresisting and semi-naked in the arms of three black-clad girls. Her eyes widened with horror; they were hungrily sucking blood from deep gashes in Becky’s breasts.

Then the scuffling forms of Hamish and Vlad blocked her view of the sinister scene.

Hamish lashed at Vlad with his knife, but it caught in the folds of the other’s cloak. Vlad struggled to free himself and at the same time brought his knife whistling down. Hamish turned and twisted just in time and the blade merely skidded along a rib, opening up a shallow wound across his muscular torso.

The skinhead snarled and after freeing his blade, he stabbed down at the Goth. Vlad’s scrawny hand shot out and grabbed Hamish’s arm. Despite his scrawny, unhealthy physique, Vlad was incredibly strong and Hamish found himself unable to free himself.

‘Look at me,’ Vlad said. Hamish tried to pull his arm back. ‘Look at me, I said,’ Vlad repeated. Hamish glanced briefly at his face and froze as their eyes met. Instantly, Hamish’s aggression fled. He stared into Vlad’s eyes with his mouth open, fascinated by the intensity of their gaze, unaware of anything other than their existence. The eyes were dark, looming, dangerous and feral with an animality that spoke to Hamish of wildness and blasphemous freedoms beyond the confines of his own narrow life...

He heard words on the edge of his awareness but they had no meaning.

‘Hamish! Do something!’ Eloise yelled.

She gazed at the skinhead with unease. A few seconds ago, he’d been fighting Vlad with tigerish ferocity - now he seemed to have given up. She shuddered at the realisation that even someone like Hamish could fall under Vlad’s spell. She remembered her own infatuation with him and how it had soon turned sour; the things he had wanted her to do brought a bad taste to her mouth even now. And what he had done to Becky!

Hamish was slowly sinking to the floor, his shaven head falling back as Vlad’s elegant features bore him down. But his knife-arm still rose above them. Eloise swallowed. She would have to do something. But she couldn’t hurt Vlad... Could she? But... She...

With an awful suddenness that surprised even herself, Eloise ran at the pair, grabbed Hamish’s arm, forced it out of Vlad’s weakened grip and plunged the knife into her ex-boyfriend’s heart.

Hamish was jerked back to normality as he hit the floor. He got up into a crouch, shook his head, blinked and looked around.

Eloise stood over Vlad’s motionless body with a look of horror and self-loathing on

her face. Behind her was a shocked tableau. Vlad's three disciples stood around the slumped body of Rebecca, their faces unusually alive with expressions of consternation. Rebecca lay across the altar, her skin an anaemic white.

Eloise dropped the bloodstained knife with a clatter. She turned to Hamish. He shook his head again, like a dog just come up from a swim in deep waters.

'What happened?' he asked, bewildered. 'One minute Ah was fighting fuckface there, next minute Ah'm over here and ye've killed him.'

Eloise gazed at the lifeless corpse at her feet. She bent down and reached into his mouth, pulling out his false fangs.

'He wasn't a vampire,' she murmured. 'But he had some amazing psychic powers. He could mesmerise you, Hamish and that's something I wouldn't have credited from anyone.' Then she rose and turned to face the three girls. She paled.

'What have you done?' she shrieked. She rushed forward to check her sister's pulse. Nothing. She turned on the three bewildered girls, her face a mask of fury.

'You've killed her, you blood-sucking bitches!' she shrieked. She glanced around. Seeing the bloody knife on the floor beside Vlad's corpse, she ran towards it. But as she reached for it, Hamish grabbed her hand.

'Ah think we should hear what they have to say for themselves first,' he said grimly. Eloise glared at her. He returned her gaze unflinching. After a few seconds, she relaxed.

'Yes,' she replied. She got to her feet and turned toward the girls. 'Well?' she demanded.

Cautiously, Miriam spoke.

'I...' She looked at her two companions. They nodded, encouragingly. 'I don't really know,' she admitted. Her voice was high-pitched and tremulous with nerves. Absently, she prodded at her false incisors. 'The last few weeks seem like a dream.'

'Or like being on acid,' Maria ventured.

Diana took up the story. 'We started hanging round with Vlad not so long ago. I think we all fancied him a bit. And we were so under his influence. We ran away from our homes to stay with him here. It all seemed cool. But he made us do... horrible things.' She went red.

'Like what?' Eloise frowned.

'Things that bring true vampires into disrepute,' came a voice from behind them. They turned and saw the dead-faced girl and her three friends framed in the doorway. She folded her arms and bared her fangs. 'Thanks for getting this bastard out of our way, incidentally.'

'True vampires?' Eloise asked cautiously.

‘Yeah, of course,’ the girl replied. ‘You hadn’t guessed?’

‘Ah don’t believe in vampires,’ Hamish blustered. ‘And Ah thought you hated Goths who pretend to be undead.’

The girl smiled again. ‘We’re not pretending to be vampires,’ she said pleasantly. ‘We’re pretending to be Goths.’ She took a small mirror out of her handbag and threw it to the skinhead. ‘Try and see us in this.’

Hamish did as she suggested. He glanced from them to the mirror and back again. Then back at the mirror.

‘It’s fucking impossible,’ he said.

‘Ah, the intelligent response,’ the girl sneered.

‘Who are you?’ Eloise asked.

‘I’m Edna and these are my friends Irene, Virginia and Kitty,’ the girl went on. ‘Not very trendy names, but we were born just after the Great War, most of us.’ She shrugged. ‘Not a good time to be around. The Depression made Thatcher’s Britain look like a tea party. We all lost our jobs, had to do all kinds of things just to stay alive; begging, scavenging, whoring... In the end, we decided to end it all. We hanged ourselves upstairs. We didn’t expect to come back - but folklore always said that suicides become vampires.’

‘This house is supposed to be haunted,’ Eloise said slowly.

‘Yes. Our ghosts - psychic recordings of our last moments imprinted on the ether - hang around upstairs,’ Edna said. ‘They tend to scare off unwanted visitors. Didn’t work with Vlad here, unfortunately. He was too strong-willed for ghosts to be able to manifest themselves in his presence; he had a psychic aura like a ten-ton truck, which went smashing through all our defences. Without even being aware of it, he desecrated our coffins so we couldn’t return to them. Now he’s dead we can actually venture into our old squat, regenerate ourselves and reconsecrate it...’

‘Really,’ said Eloise hurriedly. ‘Well, it’s been very interesting meeting you, but we must dash, you know...’

Edna smiled again. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said.

‘But we helped you!’ Eloise exclaimed in outrage.

‘But we need blood,’ Edna replied. She laughed at Eloise’s expression. ‘Feeling betrayed? Did you really expect us not to act true to form? We’re vampires, we have no ethical code; we don’t need one. Morals are for mortals. Morals are for those who cling to society and its mores because they fear death.’ She stepped closer to Eloise and caressed her cheek. ‘But as a special favour’ - she winked - ‘we’ll save you two till last.’

The other vampires followed her in. One stood in the doorway as the others rounded up Eloise, Hamish and the three Gothic girls. Try as she might, Eloise found it

impossible to struggle as Edna bore down on her and out of the corner of her eye she could see the others were equally passive, even Hamish. The vampires tied four of them to the altar, but led Miriam into the centre of the room.

Eloise tried to reason with them one last time.

‘Can’t you find some other way of doing this?’ she cried out. Edna spared her a glance.

‘Shut up, or your death will be worse,’ she snapped. Two of her followers took Miriam by the arms. Edna and the other remaining vampires advanced on their helpless prey; they reached out, pulled the robe down to expose her neck, then took it in turns to sink their sharp white teeth into her soft flesh.

Eloise watched, sickened by the sight and the smell - the smell most of all. For years, she had been obsessed with vampires, seduced by their romantic myth, Anne Rice’s most devoted follower; but there was nothing romantic about this. It was real. It was sordid. It was brutal, vicious, heartless.

It was rape.

When they had finished, they took Miriam’s limp, enervated body and savagely tore it apart into bloodless chunks, as if it was a roast chicken. Then they ceremoniously placed the pieces in the nearest coffin.

This completed, they untied Diana and took her, whimpering, into the middle of the room. She gazed up at their bestial faces with a bovine, resigned expression on her face. Edna bared her neck and the whole bloody process broke out afresh.

Nick awoke to find the morning sun beaming straight into the dilapidated room. He screwed up his eyes and got slowly to his feet. How long had he been asleep? What was he doing here? His head throbbed.

Abruptly, it came back to him in a rush. The nightclub, Eloise’s sister, the police, the house... The ghosts. He glanced around nervously. No sign of them. But it was daylight outside, so that was to be expected.

But where were Eloise and Hamish? They must have gone without waiting for him. That wasn’t nice, was it? Maybe they’d thought he’d gone already. He’d better try and find them, catch up with them, discover what had happened while he was out cold. And if he couldn’t find them, well - he’d survived without them before.

He headed for the door, eager to get back on the road.

The morning light had no chance of penetrating the cellar below. The smell of spilt blood and posthumous egestion filled the air as the vampires placed Maria’s lacerated remains in one of the coffins. Edna turned and headed towards Eloise.

She struggled in her bonds. ‘Hamish...’ she whimpered,

The skinhead lay beside her, unable to move. ‘Oh, fuck,’ he said inadequately.

The vampires clustered around Eloise and she shuddered with revulsion at the touch of their cold, dead flesh. They unbound her and heaved her up. Three of them held her while Edna stepped closer. The vampire bared her fangs, threw her head back, then plunged her teeth into Eloise's flesh.

The door creaked open. A voice could be heard.

'Eloise? Hamish?'

Simultaneously, a beam of morning sunlight lanced through the widening gap between cellar door and lintel. Edna tore herself away from her meal and spun round to confront the horrific sight. The other vampires dropped Eloise and turned.

The light struck them like a laser-beam. One after another, they exploded into flame, shrieking and sobbing with pain and rage as their superannuated flesh blazed. Edna stumbled halfway across the room, still flaming, then crashed into the wall and slid, rattling, down it, leaving a black smear of burnt flesh. The rest of the vampires smouldered where they fell. The stench was repellent.

'Er, Hamish? Eloise?' Nick repeated, peering in through the doorway, silhouetted by the sunlight. Eloise, freed from the vampires' influence by their demise, staggered to her feet and ran to him, hugging him ecstatically. Nick returned the embrace with a foolish, embarrassed grin.

'Hey, what did I do this time?' he laughed.

A quarter of an hour later, they were sitting on the cellar steps with the morning sun beaming down from the passage above. Eloise was hugging Rebecca's corpse to her chest.

'Hers must be the only body to survive intact,' Nick said sadly. The others had filled him in on the events of the night. He would have thought they were taking the piss if he hadn't grabbed a brief, sickening glimpse of the morbid detritus in the room, before staggering out to be sick. He'd almost regretted his decision to take a look in the cellar, on the off-chance of finding them.

'She doesn't have to be dead,' Eloise moaned. Tears were streaming down her face.

Hamish decided it was time he reasserted himself. 'Face it, Eloise,' he said firmly. 'She's dead. There's nuhin' you can do about it.' His helplessness in the face of a faggoty Goth and a few undead dykes had left him smarting and he needed some way of regaining his self-respect. All the same, his experiences had touched a hitherto unsuspected sensitive streak. He didn't want Eloise to cling to her delusions, but he didn't want to upset her, either. But she looked irritatingly superior, despite her grief, when she turned to him.

'I can bring her back,' she insisted. Hamish shook his head. 'I can,' she said angrily. 'That notebook Nick robbed from Anghelides, the occultist we tangled with in Silchester. It said something about a discovery his master had made in Wales, at a place called Caer Pedryfan. I'm sure if we can find the Cauldron of Annwfn we'll be able to bring my sister back to life...' There was a brief silence.

‘Well, we can’t hang around here much longer,’ Nick said. ‘We’ve already got the bizzies after Hamish. If they find us here, they’re not gonna believe a fuckin’ word we say.’

Eloise looked determined.

‘We’ll put Becky in a coffin,’ she began. ‘Then we’ll make the cellar inaccessible.’ She glanced at her two companions. ‘Then we’ll hitch a lift to Caer Pedryfan.’

‘And then what?’ asked Hamish.

‘Then?’ Eloise replied. She smiled. ‘We’ll see.’

They got up and went about their business.

Saga of the Ere-Dwellers

CHAPTER XIII

Of Snorri Thorgrimson.

Snorri Thorgrimson was fourteen winters old when he fared abroad with his foster-brothers Thorleif Kimbi and Thorod. Bork the Thick gave him fifty hundreds in silver for his voyage. They had a good voyage, and came to Norway in harvest, and were the winter through in Rogaland.

Snorri abode with Erling Skialgson at Soli, and Erling was good to him because of the ancient friendship between their former kinsmen, Horda-Karl and Thorolf Most-beard to wit.

The summer after they fared out to Iceland and were late-ready. They had a hard outing of it, and came a little before winter to Hornfirth; but when the Broadfirthers dight them from shipboard, far asunder showed the array of the twain, Snorri and Thorleif Kimbi. Thorleif bought the best horse he could get, and had withal a fair-stained saddle, and glittering and fair-dight sword, and gold-inlaid spear, and his shield was dark blue and much gilded about; and all his clothes were well wrought withal. He had spent thereon pretty much all his faring-money; but Snorri was clad in a black cape, and rode a black mare, a good one. He had an ancient trough-saddle, and his weapons were little wrought for show. But the array of Thorod was between the two.

They rode from the east over the Side, and then as the road lay, west to Burgfirth, and so west across the Flats, and gusted at Swanfirth. Thereafter Snorri rode to Holyfell, and was minded to abide there the winter through. Bork, however, took that matter slowly, and folk had much laughter over his array. Bork let out so much as that he had done unhappily with the faring-money, since it was all gone.

But one day in the beginning of winter, at Holyfell in came twelve men all armed. And there was come Eyolf the Gray, a kinsman of Bork and son of Thord the Yeller; he dwelt at Otterdale west in Ernfirmth. But when folk asked for tidings, they said that they had slain Gisli Surson, and told of the men who were fallen before him or ever he fell. At these tidings was Bork exceeding glad, and bade Thordis and Snorri welcome Eyolf at their best, as a man who had thrust off so much shame from the hands of

them and their kin.

Snorri let out little over those tidings, but Thordis said: “Cheer good enough for Gisli’s bane if grout is given him.”

Bork answered: “I meddle not with meals.”

So Bork set Eyolf in the high-seat, and his fellows out from him, and they cast their weapons on the floor. Bork sat inside of Eyolf, and then Snorri Thordis bare in dishes of grout to the board, and had spoons withal; but when she set one before Eyolf, one of the spoons fell down for her. She stooped after it, and took Eyolf’s sword therewith and drew it swiftly, and thrust it up under the board, and the thrust smote Eyolf’s thigh, but the hilt caught against the board; yet was the hurt sore. Bork thrust the table away and smote at Thordis, but Snorri thrust Bork away, so that he fell over, and caught hold of his mother and set her down beside him, and said that enough were her heart-burnings though she were left unbeaten.

Then sprang up Eyolf and his men, and man caught hold of man; but such was the end of these matters that Bork handselled self-doom to Eyolf, and much fee he awarded himself for his hurt; and withal he fared away. But thereof waxed much ill-will betwixt the twain, Bork and Snorri.

CHAPTER XIV

Snorri Gets Holyfell.

At the Spring Thing the next summer Snorri claimed his father’s heritage from Bork. Bork answered that he would yield him his heritage. “But I am loth,” said he, “to share Holyfell asunder, though I see that it is meet for us not to dwell in one stead together. So I will redeem my share of the land.” Snorri answered: “It is most fair that thou shouldst lay the land at as dear a price as thou wilt, but fair also that I choose which of us shall redeem it.”

Bork thought over that matter, and so deemed that Snorri would not have loose money

to give for the land if he should have to redeem it speedily, and he laid the worth of half the land at sixty hundreds of silver, having first set aside the islands, because he thought that he should get them at but little price when Snorri should have set up house and home elsewhere.

There followed therewith that the money should be straightway paid up, and nought of the money should be borrowed from other folk. "And choose thou now, Snorri, here on the spot which thou wilt take," said Bork.

Snorri answered: "This know I now, kinsman Bork, that thou deemest me sick of purse when thou layest down the land of Holyfell so good cheap; yet I choose to take to me my father's land at that price, so reach me out thine hand, and handsel me now the land."

"That shall not be," said Bork, "before every penny is first yolden."

Then said Snorri to Thorbrand his foster-father: "Did I hand over to thee any money last autumn?" "Yea," said Thorbrand, and therewith drew a purse from under his cape. Then was the silver told, and every penny paid for the land, and after that was left in the purse sixty hundreds of silver.

Bork took the money, and gave handsel to Snorri of the land.

Then said Bork: "More of silver hast thou got, kinsman, than we wotted; now I will that we give up the ill-will which was between us; and I will add this to thy well-doing, that we keep house both together at Holyfell these seasons, since thou hast little of live-stock."

Snorri answered: "Well then, thou shalt make the most of thy live-stock; but yet from Holyfell shalt thou get thee gone." And so must it be even as Snorri would.

But when Bork was ready to depart from Holyfell, Thordis went forth and named witnesses to this for herself, that she gave out that she was parted from Bork her husband, and gave that for the cause that he had smitten her, and she would not lie

under his hand. Then were their goods divided, and Snorri stood forth for his mother because he was her heir. Then Bork took the lot which he had minded for another, that he got but a little price for the islands.

Thereafter Bork fared away from Holyfell, and west to Midfell- strand, and dwelt first at Borkstead between Orris-knoll and Tongue.

CHAPTER XV

Of Snorri The Priest, Of The Mewlithe-Folk.

Snorri Thorgrimsom set up house at Holyfell, and his mother was over the housekeeping. Mar Hallwardson, his father's brother, betook himself thither with much live-stock, and was head over Snorri's household and husbandry. There Snorri held a thronged house of the greatest largesse.

Snorri was middling in height and somewhat slender, fair to look on, straight-faced and of light hue; of yellow hair and red beard; he was meek of mood in his daily ways; little men knew of his thought for good or ill; he was a wise man, and foreseeing in many things, enduring in wrath and deep in hatred; of good rede was he for his friends, but his unfriends deemed his counsels but cold.

He was now Warden of the Temple there; therefore was he called Snorri the Priest, and a great chief he became; but for his rule he was much envied, because there were many who for the sake of their kin thought they were of no less worth than he, but had more to fall back upon, because of their strength and proven hardihood.

Now Bork the Thick and Thordis Sur's daughter, had a daughter who was called Thurid, and was at this time wedded to Thorbiorn the Thick, who dwelt at Frodis-water. He was the son of Worm the Slender, who had dwelt there and had settled the land of Frodis-water; he had before had to wife Thurid of Broadwick, daughter of Asbrand of Combe; she was sister to Biorn, the Champion of the Broadwickers, who hereafter cometh again into this tale, and to Arnbiorn the Strong. These were the sons of Thorbiorn and Thurid: Ketil the Champion, Gunnlaug, and Hallstein.

But Thorbiorn of Frodis-water was overbearing and reckless with men lesser than he.

In those days dwelt at Mewlithe, Geirrid, daughter of Thorolf Halt-foot, with Thorarin the Swart, her son. He was a big man and a strong; ugly he was, and moody and quiet in his daily guise: he was called the Peace-maker. He had not much wealth to boast of, yet was his housekeeping gainful. So little of a meddler was he, that his foes said that he had no less the heart of a woman than a man. He was a married man, and his wife was called Aud; Gudny was his sister, whom Vermund the Slender had to wife.

At Holt, west of Mewlithe, dwelt a widow who was called Katla. She was fair to look upon, but yet not to all men's minds. Her son was called Odd; he was a big man and of good pith, a mighty brawler, and babbling, slippery, and slanderous.

Now Gunnlaug, the son of Thorbiorn the Thick, was eager to learn; he often stayed at Mewlithe, and learned cunning from Geirrid, Thorolt's daughter, because she knew much wizard lore. But on a day Gunnlaug came to Holt on his way to Mewlithe, and talked much with Katla; but she asked if he were minded once more for Mewlithe to pat the old carline's belly there. Gunnlaug said that was not his errand, "but thou art not so young, Katla, that it befits thee to cast Geirrid's eld in her teeth."

Katla answered: "I did not deem that we were so like herein; but it matters not," said she; "ye men deem that there is no woman beside Geirrid, but more women know somewhat than she alone."

Odd Katlason fared often to Mewlithe with Gunnlaug; but when they happened to go back late, Katla would often bid Gunnlaug to abide there at Holt, but he went home ever.

CHAPTER XVI

Gunnlaug Is Witch-Ridden,

Geirrid Summoned, Of Thorarin.

On a day at the beginning of that winter wherein Snorri first kept house at Holyfell, it befell that Gunnlaug Thorbiornson fared to Mewlithe, and Odd Katlason with him. Gunnlaug and Geirrid talked long together that day, and when the evening was far spent Geirrid said to Gunnlaug: "I would that thou go not home this evening, for there will be many ride-by-nights about, and oft is a fiend in a fair skin; but methinks that now thou seemest not over-lucky to look upon."

Gunnlaug answered: "No risk may there be to me," says he, "since we are two together."

She said: "No gain will Odd's help be to thee, and withal thou wilt thyself have to pay for thine own wilfulness."

Thereafter they went out, Gunnlaug and Odd, and fared till they came to Holt. Katla was by then in her bed; she bade Odd pray Gunnlaug to abide there. He said he had so done, "and he must needs fare home," said he. "Let him fare then as his fate he shapes," says she.

Gunnlaug came not home in the evening, and folk talked it over that he should be searched for; but the search came not off. But in the night, when Thorbiorn looked out, he found Gunnlaug his son before the door; and there he lay witless withal. Then was he borne in and his clothes pulled off; he was all black and blue about the shoulders, and the flesh was falling from the bones. He lay all the winter sick of his hurts, and great talk there was over that sickness of his. Odd Katlason spread that about that Geirrid must have ridden him; for he said that they had parted with short words that evening. And most men deemed that it was even thus.

This was about the summoning days. So Thorbiorn rode to Mewlithe and summoned Geirrid for this cause, that she was a ride-by-night and had brought about Gunnlaug's trouble. The case went to the Thorsness Thing, and Snorri the Priest took up the case for Thorbiorn his brother-in-law; but Arnkel the Priest defended the case for Geirrid his sister: a jury of twelve should give a verdict thereon. But neither of the two, Snorri or Arnkel, were deemed fit to bear witness, because of their kinship to the plaintiff and defendant.

Then was Helgi, the Priest of Templegarth, the father of Biorn, the father of Gest, the

father of Shald-Ref, called to give out the twelve men's finding. Arnkel the Priest went to the doom and made oath on the stall-ring that Geirrid had not wrought the hurt of Gunnlaug; Thorarin made oath with him and ten other men, and then Helgi gave the verdict for Geirrid. And the case of Thorbiorn and Snorri came to nought, and thereof gat they shame.

CHAPTER XVII

Strife At The Thorsness Thing;

Snorri Goes Between.

At this Thing Thorgrim Kiallakson and his sons strove with Illugi the Black about the jointure and dowry of Ingibiorg, Asbiorn's daughter, the wife of Illugi, which Tinforni had had in wardship.

At the Thing great storms befell, so that no man could come to the Thing from Midfell-strand, and a great drawback to Thorgrim's strength it was that his kin might not come.

Illugi had a hundred men and those a chosen band, and he pushed the case forward; but the Kiallekings went to the court, and would fain break it up.

Then there was a mighty throng, and men made it their business there to part them; but so the matter went, that Tinforni had to give up the money according to Illugi's claim. So says Odd the Skald in Illugi's lay:

"It was west at the Thorsness Thing fray was there foughten,

And there was the man by hap ever upholden;

The staff of the song from the helm that upriseth

Was a-claiming the dowry amidst of the Mote.
So the fair load of Fornir's scrip fell in the ending
To the keen-witted wight one, the warrior that feedeth
The swart swallow's brother that flits o'er the fight.
But no easy matter was peace unto menfolk."

CHAPTER XVIII

Men Will Ransack At Mewlithe:

Thorarin Falls To Fight.

That summer died Thorgrim Kiallakson, whereon Vermund the Slender, his son, took the homestead at Bearhaven; he was a wise man, and marvellous wholesome of redes. Stir also had by then dwelt for some time at Lava, up from Bearhaven; he was a wise man and a hardy. He had to wife Thorbiorg, daughter of Thorstein Windy-Nose. Thorstein and Hall were their sons; Asdis was the name of their daughter, a manly-souled woman, and somewhat high-minded. Stir was a masterful man in the countryside, and had a many folk about him; he was held guilty at many men's hands, for that he wrought many slayings and booted none.

That summer came out a ship to the Salteremouth: half of it was owned by Northmen, and their skipper was called Biorn; he went to dwell at Ere with Steinthor. The other half was owned by South-islanders, and Alfgeir was their skipper; he went to dwell at Mewlithe with Thorarin the Swart, and with him a fellow of his who was called Nail, a big man, and swift of foot; he was Scotch of kin.

Now Thorarin had a good fighting horse up in the fells; and Thorbiorn the Thick withal had many stud horses together, which he kept on the fell-pastures, and he was wont to choose out of them in autumn horses for slaughter. But in the autumn it befell that Thorbiorn's horses were not to be found, though they were searched for far and wide: and that autumn the weather was somewhat hard.

In the beginning of winter Thorbiorn sent Odd Katlason south over the heath to a stead called Under-the-Lava, where there dwelt a man called Cunning-Gils, a foreseeing man, and a great man for spying after thefts and such like other matters as

he was wistful to pry into. Odd asked whether it was outland men or out-parish men or neighbours who had stolen Thorbiorn's horses.

Cunning-Gils, answered: "Say thou to Thorbiorn even as I say, that I deem that those horses will not have gone far away from their pastures; but risky it is to tell of men's names, and it is better to lose one's own than that great troubles should arise therefrom."

Now when Odd came to Frodis-water, Thorbiorn deemed that Cunning-Gils had made a thrust at the Mewlithers in that matter. Odd said too that he had said as much as that they were the likeliest for the horse-stealing who were themselves penniless, and yet had lately got them increase of servants more than was their wont. In these words Thorbiorn thought that the Mewlithers were clearly meant.

After that rode Thorbiorn from home with eleven men. Hallstein, his son, was in that journey, but Ketil the Champion, another son of his, was then abroad; there was Thorir, the son of Ern of Ernknoll, a neighbour of Thorbiorn's and the briskest of men; Odd Katlason, too, was in this journey; but when they came to Holt to Katla, she did on Odd her son an earth-brown kirtle, which she had then newly made.

Thereafter they fared to Mewlithe, and there stood Thorarin and the home men out in the door when they saw the men coming.

Then they greeted Thorbiorn and asked for tidings. Thorbiorn said: "This is our errand here, Thorarin," says he, "that we are seeking after the horses which were stolen from me in the autumn; therefore we claim to ransack thine house."

Thorarin answered: "Is this ransacking taken up according to law; or have ye called any lawful law-seers to search into this case; or will ye handsel truce to us in this ransacking; or have ye sought further elsewhere for the doing of this ransacking?"

Thorbiorn answered: "We deem not that any ransacking need be pushed further."

Thorarin answered: "Then will we flatly refuse this ransacking, if ye begin and carry

on the search lawlessly.”

Said Thorbiorn: “Then shall we take that for sooth, that thou wilt be found proven guilty, if thou wilt not have the matter thrust off thee by the ransacking.”

“Ye may do as ye please,” said Thorarin.

Thereafter Thorbiorn made a door-doom, and named six men for that doom; and then Thorbiorn gave forth the case at Thorarin’s hands for the horse-stealing.

Then came Geirrid out to the door, and saw what betid, and said: “Overtrue is that which men say, Thorarin, that thou hast more of the mind of a woman than a man, when thou bearest from Thorbiorn the Thick all shame soever; nor wot I why I have such a son.”

Then said Alfgeir the Skipper, “We will give thee aid in whatsoever thou wilt bestir thyself.”

Thorarin answered:” No longer will I stand here;” and therewith Thorarin and his folk ran out and would break up the court. They were seven in all, and therewithal both sides rushed into the fight. Thorarin slew a house-carle of Thorbiorn’s, and Alfgeir another, and there fell also a housecarle of Thorarin’s; but no weapons would bite on Odd Katlason. ,

Now the goodwife Aud calls out on her women to part them, and they cast clothes over the weapons.

Thereafter Thorarin and his men went in, but Thorbiorn rode off with his folk, and they put off the case to the Thorsness Thing. They rode up along the Creeks, and bound up their wounds under a stackyard that is called Combe-Garth.

But in the home-field at Mewlithe men found a hand whereas they had fought, and it

was shown to Thorarin; he saw that it was a woman's hand, and asked where Aud was; it was told him that she lay in bed. Then he went to her, and asked whether she were wounded; she bade him pay no heed to that, but he was ware withal that her hand had been hewn off. Then he called to his mother, and bade her bind up the wound.

Then Thorarin rushed out with his fellows and ran after those of Thorbiorn, and when they were but a little from the garth they heard the babble of Thorbiorn and his folk; and Hallstein took up the word and said:

“Thorarin has thrust off from him the reproach of cowardice to-day.”

“Boldly he fought,” said Thorbiorn; “yet many become brave when brought to bay, but nathless are not over-brave between whiles.”

Then said Odd: “Thorarin must needs be the bravest of men, but luckless will it be deemed that he so wrought as to cut off his wife's hand.”

“Is that sure?” said Thorbiorn.

“Sure as day,” says Odd. With that they jumped up, and made great shouting and laughter thereover.

In that very nick of time came up Thorarin and his folk, and Nail was the foremost; but when he saw them threaten with their weapons, he blenched and ran forth and up into the fell, and there became one witless with fear. But Thorarin rushed at Thorbiorn and smote his sword into his head, and clave it down to the jaw-teeth. Then Thorir Ernson with two others set on Thorarin, and Hallstein and another on Alfgeir. Odd Katlason with another man gat on to a fellow of Alfgeir's, and three of Thorbiorn's fellows on two of Thorarin's folk; and the fight was joined both fierce and fell. But so their dealings ended, that Thorarin cut the leg from Thorir at the thickest of the calf, and slew both his fellows. Hallstein fell before Alfgeir wounded to death; but when Thorarin was free, Odd Katlason fled with two men; he was not wounded, because no weapon might bite on his kirtle; all their other fellows lay on the field; and there too were slain two housecarles of Thorarin.

Then Thorarin and his men took the horses of Thorbiorn and his folk and rode home; and then they saw where Nail was running along the upper hill-side. And when they came to the home-field, they see that Nail had passed by the garth and made inward towards Buland's-head. There he found two thralls of Thorarin, who were driving their sheep from the Head; he told them of the meeting, and what odds in number of men there was; he said he knew for sure that Thorarin and his men were slain; and therewithal they see how men ride away from the homestead over the field.

Then Thorarin and his folk took to galloping in order to help Nail, that he might not run into the sea or over the cliffs; but he and those others, when they saw men riding eagerly, deemed that there must Thorbiorn be going. Then they all betook themselves to running afresh up on to the Head, till they came to that place which is now called Thrall-sceae, and there Thorarin and his folk got Nail taken, because he had well-nigh broken his wind, but the thralls leapt over from the Head and were lost, as was like to be, because the Head is so high, that whatsoever leaps thereover must perish.

Thereafter Thorarin and his men rode home, and there was Geirrid in the door, and she asked how they had fared; but Thorarin sang this stave:

”The word of a woman wherewith I was wited

Have I warded away now where war dared the warrior,

He who slayeth the fire-flaught flaming in fight:

(The share of the eagle was corpse-meat new slaughtered.)

No yielding forsooth did I bear about yonder,

Where, amidst of the corpse-worms I met him,

The praiser manly the prayer of War-god beworshipped,

Not often I boast me of deeds of my doing.”

CHAPTER XIX

The Lay Of The Mewlithers.

For one night was Thorarin at home at Mewlithe, but in the morning Aud asked him what shift he was minded to seek for himself. "No will have I to turn thee out of my house," said she; "but I fear that there will be many a door-doom holden here this winter, for well I wot that Snorri the Priest must needs take up the case for Thorbiorn his brother-in-law." Then sang Thorarin:

"The wakener of law-wrong shall nowise meseemeth

This winter that waneth lay blood-wite on me,

For yonder is Arnkel, and there, as my hope is,

My life-warden liveth all praise-worth to win.

Might I come but to Vermund and fare with the feeder

Of the flame of the God of the field where the corpses

Lie fallen in slaughter, then surely for me

Might Hugin's son feed fat on field of the slain."

CHAPTER XX

The End Of Katla And Odd.

Now Geirrid, the goodwife at Mewlithe, sent word to Lairstead that she was ware of this, that Odd Katlason had stricken off the hand from Aud; she said that she had Aud's own word therefor, and that Odd had made boast of it before his friends.

But when Arnkel and Thorarin heard this, they rode from home out to Mewlithe, twelve men all told, and were there through the night; but in the morning they rode out to Holt, from whence their going was seen.

Now at Holt was no man at home but Odd. Katla sat on the dais, and span yarn. She bade Odd sit beside her; "and be thou as near to me as thou may'st." She bade her

women sit in their seats, “and be ye silent,” quoth she, “and I will have words with them.”

So when Arnkel and his folk came, they went in there, and when they came into the chamber, Katla greeted Arnkel and asked for tidings. Arnkel said he had nought to tell, and asked where was Odd. Katla said he had gone south to Broadwick. “Nor would he have foregone meeting thee if he had been at home, for that we trust thee well for thy manliness.”

“That may be,” said Arnkel, “but we will have a ransacking here.”

“That shall be as ye will,” said Katla, and bade her cookmaid bear light before them and unlock the meat bower, “that is the only locked chamber in the stead.”

Now they saw, how Katla span yarn from her rock, and they searched through the house and found not Odd; and thereafter they fared away.

But when they were come a short space from the garth, Arnkel stood still and said:

“Whether now has Katla cast a hood over our heads, and was Odd her son there whereas we saw but a rock?”

“She is not unlike to have so done,” said Thorarin, “so let us fare back.” And that they did.

But when it was seen from Holt that they turned back, then said Katla to her women:

“Ye shall still sit in your seats, but I will go with Odd out into the fore-chamber.” So when they were come out through the chamber door, she went into the porch over against the outer door, and combed Odd her son, and sheared his hair.

Then Arnkel and his folk fall in at the door, and saw where Katla was, and played with a he-goat of hers, and stroked his head and beard, and combed out his fell. Arnkel and his men went into the stove and saw Odd nowhere, but there lay Katla's rock on the bench, and thereby they deemed that Odd could never have been there.

Thereafter they went out and fared away. But when they came nigh to where they had turned before, Arnkel said: "Is it not in your mind that Odd was there in the likeness of that he-goat?"

"I wot not," said Thorarin, "but if we turn back now, then shall we lay hands on Katla."

"We will try once more then," said Arnkel, "and see what will happen;" and therewith they turned again.

But when their faring was seen, Katla asked Odd to come with her; and when they came out, she went to the ash-heap, and bade Odd lie down thereunder, "and abide thou there, whatsoever may come to pass."

Now when those of Arnkel came to the house, they ran in, and so into the chamber, and there sat Katla on the dais and span. She greeted them, and said that their visits came thick and fast. Arnkel said it was so; and therewith his fellows took the rock and hewed it asunder.

Then said Katla: "Ye will not have to say at home this eve that ye had no errand at Holt, since ye have slaughtered my rock."

Then went Arnkel and his folk and sought for Odd within and without, and saw nought quick save a house-boar that Katla owned, which lay under the ash-heap; and thereafter they fared away.

But when they were come halfway to Mewlithe, came Geirrid to meet them, with a

workman of hers, and asked, how they had fared. Thorarin told her all about it. She said they had ill sought for Odd: "But I will that ye turn back again once more, and I will fare with you; nought will it avail to sail with leaf-sails whereas Katla is."

With that they turned back. Geirrid had a blue mantle over her; and when their coming was seen from Holt, Katla was told that now they were fourteen folk altogether, and one of them in coloured raiment.

Then said Katla: "Must not Geirrid the troll be coming there? Then may glamour only nowise be brought to bear."

With that she got up from the dais, and took the seat from under her, and there was a lid under that, and the dais was hollow within; therein she made Odd to go, and set everything right as it was before, and sat thereover; but she said withal that she felt somewhat uncouth.

But when those folk came into the chamber, it came to no greetings between them. Geirrid cast off her cloak and went up to Katla, and took a sealskin bag which she had had with her, and did it over Katla's head; and then her fellows bound it fast beneath. Then bade Geirrid break open the dais, and there was Odd found, and bound sithence; and after that those twain were brought up to Buland's-head.

There was Odd hanged, and as he spurned the gallows Arnkel said: "Ill is thy lot from thy mother; and so it is that thou hast verily had an ill mother."

Katla said: "True it may be that he has had no good mother, but the ill lot that he has had from me has not been by my will; but it is my will that all ye may have ill hap from me, and I hope withal that that may come to pass; nor shall it be hidden from you that I wrought that harm to Gunnlaug Thorbiornson wherefrom all these troubles have arisen.

"But thou, Arnkel," said she, "may'st have no ill hap from thy mother, because thou hast none alive; but herein were I fain that my spell may stand fast, that from thy father thou mightest have a lot as much the worse than Odd has had from me, as thou hast the more to risk than he; and I hope that this may be said before all is over, that

thou hast an ill father.”

Thereafter they stoned her with stones that she died under the Head there; and fared afterwards to Mewlithe, and were there through the night; but the next day they rode home. Now were all these tidings known at one time, and of that tale no folk thought harm: and so the winter wore.

CHAPTER XXI

They Take Rede About The Blood-Feud.

The next spring on a day Arnkel called to him for a talk Thorarin his kinsman, Vermund, and Alfgeir, and asked them what kind of help they deemed the friendliest for them: whether they would ride to the Thing; “and that we expend therein all our other friends,” said he, “and then one of two things may hap: either that peace will be brought about, and then will your purses be shaken in atoning all who were slain there, or were hurt before you. That too may hap for one thing if the riding to the Thing is risked, that the troubles may wax, if so be the case is defended over-fiercely. But the other choice is to turn all our thoughts to this, that ye may fare abroad with all your loose goods, and let the lands be dealt with as fate may have it, such of them as may not be sold.”

Of this kind of help was Alfgeir most fain. Thorarin also said that he saw not how he might have means to atone with money all those guilts which had been wrought in these matters. Vermund said that he would not part from Thorarin whether he would that he should fare abroad with him, or give him fighting-help here in the land. But Thorarin chose that Arnkel should help them to going abroad; so thereafter was a man sent out to Ere, to Biorn the Skipper, to turn all his mind to get the ship ready for them as soon as might be.

CHAPTER XXII

Snorri Summons Thorarin.

Now it must be told of Snorri the Priest that he took up the blood-feud for the slaying of Thorbiorn his brother-in-law; he also made Thurid his sister fare home to Holyfell, because the rumour ran that Biorn, the son of Asbrand from Combe, was wont to wend thither to meet her for her beguiling.

Now Snorri deemed that he saw through all the counsel of Arnkel and his friends, as soon as he learned of that ship getting ready for sea, namely, that they had no mind to deliver money atonements for those slayings; because that as yet no biddings of peace were coming forward from their hands; yet was all quiet up to the summoning days. But when that time came round Snorri gathered men, and rode up into Swanfirth with eighty men, because it was then the law to give out the summons for blood-guilt in the hearing of the slayers, or at their home, and not to summon the neighbours till the Thing.

But when Snorri's faring was seen from Lairstead; then men talked together whether they should set on him forthwith, because there were many men there together; but Arnkel said that that should not be; "Snorri's law shall we bear," said he, and he said that only that should be wrought as things stood which need drove them to.

So when Snorri came to Lairstead, no greetings there were betwixt them, and then Snorri summoned Thorarin and all those who had been at the slayings, to the Thorsness Thing.

Arnkel hearkened duly to the summoning, and thereafter Snorri and his band rode away and up into Ulfar's-fell, and when they were gone away, then Thorarin sang:

"O ground whereon groweth the fair flame of hands,

Nought is it as if men were even now robbing

The flinger abroad of the flame of the sword-storm,

Of the law of the lands-folk, for me made all guilty.

Though they, deft in dealing with roof-sun of Odin,

Should lay me down guilty, and out of the law.

Forsooth I can see it that more is their manflock;

But yet may God give us the gain o'er the foemen."

CHAPTER XXIII

Of Vigfus And Biorn And Mar.

Vigfus, the son of Biorn, the son of Ottar, dwelt at Drapalith, as is aforesaid; he had to wife Thorgerd, Thorbein's daughter; he was a mighty bonder, but exceeding violent. A sister's son of his dwelt with him who was called Biorn; he was a rash-spoken man and unyielding.

Now in the autumn, after the closing of the Mewlithe suits, were found the horses of Thorbiorn the Thick in the mountain, and the stallion had not been able to hold his pasture-ground before a stallion of Thorarin's, who had driven the other horses, which were all found dead.

That same autumn folk held a thronged sheep-folding at Tongue up from Holyfell, betwixt it and Lax-river; thither went to the folding the home-men of Snorri the Priest, and Mar Hallwardson, the father's brother of Snorri, was at the head of them. Helgi was the name of Snorri's shepherd. Biorn, the kinsman of Vigfus, lay on the fold-garth; he had a pike-staff in his hand. Now Helgi drew out sheep. Biorn on a time asked what sheep was that which he drew; and when that was looked to, there was the mark of Vigfus on the sheep.

Then said Biorn: "Thou art in a hurry to slip out the sheep to-day, Helgi."

"That is more like to befall thee," said Helgi, "who abide in the sheep-walks of men."

"Well, thief, what knowest thou of that?" said Biorn, and sprang up and drove at him with the staff so that he fell stunned. But when Mar saw that, he drew his sword and cut at Biorn, and the stroke fell on the arm up by the shoulder, and a great wound that was. Thereat men ran into two bands, but some went betwixt them, and they were parted, so that nought else happed to tell of. But the next morning rode Vigfus down to Holyfell and claimed boot for this shaming, but Snorri spoke, saying that he saw no

odds between those haps that had befallen.

That Vigfus liked ill enough, and they parted with the greatest ill-will.

In the spring Vigfus brought a suit for the wounding to the Thorsness Thing, but Snorri set forth, that Biorn should be made guilty for the blow with the staff; and the end of the case was that Biorn was made guilty, because of the onslaught on Helgi, and got no boot for his wound, and his arm he bare ever after in a sling.

CHAPTER XXIV

Of Eric the Red.

At this same Thing Thorgest the Old and the sons of Thord the Yeller brought a case against Eric the Red for the slaughter of the sons of Thorgest, who had been slain in the autumn when Eric fetched the settles to Broadlairstead; and very thronged was that Thing; but before it they had sat at home with crowded followings. While the Thing was toward, Eric fitted out a ship for the main in Eric's-creek in Oxisle, and in aid of Eric stood Thorbiorn Vifil's son, and Slaying-Stir, and the sons of Thorbrand of Swanfirth, and Eyolf, son of Aesa of Swineisle. But out of those that furthered Eric, Stir alone was at the Thing, and drew away from Thorgest all the men he might.

Stir prayed Snorri the Priest not to set on Eric after the Thing with those of Thorgest, and gave his word to Snorri in return, that he would help him another time, should he be holden by great troubles; and because of this promise Snorri let the case pass by. After the Thing those of Thorgest sailed with many ships into the islands; but Eyolf, son of Aesa, hid Eric's ships in Dimon's bay, and thither came Stir and Thorbiorn to meet Eric; and then did Eyolf and Stir after the fashion of Arnkel, for they went in company with Eric, each in his own skiff, as far as past Ellidis-isle.

In the voyage Eric the Red found Greenland, and was there three winters, and then he went to Iceland, and abode there one winter before he fared out to settle Greenland; but this befell fourteen winters before Christ's faith was made law in Iceland.

Viriconium Nights

2 The Poisoned Chalice

The next night there was uproar in the *Golden Grasshopper*. Julilla was sitting on the bony knee of one of Vortimer's chief warriors when a drunken, angry figure staggered over.

'Traitor!' he roared, with no preliminary. Julilla recognised him as Vitalinus, leader of Vortigern's palace guard, a hard-drinking man who persisted in purchasing her services despite certain embarrassing personal problems. He was notorious for picking fights when drunk, doubtless in the interests of proving his manhood - but this time it seemed more serious.

'Wha'?' mumbled the warrior, glancing at his friends in amusement. 'I'm no traitor! What are you talking about?'

'You brought the Picts with you!' Vitalinus shouted accusingly. 'One of them killed two of my men!'

'Nothing to do with me,' the warrior replied, growing angry. 'I don't consort with heathens! Unlike your lord!'

Julilla gulped as Vitalinus' face went purple at this reference to Vortigern's wife.

'Your lord is a usurper!' he bellowed. 'He deposed his own father from sheer power lust!'

'My lord is a usurper, you sheep-shagging uplander?' Vortimer's warrior snarled. 'Who cast down the Count of Britannia?'

'Oh-ho!' Vitalinus guffawed. 'Hear this?' he called to the rest of the clientele. 'Here we have a follower of Ambrosius!'

At this ridiculous suggestion - that he supported the pro-Roman party who'd fled into the western hills after Vortigern's coup - the warrior pushed Julilla off his knee, leapt up unsteadily, and swung a savage punch at Vitalinus. Julilla scrambled away as Vitalinus, clutching his eye, pulled out his short-sword and thrust blindly at Vortimer's man. The warrior pulled out his own weapon, and at the same time, his fellows all around him leapt up and prepared for battle.

'To me, men!' shouted Vitalinus, and his own soldiers came crashing gleefully into the fray. Soon the whole common room of the inn had descended into a scene of mayhem. Julilla tried to scramble away, but found herself severely hampered by falling bodies and drunken, tussling figures. However, as she crawled desperately past a private booth, a hand shot out, and pulled her inside.

She sat thankfully down on the bench across from her rescuer and threw him a grateful look. Then the man who had helped her pushed back his hood to reveal Walwain's tattooed face.

She gasped, and looked around her worriedly.

'They're looking for you everywhere!' she said urgently. 'You must get away from the city!'

'You've heard about my exploits of last night, then?' the Pict grinned wryly, raising his voice as the sound of the riot outside increased.

'Who hasn't! What went wrong?' Julilla asked.

Walwain explained.

'And this priest helped you?' Julilla asked, when he had finished. 'Why didn't you stay in sanctuary?'

'I didn't want to remain in the church any longer - I needed to be up and doing. So

I sneaked out of the back under cover of darkness. There were men watching the place, but I got away and made it back here.'

'You can't stay here,' Julilla hissed. 'Everyone knows it was a Pict that was up to no good in the palace - and they say there's an army out there. You never told me you had your warriors with you.'

Walwain shook his head.

'Unfortunately there's only me,' he replied. He took her hand. 'And you, if you're still with me.'

Julilla looked nervously away. 'Men came here this morning and questioned me, because I'd been seen with you. I... it might be safer if we stayed apart. I want to help you - I want to be free... but...'

'No-one knows I'm here,' Walwain murmured reassuringly. 'They won't link you with me anymore.' He paused. 'But I still intend to kill Vortigern.'

Julilla shook her head impatiently. 'Don't be so stupid!' she said. 'You've got no chance!'

'But I must,' he replied gently. 'After what the priest said I have two reasons for killing him. One is what he has done to my people, the other is what he has done to Britannia. He is corrupt and decadent, when once he was holy. He must be removed so that he poses no threat to his son. Vortimer may well return the kingdom to the way it was when Marcellus was young. But if Vortigern is around to influence him, he will grow equally corrupt, and we'll all go to Hell when the Apocalypse comes.'

Julilla sighed. 'Do you really believe that?' she asked.

'Aye,' Walwain replied, his eyes shining with a sudden fervour that made her start back in amazement. 'Vortigern must die!' He sank back against the dark oak panels, and regarded her sombrely.

'Now, do you know any other ways I can get into the palace...?'

'Why did your men attack mine?' Vortigern shouted, across the empty length of the marble hall. 'Is this a plot against me?'

'Tell your father, now,' Renwein hissed from beside him.

Pascentius darted his stepmother a venomous glower, but Vortimer stared straight ahead.

'I had nothing to do with the riot,' he told his father calmly. 'It was merely the brawling you get inevitably in a town where two rival troops are stationed. Regrettable, but nothing more.'

'Regrettable!' Vortigern cried. 'The tavern has been ransacked, I have the innkeeper complaining, the citizens are up in arms... If it isn't bad enough that we have Picts infiltrating the palace, there's this!'

Pascentius turned to his father.

'Your man accused the High King of consorting with Picts,' he snapped. 'Our men were just protecting their honour.'

'I wouldn't be surprised if you had been, Vortimer,' Vortigern muttered. 'Not content with confining me to my sub-kingdom, you want me dead, your own father. Admit it!'

Vortimer shook his head steadfastly.

'Nonsense. I came here to make peace...'

'You came here to kill your own father!' Renwein's vibrant tones cut through his expostulations.

'Shut up, Saxon witch!' Pascentius growled.

'Don't speak to your mother like that!' Vortigern roared. Pascentius spat.

‘She’s not my mother! You sent Mother away. She’s just your whore!’

‘Pascentius,’ Vortimer murmured reprovingly, his quiet voice cutting the tense air like a knife. His brother looked uncertain, then flushed, and muttered an apology.

Vortimer faced his father again. ‘I suggest we forget this whole sorry incident. I shall severely reprimand my men who were involved, and I suggest you do the same, then leave it at that. Good night.’ He turned and swept from the hall, Pascentius at his heel, before Vortigern could reply.

The king turned to Renwein.

‘Little ingrate,’ he muttered. Suddenly, he looked exhausted.

Renwein put her soft hand on Vortigern’s arm. ‘Don’t worry,’ she murmured gently. ‘We’ll find some way of dealing with him.’

This seemed to revitalise him. ‘Good God, of course!’ he said abstractedly. ‘I must speak with Maugantius!’ He turned, and hurried from the hall. His wife stood silent for a moment, then looked up.

‘Sæwulf,’ Renwein called in a voice of command. The Saxon wizard stepped out from the shadows of a nearby arch.

‘My lady?’

‘He intends to go ahead with his foolish plan, then?’

‘Aye, my lady.’

‘It won’t work.’

‘My lady.’

‘I have a better plan, I tell you. And something tells me that an indispensable element will soon be within my grasp.’

With that enigmatic statement, the svelte, lithe figure turned on its heel and strode out.

A blow of his fist sent the unsuspecting servant spinning to the cobbles. Walwain dragged the man into the shadows and hurriedly exchanged clothes with him. He had appeared at the gate of the servant’s quarter posing as a beggar, with his hood over his face. The man sent to fob him off with a few crusts was now providing him with a passport into the palace.

Retaining his hood, he slipped on the rest of the servant’s clothes and stepped through the arch into a narrow corridor beyond. No-one was about, and he hoped that would remain the case as he continued into the palace. His plan relied on him getting to Renwein’s room while wearing servant’s clothing, but he doubted that his threadbare disguise would stand up to repeated inspection. He paced quickly down the hallway.

‘I can’t understand my father’s suspicions,’ Vortimer declared. Pascentius and the other chieftains nodded in sympathy. ‘He seems to see plots in every event that confronts him. I’ve already explained that there was nothing personal in my deposing him - I’ve even hinted that now I’ve thrown out the Saxons he could return to the throne. Though having seen the way he is, I doubt if that would be a good idea.’

‘What do you intend to do?’ asked a chieftain.

Vortimer sighed, and glanced around the room his father had assigned him.

‘Something must be done to ensure that my father’s suspicions are assuaged, but we must also make it impossible for him to gain further power. I want no man to say that I treated my father badly. But he is currently a threat to the smooth-running of the country. I want to fulfil his own dream of a well-structured, independent Britannia, aloof from Roman decadence but strong in its solitude, and if this is to happen, we

cannot afford to have dissension amongst the sub-kings.'

'I say we depose our father and send him to a monastery, where he can plot harmlessly among the monks,' Pascentius snapped. 'It would be no worse than what he did to our mother.'

'Pascentius,' Vortimer murmured. 'We must look to the wider implications, not think of our own personal feelings.' He frowned. 'But mentioning our mother gives me an idea.'

'They say that it was after Hengest flaunted his shameless daughter before us that our father turned into a tyrant. Superstitious fools claim Renwein has cast a spell on him, but be that as it may, she has certainly influenced him to a shocking extent - consider the trouble we had to cast out the Saxons, for example. It is she who is the real problem, not our father. She must be dealt with.'

'I say we strip her and beat her out of the city,' snarled Pascentius.

'No,' Vortimer replied sadly. 'It pains me to say it, but the solution must be more terminal.'

Walwain crept down a statue-lined passage, trying not to look furtive. He had successfully penetrated the palace, but the great stairway was on the far side from the servants' quarters and he still had a long way to go. Twice he had passed other people in the passage - two serving maids, and then a patrol of guards. Neither had given him a second glance, to his inordinate relief.

He reached a junction, and looked left and right, trying to orientate himself. Briefly, the thought struck him that Renwein might be intending to betray him, but he thrust it away immediately, and turned right.

He had a feeling that he wasn't far from the great hall.

'A sacrifice?'

Vortigern's outraged voice rang in the air of his chamber, as he stared at Maugantius' impassive face. He glanced at the other magicians.

'Is this true?' he demanded of them. 'A virgin sacrifice?'

Sæwulf nodded wisely, and his action was copied by Nechtan. Celestinus looked uncertain. He licked his lips. 'Surely they're in short supply round here?' He sniggered smugly to himself.

The others ignored him. Vortigern shook his head.

'Well, I've trusted you for the last six years, Maugantius, and you've seldom been wrong.' He shook his head again. 'I'll send for one of the maids. Getting rid of the body will be a problem - you can do that, Maugantius.'

'The demon will do that,' corrected the sorcerer. Vortigern raised an eyebrow at this; his cool facade was shaken.

By now Walwain was on the right floor, having sped up the great stairway with his heart in his mouth, convinced that someone would see him, and demand to know what he was doing here. Now he was on the landing, heading for Renwein's chamber.

He heard a door open in the distance, and voices floated out. He hid himself behind another statue - this of Laocoön and the Serpents.

'The hour of Mars is near,' came one florid voice. 'My lord, we must go down to the temple soon.'

'We'll need that serving wench,' another man declared. 'Celestinus - you go and find one, and bring her up to me.'

'With pleasure, my lord,' came a slippery, untrustworthy voice.

My lord? thought Walwain excitedly. Surely that meant Vortigern? His quest was almost over! He didn't need the Saxon sorceress. He loosened his new dirk in its scabbard. Should he be stealthy, and await his best chance? He squatted behind the statue for a second, but the impatient blood of Caledonia blazed in his veins, and soon he leapt to his feet. He hurried down the nearest passage with his dagger drawn.

Turning a corner, he collided with a blonde woman in a night-blue kirtle.

Vortigern awaited Celestinus' return. He glanced up at Maugantius.

'Does the virginity matter greatly?' he asked. 'I'm not too sure about the morals of all my staff. Or of Celestinus, for that matter.'

Maugantius nodded solemnly, and began an exposition on the difference between virginal blood and that of the sexually active, to which Vortigern paid little attention. He was planning ahead, trying to work out the best course of action for re-securing his throne after Vortimer's death. He knew that the mob loved his son more than him. He'd have to burn a few villages, maybe invite Hengest and his slayers back to Britannia - though they'd proved a troublesome crew at times...

Celestinus burst back into the room, dragging a struggling scullery maid after him. He flung her to the floor before the king.

'Really, Celestinus,' Vortigern reproved. 'There was no need for that. You could have just told her that I required her services.' He sat up, and helped the girl to her feet. 'What's your name, child?' he asked paternally.

'Branwein,' the girl lisped shyly, and she shot an angry glance at Celestinus. 'What is my lord's will?'

'And are you a virgin, Branwein?' Vortigern asked in a gentle voice.

The girl flushed hotly.

'You are Walwain the Pict, who wanted to kill my husband,' said Renwein, smiling lazily up at him. 'I've been waiting for you.'

'Look, I no longer need your help - I know he's here somewhere, I heard him. Just point me in the right direction and I'll go and knife him...' He broke off in confusion; he had no recollection of telling her his name.

'Far too unsubtle,' she reprimanded him. 'Come to my chamber, and I will give you the poison.'

Poison? He was about to tell her that he would rather use his blade when he met her ice-blue eyes again. They seemed to bore into his very soul... His hands fell limply to his sides, and she slipped out of his grasp. Unresisting, he allowed her to take his hands and lead him into her chamber.

'Wait!' he mumbled as they entered, and he shook his head to clear the mists from his brain. She turned sharply, and gazed at him once more. He found himself thinking of corn ripening under blue skies, a fire burning in his loins, a maiden thin as a willow wand leading him to a nest beneath the pines... In that moment, Renwein was every woman he had ever known.

She leaned forward, and slipped back his hood, caressing his long red hair. Her eyes held him transfixed. A scent of honeysuckle reached his nostrils as she moved closer.

'You're beautiful,' he mumbled involuntarily. She gazed silently at him, and his pulse raced. Then she was suddenly tugging at his kirtle.

'Let me see your tattoos,' she said hoarsely. 'They fascinate me.'

Panting, unable to resist her beauty, hardly able even to think, he heaved the garment over his head.

She stared at his blue-tattooed, muscular chest, and ran cool fingers across his burning skin, rapturously tracing the design of two fighting foxes that writhed on his belly.

‘Beautiful,’ she whispered, and her wicked eyes flashed up at him. ‘But I can’t see the end of it. Where does it go?’

She traced the left fox down to the point where its tail disappeared beneath Walwain’s chequered breeches. Playfully, she tugged at the drawstring. It broke, and they slid down his firmly-muscled legs. She raised her eyebrows, a little startled at what she saw.

Then she returned her hot, bewitching gaze to his eyes.

‘My own body is undecorated,’ she said enigmatically. She took his wrist and led him unresisting to her bed.

The Temple of Mithras had been disused for years. Once there had been suggestions that it could become a cellar, but this had been forestalled by those with lingering memories of years gone by, when the governor of the Cornovian civitate that was now Vortigern’s kingdom had worshipped the soldier’s god in that artificial cave; there had been those with recollections of rumours concerning dark rituals where men waded through streams of bull’s blood, and worshipped a God whose legends and rites seemed to the Christians like a Satanic mockery of their own - so the stories went. As he led his sorcerers down the stairs, even Vortigern, a man for whom fear meant nothing if it was an obstacle to burning ambition, felt a tinge of unwholesome awe.

The temple had been defaced by Christian zealots in the wild years after the death of the Emperor Julian and his abortive attempt to bring back the old gods. But the altar still stood, and it was to this that Vortigern led the petrified scullery maid, Branwein.

‘Remember, you will serve me in death far better than you ever did in life,’ Vortigern whispered into her ear, as she lay rigid on the stone surface. She didn’t move, but stared unseeingly up at the dark roof as Maugantius lit lamps in a circle around the central space of the ancient temple. The rest of the wizards clustered in a group near the altar, and looked on with disapproving jealousy.

Maugantius began to chant. ‘I invoke and conjure thee, O Spirit Caacrinolaas, and, fortified with the power of the Supreme Majesty, strongly command thee by Baralamensis, Baldachiensis, Paumacie, Apoloresede and the most potent princes Genio and Liachide, Ministers of the Tartartean Seat, chief princes of Apologia in the ninth region...’

Vortigern yawned surreptitiously. This was always the most boring part of magic, he thought, and it was the main reason he tended to leave it to the experts; the incense, the robes, the chanting, the endless lists of goetic barbarous names, the repetitive calls upon the Most High to cow the lowliest into submission.... He found it nothing short of tedious.

Maugantius had drawn the mystic Triangle of Solomon upon the ground before the altar where Branwein still lay silently weeping, and, wearing Solomon’s Seal and a piece of fixed quicksilver inscribed with the Demon Caacrinolaas’ symbol, he had laboriously drawn out the magical circle in which they stood. Now, clad in the gaudy magical vestments, he was conjuring the demon.

Vortigern found himself fidgeting, and he tried to re-enter the trance Maugantius had told him was absolutely vital for the effective performance of the rite. But he just couldn’t keep his mind in focus.

He began to envy Branwein. At least the maid was getting some kind of excitement out of it; all he felt was boredom. The conjuration droned on.

Renwein rose up from the bed, and strode swiftly to her bedside table. Upon it lay a cup of wine. She picked it up, and returned to her exhausted, enchanted paramour.

‘In this is a collection of the vilest poisons to be found in the Marshes of the Sabrina,’ she whispered lovingly. ‘You will dress, and take this to a chamber to which I will direct you. Within it lies your enemy, Vortigern’ - she noticed the dazed Pict start at this - ‘and sooner or later, he will call for wine. When he does, hurry in and proffer him this. He will take it, and die within minutes.’

Walwain shook his head slowly, not in disagreement, merely in an attempt to clear it. The fog was slowly beginning to lift, but he still felt as if he was in some kind of trance.

‘What will happen to me,’ he asked hesitantly, ‘when they know I have poisoned their king?’

Renwein smiled coldly. ‘I suggest you flee as quickly as you can.’

He frowned with the effort of thinking, then nodded again.

‘I’ll do it,’ he said thickly. His mind was a little clearer now, though his memories of recent events were still hazy. He staggered up and tugged on his clothes, then took the cup gingerly from Renwein, marvelling absently that he had reached a point where the most infamous and notorious woman in all Britannia was aiding him.

‘Where is the chamber?’ he asked in a slurred voice, as Renwein lounged lazily on the stained and rumpled bed, lying on her belly and gazing sardonically up at him.

‘Turn right outside, then left at the end, then wait outside the third door on the left,’ she told him, slowly and clearly, as if speaking to an idiot. Circe had turned men into pigs, they said. Well, she turned men into bigger fools than they were to begin with. She’d done it with Vortigern; now she had this Pict under her thumb soon all Britannia would be hers to command.

He nodded, and left the chamber.

Renwein waited cautiously for a few seconds as his footsteps died away. Then she grinned savagely, and her whole body shook with silent laughter.

She sneered, sadistic venom lacing her tones; ‘Enjoy your revenge, you gullible Pict,’ she whispered.

In the Temple, the tension was finally beginning to mount. To Vortigern’s relief, Maugantius had almost come to the end of his incantation. His triumphant words rang out through the incense-wreathed air.

‘...by Him to Whom all creatures are obedient, by this ineffable name, Tetragrammaton Jehovah,’ he called out in a loud, booming voice, ‘by which the elements are overthrown, the air is shaken, the sea turns back, the fire is generated, the earth moves and all the hosts of things celestial, of things terrestrial, of things infernal, do tremble and are confounded together; speak unto me visibly and affably in a clear, intelligible voice, free from ambiguity.’ He paused briefly, and then his face turned dark with wrath. ‘Come therefore in the name Adonai Zebaoth; come! why dost thou tarry? Adonai Saday, King of kings, commands thee!’

Maugantius paused again, and silence fell upon the dark temple, split only by the continual whimpers of the girl on the altar. He waved his wand three times, and repeated the end of his invocation.

‘No sign of the devil,’ Celestinus reported, peering curiously towards the Triangle of Conjunction and sniggering to himself.

Again, fury suffused Maugantius' face. He glowered angrily towards the triangle.

'We'll have to try the second chant,' he muttered. 'I invoke thee, conjure and command thee, O Spirit Caacrinolaas, to appear and show thyself...'

As the magician launched into another interminable conjuration, Vortigern gritted his teeth and wistfully considered the virtues of a knife in the back, or hemlock soup.

'But how can we rid ourselves of the witch and preserve your integrity in the people's eyes?' Pascentius repeated earnestly from the other side of the chamber.

Vortimer shook his head. The argument had been raging for the last ten minutes. Pascentius, with uncharacteristic forethoughtfulness, had pointed out that if Renwein was assassinated, and the finger of blame fell upon Vortimer, his public image would be compromised. Vortimer himself knew that he would find it hard enough to square with his personal self-image, but was aware that his feelings came second in all matters concerning the state.

'The people won't rise against me if they think I've had Renwein killed,' he replied swiftly, reassuringly. 'They hate her, remember? As much as we do. I don't want to have to kill her, but I doubt the people have such scruples...'

'Look, Pascentius, I've no desire to argue the matter all night. I'm for a goblet of wine, and then to bed. You too?'

His brother shook his head ruefully. 'Need you ask?' He turned to shout; 'Wine!'

With a suddenness unusual in Vortigern's lazy servants, a man pushed through the doors and proffered them a cup. Vortimer reached out and took it.

'And one for my brother, too,' he said commandingly. 'Chop-chop!'

The hooded servant stopped short, and stared from brother to brother. He stood rooted to the spot, seemingly amazed.

'Come on!' Pascentius barked irritably, as his brother sipped the drink. 'Do as the High King tells you!'

Obviously awed by his charges, the servant scuttled back out of the chamber. After the door had slammed behind him, Pascentius turned with a shrug to his brother.

'Our father's always skimped on the servants, hasn't h... - Vortimer? Are you alright?'

The High King's face was pale. He gave a sickly smile, and nodded.

'I'm... I'm fine,' he mumbled. 'I think I'll retire.' He groped about him for a table to put the goblet down on, then staggered towards the interior door. His brother stared after him worriedly.

He picked up the goblet and sniffed at it.

Walwain stood panting in the corridor outside the chamber. What had he done? That hadn't been Vortigern! It had been Vortimer! He'd poisoned his enemy's son! The haze that had settled on him when the witch first caught him with her achingly beautiful eyes had lifted the second he handed Vortimer the cup, and he'd recognised him immediately. Not Vortigern but his son!

Should he rush back in and warn the man? But it was doubtless too late - and Vortimer's men would probably kill him if he returned. He had to get out of here! But he had to kill Vortigern, first. No - he had to find the witch first! She would answer for this.

He rushed round the corner, and burst open her door. But the chamber beyond was empty. He glanced at the bed. The silk sheets had been replaced, and there was no sign of their love-making. It was as if the witch had never been there...

At a footfall from behind him, Walwain spun round, and his hood fell back as he

gaped at the British warrior who stood before him.

‘What are you doing in the Lady Renwein’s room - Hu Gadarn! The Pict!’ The man - an officer, by his uniform - broke off in mid-flow as he recognised Walwain as the previous night’s fugitive. But before he could shout out and raise the alarm, Walwain bore him to the marble floor. The warrior’s helm fell off and landed with a clatter beside him. Whipping out the man’s short sword before he could struggle, Walwain threatened him with it.

‘Where is Vortigern? Tell me!’

‘I’ll tell you nothing...’ the officer began. Instantly Walwain raised the sword high above his head, apparently about to bring it down point-first. Frightened, the officer gabbled; ‘Look, I don’t know anyway! Don’t kill me!’

‘The other man mentioned that they were going down to the temple. Where is there a temple?’

The man looked confused. He shook his head slowly. Then his face suddenly cleared. ‘I know! The cellar! It used to be a temple back in pagan times...’

‘Thanks,’ Walwain muttered. He reversed the sword, bringing the pommel savagely down on the man’s head. He lolled back, and Walwain sprang up and ran for the stairs.

In Vortimer’s bedchamber, Pascentius stood with a look of horror on his face. Writhing and choking, and vomiting bile on the tiled floor, lay his brother, the High King of Britannia.

Catching sight of him, Vortimer gasped; ‘Treachery! The wine was poisoned! I die... Call my chieftains to me!’

Pascentius hurried to obey, and soon Vortimer’s principal warriors were crowding the chamber. The dying High King lay on a couch, gazing blindly towards them.

‘Is this all, brother?’ he said in a choked voice.

‘Aye,’ Pascentius replied. ‘But we must find that servant, and slay him!’

‘No,’ Vortimer muttered. ‘He was merely the agent of evil. You must find the witch who did this, and punish her. Now, share my wealth out equally amongst my men, and prepare to inter my remains...’

Pascentius broke down, sobbing piteously and cradling his dying brother’s head in his arms.

Vortimer smiled painfully.

‘The road I am to travel is merely the way of all flesh,’ he said dismissively. ‘But you who are to remain in this vale of tears, you must fight the good fight, and defend this island from foreign invaders...’

‘But where shall we bury you, brother?’ Pascentius asked, muffling his sobs.

‘No longer shall I be able to protect my beloved folk from the pagans...’ he muttered dolefully to himself, as if Pascentius’ question had gone unheeded. Then he turned his face towards the warriors again. ‘Are you there, Pascentius? I can’t see you...’

‘Of course I’m here,’ Pascentius choked. ‘Tell us how to bury you. What rites, what observances?’

Vortimer drew himself up a little, and spoke again, in a stronger, clearer voice.

‘Build for me a brazen pyramid and erect it on Tanatus, the island where the Saxons land. Entomb my body in the top section of this, and it may be that at the sight of Vortimer’s Pyramid, the barbarians will reverse their sails and hurry back across the waves to the stagnant swamps and gloomy forests of Germania, and trouble us no further. None of them will dare come near our island once they set eyes upon my

burial place...

‘Our home, Britannia! the best of islands, with its three mighty rivers of Tamesis, Sabrina and Abus; its three offshore islands, Vectis, Mona and Orcadia; its four imperial roads and its twenty-eight noble cities; this honey isle, this sea-girt precinct, this island of the mighty...!’

But in the midst of his patriotic fervour he began to choke, and to vomit dark clots of blood over the crimson stuffing of his gold-chased couch; and then to spasm. And even as Pascentius watched, the seizures jerked to a stop. His body collapsed.

Silent, Pascentius reached out towards his dead brother’s wrist, and desperately felt for a pulse. Then he shook his head, and looked up at the circle of impassive warriors. His face hardened, and a new resolve coursed through him.

Revenge!

In the Mithræum, Maugantius was desperately concluding the final conjuration. Nothing had happened so far, and the sorcerer kept looking round at his lord with an apologetic expression.

‘...I will chain thee in the Lake of Eternal Fire and Brimstone, unless thou come quickly, appearing before this circle to do my will,’ he chanted. ‘Come, therefore, in the Holy Names Adonai, Zebaoth, and Amioram; come, Adonai commands thee!’

Even as Vortigern sneered to himself at the foolishness he had fallen for, and turned to stride contemptuously from the circle, his nostrils were troubled by a noxious stench, like that of spoiled meat. It came from a vortex which had appeared suddenly above the altar and its trembling occupant. Within the swirl of fiery light appeared a winged, canine figure with madly rolling eyes and a stream of hissing saliva that drooled constantly from its multi-fanged mouth. It shimmered like a mirage.

Maugantius gasped.

‘What is thy will?’ the demon howled, in a voice that recalled the barking of a thousand hounds.

Vortigern took a step forward, shouldering aside his stuttering magician.

‘Kill my son, and you may have the life of this maiden!’ he shouted.

The devil-dog cocked its head, and whined; ‘It is achieved!’

‘You’ve done it already?’ the king marvelled. He grinned like an imbecile, but then his face fell as the demon shook its head violently. The stench of offal rose, so that Vortigern was forced to gag and retch.

‘Not I,’ the demon dog barked gloomily; ‘but through the agency of one who will some day join me in the flames of Hades! Now give me my sacrifice.’

As Branwein convulsed with fear on the altar, Vortigern turned to the wizards, frowning in incomprehension.

‘My son is dead?’ he muttered. ‘But who... how...’

He put his hand to his brow.

At that second, the door to the cellar burst open, and in dashed a savage, barbaric figure.

‘Die, Vortigern!’ shouted the Pictish warrior who bounded down the steps. He rushed towards the king.

Vortigern turned madly towards the demon.

‘Take the maiden,’ he declared hastily, ‘but first you must slay that assassin!’ He had no idea who it was, or who had sent him, but clearly this was some plot against his life.

‘Very well,’ snarled the winged dog, and it rose into the air and flew towards the

Pict.

Walwain came to a halt just outside the magic circle. He stared at the fantastic figure that flew towards him, and glanced about him in despair, noticing for the first time the apparatus of diabolism that surrounded him. The demon dog soared down at him; he hacked at it desperately, but before his blade met it, the thing's skull detonated in an explosion of blood and brains that showered Walwain, flying into his face. When he could see again, his eyes focused on something that was forcing its way out of the tattered flesh; a naked figure, sexless and beautiful, with the head of a crocodile, swelling rapidly to the size of a man as it birthed itself. In its hand it bore an ornate blade.

Staggered by the sight, Walwain was hard put to dodge the demon's first attack, but he countered it with a desperate lunge that slashed open the demon's ribcage. Although yellow mucus bubbled out of the wound, the demon seemed unaffected, and it hacked brutally at Walwain's skull. The Pict brought his blade up to deflect the attack. But it was just a feint; the demon lunged down, and slashed open a deep wound in Walwain's chest; it quickly welled up with blood that began to stream down his body. Gritting his teeth in pain, Walwain returned to the attack, swinging his steel savagely, hacking off the front section of the reptilian mouth almost by accident. Foul liquid bubbled venomously from the wound, but again, it seemed to do nothing to deter the demon.

Slowly, Walwain began to realise that his opponent was nigh-on invincible.

'Treachery!' shouted Pascentius to his men. 'Poison!'

The chieftains - now his chieftains - growled their agreement.

'We must avenge our king!' shouted one.

'Loot the palace!' yelled another. 'Slay Vortigern, and that Saxon witch!'

'Aye - this is her doing!' another cried, pulling out his sword and waving it wildly.

As one, they turned and charged out of the door, Pascentius at their head, as amivestial as the rest.

The demon had forced Walwain into a corner, and as he struggled against the unstoppable thing the Pict saw Vortigern and the magicians rushing towards the steps. Clearly, he could expect no assistance from them. The door slammed, and he was left alone in the Temple of Mithras with only the demon and its whimpering sacrifice for company.

Their blades clanged and the temple rang with the din of battle as Walwain and the demon fought back and forth across the paved floor. Walwain had hacked huge lumps out of the thing, and its intestines were dragging along on the floor behind it, but this seemed to discomfort the creature not a whit, and it continued its wild attack, hacking and slashing at its ardent foe. Walwain's clothes were in tatters, his kirtle was soaked and crusted with his own blood, and his brain was a-whirl with thousands of ways to defeat his invincible, Satanic enemy. But finally, he found himself with his back against the altar.

He glanced down at the girl, and grinned reassuringly.

'Don't worry,' he shouted, and leapt up to parry another attack from the hideous monster. 'We'll get you out of here in no time!'

'Confident, mortal?' the demon howled. 'You can't slay me! I'm a demon!'

'No!' Walwain exclaimed mockingly. 'And I thought you were just a little pixie.'

He ducked a wild, angry swing, and cut low at the demon's legs. His frenzied

attack hacked through pustulent flesh and brittle bone, and the demon collapsed abruptly as its' hams were severed. Immediately, it pulled itself up on its knees and began to grab at the warrior, but Walwain leapt back onto the altar, standing astride the timid scullery maid.

'The world, the flesh, and the devil! You may be invincible, demon,' he taunted, glaring down at it as it grovelled wrathfully beneath him, 'but your flesh is as weak as anyone else's! Now try and follow me!'

He grabbed the girl by the wrist and heaved her up, then, holding her in his arms, he leapt across the temple floor with the disabled demon snapping and grabbing at his flying legs. He landed beside the steps, and rushed up them to the door. After shoulder-barging it open, he took one look back.

He saw the demon desperately struggling to heave itself after him, grinned victoriously, and forced his way through the door.

As he burst out into the antechamber at the bottom of the main stairway, more violent action confronted him. Two groups of Britons, who he recognised briefly as Vortimer's troop and the palace guard, were fighting savagely in the antechamber before him. And from all around, he could hear the sounds of battle and looting.

'What's happening?' the scullery maid whispered weakly. He put her down, but she clung to him.

'Looks like the locals and Vortimer's men have fallen out again,' he muttered. 'Probably because of Vortimer's death... I've got to get out of here!'

'Let me come with you!' the maid urged. Walwain glanced at her sweet, frightened face, briefly tempted; but then he remembered his promise to Julilla. He shook his head.

'You don't want to follow me on my red road,' he replied. 'Come on. I'll get you somewhere safe, but then we must part. I intend to have put many leagues between me and Viriconium before the sun rises.'

Hastily, they fled through the palace, dodging struggling knots of warriors. It seemed that the news of Vortimer's death had spread throughout his troop, and they were torching the palace even as they slew Vortigern's guards. Branwein led Walwain through a series of passages used only by the servants, and they came out by the stables. Glancing back, Walwain saw that the roof of the palace was already ablaze. From nearby, he caught the sound of nervous horses.

'Stay here!' he ordered, and leaving Branwein beside the portico, he rushed into the stable. A minute later he returned, leading after him a dapple grey, whose eyes rolled nervously, but who seemed strangely reassured by the Pict's presence.

'My people have always been good with horses,' he explained to the girl, whose eyes were wide with amazement.

'But - but that's Vortigern's favourite!'

'He's got good taste, then,' Walwain said casually, about to swing himself up onto the horse's bare back.

Three warriors rushed from out of a nearby doorway, pursued by about ten more, and the scullery maid turned to stare at them in terror. Walwain leapt astride the unharnessed steed, and leant to pull the maid up behind him.

'No time to saddle him,' he shouted, as the second group of warriors surrounded the first and began to butcher them. 'Time to be going!'

Urging the horse straight at the struggling warriors, Walwain rode through them, his mount catching three with its' hoofs and sending them spinning bloodily to the cobbles. Then they galloped straight for the deserted gateway, and the wide city beyond.

The madness had spread outside the palace by the time Walwain drew his horse up beside the forum. Citizens and soldiers battled ferociously in the streets, and Vortimer's men had spilled over into the city to be enthusiastically greeted by many of the rioting townsfolk. Vortigern might well rise triumphant from this night to retake his throne, assuming the demon in his cellar didn't get him, Walwain reflected as he rode grimly through the chaos, but many of his subjects would have to be crushed beneath his iron heel before he could sit on the throne with any comfort. And how long would his second reign last?

'Does your family live in the city?' Walwain asked the scullery maid, keeping a wary eye on the milling mob that was struggling outside the bathhouse.

Branwein nodded. 'Aye, on the Via Bravonia,' she murmured. 'Will they be alright?'

'I couldn't say. But I suggest you go to them, and tell them to leave the city. Things will get worse before they get better, and even then, I think this night will see the tyrant reinstated over the whole of Britannia.'

Walwain spurred the horse on with his heels and rode down the Via Bravonia, a much quieter part of town where only the rumour of rioting rumbled in the distance. Outside Branwein's house he halted.

'This is where I must leave you,' Walwain said, overriding her complaints. 'Go to your family, and tell them what is happening across the city.' Tearful, Branwein slipped down from the horse, and rushed up to her parents' house. Giving her one last backwards glance, Walwain rode off into the night, back towards the turbulent centre of town, happy to have done his duty by her, but also glad to get the wretched girl out of his way.

He cantered down the Via Londinia, which was currently free of rioters, although the shouts of battle were still audible from over the rooftops, and a line of shops to the left was burning fiercely, throwing great flickering shadows across the empty street. He halted outside the *Golden Grasshopper*.

Julilla had been distracted from entertaining her latest client by the distant roar of rioting that came from across the city, and her customer, a merchant from the northern kingdom of Loidis, was angry with her.

'Come here now, you daft whore!' he barked from the bed, where his corpulent body rested. She bobbed her head apologetically, and left the window. 'That's right. I don't care if your whole blasted kingdom is going up in flames - I paid good money for your arse!'

At that moment she heard a shout from outside.

'Julilla!' It sounded like... Walwain? She flashed a coy smile at her client to try and keep him happy, then rushed to the window, flung it open, and called;

'Who is it? I'm with a customer!'

'Come back to bed!' growled the merchant loudly.

'It's Walwain!' the Pict shouted. 'If you want your freedom, come down now!'

Julilla peered down muzzily. 'What's happening in the city?' she demanded.

'Anarchy,' Walwain shouted up. 'I failed in my mission - made quite a mess of things. And now the Britons are fighting each other, Vortimer's troop and Vortigern's men, and...'

There was a rustle from above him, an angry snarl from within, and Julilla leapt down into Walwain's arms.

'Tell me on the way!' she urged as she slid herself behind him. 'Let's just get away from here! My last customer was revolting.'

‘Gladly,’ replied the Pict. ‘But there is one man I must see before we go.’

They stopped outside the church.

‘What do you want the priest for?’ Julilla demanded. Really, Walwain was acting eccentrically, even for a Pict. Why didn’t they just get out of this dangerous city?

‘He saved my life last night,’ Walwain said, leaping down and heading for the open door. ‘I’m not leaving him here when there’s uproar in the rest of the city...’ In the distance, the noise of the riots thundered on.

He broke off, gazing at a huddled shape on the ground.

‘What is it?’ asked Julilla, getting down from the patient horse. She stepped closer.

Walwain was staring inside the church. It had already been thoroughly ransacked. The looters had obviously moved on, since the place was empty and silent, but before they had gone, they had cut down Marcellus.

The priest lay in the entrance, the ground around his head dark with blood from a slit throat. Julilla moved up behind Walwain, and placed her arm gently around his shoulders. Words were unnecessary. She looked softly at him.

‘I was too late, it seems,’ he said emotionlessly. How like a man, to hide his feelings. ‘The looters got here before him. Ended the life of a man whose dreams could have transformed Britannia into a kingdom of saints. A man who I failed.’

‘Don’t be so harsh on yourself,’ Julilla murmured to comfort him. She gazed down at the murdered priest. ‘I never knew him, but I’d heard of him as a good man.’ Perhaps that was why she’d never spoken to him, she thought wryly to herself. ‘But he was one among hundreds of sinners. Many worse than myself.’

‘He said that we all have a choice when it comes to good and evil,’ Walwain reflected. ‘That we are all free to choose, not cursed from the outset and saved only by the grace of God. But doubtless to the man who ended his life, such arguments were meaningless.’

He looked bleakly up at the dark, empty sky.

‘Who was right, I wonder? He who was a saint on Earth and died at the hands of a thief, or the monk who told me that this is a world of sin? Do we have a choice? Or are we all doomed?’

He allowed Julilla to lead him back to the horse, miserably considering the conundrum. Could he even continue to believe in a God who had saved Mankind from sin? Was this not a world ruled by arbitrary, chaotic, amoral powers - Blind Fate, Chance, Luck?

As he mounted his steed and galloped into the night, the kindly whore Julilla clinging to his back, as he fled the city where he had failed to find either worldly vengeance or heavenly salvation, he considered himself - a man of blood, an outcast, an exile. Was there any place for him in a divinely-ordered world?

Would there one day be a Day of Reckoning?

Herbert West: Reanimator

I. From the Dark

Of Herbert West, who was my friend in college and in after life, I can speak only with extreme terror. This terror is not due altogether to the sinister manner of his recent disappearance, but was engendered by the whole nature of his life-work, and first gained its acute form more than seventeen years ago, when we were in the third year of our course at the Miskatonic University Medical School in Arkham. While he was with me, the wonder and diabolism of his experiments fascinated me utterly, and I was his closest companion. Now that he is gone and the spell is broken, the actual fear is greater. Memories and possibilities are ever more hideous than realities.

The first horrible incident of our acquaintance was the greatest shock I ever experienced, and it is only with reluctance that I repeat it. As I have said, it happened when we were in the medical school, where West had already made himself notorious through his wild theories on the nature of death and the possibility of overcoming it artificially. His views, which were widely ridiculed by the faculty and his fellow-students, hinged on the essentially mechanistic nature of life; and concerned means for operating the organic machinery of mankind by calculated chemical action after the failure of natural processes. In his experiments with various animating solutions he had killed and treated immense numbers of rabbits, guinea-pigs, cats, dogs, and monkeys, till he had become the prime nuisance of the college. Several times he had actually obtained signs of life in animals supposedly dead; in many cases violent signs; but he soon saw that the perfection of this process, if indeed possible, would necessarily involve a lifetime of research. It likewise became clear that, since the same solution never worked alike on different organic species, he would require human subjects for further and more specialised progress. It was here that he first came into conflict with the college authorities, and was debarred from future experiments by no less a dignitary than the dean of the medical school himself—the learned and benevolent Dr. Allan Halsey, whose work in behalf of the stricken is recalled by every old resident of Arkham.

I had always been exceptionally tolerant of West's pursuits, and we frequently discussed his theories, whose ramifications and corollaries were almost infinite. Holding with Haeckel that all life is a chemical and physical process, and that the so-called "soul" is a myth, my friend believed that artificial reanimation of the dead can depend only on the condition of the tissues; and that unless actual decomposition has set in, a corpse fully equipped with organs may with suitable measures be set going again in the peculiar fashion known as life. That the psychic or intellectual life might be impaired by the slight deterioration of sensitive brain-cells which even a short period of death would be apt to cause, West fully realised. It had at first been his hope to find a reagent which would restore vitality before the actual advent of death, and only repeated failures on animals had shewn him that the natural and artificial life-motions were incompatible. He then sought extreme freshness in his specimens, injecting his solutions into the blood immediately after the extinction of life. It was this circumstance which made the professors so carelessly sceptical, for they felt that true death had not occurred in any case. They did not stop to view the matter closely and reasoningly.

It was not long after the faculty had interdicted his work that West confided to me his resolution to get fresh human bodies in some manner, and continue in secret the

experiments he could no longer perform openly. To hear him discussing ways and means was rather ghastly, for at the college we had never procured anatomical specimens ourselves. Whenever the morgue proved inadequate, two local negroes attended to this matter, and they were seldom questioned. West was then a small, slender, spectacled youth with delicate features, yellow hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft voice, and it was uncanny to hear him dwelling on the relative merits of Christchurch Cemetery and the potter's field. We finally decided on the potter's field, because practically every body in Christchurch was embalmed; a thing of course ruinous to West's researches.

I was by this time his active and enthralled assistant, and helped him make all his decisions, not only concerning the source of bodies but concerning a suitable place for our loathsome work. It was I who thought of the deserted Chapman farmhouse beyond Meadow Hill, where we fitted up on the ground floor an operating room and a laboratory, each with dark curtains to conceal our midnight doings. The place was far from any road, and in sight of no other house, yet precautions were none the less necessary; since rumours of strange lights, started by chance nocturnal roamers, would soon bring disaster on our enterprise. It was agreed to call the whole thing a chemical laboratory if discovery should occur. Gradually we equipped our sinister haunt of science with materials either purchased in Boston or quietly borrowed from the college—materials carefully made unrecognisable save to expert eyes—and provided spades and picks for the many burials we should have to make in the cellar. At the college we used an incinerator, but the apparatus was too costly for our unauthorised laboratory. Bodies were always a nuisance—even the small guinea-pig bodies from the slight clandestine experiments in West's room at the boarding-house.

We followed the local death-notices like ghouls, for our specimens demanded particular qualities. What we wanted were corpses interred soon after death and without artificial preservation; preferably free from malforming disease, and certainly with all organs present. Accident victims were our best hope. Not for many weeks did we hear of anything suitable; though we talked with morgue and hospital authorities, ostensibly in the college's interest, as often as we could without exciting suspicion. We found that the college had first choice in every case, so that it might be necessary to remain in Arkham during the summer, when only the limited summer-school classes were held. In the end, though, luck favoured us; for one day we heard of an almost ideal case in the potter's field; a brawny young workman drowned only the morning before in Sumner's Pond, and buried at the town's expense without delay or embalming. That afternoon we found the new grave, and determined to begin work soon after midnight.

It was a repulsive task that we undertook in the black small hours, even though we lacked at that time the special horror of graveyards which later experiences brought to us. We carried spades and oil dark lanterns, for although electric torches were then manufactured, they were not as satisfactory as the tungsten contrivances of today. The process of unearthing was slow and sordid—it might have been gruesomely poetical if we had been artists instead of scientists—and we were glad when our spades struck wood. When the pine box was fully uncovered West scrambled down and removed the lid, dragging out and propping up the contents. I reached down and hauled the contents out of the grave, and then both toiled hard to restore the spot to its former appearance. The affair made us rather nervous, especially the stiff form and vacant face of our first trophy, but we managed to remove all traces of our visit. When we had patted down the last shovelful of earth we put the specimen in a canvas sack and set out for the old Chapman place beyond Meadow Hill.

On an improvised dissecting-table in the old farmhouse, by the light of a powerful acetylene lamp, the specimen was not very spectral looking. It had been a sturdy and apparently unimaginative youth of wholesome plebeian type—large-framed, grey-eyed, and brown-haired—a sound animal without psychological subtleties, and probably having vital processes of the simplest and healthiest sort. Now, with the eyes closed, it looked more asleep than dead; though the expert test of my friend soon left no doubt on that score. We had at last what West had always longed for—a real dead man of the ideal kind, ready for the solution as prepared according to the most careful calculations and theories for human use. The tension on our part became very great. We knew that there was scarcely a chance for anything like complete success, and could not avoid hideous fears at possible grotesque results of partial animation. Especially were we apprehensive concerning the mind and impulses of the creature, since in the space following death some of the more delicate cerebral cells might well have suffered deterioration. I, myself, still held some curious notions about the traditional “soul” of man, and felt an awe at the secrets that might be told by one returning from the dead. I wondered what sights this placid youth might have seen in inaccessible spheres, and what he could relate if fully restored to life. But my wonder was not overwhelming, since for the most part I shared the materialism of my friend. He was calmer than I as he forced a large quantity of his fluid into a vein of the body’s arm, immediately binding the incision securely.

The waiting was gruesome, but West never faltered. Every now and then he applied his stethoscope to the specimen, and bore the negative results philosophically. After about three-quarters of an hour without the least sign of life he disappointedly pronounced the solution inadequate, but determined to make the most of his opportunity and try one change in the formula before disposing of his ghastly prize. We had that afternoon dug a grave in the cellar, and would have to fill it by dawn—for although we had fixed a lock on the house we wished to shun even the remotest risk of a ghoulish discovery. Besides, the body would not be even approximately fresh the next night. So taking the solitary acetylene lamp into the adjacent laboratory, we left our silent guest on the slab in the dark, and bent every energy to the mixing of a new solution; the weighing and measuring supervised by West with an almost fanatical care.

The awful event was very sudden, and wholly unexpected. I was pouring something from one test-tube to another, and West was busy over the alcohol blast-lamp which had to answer for a Bunsen burner in this gasless edifice, when from the pitch-black room we had left there burst the most appalling and daemoniac succession of cries that either of us had ever heard. Not more unutterable could have been the chaos of hellish sound if the pit itself had opened to release the agony of the damned, for in one inconceivable cacophony was centred all the supernal terror and unnatural despair of animate nature. Human it could not have been—it is not in man to make such sounds—and without a thought of our late employment or its possible discovery both West and I leaped to the nearest window like stricken animals; overturning tubes, lamp, and retorts, and vaulting madly into the starred abyss of the rural night. I think we screamed ourselves as we stumbled frantically toward the town, though as we reached the outskirts we put on a semblance of restraint—just enough to seem like belated revellers staggering home from a debauch.

We did not separate, but managed to get to West’s room, where we whispered with the gas up until dawn. By then we had calmed ourselves a little with rational theories and plans for investigation, so that we could sleep through the day—classes being disregarded. But that evening two items in the paper, wholly unrelated, made it

again impossible for us to sleep. The old deserted Chapman house had inexplicably burned to an amorphous heap of ashes; that we could understand because of the upset lamp. Also, an attempt had been made to disturb a new grave in the potter's field, as if by futile and spadeless clawing at the earth. That we could not understand, for we had patted down the mould very carefully.

And for seventeen years after that West would look frequently over his shoulder, and complain of fancied footsteps behind him. Now he has disappeared.