

Schlock! webzine

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

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

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

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**Schlock! Publishing**

## This Edition

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

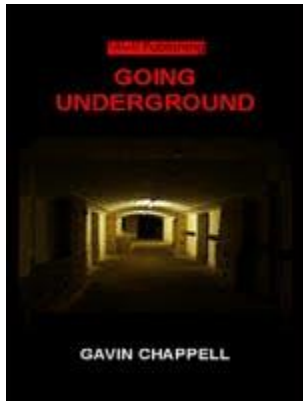
[Super Duper: Part Three](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - In which we meet our hero and he ignores us in favour of Sonic the Hedgehog.

[Wolf Moon: Part One](#) by [Gavin Roach](#) and [Gavin Chappell](#) - Horror on the edge of civilisation!

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

[The Castle of Illusion](#) by Millicent 'Mad Dog' McGuire - more comic fantasy featuring highland rogue Dougal the Wanderer.

**Schlock! Classic Serial:** [Edison's Conquest of Mars \(Part 6\)](#) by [Garrett P. Serviss](#) - Conclusion of this gripping tale.



[The Gods of Yesterday](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways spend a terrifying night in a Bed and Breakfast. *Fourth in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

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

[The Ruin of Britain](#) by Rex Mundy - Walwain the Pict searches derelict Londinium for Britannia's future.

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

## Super Duper

Corrine had very athletic calves. Corrine's athletic calves were beginning to ache. It was a good three quarters of an hour walk from her father's house in Prenton to Smith's house in Bebington. She was apprehensive about leaving her father alone whilst he was sick. However, since the phones had been cut off she didn't feel as though she had an awful lot of choice. She needed to let Smith know that she wasn't going to be able to see him much anymore, unless he started visiting her. Corrine knew that Smith loved her but she wasn't sure that he loved her more than he hated going out. In practical terms, that meant that Smith was about to get dumped.

There was another reason Corrine wanted to visit Smith. If Corrine was destined to spend her life foraging through abandoned junk then she needed a more reliable form of transportation than her feet. Smith owned a bicycle which he never used. She was going to ask him for it (probably before she dumped him). The bicycle was the justification for the trip; however Smith was his own reason. Corrine wanted to check that he was coping at least as badly as normal, she wanted to hear him endlessly insult his television and, given the amount of stress she was currently under, she wanted quite badly to get fucked by him. It was, after all, just about the only useful skill he possessed.

The house that Smith lived in was a shared student house. Even though he had never gone to college himself, he enjoyed the fact that he could easily afford his share of the rent on the disability allowance that he received for the agoraphobia that he used as a metaphor for being too lazy to get the bus to Bromborough and sign on. One advantage of the arrangement was that over college holidays he got the whole house to himself and, as the colleges were closed due to a lack of staff Smith was feeling pretty happy with the world.

Smith lay contentedly in bed. He was too sleepy to hear Corrine unlocking his door and even as she slipped her cold hands under the duvet to wake him, he still made no sign of stirring. She kissed the back of his neck and he hummed appreciatively but still no sign of actually waking up. She slipped her hands down the front of his boxer shorts and he hummed yet more appreciatively. Rolling over clumsily, he threw his hands haphazardly over her breasts and made nonsensical sweet talk. She tightened her grip.

"Wake up!"

"What? Corrine?"

"Jesus I could have been anyone."

"Hey, thirty seconds after waking up, you legally have diminished responsibility; it's true for murder and doubly true for copulation."

It was this kind of pseudo intelligent banter that made Smith attractive to Corrine. He was widely considered a hopeless layabout even by the most liberal of her activist friends but he was a fountain of potential.

"I was dreaming about you, so you can't call it cheating."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"Pretty much what has just happened. What are you doing here by the way?"

"I wanted to check that you hadn't caught the slouch. I don't think you'd survive being any lazier."

"True that. It's a miracle I've lived this long."

Another thing Corrine liked about Smith was that he never argued when she insulted him. He sat up in the single bed and rubbed his eyes as if they were filled

with shards of glass. Then, turning his attention seriously to Corrine, he managed to be back to sleep again within forty minutes. Corrine, who was genuinely in need of rest, cleaned his kitchen before contentedly lying down next to him.

Corrine awoke to a sound that she recognised immediately as being a digitally rendered hedgehog collecting coins on Smith's television. As Smith stalwartly refused to own a clock she could only guess at how long she had been asleep, though if Smith had woken up before her, then it must have been a while. A quick peep through the curtains confirmed her suspicion as the shadows had already grown long over the cracked paving stones and abandoned fridge in Smith's garden.

Smith was wearing his preferred choice of lounging garb - jogging pants, a tea stained t-shirt and his dressing gown - nursing home chic, as he described it. His long legs filled the length of the couch and, much to Corrine's surprise he actually moved them out of her way so that she could sit down next to him. Even more surprisingly, he paused his game for long enough to talk to her.

"I'm surprised you're up so quickly."

"Why, how long have I been asleep?"

"No idea, but after what I did to you..."

He left the thought hanging and gave her one of his most alluring smiles.

"You know for a grown man playing Sonic in his pyjamas you talk pretty big. Why do you still play these old games, anyway?"

"Because they're fun and they don't expect anything back from you. There's not a single 3d game I know of that you can't complete in one sitting - who wants to dedicate that much time to a game? It's like you're entertaining the computer. Besides, I've played this game so many times I don't even have to think about it anymore."

"Can you make me a cup of tea?"

"After this level."

Corrine was being more than usually patient with Smith, only because she was about to deliver the news of their separation. She didn't want to, but there it was - her dad was sick and she didn't have any choice. She was spoon-feeding the man, for Christ's sake.

Smith finished his level and carried on playing obliviously. Corrine gave a polite but stern cough and then several more before finally punching him in the leg.

"Are you going to make me a cup of tea or are you going to let me sit her until I cough to death?"

"I'm weighing it up."

The I'm-really-not-joking-now stare that followed his statement was enough to get him out of his chair.

"Excuse me, your worshipfulness."

Smith disappeared into the kitchen. He took [a surprisingly long time](#) but eventually he reappeared with two mugs of tea. He looked considerably fazed, as if it had been an ordeal.

Corrine let Smith get all the way to Act Three of the Star Light Zone before dropping the bomb on him.

"You do know how lucky you are, right?"

"Of course I do, you are amazing." Smith said, his eyes focussed firmly on Doctor Robotnik.

"Not to have me, to still be normal."

Sonic fell off the platform.

"Fuck you," Smith announced with a defiance that spited his phlegmatic

nature. "I've never been normal a day of my life."

"I meant not to have the slouch. They reckon it's four in five people that have it, but I think it might be more - there was literally no-one out at all on the way here. A lot of them are dying, my father included."

Smith opened his mouth to say something and then thought better of it, he replaced it with:

"He doesn't deserve that."

"No, none of them do. In fact if anyone does, it's probably you."

Smith thought hard about a defence that wouldn't make him look any more ridiculous than he was.

"Maybe I'm just a mild early case. Have you thought about that?"

"You're a lazy bastard, Smith, no more and no less."

"So what do you want me to do? Walk around door to door force-feeding people? Muck out their houses? What?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything but acknowledge that you're lucky. I have to look after my dad but you don't have any responsibilities at all. You could be doing something - I'm going to try, which means I won't be visiting much and I know you won't cycle to Prenton just to see me."

Smith sighed; he'd been dumped enough times to know when it was coming. He played the only card left in his deck, the Jack of Pity.

"Look, you're right but look at me. I've had this game fifteen years and I've never once completed it. I can barely make myself dinner, saving the world is beyond me. I'm an all or nothing type. I can't do moderation. How do you think I ended up like this?"

"Your parents' death? I don't know."

Corrine squirmed emotionally for a moment and then realised what Smith was doing.

"Look, you can't just sit here playing video games while the world dies. I don't think the electricity will last that long."

Smith knew that she was right and it burned at him, but he still didn't feel as though he could honestly help anyone. Corrine was staring at him, intently waiting for an answer.

"I have an old Gameboy colour and ample batteries. Sure it doesn't have Sonic but I've got Double Dragon. Besides, there's always books."

"Look Smith, I'm leaving. At least there's some hope for the rest of the world. Maybe I'll see you in it someday."

"Wait."

Smith wasn't sure if he was about to launch an effort to hurt her feelings or if he genuinely loved her. It felt like the latter and he wanted it to be the former.

"Do you know where my bike is?"

Corrine nodded.

"You should take it, I don't think I'll be needing it anymore... Since I have no-one to visit."

"Thank you."

She kissed him on the cheek with greater tenderness than he had ever been kissed. "I'll miss you."

And then she was gone. Smith tried to console himself with the fact that she had left most of her tea and it saved him making another cup. He went back to his game and tried to play it through but there was one thing that kept on nagging at him - the electricity.

# Wolf Moon

## Chapter One

Two brothers pelted through the dark forest, casting terrified glances over their shoulders. Shouts and cries still rang from the trees behind them, in the direction of the flickering light of a campfire. Aulus caught his foot in a hidden tree root and went crashing down on his face on the hard-packed earth. Immediately Titus was at his side.

‘Aulus!’ he hissed. ‘Are you alright?’

Aulus groaned, clutching at his shin in the darkness. ‘I suppose I’ll live,’ he muttered. ‘But we’ve got to get moving. Those men were after us. What are they? Bandits?’

Titus looked back towards the clearing where they had camped. He could hear the old physician talking loudly to his captors.

Aulus blundered to his feet. ‘Come on! We’ve got to get moving!’ He hobbled away and then stumbled and almost fell.

Titus shot out a hand to steady him. He drew Aulus close, and directed his attention to the distant clearing.

‘We can’t leave them,’ he insisted. Aulus looked at him pityingly.

‘Did you see how many bandits there were?’ he asked. Titus fell silent.

They had been travelling for some days across Italy towards the Alps, wandering through the wide, open countryside on foot when they couldn’t hitch lifts on ox-carts, and sleeping rough. Titus had kept Uncle Tiberius’ letter of introduction safe in his pack throughout the journey. It was still a long way to Pannonia, the city of Carnuntum, and the First Legion, but until that night the journey had been uneventful.

That afternoon they had fallen in with a travelling Greek physician named Ajax and his boy, Zeno. The physician had suggested they band together for protection, since he had heard news of bandit attacks. As they travelled on, Titus had been amazed to discover that the physician was on his way to Upper Pannonia too, to replace the existing camp physician in Carnuntum. It had seemed like a stroke of fortune to be travelling with someone more experienced who was going their way. But that evening, just as they were sitting down to eat supper, the bandits had attacked.

Seven or eight men, all of them as big as any Praetorian or City Guard back in Rome, had burst into the clearing where Ajax had led them and hobbled his donkey. Aulus had grabbed Titus and bundled him from the clearing. Zeno had sprinted after them, but when they reached the edge of the clearing they saw that the bandits had grabbed Ajax. Zeno had turned and run at them, but Aulus had dragged the protesting Titus away.

Now he was having second thoughts. He felt in his tunic.

‘We can’t leave,’ he told Aulus.

‘Watch me,’ Aulus panted. ‘What do we owe to those two Greeks?’

Titus shook his head. ‘They were good to us, they warned us about the bandits...’

‘For all we know they were in league with them,’ Aulus replied.

‘But it’s not that,’ Titus added. ‘Uncle Tiberius’ letter – I left it behind!’

Aulus stared at him, the pale moonlit oval of his face aghast.

‘Where are those lads?’

The distant shout rang out from the trees between them and the clearing. *‘Hunt*

*them down,*’ it added. *‘We can’t let them get away. Keep on at these two, Corocotta! We’ll grab the others.’*

Titus and Aulus ducked down in the cover of a laurel bush and strained their eyes towards the blundering dark figures in the middle distance. The aromatic smell of the leaves reminded Titus of working in his father’s kitchen, and powerful wave of nostalgia almost overcame him. He shook his head.

‘What are we going to do?’ Aulus hissed. ‘We could go back to Rome and ask Uncle for another letter.’

Titus shook his head tightly. ‘We can’t leave Ajax and Zeno,’ he insisted. ‘Besides, if we turn back and start again it’ll be autumn before we reach the Alps and we might have trouble crossing them. No, we’ve got to get back to the camp.’

Aulus was silent for a while as the bandits crashed about the undergrowth, moving further and further away. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘We’ve got to sneak back, then, and see what’s what. They must have left men with the physician and Zeno.’

Slowly the two boys made their way back to the edge of the clearing, slithering on their bellies like snakes, or scuttling through the bushes like rabbits. The yellow light of the flickering fire licked at the trunks on either side of them as they peered out.

Five people were in the clearing, three bandits menacing the two Greeks Aulus and Titus had befriended; a drably-clad youth their own age with olive skin and curly hair, and a white-bearded old man in a green tunic. Standing over them were the three bandits, men clad in tatters but carrying military issue swords. They were looking in the direction their comrades had taken. As Titus watched, one spat into the fire and snapped at the physician.

Ajax shook his head. ‘We met them on the journey,’ he replied in his reedy but authoritative voice. ‘We banded together for protection, if you’d believe it. Now let my servant and I go. You’ve established we have nothing to interest you. I must be in Pannonia before winter.’

The bandit – Corocotta, presumably – shook his head. ‘Those drugs and herbs could find a buyer in Ravenna,’ he replied. ‘They have need for eye-doctor’s simples and nostrums. They’ve all got eye diseases...’

‘The proximity of the marshes,’ Ajax told him.

‘I don’t care what it is!’ the bandit roared. ‘I’m taking them. But you, old man, you’re no use to us.’

‘The let us go!’ shrilled Zeno from his master’s side. ‘If you don’t need us, let us go.’

Corocotta crouched over him and felt the blade of his sword. ‘Well, we might just have a bit of fun first, lad.’ He glanced craftily at Ajax. ‘Too much to hope this boy’s new to the game – Greeks are all the same. I bet that’s what you employ him for, you invert! Makes me sick, what you Greeks get up to.’ He looked at his companions. ‘I’ll have the boy first. You two keep an eye out.’ The bandit leader flung Zeno to the ground while Ajax struggled in the arms of his captors.

Titus looked at Aulus. ‘We must do something!’ His mind was blank. He could think of no solution except to attack them head on, and weaponless and outnumbered as they were, they stood little chance.

Quickly, Aulus scooped up a pebble from the ground, and flung it across the clearing. Zeno was struggling in Corocotta’s arms now, and the man was laughing uproariously. At the crash from the side of the clearing, however, he staggered to his feet and glared about him.

‘Over there!’ he cried. ‘They’ve circled round us!’

The other two bandits leapt up, flinging Ajax to one side, and blundered towards

the edge of the clearing. Titus looked at Aulus, whose shadowy face was drawn. The plan had worked so far, but what now?

Aulus looked up at a crashing from closer by. The other bandits were returning.

‘What now?’ Titus demanded. Had Aulus any kind of plan?

‘Quick,’ Aulus hissed, grabbing Titus and sprinting across the path that led out of the clearing. Titus heard a shout from behind them as the larger group of bandits got a clear view of their silhouetted forms between them and the campfire. Titus looked back and saw the shadowy forms of the bandits charging forward, their swords raised high.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded, as Aulus led them into the darkness beyond, circling round the edge of the clearing. Surely they were heading towards the other bandits? Aulus had attracted the attention of one group of bandits and was now leading them towards the others. ‘Don’t be stupid!’ he added as he heard the other two bandits approaching in the darkness.

‘Quiet!’ Aulus snapped, grabbing Titus and pulling him down into the cover of a bush. They saw two pairs of legs rush past, and heard the battle cries of the two bandits. Suddenly, Titus heard a brutal noise from up ahead, and a headless corpse collapsed in the gloom beside the bush. His eyes fixed on the glimmer of steel from a dropped sword.

The other bandit shouted incoherently, and Titus saw him silhouetted against the light from the clearing, charging blindly into the larger group of bandits. Two or three men fell before his assault before they dragged him down and plunged their swords blades into him. Titus rolled over to Aulus.

‘You knew that would happen!’ he hissed. Aulus grinned.

‘I hoped,’ he corrected. ‘Get that sword!’

Titus leaned over to grab the sword dropped by the first bandit. He heard one of the surviving bandits shout:

‘This isn’t one of them! It’s Manius!’

‘You killed him!’ another bandit bellowed, and Titus heard the clash of blade on blade. Aulus touched his arm.

‘Back to the clearing,’ he hissed.

They rushed through the trees away from the bushes where the bandits seemed intent on extirpate each other. Aulus entered the clearing first, followed by Titus, to see the physician, Ajax, lying flat out beside the fire and Corocotta struggling with Zeno again. Titus rushed over. Corocotta whirled round, still keeping Zeno down with one beefy arm, and Titus thrust the sword into his heart.

‘Come on,’ Aulus said, helping Zeno to his feet. ‘Get your master – drag him.’ Aulus shot a glance towards the edge of the clearing where the bandits were still fighting. ‘Chuck him over the donkey. Now come on, Titus – we’ve got to get moving.’

Titus was scrabbling at the meagre pile of their belongings. He produced his pack.

‘No time,’ Aulus said as he helped Zeno load Ajax’s unconscious body on the back of the protesting donkey. ‘Any moment those bandits could be after us.’

‘Uncle Tiberius’ letter!’ Titus exclaimed. ‘We can’t leave it!’

Aulus turned to him with a look of surprise. ‘All right, then!’ he said. ‘But let’s get back to the road.’

‘We should head for Ariminum,’ Zeno said. ‘It’s only down the road, and we could stay the night in an inn.’ He gave his master a look as they led the donkey from the clearing as quickly as possible. ‘Tight-arsed old miser,’ he added under his breath. ‘We could at least afford to sleep in an inn when there’s bandits about.’



Grumbling, he led them down towards the road.  
The woods were silent now. The bandits seemed to have settled their differences.

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Titus rose from his pallet the next morning and shambled over to the narrow window as he pulled on his tunic. He peered down at the courtyard of the inn.

‘It can’t be morning yet!’

He turned to see Aulus peering blearily from beneath his blanket. Titus scratched absently at his ankles as he regarded his brother.

‘Get up,’ he said shortly. ‘Time to find breakfast.’

Downstairs they found Zeno and Ajax already risen and eating at the main table in the bustling common room. The physician looked pale, but was eating spelt bread with a hearty appetite. He looked up as the two youths entered.

‘My boy tells me I have you to thank,’ he said. ‘Come join us.’

Titus and Aulus sat at the table with them. Aulus looked hungrily at Ajax’s breakfast.

‘Not eaten yet?’ the physician asked.

Zeno nudged him. ‘Master,’ he said reprovingly. ‘These Romans saved us. You could at least offer to share our breakfast.’ Titus heard the reverence with which the Greek boy said “Roman.”

Ajax looked glumly at him, then cut hunks of bread from the loaf before them and offered them grudgingly to Titus and Aulus. The two youths tucked in enthusiastically, and Titus looked slowly about the room at their fellow guests.

‘Where are all these people travelling to?’ he asked the physician. Ajax shrugged, and followed his gaze.

‘Some no doubt are heading up the Aemilian Way to Bononia, for the festival of Unconquered Herakles – Hercules, rather. Others, who knows? Maybe some are bound for Pannonia, like myself.’

‘Like us,’ Titus added. ‘Who do you think is going that way?’

‘If there are going to be more bandits on the roads, we should get in as big a group as possible,’ Aulus added. Zeno looked curiously at him.

‘I thought you were legionaries,’ he said. ‘Surely you’re not scared of bandits? You settled those last night.’

‘Legionaries?’ Titus looked up as a big man sat down beside him. ‘These lads aren’t legionaries, Greek.’ A proud look appeared on his beefy, lined face. ‘I was a legionary.’

Aulus studied the man, who was in his late forties with greying, curly hair and a raven-shaped brand in his forehead. ‘We’re going to join the First Legion,’ he told the man. ‘We’re not legionaries yet, but we sorted out some bandits last night. Still, we don’t want to meet delays like that every night, do we Titus? We want to get to Pannonia as soon as we can.’

‘As do I,’ Ajax stated firmly.

The ex-legionary laughed. ‘That you won’t, with these bandits on the roads. What’s happened to the Empire I don’t know. But the only way you’ll reach Pannonia is if you join a larger group. I’m Macro, by the way, on the way back to the veteran’s colony where I live after a visit to my family in Capua. I’ve been working my passage as a guard for a merchant’s caravan on their way to the frontier towns. If you’re on your way to Carnuntum, I suggest you join us. But we’re going via Bononia with these pilgrims first, for protection. Dangerous business on the roads these days. It was

different in my young day, when the only threat was from the barbarians.’

It was about seventy five miles to Bononia, and it took over two days for the enlarged band of travellers to reach the city, entering the place on the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> August, as the Festival of Unconquered Hercules was beginning. Processions of priests and local dignitaries in brilliant white togas paraded through the streets towards the Temple of Hercules and the pilgrims who had made up a large proportion of the party left them to join the ceremony.

Ajax gave Zeno the day off and the Greek boy joined Titus and Aulus as they explored the jubilant town. Zeno was enthusing about army life.

‘I wish I could join the legions,’ he said wistfully.

‘You’re not a Roman citizen,’ Titus explained. ‘Only Roman citizens join the legions.’

‘And you don’t get many Greek auxiliaries either,’ Aulus added.

Zeno nodded impatiently. ‘I know all that, I’ve heard it before,’ he said. ‘But I don’t want to be a physician’s servant. I want to see something of life before I die.’

‘You’ll be bound to do that on the frontier,’ said Macro, coming up behind them. He looked at the boy, and shook his head. ‘But you haven’t a hope of becoming a legionary, not like your friends.’

Zeno looked glum. Aulus preened himself. Titus said nothing as they began to follow the procession as the priests led two garlanded oxen towards the steps of the Temple of Hercules.

‘But I’ll still see life, on the frontier?’ Zeno probed.

Macro nodded. ‘Oh, you will that,’ he replied. ‘You’re the physician’s boy, aren’t you? You’ll have your work cut out for you.’

‘What about us legionaries?’ Aulus asked anxiously. The priests were escorting the complacent oxen to the altar. One of them began to seem skittish, uncertain, sniffing the air and blowing uneasily. It halted in its tracks and the attendants had to force it on with blows. The other ox lumbered stolidly on towards its doom.

‘Plenty of work for legionaries,’ Macro replied. ‘I was on the frontier in the old emperor’s days – Marcus Aurelius. In those times, the barbarians came south, burning and pillaging like madmen – berserk Germans with red-dyed hair, wild Sarmatians on horseback – stinking of horses, too. We fought and fought year after year. Most of my mates copped it sooner or later. Only I lived on.’

‘I remember one time we were out in the middle of the Pannonian prairie,’ he went on, ‘when the Sarmatians surrounded us! We could hear their war-whoops on the wind; see them circling our forces, surrounding us on all sides. We had marched long and far. The emperor was sickening for something, the legionaries had lost morale. There was no way out!’

‘We had defeated the Quadi and the Marcomanni, and it had seemed like there was an end in sight to this bloody war. But then the Iazyges rose up against us, and it was their warriors who surrounded us, out on the prairie. The sun baked us, the wind stirred up the dust in clouds; and they were the only clouds on the horizon. The sky was empty, and the barbarians had us surrounded.’

‘The emperor sent out men to find water, but none of them returned, unless the barbarians slung us their severed heads. We were trapped. I was on guard duty at the emperor’s side; only just been seconded from the First Legion. I could hear him speaking to his staff officers; how could we get out of this one? he was asking. None of the legates and tribunes had a clue.’

‘But then that old Egyptian the emperor kept, as a jester I’d always thought, he told them that he would bring down the rain. The legates laughed, and told him to

give it a try – what options were left? He smiled coldly, and turned away to cast his spells. He cried out aloud to thrice-great Mercury and the celestial gods, and yammered away in his own language. Then there was nothing.

‘Out beyond the fires, the Quadi were still circling like jackals. We stood there in silence.

‘Clouds began to gather on the horizon. I thought they were dust clouds at first; that the Quadi were bringing up reinforcements. But soon they were directly overhead; black, bulging rain clouds. The heavens opened, and rain poured down. Some say they saw divine faces in the clouds, but I saw nothing. All the same, that day we dealt the Quadi a resounding defeat.’

Titus, Aulus and Zeno listened in awe. Absently, Titus watched as the priests sprinkled the oxen’s heads with wine and flour. One priest moved forward to stun the beast with a poleaxe before the high priest thrust a sacrificial knife into its throat. An attendant caught the red spray of gore in a bowl, and they began to skin the beast in preparation for the ritual banquet. The second oxen followed the first as the priests slaughtered it with soulless efficiency. People were going about their business in the square below with hardly a thought for the ceremony, which was attended mainly by civic dignitaries and travellers from out of town. The coppery tang of blood hung in the summer air, mingling with the incense. It seemed to Titus like nothing more holy than an abattoir.

## Chapter Two

They left Bononia the next morning and continued through the province of Cisalpine Gaul; once this had been barbarian territory, before the armed might of Rome had spilt sufficient Celtic blood to bring the wayward tribes to heel. Now the wide plain was a patchwork of fields and vineyards, with the red-tiled roofs of villas visible at the centre of vast, slave-worked estates.

By the end of the fourth day out from Bononia, they were amidst the Alps.

The wind howled in their ears like an angry god and plucked at their cloaks, buffeting them to and for. Snow began to fall as they made their way up the pass, stinging their skin and blinding them, rendering the path ever more treacherous.

‘Time to make camp,’ Macro shouted above the roar of the storm. ‘Come on, come on! The storm’s not getting any calmer. I think it’s trying to blow the mountain down.’

Titus and Aulus tried to get a fire going while the small group of merchants tried to calm their skittish pack animals and set up their tents in the encroaching gloom.

Half an hour later the group sat huddled around a dancing fire, their cloaks wrapped tightly around them. The merchants discussed opportunities for trade in Pannonia while preparing to retire for the evening. Titus, Aulus and Zeno were listening to another of Macro’s exploits.

‘How can anyone sleep in this?’ Aulus asked dejectedly, looking at Ajax’s tent, to which the physician had retired shortly before.

‘Ajax has the right idea. Time to get some sleep now, boys, we’ve still got some way to go. Macro yawned as he rose to his feet. ‘It’ll be good to see Pannonia again. I’m getting too old for this,’ he added as he crawled into his tent.

‘What’s that rumbling noise?’ Zeno asked, with his head cocked to one side.

‘It’s probably Macro.’ Aulus smirked.

‘No, listen!’ Zeno insisted.

Suddenly the ground started to shake and a deep rumbling drowned out the howling wind. They were thrown off their feet as a wall of snow and ice tumbled out of the darkness. For a moment all was noise and chaos.

As quickly as it began, the avalanche stopped. It had passed, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Zeno ran back and forth through the snow calling Ajax's name as Aulus helped a shivering Macro clamber out from the snow.

'Where are the others?' Titus asked the two remaining merchants. 'Help me! We must find them!' Titus and the merchants spread out across the snow and began searching for survivors.

They found Ajax half-buried in the snow some distance away, miraculously unhurt, and took stock of their situation.

'Most of the supplies are gone, not to mention the animals carrying them,' Ajax observed. 'And we have only two tents left.'

'We'll sleep together to keep warm,' said Macro. 'You two,' - he addressed the merchants - 'sleep in Ajax's tent. It's the largest. I'll stay with these two. We'll start early tomorrow. Get some sleep.'

Titus felt uncomfortable lying between Aulus and Macro. He was accustomed to sleeping beside his brother - with only one bed in their tenement flat he and his family had known nothing else - but Macro's nearness made him feel ill-at-ease. Not that he had anything against the bluff veteran but he had heard stories about men and youths sleeping together, usually men from the richer parts of Rome but legionaries were known for it as well. Still, Macro's warmth was as welcome as Aulus' - although strangely it seemed to seep away as the night drew on, and Titus tried to sleep despite Aulus' stentorian snores...

He awoke with a start. It was black as Tartarus in the tent. The wind was howling outside. Macro was huddled against Titus, stone cold. Titus lay unmoving, his sleep-numbed mind asking slow questions again and again until dawn.

'Titus?' Aulus mumbled. 'Is it morning yet?'

Titus turned to face his brother. For a long time he couldn't speak. The golden glow of dawn gradually illuminated the gloom of the tent.

'I'm worried about Macro,' he said at last.

'Why?' Aulus asked. He sat up. 'He hasn't been trying it on with you, has he?' he added in a whisper.

Titus turned to face Macro, and the veteran's stiff corpse rolled over with a heavy thud. Wide open eyes gazed glassily at a point far above the tent roof.

They buried Macro's body beside the road; Titus and Aulus, Ajax and Zeno. The merchants wanted nothing to do with the death, convinced that it would bring them bad luck and poor profits. The frozen ground was as hard as iron, and it took all the strength of Titus' fury and bewildered frustration to hack out a shallow grave.

Finally, the last clumps of earth covered the old legionary's face. Ajax led the youths in silence after the traders and their heavily loaded pack animals.

As they reached the head of the pass, Aulus turned longingly to look back down it. The rugged mountains receded into the haze of morning. The air was crisp and chill. Far off, he knew the fields of the Padus valley would be busy with haymaking. 'I wonder if we'll ever come back this way again,' he murmured.

The forests of Pannonia extended on all sides, encompassing the entire province from the mountain slopes to the Danube. In places, settlers had hacked out large clearings that now contained farms and villages and small towns, but the trees loomed on every side, mighty oaks and elms and beeches. The Roman road cut straight

through the forest like a sword slash. After the chill of the mountains, the summer heat of Pannonia was sweltering.

Titus trudged at the head of the little group of travellers, listening to Aulus as he boasted about what he would do when they joined the legion. Ajax sat on his donkey while Zeno led it. The two merchants and their pack animals followed closely behind.

‘Soon we’ll be at the town of Savaria,’ Ajax murmured. ‘We can find shelter for the night there if...’

A thunder of horses’ hooves broke out behind them. One of the traders glanced over his shoulder, and he shouted:

‘Off the road!’ he tugged at his pack horse. ‘Get off the road right now!’

Titus looked back to see a troop of cavalry racing towards them. Zeno was urging his master’s donkey towards the grassy bank.

‘Come on, Aulus!’ Titus barked at his brother, who was gaping at the new arrivals.

‘Why should we?’ Aulus demanded as Titus steered him to the side of the road.

The dust rose in a cloud as the horsemen galloped past and the travellers’ cloaks were blown about in the wind of their passage. Titus received a brief glimpse of savage-looking men with blue faces and red beards, wearing helmets and chainmail. Then they were gone, riding down the dusty road towards the town Titus now saw on the distant horizon.

‘Did you see them?’ Aulus demanded. ‘Those men had blue skin!’

Ajax nodded. ‘British auxiliaries,’ he commented. ‘They tattoo themselves. They come from the island in the ocean that Emperor Claudius conquered. I was there in my youth. It breeds fierce warriors. Come! Let us follow them to Savaria.’

Some time later the little group passed through the gates of the bustling town. The crowds seemed to move with no sense of order, and people were everywhere. A miasma of odours assaulted their nostrils; human smells, animal smells, and the sour-sweet smell of exotic food.

Most of the inhabitants had much in common with the Gauls Titus had seen in Rome. Long houses lined the streets, between which hordes of half-naked children and dogs were scampering, sometimes difficult to distinguish. The people themselves wore their hair quite long and many of the men sported moustaches. Some of the women wore Roman jewellery. Aulus seemed to find the men’s trousers comical.

Now and then Roman citizens passed, wearing shabby-looking togas. In one part of town Titus saw an amphitheatre, in another a public baths. But for all these Roman appurtenances, it didn’t feel like Rome.

‘Over there,’ said Ajax, indicating an inn on one side of the main street. ‘That looks a likely place, and cheap.’ They began to push their way through the crowds. As they reached the entrance to the inn, Titus heard a commotion from within and a heavily tattooed, red hair man rolled out, his muscular body completely naked.

‘And don’t come back!’ a woman screeched from above. Titus looked up to see a stout, middle aged female in a first storey window, holding a bundle of clothes and armour. She flung them down at the naked man, who rose with a guttural curse and seized the bundle. Titus noticed two snake-like tattoos spiralling up his neck to terminate on his cheeks.

‘Och, no ya don’t!’ the man bellowed. ‘I paid good money and I’m gettin’ what I came for!’ He charged back in through the entrance and the hide curtain covering it flopped back. Shouts and crashing noises came from within.

‘Why don’t we try somewhere else?’ Zeno suggested gently.

Shortly after, they reached a more salubrious-seeming tavern, whose Roman

proprietor stabled their horses and donkeys before leading them into the common room, where well-dressed merchants and other travellers sat eating and drinking at trestle tables.

'How much?' Titus heard Aulus exclaim. They had sat down and were discussing drinks with the proprietor. He was looking superciliously at Aulus.

'Twelve denarii,' the man repeated.

'For wine?' Aulus asked, scandalised. 'Don't you have anything cheaper?'

'We have beer,' the man replied. 'A denarius a pint.'

'Beer?' Titus asked. 'What's that?'

'Fermented grain,' Ajax told him. 'Like the Egyptians make. Rather good, in Alexandria at least. I'll have a pint, landlord. Go on, lad – live a little.'

Titus, Aulus and Zeno gazed at the beakers the landlord brought them. Cautiously, Titus took a sip. He winced at the rough taste, then tried some more. Looking up, he saw Ajax was drinking steadily. He wrinkled his nose. It tasted like water from a badly maintained aqueduct. Fermented grain, blue-faced men... These were strange parts indeed.

A man sat down heavily next to him, accompanied by another. He was gripping a beaker of beer and his manner suggested that this was not his first.

'Don't know why you drink that stuff, lad,' he slurred.

Titus turned to look down at him. He was a smallish man with a permanently anxious expression.

'Oops,' the man added. 'You can drink anything you like, of course, big man.'

'Servius!' his companion said in a reasonable tone. But Servius had turned to look at Zeno.

'Are you a Greek?' he demanded. 'Backs to the wall, everyone. There's a Greek in here!'

'This Greek is my friend,' Titus rumbled.

'Ignore him,' said the second man. 'He's had too much to drink. I'm Mustela. So what brings you to this fleapit town?'

'My brother and I are joining the First Legion,' Aulus broke in, looking proud.

'And I am to be camp physician,' Ajax added. 'My boy will be my aide.'

'We're going to Aquincum,' said Brutus, the merchant, but Servius interrupted.

'Joining the First? So are we! I don't really want to....' he added dolefully. 'I wanted to become a cook. But we were conscripted...'

'A cook?' Aulus hooted.

'Yeah, why not?' asked Servius.

'It's not a man's life,' Aulus told him, emboldened by the beer. 'You need to be in the army. No one can push you around then. People listen to what you have to say.'

'Well, they have to, don't they?' Mustela said with a wry smile. 'You're the one with the sword then, aren't you?'

'And the uniform, don't forget that,' Aulus replied. 'That really turns the girls' heads.' He gestured with his empty cup

'Take it easy with that stuff,' Titus said. 'We've got to leave early tomorrow morning.'

'Oh, come on! What's the matter, everyone else is knocking it back!' Aulus indicated the rest of the clientele.

He was right, Titus observed; the locals were drinking heavily. They seemed in high spirits. Some had even brought along drums and pipes, which they were playing with wild abandon.

'What do you think is going on?' Zeno asked.

‘Oh, no doubt one of their festivals,’ Brutus remarked, and his fellow merchant nodded wisely. ‘They seem to have one for every day of the year round here.’

‘Yes, but what’s it mean?’ Titus asked.

‘I’m not really sure, lad,’ the merchant replied. ‘This one seems a bit like the festival we saw in Bononia, the festival of Unconquered Hercules.’

‘Hah! Festival! Seemed more like a wake,’ Aulus laughed, as he returned from the bar. ‘Everyone looked like they wanted to be somewhere else.’

‘Yes, but it’s different here,’ Titus told him. ‘It seems to have some real meaning to these people. Not like that one in Bononia.’

‘That’s state religion for you,’ said Ajax judiciously. ‘You make it official and all the life seeps out. The people still need mysteries, even in this day and age. That’s why foreign cults are so popular in Rome.’

‘I can see why the cult of Bacchus is so popular,’ Mustela chipped in. ‘It’s just an excuse to get pissed.’

‘Hail Bacchus!’ Servius giggled, and he knocked back another mug of beer.

‘It’s those Christians I don’t understand,’ Brutus muttered. ‘I see the point of Bacchus – all that drinking’s bound to make life seem better. But why follow a religion that makes you feel guilty?’

Bacchus smiled fatly on their evening, and Titus remembered little more than staggering onto a straw pallet in a dingy room provided by the landlord. The next morning he awoke to the worst hangover of his life. He heard someone retching. Weakly opening his gummy eyes to a slit, he saw Aulus bent over a bucket in the corner of the dark room. A beam of light from the shuttered window cut the gloom. Titus winced at its harshness.

A dark figure swept across the light and stood before the windows for a second. Suddenly the shutters creaked open. Titus saw a shape silhouetted in the bright morning light, and recognised it as Ajax.

A chorus of groans came from the prone figures of the two merchants and Zeno. Aulus looked up from his sick bucket.

‘Aren’t you feeling ill?’ he demanded thickly. His face was deathly pale.

‘Not at all, not at all!’ the physician said gaily. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve imbibed fermented grain, but I think it’s almost equal to Iberian wine. Of course, it’s unwise to drink in such vast quantities.’

It was some time before the others felt well enough to continue. After paying off the landlord, they found the courtyard outside deserted apart from two figures Titus recognised from the night before. They had packs bundled at their feet and seemed to be waiting for someone. As Ajax’s little group entered the courtyard, the taller man turned to grin at them.

‘You’re up at last,’ Mustela said with a laugh. ‘Servius here thought you wouldn’t be joining us, for all you said last night.’

‘Last night?’ Titus asked.

‘Oh, don’t you remember, lad?’ Ajax asked genially. ‘You invited them to join us on the road to Carnuntum. A little presumptuous of you, since I’m the senior man in the party, but I’ll let that pass.’

‘Is that alright?’ Servius asked anxiously, looking at Titus and Aulus. ‘Safer than going on our own.’

‘You’ll appreciate the company, now Brutus and I are going on to Aquincum,’ said Camillus, Brutus’ taciturn fellow merchant.

Together, the travellers walked out of the courtyard into the street. They made their way through the town. Titus noticed that the streets were almost deserted.

‘Where is everyone?’ he asked. ‘The place seems empty.’

Before anyone could reply, they turned a corner and found themselves passing the bustling forum. It was packed with locals clad in their finest clothes. Auxiliary troopers were stationed discreetly at intervals around the square. In the centre, a group of toga-clad priests were busying themselves around a large cauldron.

‘Since you seemed so interested, lad,’ Ajax said, as they led their horses and the donkey round the edge of the festive throng, ‘I asked the landlord about the festival. Apparently it celebrates Jupiter Taranis’ victory over the Titans in a porridge-eating contest.’

Zeno exclaimed, ‘That’s not in Homer!’

Titus looked about him at the jubilant, dancing figures. He saw that the priests in the centre were approaching the cauldron with long ladles, and the people were beginning to line up, clutching pottery bowls and horn spoons.

Aulus sniggered. ‘Jupiter in a porridge-eating contest?’ he sneered. ‘What a bunch of barbarians.’

Titus felt irritated. So the story lacked elegance. But the passion of the people seemed a potent force, when compared with the drabness of the Roman festival they had seen earlier in the journey.

They said farewell to Brutus and Camillus at the edge of town, where they took a road north and the two traders rode to the east. The road led through the forests and hills for many miles – Ajax said it was about fifty miles from Savaria to Carnuntum – during which time the countryside altered in character as they neared the banks of the Danube.

They left the thickest woodlands, and from thereon the road led across an area of marshland. Ahead of them, the silver thread of the Danube wound its way across the landscape. The forests of Germany brooded beyond it, black and silent.

In the foreground, Titus saw the stone walls of a Roman fort, and the houses, markets, amphitheatre, and bathhouse of a civil settlement sprawling before it. Sunlight glittered from the burnished armour of tiny figures standing on the walls. The fort of Carnuntum looked out over the sluggish Danube waters with an air of expectancy. Titus experienced a chill as he looked beyond it again, to that ominous, looming forest wall that marked the uttermost limits of the Roman Empire – and the beginnings of barbarian country.

A hawk soared and coasted on thermals above the forest, a tiny dot in a blue sky. The forest beneath was dark, grim, and ancient, redolent of primeval, alien wickedness. But Titus felt a strange compulsion from the back of his mind, the same desire that comes as you stand at the edge of a cliff – an urge to fling himself into those inimical depths and be lost from the world forever.

‘Titus?’ Aulus’ voice roused him from his trance. He looked at his brother, whose face was pale. ‘This is it,’ Aulus added. ‘We’re almost there.’

‘It stinks,’ Zeno said quietly. Servius and Mustela muttered together.

Titus sniffed. It was true, a reek of raw sewage drifted across from the civil settlement, pungent in the hot summer air. Ajax shook his head.

‘We have reached the furthest edges of civilisation,’ he said solemnly.

### Chapter Three

Half an hour later found them picking their way up a dirt track that wound between straggling lines of wattle and daub hovels towards the southern gate of the



camp. Ajax sat upon his donkey, looking down at the filth below with a queasy expression. Titus and the others followed him circumspectly, trying to walk in a way that suggested military men, not frightened civilians. Titus was careful where he trod. He had already seen a native woman hitch up her gown to defecate in the middle of the street. Even the Subura was less filthy. In places they had seen Roman temples or civic buildings, but most were half-built, or half-derelict. Ajax was right. They had reached the edges of civilisation. Would they ever return to the luxuries of Rome?

‘Who goes there?’

At the bark from the gate guard, Ajax reined his donkey, and the younger men came to a halt in a ragged line.

‘Physician Ajax and servant,’ Ajax said. ‘Here to replace Anaximander.’

The second legionary on sentry duty spat in the mud. ‘Anaximander? About time. Anaximander’s hide is a Sarmatian horse-archer’s saddle by now. Mithras knows what happened to the rest of him. You’re welcome, physician. Who are these children?’

‘Anaximander was killed by Sarmatians?’ Ajax asked. ‘But I thought the frontier was at peace.’

‘Oh, peace,’ the legionary said contemptuously. ‘We’re not at war – not officially. But you won’t see much peace with the First Legion. The hospital’s in the south west quadrant. What about these lads? They’re not all your servants are they?’

Ajax indicated Titus, Aulus, Servius and Mustela.

‘These lads want to join up,’ he told the legionary. ‘I encountered them on the journey. To whom should they report?’

The legionary, a grizzled, surly-faced man about forty, looked Titus and his companions up and down with a contemptuous grunt.

‘Join the legion?’ he sneered. ‘Look like they’ve run away from a Greek theatre. I’ve never seen such a bunch of ponces. Report to Centurion Decimus, in the headquarters building, end of the main street.’ He laughed. ‘More lambs for the slaughter. Get moving!’

The two legionaries stepped aside to allow Ajax and Zeno past, followed by Titus and his companions. Passing under the great arched gate, they entered the fort.

Inside they found a scene of order which contrasted strongly with the chaos and filth of the civil settlement. Identical stone garrison buildings with red tiled roofs lined straight gravel streets down which walked grim-faced men in uniform tunics, some in full armour. The main street ended in a T-junction, Titus saw, over which loomed the two storey colonnaded building he guessed was the headquarters.

‘We must leave you here,’ Ajax said to the four youths. ‘I wish you good luck in your careers – and the gods grant that I don’t see any of you in a professional capacity. Come along, Zeno.’ Zeno gave them a shy farewell, and followed his master down a side street.

‘That was an insult,’ Aulus complained. ‘Why doesn’t he want to see us again?’

‘Probably because he heard enough of your snoring on the journey,’ Titus said solemnly.

‘What?’ Aulus demanded.

Mustela grinned. ‘I reckon he meant he hoped we wouldn’t end up in hospital,’ he said.

‘I hope he’s right,’ Servius mumbled.

‘Come on,’ Titus said resolutely. ‘We’d better report to this... Centurion Decimus.’

The headquarters guards passed on their message and left them waiting in the

baking sun for a quarter of an hour. Finally, a stocky man in his forties appeared. He had clearly been muscular in his youth but was now running to seed. Beneath his crested helmet his face was scarred and dark, but two pale eyes glimmered like uncut gemstones. He looked the four youths up and down.

‘You!’ he bellowed at Servius. ‘What the hell is scum like you doing in my headquarters? Are you a bum-boy? Is that it? Come to unman my men with your degenerate Greek ways? What the fuck are you doing here?’

Servius stared back at him like a rabbit.

‘He’s here to join up,’ said Titus with a scowl. Decimus rounded on him, and Titus drew back slightly at the wave of stinking breath.

‘Who are you, big man? A gladiator? A charioteer? You’re not legionary material!’

‘I was a cook,’ Titus replied, then glanced angrily to left and right as the centurion broke out into guffaws of laughter.

‘A cook?’ he barked. ‘A mincing pastry chef? And you think you can join the First Legion? We only accept men here!’

‘We’ve got this letter,’ Aulus broke in.

‘Silence!’ Decimus bellowed. ‘Alright you catamites, you’re not wagging your arses at passing merchants, you’re not up to your arms in honey and dough now! This is the First Legion, and if you think you stand a chance of joining up, we will observe the correct procedure! Follow me!’

Decimus turned on his heel, and marched under the colonnaded archway. Titus glanced at his companions, and fell in behind the centurion. The other three came after him in a straggling line. They followed the centurion through a series of cool, shaded passages, until he came to a halt outside a door. He rapped on it respectfully, shooting venomous glances at the four youths.

‘Come,’ a cultured voice came from within. Decimus opened the door and slipped inside.

Titus and the others stood in silence as the rumbles of Decimus’ voice emanated from behind the door, answered by lighter tones. Finally, the door swung open, and Decimus ushered them in.

Sitting at a desk in the middle of the room was a tall, hollow-eyed man with a curl of cruelty to his mouth. He wore the uniform of a tribune.

‘Ahh, the new recruits,’ he said coldly. ‘Centurion Decimus has doubts about your abilities. Do any of you have anything to prove that you’re not merely a bunch – and I quote – of “lily-livered poofers”?’

Titus dug into his pouch and produced Uncle Tiberius’ letter of recommendation. Centurion Decimus stepped forward to take it but Titus placed it directly on the table in front of the tribune. Immediately he realised he had done something wrong.

‘Pick that up and hand it to me!’ Decimus shouted. ‘Tribune Plautianus doesn’t accept anything straight from your grubby hands!’

Titus stared back at the red-faced man for a second, just long enough for Decimus to raise an eyebrow and prepare another ear-splitting blast. Then Titus picked up the letter and handed it to the centurion.

Decimus snatched the letter, almost tearing it in the process. He thrust it brusquely at Plautianus.

Plautianus examined it quietly. His cold expression changed slightly. ‘How interesting,’ he said. ‘This letter is from one ex-centurion Tiberius... Know the name, Decimus?’

Decimus’ eyes narrowed momentarily, and he studied Titus and Aulus.

‘Never heard of him,’ he barked.

‘Nevertheless, these two lads come highly recommended,’ Plautianus commented. ‘And the other two?’

Servius shook his head violently. Mustela smiled.

‘We don’t really have anyone to recommend us. We were conscripted.’

‘Get that grin off your face!’ Decimus bellowed. ‘And as for you – stop trembling!’ This was directed at Servius. ‘Alright, you pansies, you’re assigned to squad 0405. They’re in need of men to replace comrades who fell while out on patrol. It’s an insult to send you, but needs must. Now get moving!’

They found the barracks room assigned to squad 0405 after fruitless searching along the rows of identical garrison blocks. Titus led the way, towering over his companions, and knocked on the wooden door.

After a moment, a hubbub came from inside, and the door opened. A heavily scarred face appeared in the doorway, gazing questioningly at them.

‘Hail,’ Titus said formally. ‘We’re the recruits, assigned to squad 0405 for training. We’re replacing the men you lost out on patrol.’

The scarred man’s face fell. He shook his head, his eyes wide. ‘Don’t talk about them!’ he hissed. ‘Their ghosts are not gone yet!’ His hands fumbled with one of many charms hanging from his neck.

TO BE CONTINUED

# Varney the Vampire

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE MEETING OF THE LOVERS IN THE GARDEN.—AN AFFECTING SCENE.—THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF SIR FRANCIS VARNEY.

Our readers will recollect that Flora Bannerworth had made an appointment with Charles Holland in the garden of the hall. This meeting was looked forward to by the young man with a variety of conflicting feelings, and he passed the intermediate time in a most painful state of doubt as to what would be its result.

The thought that he should be much urged by Flora to give up all thoughts of making her his, was a most bitter one to him, who loved her with so much truth and constancy, and that she would say all she could to induce such a resolution in his mind he felt certain. But to him the idea of now abandoning her presented itself in the worst of aspects.

“Shall I,” he said, “sink so low in my own estimation, as well as in hers, and in that of all honourable-minded persons, as to desert her now in the hour of affliction? Dare I be so base as actually or virtually to say to her, ‘Flora, when your beauty was undimmed by sorrow—when all around you seemed life and joy, I loved you selfishly for the increased happiness which you might bestow upon me; but now the hand of misfortune presses heavily upon you—you are not what you were, and I desert you? Never—never—never!’”

Charles Holland, it will be seen by some of our more philosophic neighbours, felt more acutely than he reasoned; but let his errors of argumentation be what they may, can we do other than admire the nobility of soul which dictated such a self denying generous course as that he was pursuing?

As for Flora, Heaven only knows if at that precise time her intellect had completely stood the test of the trying events which had nearly overwhelmed it.

The two grand feelings that seemed to possess her mind were fear of the renewed visit of the vampyre, and an earnest desire to release Charles Holland from his repeated vows of constancy towards her.

Feeling, generosity, and judgment, all revolted holding a young man to such a destiny as hers. To link him to her fate, would be to make him to a real extent a sharer in it, and the more she heard fall from his lips in the way of generous feelings of continued attachment to her, the more severely did she feel that he would suffer most acutely if united to her.

And she was right. The very generosity of feeling which would have now prompted Charles Holland to lead Flora Bannerworth to the altar, even with the marks of the vampyre’s teeth upon her throat, gave an assurance of a depth of feeling which would have made him an ample haven in all her miseries, in all her distresses and afflictions.

What was familiarly in the family at the Hall called the garden, was a semicircular piece of ground shaded in several directions by trees, and which was exclusively devoted to the growth of flowers. The piece of ground was nearly hidden from the view of the house, and in its centre was a summer-house, which at the usual season of the year was covered with all kinds of creeping plants of exquisite perfumes, and rare beauty. All around, too, bloomed the fairest and sweetest of flowers, which a rich soil and a sheltered situation could produce.

Alas! though, of late many weeds had straggled up among their more estimable

floral culture, for the decayed fortunes of the family had prevented them from keeping the necessary servants, to place the Hall and its grounds in a state of neatness, such as it had once been the pride of the inhabitants of the place to see them. It was then in this flower-garden that Charles and Flora used to meet.

As may be supposed, he was on the spot before the appointed hour, anxiously expecting the appearance of her who was so really and truly dear to him. What to him were the sweet flowers that there grew in such happy luxuriance and heedless beauty? Alas, the flower that to his mind was fairer than them all, was blighted, and in the wan cheek of her whom he loved, he sighed to see the lily usurping the place of the radiant rose.

“Dear, dear Flora,” he ejaculated, “you must indeed be taken from this place, which is so full of the most painful remembrance; now, I cannot think that Mr. Marchdale somehow is a friend to me, but that conviction, or rather impression, does not paralyze my judgment sufficiently to induce me not to acknowledge that his advice is good. He might have couched it in pleasanter words—words that would not, like daggers, each have brought a deadly pang home to my heart, but still I do think that in his conclusion he was right.”

A light sound, as of some fairy footstep among the flowers, came upon his ears, and turning instantly to the direction from whence the sound proceeded, he saw what his heart had previously assured him of, namely, that it was his Flora who was coming.

Yes, it was she; but, ah, how pale, how wan—how languid and full of the evidences of much mental suffering was she. Where now was the elasticity of that youthful step? Where now was that lustrous beaming beauty of mirthfulness, which was wont to dawn in those eyes?

Alas, all was changed. The exquisite beauty of form was there, but the light of joy which had lent its most transcendent charms to that heavenly face, was gone. Charles was by her side in a moment. He had her hand clasped in his, while his disengaged one was wound tenderly around her taper waist.

“Flora, dear, dear Flora,” he said, “you are better. Tell me that you feel the gentle air revives you?”

She could not speak. Her heart was too full of woe.

“Oh; Flora, my own, my beautiful,” he added, in those tones which come so direct from the heart, and which are so different from any assumption of tenderness. “Speak to me, dear, dear Flora—speak to me if it be but a word.”

“Charles,” was all she could say, and then she burst into a flood of tears, and leant so heavily upon his arm, that it was evident but for that support she must have fallen.

Charles Holland welcomed those, although, they grieved him so much that he could have accompanied them with his own, but then he knew that she would be soon now more composed, and that they would relieve the heart whose sorrows called them into existence.

He forbore to speak to her until he found this sudden gush of feeling was subsiding into sobs, and then in low, soft accents, he again endeavoured to breathe comfort to her afflicted and terrified spirit.

“My Flora,” he said, “remember that there are warm hearts that love you. Remember that neither time nor circumstance can change such endearing affection as mine. Ah, Flora, what evil is there in the whole world that love may not conquer, and in the height of its noble feelings laugh to scorn.”

“Oh, hush, hush, Charles, hush.”

“Wherefore, Flora, would you still the voice of pure affection? I love you surely, as few have ever loved. Ah, why would you forbid me to give such utterance as I may to those feelings which fill up my whole heart?”

“No—no—no.”

“Flora, Flora, wherefore do you say no?”

“Do not, Charles, now speak to me of affection or love. Do not tell me you love me now.”

“Not tell you I love you! Ah, Flora, if my tongue, with its poor eloquence to give utterance to such a sentiment, were to do its office, each feature of my face would tell the tale. Each action would show to all the world how much I loved you.”

“I must not now hear this. Great God of Heaven give me strength to carry out the purpose of my soul.”

“What purpose is it, Flora, that you have to pray thus fervently for strength to execute? Oh, if it savour aught of treason against love’s majesty, forget it. Love is a gift from Heaven. The greatest and the most glorious gift it ever bestowed upon its creatures. Heaven will not aid you in repudiating that which is the one grand redeeming feature that rescues human nature from a world of reproach.”

Flora wrung her hands despairingly as she said,—

“Charles, I know I cannot reason with you. I know I have not power of language, aptitude of illustration, nor depth of thought to hold a mental contention with you.”

“Flora, for what do I contend?”

“You, you speak of love.”

“And I have, ere this, spoken to you of love unchecked.”

“Yes, yes. Before this.”

“And now, wherefore not now? Do not tell me you are changed.”

“I am changed, Charles. Fearfully changed. The curse of God has fallen upon me, I know not why. I know not that in word or in thought I have done evil, except perchance unwittingly, and yet—the vampyre.”

“Let not that affright you.”

“Affright me! It has killed me.”

“Nay, Flora,—you think too much of what I still hope to be susceptible of far more rational explanation.”

“By your own words, then, Charles, I must convict you. I cannot, I dare not be yours, while such a dreadful circumstance is hanging over me, Charles; if a more rational explanation than the hideous one which my own fancy gives to the form that visits me can be found, find it, and rescue me from despair and from madness.”

They had now reached the summer-house, and as Flora uttered these words she threw herself on to a seat, and covering her beautiful face with her hands, she sobbed convulsively.

“You have spoken,” said Charles, dejectedly. “I have heard that which you wished to say to me.”

“No, no. Not all, Charles.”

“I will be patient, then, although what more you may have to add should tear my very heart-strings.”

“I—I have to add, Charles,” she said, in a tremulous voice, “that justice, religion, mercy—every human attribute which bears the name of virtue, calls loudly upon me no longer to hold you to vows made under different auspices.”

“Go on, Flora.”

“I then implore you, Charles, finding me what I am, to leave me to the fate which it has pleased Heaven to cast upon me. I do not ask you, Charles, not to love me.”

“‘Tis well. Go on, Flora.”

“Because I should like to think that, although I might never see you more, you loved me still. But you must think seldom of me, and you must endeavour to be happy with some other—”

“You cannot, Flora, pursue the picture you yourself would draw. These words come not from your heart.”

“Yes—yes—yes.”

“Did you ever love me?”

“Charles, Charles, why will you add another pang to those you know must already rend my heart?”

“No, Flora, I would tear my own heart from my bosom ere I would add one pang to yours. Well I know that gentle maiden modesty would seal your lips to the soft confession that you loved me. I could not hope the joy of hearing you utter these words. The tender devoted lover is content to see the truthful passion in the speaking eyes of beauty. Content is he to translate it from a thousand acts, which, to eyes that look not so acutely as a lover’s, bear no signification; but when you tell me to seek happiness with another, well may the anxious question burst from my throbbing heart of, ‘Did you ever love me, Flora?’”

Her senses hung entranced upon his words. Oh, what a witchery is in the tongue of love. Some even of the former colour of her cheek returned as forgetting all for the moment but that she was listening to the voice of him, the thoughts of whom had made up the day dream of her happiness, she gazed upon his face.

His voice ceased. To her it seemed as if some music had suddenly left off in its most exquisite passage. She clung to his arm—she looked imploringly up to him. Her head sunk upon his breast as she cried,

“Charles, Charles, I did love you. I do love you now.”

“Then let sorrow and misfortune shake their grisly locks in vain,” he cried. “Heart to heart—hand to hand with me, defy them.”

He lifted up his arms towards Heaven as he spoke, and at the moment came such a rattling peal of thunder, that the very earth seemed to shake upon its axis.

A half scream of terror burst from the lips of Flora, as she cried,—

“What was that?”

“Only thunder,” said Charles, calmly.

“‘Twas an awful sound.”

“A natural one.”

“But at such a moment, when you were defying Fate to injure us. Oh! Charles, is it ominous?”

“Flora, can you really give way to such idle fancies?”

“The sun is obscured.”

“Ay, but it will shine all the brighter for its temporary eclipse. The thunder-storm will clear the air of many noxious vapours; the forked lightning has its uses as well as its powers of mischief. Hark! there again!”

Another peal, of almost equal intensity to the other, shook the firmament. Flora trembled.

“Charles,” she said, “this is the voice of Heaven. We must part—we must part for ever. I cannot be yours.”

“Flora, this is madness. Think again, dear Flora. Misfortunes for a time will hover over the best and most fortunate of us; but, like the clouds that now obscure the sweet sunshine, will pass away, and leave no trace behind them. The sunshine of joy will shine on you again.”

There was a small break in the clouds, like a window looking into Heaven. From it streamed one beam of sunlight, so bright, so dazzling, and so beautiful, that it was a sight of wonder to look upon. It fell upon the face of Flora; it warmed her cheek; it lent lustre to her pale lips and tearful eyes; it illumined that little summer-house as if it had been the shrine of some saint.

“Behold!” cried Charles, “where is your omen now?”

“God of Heaven!” cried Flora; and she stretched out her arms.

“The clouds that hover over your spirit now,” said Charles, “shall pass away. Accept this beam of sunlight as a promise from God.”

“I will—I will. It is going.”

“It has done its office.”

The clouds closed over the small orifice, and all was gloom again as before.

“Flora,” said Charles, “you will not ask me now to leave you?”

She allowed him to clasp her to his heart. It was beating for her, and for her only.

“You will let me, Flora, love you still?”

Her voice, as she answered him, was like the murmur of some distant melody the ears can scarcely translate to the heart.

“Charles we will live, love, and die together.”

And now there was a wrapt stillness in that summer-house for many minutes—a trance of joy. They did not speak, but now and then she would look into his face with an old familiar smile, and the joy of his heart was near to bursting in tears from his eyes.

A shriek burst from Flora’s lips—a shriek so wild and shrill that it awakened echoes far and near. Charles staggered back a step, as if shot, and then in such agonised accents as he was long indeed in banishing the remembrance of, she cried,—

“The vampyre! the vampyre!”

## CHAPTER XVII.

THE EXPLANATION.—THE ARRIVAL OF THE ADMIRAL AT THE HOUSE.—A SCENE OF CONFUSION, AND SOME OF ITS RESULTS.

So sudden and so utterly unexpected a cry of alarm from Flora, at such a time might well have the effect of astounding the nerves of any one, and no wonder that Charles was for a few seconds absolutely petrified and almost unable to think.

Mechanically, then, he turned his eyes towards the door of the summer-house, and there he saw a tall, thin man, rather elegantly dressed, whose countenance certainly, in its wonderful resemblance to the portrait on the panel, might well appal any one.

The stranger stood in the irresolute attitude on the threshold of the summer-house of one who did not wish to intrude, but who found it as awkward, if not more so now, to retreat than to advance.

Before Charles Holland could summon any words to his aid, or think of freeing himself from the clinging grasp of Flora, which was wound around him, the stranger made a very low and courtly bow, after which he said, in winning accents,—

“I very much fear that I am an intruder here. Allow me to offer my warmest apologies, and to assure you, sir, and you, madam, that I had no idea any one was in the arbour. You perceive the rain is falling smartly, and I made towards here, seeing it was likely to shelter me from the shower.”

These words were spoken in such a plausible and courtly tone of voice, that they might well have become any drawing-room in the kingdom.



Flora kept her eyes fixed upon him during the utterance of these words; and as she convulsively clutched the arm of Charles, she kept on whispering,—

“The vampyre! the vampyre!”

“I much fear,” added the stranger, in the same bland tones, “that I have been the cause of some alarm to the young lady!”

“Release me,” whispered Charles to Flora. “Release me; I will follow him at once.”

“No, no—do not leave me—do not leave me. The vampyre—the dreadful vampyre!”

“But, Flora—”

“Hush—hush—hush! It speaks again.”

“Perhaps I ought to account for my appearance in the garden at all,” added the insinuating stranger. “The fact is, I came on a visit—”

Flora shuddered.

“To Mr. Henry Bannerworth,” continued the stranger; “and finding the garden-gate open, I came in without troubling the servants, which I much regret, as I can perceive I have alarmed and annoyed the lady. Madam, pray accept of my apologies.”

“In the name of God, who are you?” said Charles.

“My name is Varney.”

“Oh, yes. You are the Sir Francis Varney, residing close by, who bears so fearful a resemblance to—”

“Pray go on, sir. I am all attention.”

“To a portrait here.”

“Indeed! Now I reflect a moment, Mr. Henry Bannerworth did incidentally mention something of the sort. It’s a most singular coincidence.”

The sound of approaching footsteps was now plainly heard, and in a few moments Henry and George, along with Mr. Marchdale, reached the spot. Their appearance showed that they had made haste, and Henry at once exclaimed,—

“We heard, or fancied we heard, a cry of alarm.”

“You did hear it,” said Charles Holland. “Do you know this gentleman?”

“It is Sir Francis Varney.”

“Indeed!”

Varney bowed to the new comers, and was altogether as much at his ease as everybody else seemed quite the contrary. Even Charles Holland found the difficulty of going up to such a well-bred, gentlemanly man, and saying, “Sir, we believe you to be a vampyre”—to be almost, if not insurmountable.

“I cannot do it,” he thought, “but I will watch him.”

“Take me away,” whispered Flora. “‘Tis he—’tis he. Oh, take me away, Charles.”

“Hush, Flora, hush. You are in some error; the accidental resemblance should not make us be rude to this gentleman.”

“The vampyre!—it is the vampyre!”

“Are you sure, Flora?”

“Do I know your features—my own—my brother’s? Do not ask me to doubt—I cannot. I am quite sure. Take me from his hideous presence, Charles.”

“The young lady, I fear, is very much indisposed,” remarked Sir Francis Varney, in a sympathetic tone of voice. “If she will accept of my arm, I shall esteem it a great honour.”

“No—no—no!—God! no,” cried Flora.

“Madam, I will not press you.”

He bowed, and Charles led Flora from the summer-house towards the hall.

“Flora,” he said, “I am bewildered—I know not what to think. That man most certainly has been fashioned after the portrait which is on the panel in the room you formerly occupied; or it has been painted from him.”

“He is my midnight visitor!” exclaimed Flora. “He is the vampyre;—this Sir Francis Varney is the vampyre.”

“Good God! What can be done?”

“I know not. I am nearly distracted.”

“Be calm, Flora. If this man be really what you name him, we now know from what quarter the mischief comes, which is, at all events, a point gained. Be assured we shall place a watch upon him.”

“Oh, it is terrible to meet him here.”

“And he is so wonderfully anxious, too, to possess the Hall.”

“He is—he is.”

“It looks strange, the whole affair. But, Flora, be assured of one thing, and that is, of your own safety.”

“Can I be assured of that?”

“Most certainly. Go to your mother now. Here we are, you see, fairly within doors. Go to your mother, dear Flora, and keep yourself quiet. I will return to this mysterious man now with a cooler judgment than I left him.”

“You will watch him, Charles?”

“I will, indeed.”

“And you will not let him approach the house here alone?”

“I will not.”

“Oh, that the Almighty should allow such beings to haunt the earth!”

“Hush, Flora, hush! we cannot judge of his allwise purpose.”

“‘Tis hard that the innocent should be inflicted with its presence.”

Charles bowed his head in mournful assent.

“Is it not very, very dreadful?”

“Hush—hush! Calm yourself, dearest, calm yourself. Recollect that all we have to go upon in this matter is a resemblance, which, after all, may be accidental. But leave it all to me, and be assured that now I have some clue to this affair, I will not lose sight of it, or of Sir Francis Varney.”

So saying, Charles surrendered Flora to the care of her mother, and then was hastening back to the summer-house, when he met the whole party coming towards the Hall, for the rain was each moment increasing in intensity.

“We are returning,” remarked Sir Francis Varney, with a half bow and a smile, to Charles.

“Allow me,” said Henry, “to introduce you, Mr. Holland, to our neighbour, Sir Francis Varney.”

Charles felt himself compelled to behave with courtesy, although his mind was so full of conflicting feelings as regarded Varney; but there was no avoiding, without such brutal rudeness as was inconsistent with all his pursuits and habits, replying in something like the same strain to the extreme courtly politeness of the supposed vampyre.

“I will watch him closely,” thought Charles. “I can do no more than watch him closely.”

Sir Francis Varney seemed to be a man of the most general and discursive information. He talked fluently and pleasantly upon all sorts of topics, and notwithstanding he could not but have heard what Flora had said of him, he asked no

questions whatever upon that subject.

This silence as regarded a matter which would at once have induced some sort of inquiry from any other man, Charles felt told much against him, and he trembled to believe for a moment that, after all, it really might be true.

“Is he a vampyre?” he asked himself. “Are there vampyres, and is this man of fashion—this courtly, talented, educated gentleman one?” It was a perfectly hideous question.

“You are charmingly situated here,” remarked Varney, as, after ascending the few steps that led to the hall door, he turned and looked at the view from that slight altitude.

“The place has been much esteemed,” said Henry, “for its picturesque beauties of scenery.”

“And well it may be. I trust, Mr. Holland, the young lady is much better?”

“She is, sir,” said Charles.

“I was not honoured by an introduction.”

“It was my fault,” said Henry, who spoke to his extraordinary guest with an air of forced hilarity. “It was my fault for not introducing you to my sister.”

“And that was your sister?”

“It was, sir.”

“Report has not belied her—she is beautiful. But she looks rather pale, I thought. Has she bad health?”

“The best of health.”

“Indeed! Perhaps the little disagreeable circumstance, which is made so much food for gossip in the neighbourhood, has affected her spirits?”

“It has.”

“You allude to the supposed visit here of a vampyre?” said Charles, as he fixed his eyes upon Varney’s face.

“Yes, I allude to the supposed appearance of a supposed vampyre in this family,” said Sir Francis Varney, as he returned the earnest gaze of Charles, with such unshrinking assurance, that the young man was compelled, after about a minute, nearly to withdraw his own eyes.

“He will not be cowed,” thought Charles. “Use has made him familiar to such cross-questioning.”

It appeared now suddenly to occur to Henry that he had said something at Varney’s own house which should have prevented him from coming to the Hall, and he now remarked,—

“We scarcely expected the pleasure of your company here, Sir Francis Varney.”

“Oh, my dear sir, I am aware of that; but you roused my curiosity. You mentioned to me that there was a portrait here amazingly like me.”

“Did I?”

“Indeed you did, or how could I know it? I wanted to see if the resemblance was so perfect.”

“Did you hear, sir,” added Henry, “that my sister was alarmed at your likeness to that portrait?”

“No, really.”

“I pray you walk in, and we will talk more at large upon that matter.”

“With great pleasure. One leads a monotonous life in the country, when compared with the brilliancy of a court existence. Just now I have no particular engagement. As we are near neighbours I see no reason why we should not be good friends, and often interchange such civilities as make up the amenities of existence, and which, in the

country, more particularly, are valuable.”

Henry could not be hypocrite enough to assent to this; but still, under the present aspect of affairs, it was impossible to return any but a civil reply; so he said,—

“Oh, yes, of course—certainly. My time is very much occupied, and my sister and mother see no company.”

“Oh, now, how wrong.”

“Wrong, sir?”

“Yes, surely. If anything more than another tends to harmonize individuals, it is the society of that fairer half of the creation which we love for their very foibles. I am much attached to the softer sex—to young persons full of health. I like to see the rosy cheeks, where the warm blood mantles in the superficial veins, and all is loveliness and life.”

Charles shrank back, and the word “Demon” unconsciously escaped his lips.

Sir Francis took no manner of notice of the expression, but went on talking, as if he had been on the very happiest terms with every one present.

“Will you follow me, at once, to the chamber where the portrait hangs,” said Henry, “or will you partake of some refreshment first?”

“No refreshment for me,” said Varney. “My dear friend, if you will permit me to call you such, this is a time of the day at which I never do take any refreshment.”

“Nor at any other,” thought Henry.

They all went to the chamber where Charles had passed one very disagreeable night, and when they arrived, Henry pointed to the portrait on the panel, saying—

“There, Sir Francis Varney, is your likeness.”

He looked, and, having walked up to it, in an under tone, rather as if he were conversing with himself than making a remark for any one else to hear, he said—

“It is wonderfully like.”

“It is, indeed,” said Charles.

“If I stand beside it, thus,” said Varney, placing himself in a favourable attitude for comparing the two faces, “I dare say you will be more struck with the likeness than before.”

So accurate was it now, that the same light fell upon his face as that under which the painter had executed the portrait, that all started back a step or two.

“Some artists,” remarked Varney, “have the sense to ask where a portrait is to be hung before they paint it, and then they adapt their lights and shadows to those which would fall upon the original, were it similarly situated.”

“I cannot stand this,” said Charles to Henry; “I must question him farther.”

“As you please, but do not insult him.”

“I will not.”

“He is beneath my roof now, and, after all, it is but a hideous suspicion we have of him.”

“Rely upon me.”

Charles stepped forward, and once again confronting Varney, with an earnest gaze, he said—

“Do you know, sir, that Miss Bannerworth declares the vampyre she fancies to have visited this chamber to be, in features, the exact counterpart of this portrait?”

“Does she indeed?”

“She does, indeed.”

“And perhaps, then, that accounts for her thinking that I am the vampyre, because I bear a strong resemblance to the portrait.”

“I should not be surprised,” said Charles.

“How very odd.”

“Very.”

“And yet entertaining. I am rather amused than otherwise. The idea of being a vampyre. Ha! ha! If ever I go to a masquerade again, I shall certainly assume the character of a vampyre.”

“You would do it well.”

“I dare say, now, I should make quite a sensation.”

“I am certain you would. Do you not think, gentlemen, that Sir Francis Varney would enact the character to the very life? By Heavens, he would do it so well that one might, without much difficulty, really imagine him a vampyre.”

“Bravo—bravo,” said Varney, as he gently folded his hands together, with that genteel applause that may even be indulged in in a box at the opera itself. “Bravo. I like to see young persons enthusiastic; it looks as if they had some of the real fire of genius in their composition. Bravo—bravo.”

This was, Charles thought, the very height and acme of impudence, and yet what could he do? What could he say? He was foiled by the downright coolness of Varney.

As for Henry, George, and Mr. Marchdale, they had listened to what was passing between Sir Francis and Charles in silence. They feared to diminish the effect of anything Charles might say, by adding a word of their own; and, likewise, they did not wish to lose one observation that might come from the lips of Varney.

But now Charles appeared to have said all he had to say, he turned to the window and looked out. He seemed like a man who had made up his mind, for a time, to give up some contest in which he had been engaged.

And, perhaps, not so much did he give it up from any feeling or consciousness of being beaten, as from a conviction that it could be the more effectually, at some other and far more eligible opportunity, renewed.

Varney now addressed Henry, saying,—

“I presume the subject of our conference, when you did me the honour of a call, is no secret to any one here?”

“None whatever,” said Henry.

“Then, perhaps, I am too early in asking you if you have made up your mind?”

“I have scarcely, certainly, had time to think.”

“My dear sir, do not let me hurry you; I much regret, indeed, the intrusion.”

“You seem anxious to possess the Hall,” remarked Mr. Marchdale, to Varney.

“I am.”

“Is it new to you?”

“Not quite. I have some boyish recollections connected with this neighbourhood, among which Bannerworth Hall stands sufficiently prominent.”

“May I ask how long ago that was?” said Charles Howard, rather abruptly.

“I do not recollect, my enthusiastic young friend,” said Varney. “How old are you?”

“Just about twenty-one.”

“You are, then, for your age, quite a model of discretion.”

It would have been difficult for the most accurate observer of human nature to have decided whether this was said truthfully or ironically, so Charles made no reply to it whatever.

“I trust,” said Henry, “we shall induce you, as this is your first visit, Sir Francis Varney, to the Hall, to partake of some thing.”

“Well, well, a cup of wine—”

“Is at your service.”

Henry now led the way to a small parlour, which, although by no means one of the showiest rooms of the house, was, from the care and exquisite carving with which it abounded, much more to the taste of any who possessed an accurate judgment in such works of art.

Then wine was ordered, and Charles took an opportunity of whispering to Henry,—

“Notice well if he drinks.”

“I will.”

“Do you see that beneath his coat there is a raised place, as if his arm was bound up?”

“I do.”

“There, then, was where the bullet from the pistol fired by Flora, when we were at the church, hit him.”

“Hush! for God’s sake, hush! you are getting into a dreadful state of excitement, Charles; hush! hush!”

“And can you blame—”

“No, no; but what can we do?”

“You are right. Nothing can we do at present. We have a clue now, and be it our mutual inclination, as well as duty, to follow it. Oh, you shall see how calm I will be!”

“For Heaven’s sake, be so. I have noted that his eyes flash upon yours with no friendly feeling.”

“His friendship were a curse.”

“Hush! he drinks!”

“Watch him.”

“I will.”

“Gentlemen all,” said Sir Francis Varney, in such soft, dulcet tones, that it was quite a fascination to hear him speak; “gentlemen all, being as I am, much delighted with your company, do not accuse me of presumption, if I drink now, poor drinker as I am, to our future merry meetings.”

He raised the wine to his lips, and seemed to drink, after which he replaced the glass upon the table.

Charles glanced at it, it was still full.

“You have not drunk, Sir Francis Varney,” he said.

“Pardon me, enthusiastic young sir,” said Varney, “perhaps you will have the liberality to allow me to take my wine how I please and when I please.”

“Your glass is full.”

“Well, sir?”

“Will you drink it?”

“Not at any man’s bidding, most certainly. If the fair Flora Bannerworth would grace the board with her sweet presence, methinks I could then drink on, on, on.”

“Hark you, sir,” cried Charles, “I can bear no more of this. We have had in this house most horrible and damning evidence that there are such things as vampyres.”

“Have you really? I suppose you eat raw pork at supper, and so had the nightmare?”

“A jest is welcome in its place, but pray hear me out, sir, if it suit your lofty courtesy to do so.”

“Oh, certainly.”

“Then I say we believe, as far as human judgment has a right to go, that a vampyre has been here.”

“Go on, it’s interesting. I always was a lover of the wild and the wonderful.”

“We have, too,” continued Charles, “some reason to believe that you are the man.”

Varney tapped his forehead as he glanced at Henry, and said,—

“Oh, dear, I did not know. You should have told me he was a little wrong about the brain; I might have quarreled with the lad. Dear me, how lamentable for his poor mother.”

“This will not do, Sir Francis Varney alias Bannerworth.”

“Oh—oh! Be calm—be calm.”

“I defy you to your teeth, sir! No, God, no! Your teeth!”

“Poor lad! Poor lad!”

“You are a cowardly demon, and here I swear to devote myself to your destruction.”

Sir Francis Varney drew himself up to his full height, and that was immense, as he said to Henry,—

“I pray you, Mr. Bannerworth, since I am thus grievously insulted beneath your roof, to tell me if your friend here be mad or sane?”

“He’s not mad.”

“Then—”

“Hold, sir! The quarrel shall be mine. In the name of my persecuted sister—in the name of Heaven. Sir Francis Varney, I defy you.”

Sir Francis, in spite of his impenetrable calmness, appeared somewhat moved, as he said,—

“I have already endured insult sufficient—I will endure no more. If there are weapons at hand—”

“My young friend,” interrupted Mr. Marchdale, stepping between the excited men, “is carried away by his feelings, and knows not what he says. You will look upon it in that light, Sir Francis.”

“We need no interference,” exclaimed Varney, his hitherto bland voice changing to one of fury. “The hot blooded fool wishes to fight, and he shall—to the death—to the death.”

“And I say he shall not,” exclaimed Mr. Marchdale, taking Henry by the arm. “George,” he added, turning to the young man, “assist me in persuading your brother to leave the room. Conceive the agony of your sister and mother if anything should happen to him.”

Varney smiled with a devilish sneer, as he listened to these words, and then he said,—

“As you will—as you will. There will be plenty of time, and perhaps better opportunity, gentlemen. I bid you good day.”

And with provoking coolness, he then moved towards the door, and quitted the room.

“Remain here,” said Marchdale; “I will follow him, and see that he quits the premises.”

He did so, and the young men, from the window, beheld Sir Francis walking slowly across the garden, and then saw Mr. Marchdale follow on his track.

While they were thus occupied, a tremendous ringing came at the gate, but their attention was so rivetted to what was passing in the garden, that they paid not the least attention to it.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ADMIRAL'S ADVICE.—THE CHALLENGE TO THE VAMPYRE.—  
THE NEW SERVANT AT THE HALL.

The violent ringing of the bell continued uninterruptedly until at length George volunteered to answer it. The fact was, that now there was no servant at all in the place for, after the one who had recently demanded of Henry her dismissal had left, the other was terrified to remain alone, and had precipitately gone from the house, without even going through the ceremony of announcing her intention to. To be sure, she sent a boy for her money afterwards, which may be considered a great act of condescension.

Suspecting, then, this state of things, George himself hastened to the gate, and, being not over well pleased at the continuous and unnecessary ringing which was kept up at it, he opened it quickly, and cried, with more impatience, by a vast amount, than was usual with him.

“Who is so impatient that he cannot wait a seasonable time for the door to be opened?”

“And who the d——I are you?” cried one who was immediately outside.

“Who do you want?” cried George.

“Shiver my timbers!” cried Admiral Bell, for it was no other than that personage. “What’s that to you?”

“Ay, ay,” added Jack, “answer that if you can, you shore-going-looking swab.”

“Two madmen, I suppose,” ejaculated George, and he would have closed the gate upon them; but Jack introduced between it and the post the end of a thick stick, saying,—

“Avast there! None of that; we have had trouble enough to get in. If you are the family lawyer, or the chaplain, perhaps you’ll tell us where Mister Charley is.”

“Once more I demand of you who you want?” said George, who was now perhaps a little amused at the conduct of the impatient visitors.

“We want the admiral’s nevey” said Jack.

“But how do I know who is the admiral’s nevey as you call him.”

“Why, Charles Holland, to be sure. Have you got him aboard or not?”

“Mr. Charles Holland is certainly here; and, if you had said at once, and explicitly, that you wished to see him, I could have given you a direct answer.”

“He is here?” cried the admiral.

“Most certainly.”

“Come along, then; yet, stop a bit. I say, young fellow, just before we go any further, tell us if he has maimed the vampyre?”

“The what?”

“The wamphigher,” said Jack, by way of being, as he considered, a little more explanatory than the admiral.

“I do not know what you mean,” said George; “if you wish to see Mr. Charles Holland walk in and see him. He is in this house; but, for myself, as you are strangers to me, I decline answering any questions, let their import be what they may.”

“Hilloa! who are they?” suddenly cried Jack, as he pointed to two figures some distance off in the meadows, who appeared to be angrily conversing.

George glanced in the direction towards which Jack pointed, and there he saw Sir Francis Varney and Mr. Marchdale standing within a few paces of each other, and apparently engaged in some angry discussion.

His first impulse was to go immediately towards them; but, before he could



execute even that suggestion of his mind, he saw Varney strike Marchdale, and the latter fell to the ground.

“Allow me to pass,” cried George, as he endeavoured to get by the rather unwieldy form of the admiral. But, before he could accomplish this, for the gate was narrow, he saw Varney, with great swiftness, make off, and Marchdale, rising to his feet, came towards the Hall.

When Marchdale got near enough to the garden-gate to see George, he motioned to him to remain where he was, and then, quickening his pace, he soon came up to the spot.

“Marchdale,” cried George, “you have had an encounter with Sir Francis Varney.”

“I have,” said Marchdale, in an excited manner. “I threatened to follow him, but he struck me to the earth as easily as I could a child. His strength is superhuman.”

“I saw you fall.”

“I believe, but that he was observed, he would have murdered me.”

“Indeed!”

“What, do you mean to say that lankey, horse-marine looking fellow is as bad as that!” said the admiral.

Marchdale now turned his attention to the two new comers, upon whom he looked with some surprise, and then, turning to George, he said,—

“Is this gentleman a visitor?”

“To Mr. Holland, I believe he is,” said George; “but I have not the pleasure of knowing his name.”

“Oh, you may know my name as soon as you like,” cried the admiral. “The enemies of old England know it, and I don’t care if all the world knows it. I’m old Admiral Bell, something of a hulk now, but still able to head a quarter-deck if there was any need to do so.”

“Ay, ay,” cried Jack, and taking from his pocket a boatswain’s whistle, he blew a blast so long, and loud, and shrill, that George was fain to cover his ears with his hands to shut out the brain-piercing, and, to him unusual sound.

“And are you, then, a relative,” said Marchdale, “of Mr. Holland’s, sir, may I ask?”

“I’m his uncle, and be d——d to him, if you must know, and some one has told me that the young scamp thinks of marrying a mermaid, or a ghost, or a vampyre, or some such thing, so, for the sake of the memory of his poor mother, I’ve come to say no to the bargain, and d——n me, who cares.”

“Come in, sir,” said George, “I will conduct you to Mr. Holland. I presume this is your servant?”

“Why, not exactly. That’s Jack Pringle, he was my boatswain, you see, and now he’s a kind o’ something betwixt and between. Not exactly a servant.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” said Jack. “Have it all your own way, though we is paid off.”

“Hold your tongue, you audacious scoundrel, will you.”

“Oh, I forgot, you don’t like anything said about paying off, cos it puts you In mind of—”

“Now, d——n you, I’ll have you strung up to the yard-arm, you dog, if you don’t belay there.”

“I’m done. All’s right.”

By this time the party, including the admiral, Jack, George Bannerworth, and Marchdale, had got more than half-way across the garden, and were observed by Charles Holland and Henry, who had come to the steps of the hall to see what was going on. The moment Charles saw the admiral a change of colour came over his

face, and he exclaimed,—

“By all that’s surprising, there is my uncle!”

“Your uncle!” said Henry.

“Yes, as good a hearted a man as ever drew breath, and yet, withal, as full of prejudices, and as ignorant of life, as a child.”

Without waiting for any reply from Henry, Charles Holland rushed forward, and seizing his uncle by the hand, he cried, in tones of genuine affection,—

“Uncle, dear uncle, how came you to find me out?”

“Charley, my boy,” cried the old man, “bless you; I mean, confound your d——d impudence; you rascal, I’m glad to see you; no, I ain’t, you young mutineer. What do you mean by it, you ugly, ill-looking, d——d fine fellow—my dear boy. Oh, you infernal scoundrel.”

All this was accompanied by a shaking of the hand, which was enough to dislocate anybody’s shoulder, and which Charles was compelled to bear as well as he could.

It quite prevented him from speaking, however, for a few moments, for it nearly shook the breath out of him. When, then, he could get in a word, he said,—

“Uncle, I dare say you are surprised.”

“Surprised! D——n me, I am surprised.”

“Well, I shall be able to explain all to your satisfaction, I am sure. Allow me now to introduce you to my friends.”

Turning then to Henry, Charles said,—

“This is Mr. Henry Bannerworth, uncle; and this Mr. George Bannerworth, both good friends of mine; and this is Mr. Marchdale, a friend of theirs, uncle.”

“Oh, indeed!”

“And here you see Admiral Bell, my most worthy, but rather eccentric uncle.”

“Confound your impudence.”

“What brought him here I cannot tell; but he is a brave officer, and a gentleman.”

“None of your nonsense,” said the admiral.

“And here you sees Jack Pringle,” said that individual, introducing himself, since no one appeared inclined to do that office for him, “a tar for all weathers. One as hates the French, and is never so happy as when he’s alongside o’ some o’ those lubberly craft blazing away.”

“That’s uncommonly true,” remarked the admiral.

“Will you walk in, sir?” said Henry, courteously. “Any friend of Charles Holland’s is most welcome here. You will have much to excuse us for, because we are deficient in servants at present, in consequence of come occurrences in our family, which your nephew has our full permission to explain to you in full”

“Oh, very good, I tell you what it is, all of you, what I’ve seen of you, d——e, I like, so here goes. Come along, Jack.”

The admiral walked into the house, and as he went, Charles Holland said to him,—

“How came you to know I was here, uncle?”

“Some fellow wrote me a despatch.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, saying at you was a going to marry some odd sort of fish as it wasn’t at all the thing to introduce into the family.”

“Was—was a vampyre mentioned?”

“That’s the very thing.”

“Hush, uncle—hush.”

“What for?”

“Do not, I implore, hint at such a thing before these kind friends of mine. I will take an opportunity within the next hour of explaining all to you, and you shall form your own kind and generous judgement upon circumstances in which my honour and my happiness are so nearly concerned.”

“Gammon,” said the admiral.

“What, uncle?”

“Oh, I know you want to palaver me into saying it’s all right. I suppose if my judgment and generosity don’t like it, I shall be an old fool, and a cursed goose?”

“Now, uncle.”

“Now, nevey.”

“Well, well—no more at present. We will talk over this at leisure. You promise me to say nothing about it until you have heard my explanation, uncle?”

“Very good. Make it as soon as you can, and as short as you can, that’s all I ask of you.”

“I will, I will.”

Charles was to the full as anxious as his uncle could be to enter upon the subject, some remote information of which, he felt convinced, had brought the old man down to the Hall. Who it could have been that so far intermeddled with his affairs as to write to him, he could not possibly conceive.

A very few words will suffice to explain the precise position in which Charles Holland was. A considerable sum of money had been left to him, but it was saddled with the condition that he should not come into possession of it until he was one year beyond the age which is usually denominated that of discretion, namely, twenty-one. His uncle, the admiral, was the trustee of his fortune, and he, with rare discretion, had got the active and zealous assistance of a professional gentleman of great honour and eminence to conduct the business for him.

This gentleman had advised that for the two years between the ages of twenty and twenty-two, Charles Holland should travel, inasmuch as in English society he would find himself in an awkward position, being for one whole year of age, and yet waiting for his property.

Under such circumstances, reasoned the lawyer, a young man, unless he is possessed of very rare discretion indeed, is almost sure to get fearfully involved with money-lenders. Being of age, his notes, and bills, and bonds would all be good, and he would be in a ten times worse situation than a wealthy minor.

All this was duly explained to Charles, who, rather eagerly than otherwise, caught at the idea of a two years wander on the continent, where he could visit so many places, which to a well read young man like himself, and one of a lively imagination, were full of the most delightful associations.

But the acquaintance with Flora Bannerworth effected a great revolution in his feelings. The dearest, sweetest spot on earth became that which she inhabited. When the Bannerworths left him abroad, he knew not what to do with himself. Everything, and every pursuit in which he had before taken a delight, became most distasteful to him. He was, in fact, in a short time, completely “used up,” and then he determined upon returning to England, and finding out the dear object of his attachment at once. This resolution was no sooner taken, than his health and spirits returned to him, and with what rapidity he could, he now made his way to his native shores.

The two years were so nearly expired, that he made up his mind he would not communicate either with his uncle, the admiral, or the professional gentleman upon whose judgment he set so high and so just a value. And at the Hall he considered he

was in perfect security from any interruption, and so he would have been, but for that letter which was written to Admiral Bell, and signed Josiah Crinkles, but which Josiah Crinkles so emphatically denied all knowledge of. Who wrote it, remains at present one of those mysteries which time, in the progress of our narrative, will clear up.

The opportune, or rather the painful juncture at which Charles Holland had arrived at Bannerworth Hall, we are well cognisant of. Where he expected to find smiles he found tears, and the family with whom he had fondly hoped he should pass a time of uninterrupted happiness, he found plunged in the gloom incidental to an occurrence of the most painful character.

Our readers will perceive, too, that coming as he did with an utter disbelief in the vampyre, Charles had been compelled, in some measure, to yield to the overwhelming weight of evidence which had been brought to bear upon the subject, and although he could not exactly be said to believe in the existence and the appearance of the vampyre at Bannerworth Hall, he was upon the subject in a most painful state of doubt and indecision.

Charles now took an opportunity to speak to Henry privately, and inform him exactly how he stood with his uncle, adding—

“Now, my dear friend, if you forbid me, I will not tell my uncle of this sad affair, but I must own I would rather do so fully and freely, and trust to his own judgment upon it.”

“I implore you to do so,” said Henry. “Conceal nothing. Let him know the precise situation and circumstances of the family by all means. There is nothing so mischievous as secrecy: I have the greatest dislike to it. I beg you tell him all.”

“I will; and with it, Henry, I will tell him that my heart is irrevocably Flora’s.”

“Your generous clinging to one whom your heart saw and loved, under very different auspices,” said Henry, “believe me, Charles, sinks deep into my heart. She has related to me something of a meeting she had with you.”

“Oh, Henry, she may tell you what I said; but there are no words which can express the depth of my tenderness. ‘Tis only time which can prove how much I love her.”

“Go to your uncle,” said Henry, in a voice of emotion. “God bless you, Charles. It is true you would have been fully justified in leaving my sister; but the nobler and the more generous path you have chosen has endeared you to us all.”

“Where is Flora now?” said Charles.

“She is in her own room. I have persuaded her, by some occupation, to withdraw her mind from a too close and consequently painful contemplation of the distressing circumstances in which she feels herself placed.”

“You are right. What occupation best pleases her?”

“The pages of romance once had a charm for her gentle spirit.”

“Then come with me, and, from among the few articles I brought with me here, I can find some papers which may help her to pass some merry hours.”

Charles took Henry to his room, and, unstrapping a small valise, he took from it some manuscript papers, one of which he handed to Henry, saying—

“Give that to her: it contains an account of a wild adventure, and shows that human nature may suffer much more—and that wrongfully too—than came ever under our present mysterious affliction.”

“I will,” said Henry; “and, coming from you, I am sure it will have a more than ordinary value in her eyes.”

“I will now,” said Charles, “seek my uncle. I will tell him how I love her; and at the end of my narration, if he should not object, I would fain introduce her to him, that

he might himself see that, let what beauty may have met his gaze, her peer he never yet met with, and may in vain hope to do so.”

“You are partial, Charles.”

“Not so. ‘Tis true I look upon her with a lover’s eyes, but I look still with those of truthful observation.”

“Well, I will speak to her about seeing your uncle, and let you know. No doubt, he will not be at all averse to an interview with any one who stands high in your esteem.”

The young men now separated—Henry, to seek his beautiful sister; and Charles, to communicate to his uncle the strange particulars connected with Varney, the Vampyre.

## The Castle of Illusion

A flash of lightning illuminated the dark tower that loomed upon the peak of the mountain and dominated the narrow valley below. The storm rumbled querulously overhead, and a second crack of lightning lit up the valley, briefly revealing three dark figures scurrying up the steep road towards the tower.

The rain lashed down, and thunder boomed around the massive granite cliffs. Up in the tower, a light was burning fitfully.

In the great hall above, the evil dwarven wizard Poldanyelz lay in the arms of his beautiful teenage wife D'jeebe, and grinned a gap-toothed grin.

He was small, even for a dwarf, and his poor taste in sorcerous robes contrasted awkwardly with D'jeebe's elegant attire; her long, diaphanous gown and his chemical-stained, star-spangled robe clashed almost as much as her vacuous expression alongside his own visage, alive as it was with cunning and a twisted intelligence.

D'jeebe sighed with boredom.

'What is it, my love?' Poldanyelz oozed with ersatz concern.

'I'm bored,' D'jeebe complained undiplomatically. 'No one ever comes here. I never see anyone except you.'

A shuffling from the main arch alerted her to the inaccuracy of her statement.

'Oh, and the butler,' she corrected herself.

'What is it, Flapsax?' Poldanyelz rapped, eyeing his hunchbacked Manhu servant with irritation.

'Will that be all, sir?' the butler groaned in a sepulchral voice. His one, mad, staring eye rolled around, taking in the whole hall before settling on the wizard.

'Yes, that's it,' Poldanyelz said. 'I won't be needing you until I start the experiment.'

A rusty clang rang out from the direction of the front gate, sending Flapsax's eye rolling in terror.

'That'll be the door,' he mumbled dismally.

'Oh, confound it!' the wizard snapped. 'This night of all nights.' He glared at Flapsax. 'Well - go and answer it, you incompetent nincompoop!'

The butler stumbled off.

'Tut!' said Poldanyelz to D'jeebe. 'You just can't get the staff these days.' She laughed sycophantically at this witticism.

Flapsax lumbered down the main corridor, staggering to a stop at a thick, ironwood door. Moaning sour nothings to himself, he drew back its six bolts and pulled the door open.

Standing on the step were three black-robed figures; two of average height, the third no more than four feet high. Dark cowls hid their features. Flapsax stared at them in silence.

'Erm!' harrumphed one of the taller figures. 'We are three travelling members of the Masked Order of Grimoire Salesmen, lost in these mountains. Is bed and board available?'

Flapsax gibbered helplessly.

'What he means,' the other tall salesman explained in a barbarous accent, 'is that we want ta come in and we're expectin' a bit of food and a wee kip afore we start out

in the mornin’.’

Flapsax grunted. He scratched his head as if he’d forgotten something. All of a sudden, it seemed to come back to him.

‘You *rang*, sir?’ he mumbled.

The barbarously accented figure snarled, and pushed impatiently past the butler and strode in. The other two followed him.

The butler lumbered off down the corridor, finally overtaking the first salesman as he was about to burst open the door to the great hall. Flapsax slammed it open for him.

Poldanyelz leapt up as the butler shoved the three salesmen into the room.

‘Flapsax! How many times must I tell you? Treat that door with respect! And any guests we have, too.’ He stared curiously at his enigmatic visitors, and then remembered his manners.

‘Come in, come in, sit down,’ he bumbled. ‘It’s so unusual for us to have visitors, I’m afraid my butler’s a little rusty.’

With dignity, the three salesmen sat down at the table. The wizard glanced at his beautiful companion.

‘This is my wife, D’jebee,’ he said, smiling unctuously ‘and I’m known as Poldanyelz. You may know my name, in fact - I gained some notoriety at one point... In some circles.’

‘Never heard of you,’ one of the salesmen denied quickly. Poldanyelz noticed this, and raised an eyebrow.

‘And you are...?’

‘Och, we’re just simple members o’ the Masked Order of Grimoire Salesmen, lost upon these mountains,’ growled the salesman with the barbarous accent.

‘Ah...?’ Poldanyelz replied in interested tones. ‘Is that so?’ He frowned. ‘I don’t suppose you have a copy of the Arcane Rite of the Shu-wadi-wadi Brotherhood for sale, do you? Or even *Practical Aeromancy for Beginners* by the High Rammalammah of the Temple of the Apocalyptic Snurk?’

‘Unfortunately, we lost our whole stock in an accident further down the valley,’ the second tall figure broke in.

‘Shame, shame,’ Poldanyelz sympathised. He turned to his butler. ‘Get our guests some supper, will you?’ Flapsax lurched away. The wizard turned to his guests. ‘Excellent fellow in his own way, but a little taciturn. Now, will you join me in this delightful little mulled claret? That’s right, help yourself. And while you do so, tell me all about everything that’s going on out in the big wide world. How are things in the Manhu lands? And in Gogland? I hear Gonad the Barbarian has usurped the throne - terrible business, that. And how is the war between the Langohari and the Heep progressing...?’

The wizard provided the three salesmen with excellent conversation and a pleasant supper of crushed sweetbreads and sugared plums in a tagnut and dangleberry sauce, then begged them to excuse him and departed, his wife following him after one last, lingering glance at the largest of the masked visitors.

‘Oh, call for Flapsax when you want to retire,’ the wizard called as he departed.

‘Aye, we’ll do that,’ agreed the largest salesman. The door crashed shut. The three salesmen sat silent for a while, then glanced at each other.

‘D’ya think it’s safe to take our masks off yet?’ the smallest figure demanded.

‘Aye,’ replied the largest one, pulling his hood back. ‘Poldanyelz doesn’t realise who he’s let into his castle.’ He took off his mask to reveal a broad, snub-nosed face with glacial blue eyes and sharpened teeth. A mane of greasy hair hung rattily down

his back.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ sighed the third figure, removing his mask and hood. He was long, thin, and nondescript apart from a goatee and thick, bushy eyebrows. Beside him, the shortest figure was slipping off his own mask. His face was mean and pinched, despite a generous beard.

He squinted up at the longhaired barbarian.

‘Dougal, do you think this is wise?’ he asked. ‘Infiltrating our greatest enemy’s stronghold with no more protection than a few weapons and the dodgy spells Rumblebum here can come up with?’

‘Well, that’s the reason we’ve come here, Shawtarz,’ Dougal growled. Had the dwarf forgotten? It was only a week since Rumblebum came up with his master plan finally to defeat the sorcerer whose path had crossed their own with such catastrophic results.

Last of a warrior tribe (for reasons he always refused to go into) and roaming the world with his two companions Rumblebum the Wizard and Shawtarz the Dwarf, Dougal the Wanderer had financed his aimless travels in the main by acts of piracy and highway robbery, burglary and assault. Many a temple had he deprived of its riches, many a merchant caravan had he looted along the highways of the Wastes of Brum and the Desert of Agribiz. Though there was a price on his head in every town from Hellswall to Portus Madoic, from Manhutown to the eastern Gogland marches, no one had ever managed to bring an end to his career of red rapine and robbery; none could stand up to the might of the barbarian warrior, or the wizardry and cunning of his dubious partners in crime. Until he first came up against Poldanyelz the Wizard.

Following that first meeting, when the sorcerer sacrificed the beautiful Nicotina, daughter of the renegade Manhu chieftain Barf Sword-dropper, and brought the white dragon Kelarx the Mighty back from his aeon-long sleep, Dougal had sworn a mighty oath by Holy Kris mother of Bob herself to wreak red revenge upon the evil dwarf. Both his friends had done their best to dissuade him from pursuing such a dangerous vendetta, but he had refused to give up, even after their most recent attempt at vengeance had ended in embarrassment for the Highlander, and a horde of turncoat Skategoats on his tail. After the three rogues had managed to evade this pursuit, Rumblebum, after a few inspiring pints of Buckfast at the Seedy Dragon Inn, had come up with this plan.

Arguing that the chief problem in pursuing this feud with the wizard was his own ineptitude in occult matters, he suggested that they find some way of defeating Poldanyelz with his own arts. But Shawtarz seemed to have some problem with the plot.

So did Dougal, to be honest, but now he had a more important matter on his mind.

‘If we can pull this off,’ Dougal explained patiently, ‘*our* wizard can find a way of dealing with Poldanyelz. Tell ya what, though, I wouldn’t mind dealing with his wife. Reet randy pokeable piece, her.’

‘Yeah, and she was ogling you all through the meal.’ Shawtarz winked. ‘Reckon you’re in there, Dougal old feller.’

Rumblebum looked irritated by their sordid discourse.

‘If you recall, we’re here to find a way of dealing with Poldanyelz, not to indulge in vulgarity,’ he reprimanded them. ‘Now, I suggest we call the butler and go to our rooms. Then, later in the night, make our way to the library and while you two keep an eye out for any of the castle’s inhabitants, I’ll go through the books and learn the source of his power.’

‘Reckon she must be pretty bored with that dried-up old git, too,’ Dougal leered at



Shawtarz. The dwarf nodded.

The wizard scowled.

‘You’re not listening, are you?’ he snapped.

‘What? Oh, oh yes, Rumblebum, good plan,’ Shawtarz mollified him. ‘We’ll do it straightaway.’

They replaced their masks and called for the butler.

Flapsax showed the three salesmen to their rooms and then lurched off down the corridor to his master’s laboratory. Entering via the servants’ door, he found himself confronted by a sinister and macabre scene. Amidst the usual paraphernalia of a sorcerer’s lab - the obligatory stuffed cocodrill, the towering piles of books, and the jars of unmentionable powders and pastes - two things stood out. One was a large priapic clay figure, which lay upon a rough trestle table; the other was the shelf of jars in which human hearts floated in preserving liquid. Here Poldanyelz now stood, staring in rapture at one of his collection. He turned as the butler entered and took his accustomed place at the head of the table.

‘Here it is,’ Poldanyelz cackled. ‘The heart of Don Juan himself, stolen from his seconds-dead corpse by a temporal buccaneer - not the finest of my collection, of course, which as you know includes the hearts of Caesar and Cleopatra, Sauron and Aslan, Jack the Ripper and Queen Victoria, and many others that my magic had brought to me - but, when placed in the chest of this golem, and after the intonation of the correct rite from the Last Book of Salamonellus, will give this inanimate clay all the attributes and lusts of its’ previous owner. *Thus shall I be able to keep my wife satisfied despite my embarrassing personal problems!*’ He broke off into peals of melodramatic laughter.

‘So, where is his library?’ Dougal whispered, as the three adventurers crept out of their room, elsewhere in the tower.

‘I couldn’t say for sure,’ Rumblebum admitted, as they made their way down the passage, ‘but most wizards keep their libraries not far from their sleeping chambers.’

‘So they can get something to read when they can’t get to sleep?’ suggested Shawtarz.

Rumblebum shuddered, considering what he had read in certain grimoires.

‘No,’ he said carefully. ‘Not for that reason. But anyway, we had better go quietly.’

They headed down another corridor at random, and froze on hearing a door open nearby. The three of them leapt behind a chest by the wall and hid.

Footsteps padded wetly closer. They waited as it approached their hiding place.

Worried, Dougal decided that it was time to chance a glance at whatever it was.

He poked his head out, and saw with pleasant surprise that it was D’jeebe, the wizard’s wife, a towel wrapped around her otherwise naked body, her hair dripping. After he’d got an eyeful, he turned to the others.

‘Och, it’s just the wazzock’s bint,’ he whispered gruffly. ‘Just bin in the shower.’

‘Oh, let *me* see,’ said Shawtarz.

‘You get ya lecherous eyes off, ya deviant little dwarf...’

‘Stop bickering, you two,’ Rumblebum muttered. ‘Don’t you see? This is our chance. We follow Poldanyelz’ wife back to her bedroom...’

‘*Yeah?*’ said Dougal, his eyes lighting up.

‘And then we’ll be able to find the library, if it’s near to the bedchambers,’ the wizard added, putting a damper on the whole affair, in Dougal’s eyes. But he

followed Rumblebum nevertheless, and Shawtarz tagged on behind.

As Rumblebum had predicted, the library was just next door to the bedchamber, whose door was just closing as they followed the trail of wet footprints round the corner. The wizard rubbed his hands with glee and turned to the others.

‘Now, you wait out here, and keep an eye on the corridor. If you hear anyone coming, warn me.’

‘Yeah yeah yeah,’ muttered Dougal sulkily, irritated by the way Rumblebum seemed to think he was running this show. He watched with resentment as the wizard disappeared into the library, and then glanced at Shawtarz. The dwarf shrugged.

‘Wanker,’ the Highlander muttered.

In the laboratory, all the preparations were complete. The clay figure had been encircled by a plethora of obscure occult devices; ram skulls, numbskulls, black candles, strange herbs and oils... And Poldanyelz had readied the heart for its subsequent immersion inside the clay figure’s gaping breast.

He placed the jar back on its shelf next to the others, and reached for his grimoire. It wasn’t where he had been expecting to find it. Wrathfully, he turned on his butler.

‘Where is my copy of the last Book of Salamonellus?’ he barked.

‘Library,’ Flapsax grunted. ‘I think.’

‘What’s it doing there?’ demanded the wizard, running round in circles like a headless Skategoat. ‘I need it here, now. The rite can’t be postponed any longer. Quick - you must place the heart inside the golem while I run and get the book. The conjunction of Azimoth and Xocolatl won’t last more than a few seconds.’

With this, the dwarven sorcerer bustled from the room, muttering to himself.

After he had vanished, Flapsax laughed quietly, and turned back to the golem.

‘Now I can prove myself to master,’ he grunted, and reached towards the shelf of jars.

Dougal was bored. He’d never been into this idea of robbing Poldanyelz’ library - he’d strongly suspected that it was just Rumblebum’s excuse for hanging round in a musty room and reading books and stuff. Dougal had never seen the point in reading. He’d rather go on a good nuppet hunt, or even go and dance with the pixies in the wondrous land of Wogulifunos - and those pixies really rocked. But now that they and the wizard were at each other’s throats on a regular basis, it seemed to be a case of kill or be killed. He had to admit that this crazy plan of Rumblebum’s might just work.

But he was still bored.

‘I’m bored,’ said Shawtarz after a while, echoing his thoughts.

Dougal looked at him heavily.

‘Och, so am I,’ he said. ‘But what’s ta do? When I get bored, I usually pick a fight - which is a bit impractical here - or else I find some bint to shag, which is just as...’

He broke off, and gave Shawtarz a look. An evil grim slowly spread across his face. The dwarf looked perturbed.

‘You’re not shagging me!’ he said firmly. ‘I’m... I’m not ready.’

‘*What?* Och, no, ya smelly little sodomite,’ the highlander growled impatiently. ‘I’m thinking of the wazsock’s wife.’

‘You mean that D’jeebe?’ Shawtarz asked. ‘Ahh, you’ll get nowhere with her!’

‘But you said she was giving me the eye all through the meal,’ Dougal complained angrily.

‘Yeah, but she couldn’t see your face then,’ the dwarf pointed out unpleasantly.

‘Face it, Dougal - you’re a failure with women.’

‘Och, am I?’ huffed Dougal. ‘Och, ya stinking little toe-rag, I’ll show ya! I’ll be in D’jebee’s knickers afore ye can say “Buggering Bulgarian Bogomils”!’

He strode to the chamber door, leaving Shawtarz hopping from foot to foot with exasperation. He watched worriedly as the Highlander pushed open the door and slipped inside. A cool, voluptuous voice said huskily;

‘Hello...’

After a few introductory grunts from Dougal, all Shawtarz could hear was a lustful panting and rapid creaking of bedsprings. He shook his hairy little head. What was he going to do?

In the library, Rumblebum was poring over a collection of musty tomes, nodding happily to himself and occasionally scribbling notes on the back of his hand.

The library was vast and extensive, piled to the ceiling with notorious, infamous - and in places even blasphemous - books; everything written on the occult from the Liber 777 to Enid Blyton’s Guide to Satanic Child Abuse.

‘Ahhh,’ sighed Rumblebum with bibliophiliac pleasure as he lifted down a copy of the Last Book of Salamonellus. He opened it at random.

‘*Dispell Illusion,*’ he read. ‘Hmmm.’

Happily, he began to skip through this latest spell.

In the corridor, Shawtarz was getting desperate. Dougal and D’jebee were going at it like the seven dwarfs at a rock face, Rumblebum was apparently still reading away in the library, Shawtarz’ bladder was troubling him - and someone was coming down the passage.

Shawtarz listened in horror as the rapid *click-click-click* of footsteps grew louder. Only one person in the vicinity would sound like that - Poldanyelz. But what should the dwarf do? Warn Rumblebum? But there was no way of knowing whether he would be able to magic them out of the situation yet. Get Dougal? He might possibly be able to fight off the wizard...

Certainly, Shawtarz could do nothing.

Feeling highly inadequate, Shawtarz headed for the bedchamber. As he slipped into the dark, silk-strewn, perfumed boudoir, he heard Poldanyelz’ footsteps come to an abrupt halt. Gulping, he let the door shut behind him, and headed for the two naked figures writhing on the bed.

Poldanyelz stood in the passageway, the cold hand of jealousy clutching at his guts. He might have known! Three men in the tower, and already D’jebee was bedding one of them. He listened, wracked with pain, to the orgasmic grunts and groans coming from the bedchamber. This was the reason he had been secretly constructing the golem, so that *he* could have some control over his wife’s sex life, however remote. And on the very night his experiments were scheduled for fruition, *this!* This was why he had moved out of the city of Hellswall, where it had seemed that everyone from the watchman to the mayor of the palace had a finger in his wife’s pie, to come and live in this remote fastness up in the peaks of the Mountains of Murglewurgle. This was....

This was intolerable.

Poldanyelz was a dwarf, both physically and morally, and as cowardly and greedy as any of his gold-digging fellows; but now he felt stirred by righteous wrath. As he strode towards the bedchamber, his brain boiled with a million and one ways to

punish D'jeebe and her lover.

D'jeebe moaned and cried out as the hairy highland barbarian buffeted away at her like an army with a battering ram, eager to smash its way into a rich castle. The warrior grasped her firmly in his strong arms as she cried out her shuddering orgasm, growling with lust, singing 'Yi-yi-yippee,' as she came, and...

Suddenly the Highlander stopped.

D'jeebe groaned, but this time not with ecstasy. Surely this lusty stranger - who had audaciously barged his way into her bedchamber without a by-your-leave, to meet a passionate welcome even he had hardly been anticipating - surely he wasn't turning as floppy and ineffective as her husband?

She looked up, to see the naked barbarian looking embarrassed and angry as he glared down at a weaselly-looking dwarf, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

'What the fuck's the matter noo, Shawtarz?' growled her visitor.

'Dougal, he's coming!' the dwarf hissed. 'The wizard!'

Immediately, D'jeebe went into her customary routine.

'Quick, quick!' she squealed. 'You can't be found in here!'

Dougal glanced round for somewhere to run to.

'Where can I hide?' he shouted in desperation.

D'jeebe leapt out of the bed and hurriedly made her way over to the far side of the room, ignoring the lecherous gaze of Shawtarz. She grabbed the Cloak of Invisibility from the peg where it hung and flung it to Dougal.

'Put this on,' she commanded. 'It conveys the illusion of invisibility.'

Dougal complied, and in an instant - and much to Shawtarz' relief - his hairy body vanished.

'What about me?' demanded the dwarf. Quickly, she grabbed him, and took him over to the window.

Meanwhile, in the laboratory, Flapsax was glowing with pride. Ever since the day his mother had birthed him, twisted and weak, in the great Manhu breeding-pits beneath the dread land of Nodnol, he had been despised and reviled by everyone he encountered. Cast out of Manhutown during the Purges of the Year of the Bathrat, he had wandered the world for many years, his deformed body shunned even by the exiles he encountered as he staggered down the highways and byways of Gogland and the Langohari Plains. He'd been half way to Himelé in the East, between Heopohon and Ecnahcon, when he met Poldanylez; the dwarven sorcerer had been kinder to him than most, and had accepted Flapsax' indentured labour with only the slightest suggestion of exploitation.

He was not a bad master - he was the best Flapsax had ever had, in fact - but like everyone else, he made the elementary mistake of assuming that because Flapsax was a) slow, b) deformed, and c) a Manhu, he was therefore unintelligent. This was emphatically not the case. Slowly, over the years, the hunchbacked Manhu had learnt how to read and write, and had by now secretly worked his way through half Poldanyelz' library. And it was time he proved himself.

He had learnt the golem-incantation in the Last Book of Salamonellus off by heart, and had cunningly taken the book back to the library earlier that day to give himself a chance of performing the rite while his master was otherwise engaged. Now, all he had to do was place the heart in the golem's chest and recite the relevant rune, and then the ritual would be done - by him, and no one else. The master *would*

be pleased.

He potted along the shelf, looking for the right brain.

'Now, lessee,' he mumbled to himself. 'Who was it? J... J? It started with a J, didn't it? John... No, James... No, no. Jack... Was it Jack?' Just then, his eye fell on the jar marked "Jack the Ripper". 'Ah, here it is.'

He reached for the preserved heart.

Poldanyelz stopped just in front of the bedchamber door, and took a deep breath. He'd have to go in there and shout at D'jeebe, and chase her lover out, and... And he *hated* having to do it, but he had to. Or else no one would respect him. If people respected him, they wouldn't be so eager to swive his wife's cunnyborough behind his back.

Scowling, he threw open the door to find the room empty apart from the recumbent form of his wife. She stirred, and languorously opened one of her beautiful eyes.

'Is that you, darling?' she murmured.

'I heard voices from in here,' Poldanyelz said in his toughest voice. 'You've got someone with you, haven't you?'

'What?' D'jeebe yawned. 'No, no, of course not.'

'Then what was all that crying and moaning about?' Poldanyelz persisted in his suspicions.

'I mus' - she yawned again - 'must have been having a bad dream. Yes, that was it, I dreamt that I was being savaged by a mighty highland bull. When are you coming to bed?'

'I don't believe you,' said Poldanyelz sternly. He stared round the room. On an impulse, he opened a chest of drawers.

'You won't find him in there,' D'jeebe said wearily. Poldanyelz swung round immediately.

'Ah, so you admit he's here!' he barked.

D'jeebe smiled sweetly. 'Who is, darling?' she asked.

'Probably under the bed,' muttered the dwarf. He stumped over, and peered beneath.

'Nothing there but my close-stool,' D'jeebe said primly. Poldanyelz straightened up.

'I know he's here somewhere,' the dwarf growled, and he stamped over to the cupboard, swinging the door open. Nothing except a collection of diaphanous robes and a serried row of identical shabby wizard's robes. He slammed it shut, and glared round the room again. Nothing.

He turned to D'jeebe, who was still lounging in the bed, gazing languidly at her jealous old husband. He wagged a finger at her.

'You win this time, but let me warn you - if I ever think you're hiding a man in here again, I'll... I'll... I'll...'

'You'll what?' demanded D'jeebe, coolly. 'Run along, you *silly* little man.'

Retrieving the remaining shards of his dignity, Poldanyelz turned and flounced out. As soon as he had gone, the air in the centre of the room shimmered, and Dougal appeared, slipping off the Cloak of Invisibility.

'No, no!' D'jeebe said urgently. 'Keep it on and take me while you're invisible. Then if my husband bursts in on us again, he won't be able to prove anything.'

Dougal shrugged philosophically, and disappeared again. An instant later, the duvet was bulked out by an unseen presence; D'jeebe parted her friendly thighs and

soon the bed was creaking once again.

Slowly, painfully, resentfully, Shawtarz the Dwarf, who had spent the last quarter of an hour hanging outside the window, clambered over the sill and leapt down into the room casting a sour look at the bed and its blissful occupants.

*Abarathaxaskatogoata  
Azimoth-Xocalatl*

Flapsax intoned, as he stood over the clay golem;

*Arbadacarba  
Kutulu Yna Miniz Kyr...*

he continued, repeating the sorcerous rune that would bring the clay to life.

*Mehon-Aze-An-Zhoulaas-Azz  
Phlapsaxamanhu...*

But before he could complete the incantation, two clay hands reached up and throttled out his life.

Two clay eyeballs glowed with life and malign intelligence as the golem sat up and clambered down from the table.

*'Alive again!'* it exulted, and shambled from the room.

Poldanyelz reached the library in a fury. He only had a few seconds left before the conjunction would be over for another forty years - he'd wasted far too much time with his wife. He would have to grab the book and run for the lab, knowledge of which put him in a less than sweet mood as he pushed open the door and strode in.

Rumblebum leapt up from the reading table, guilt written across his face. Poldanyelz glared at him.

'Don't I know you?' he growled after a second.

'Who, me?' said Rumblebum, flustered. 'Not at all, not at all.'

'Oh yes I do,' Poldanyelz stated.

'Oh no you don't!' Rumblebum suggested.

With a brief click of his fingers, Poldanyelz froze Rumblebum to the spot. He approached the wizard.

'Yes I *do!*' he hissed. 'You're that cheap jade, no-frills wizard who accompanies Dougal the Wanderer on his nefarious exploits. You were with him when he tried to stop me raising Kelarx the Mighty from his aeon-long sleep. You were also there when he foiled my plot to gain control over the city at the edge of time, and again when he led that horde of renegade Skategoats against me...'

As Poldanyelz grew more and more incensed, Rumblebum wracked his brain to remember the counter-cantrip that would free him. He'd just read it, only a few seconds ago! What in the name of the Seven Hells of Gehenna was it? He frowned with concentration.

Finally, he managed to dredge the rune back up from the sludge of his subconscious.

*'Fwatool-celating!'* he croaked, and suddenly he was free.

Poldanyelz broke off in mid-rant.

‘So, you have become rather more proficient in the Black Arts, have you?’ said he, quietly. ‘But not good enough to protect yourself from this, I’ll warrant.’ And he sent a fireball whizzing towards the wizard.

‘Easy,’ smirked Rumblebum, and he threw up a magic force field that bounced the fireball straight back. The sorcerer ducked, and his spell went whizzing out of the door to explode harmlessly in the passage outside.

In a corridor not far away, the sinister shape of the golem stalked towards the sound of explosions and voices raised in anger. Its undead soul was in turmoil, agitated by a desire to kill, slay, murder... Unsated by throttling the Manhu hunchback, it headed towards the noise.

As it progressed, it began to distinguish two strains of noise - shouts of anger and the whizzing of flame were coupled with the sound of passionate lovemaking. It nursed a desire to slaughter the lustful couple...

In the bedchamber, the invisible Highlander was still pleasuring Poldanyelz’ oversexed wife while Shawtarz sat in the corner with his back to them. When the sorcerous duel had first broken out next door, the dwarf had assumed that Rumblebum was trying out his new magic. But above the rumble of miscast spells, he began to pick out the wizardly insults that peppered the combat.

‘Hedge-wizard!... Witch-wife!... Wart-charmer!.... Level Two Magic-user!....’

Shawtarz shot up, and shouted to the invisible form that was humping up and down beneath the bedclothes.

‘Dougal! Can’t you hear? Poldanyelz must have found Rumblebum!’

‘Oh, bugger,’ muttered D’jebbe as the door slammed open.

Poldanyelz staggered in, dodging a further fireball, and gave his fellow-countryman a glower.

‘I might’ve known you’d be somewhere round here, Shawtarz,’ he snarled, then turned to face Rumblebum, who had just forced his way through the door.

‘Ha! Think you can defeat me?’ laughed Poldanyelz desperately. ‘But no! I am not the simple dwarf I seem to be, but rather a gargantuan demonic fiend!’

And before anyone could contradict him, Poldanyelz began to grow. To expand, and to change shape. In seconds, he towered above them all; a scaly, ten-foot high monster, covered with horns and spikes, glaring madly down at them. He opened his mouth and coughed a great gout of flame towards Rumblebum.

*‘Begone now, or I shall slay thee!’*

But the wizard was unperturbed.

‘Illusionism is the last resort of the inferior mage,’ he muttered smugly, and spoke the words of the Dispell Illusion rune.

A faint pink cloud wafted from between his fingers. As it brushed across the demon’s scaly body, there was a flash of green light, and the titanic figure was replaced by a rather shame-faced looking dwarven wizard.

‘Curses!’ he muttered despondently, then turned towards his wife...

But as the pink cloud continued to float across the room, it reached the bed, where D’jebbe lay in an ungainly posture; another flash revealed Dougal, lying between her outspread legs, his face turned worriedly in the direction of the wizard. He flushed.

‘Och, hi,’ he grinned. He turned back to D’jebbe, and as he did so, there was a third flash.

‘Tell him you can expl...’ Dougal broke off, staring in horror. For, even as he watched, her lips and nipples turned blue, her fingers became long talons, her white

teeth lengthened into fangs. The Highlander gagged, and tried to fling himself away from the pitch-black, wart-encrusted succubus that had lovingly wrapped its foul, putrid tentacles around him.

She shrugged.

‘But I’ve got a great personality,’ she said weakly.

At that moment, another figure came lumbering into the room; a clay man with an outrageous phallus. It roared, and threw itself at Rumblebum.

‘Ah, no... Dougal, get him off me...!’

Dougal grasped the succubus by some unnameable portion of her anatomy, and twisted round, flinging the chittering demon straight at the golem. Throwing Rumblebum aside, the golem turned to grab the succubus. She squealed with joy, and wrapped her legs round him in a passionate embrace. Although the psychopathic golem did its best to throttle her, her lust was unabatable. Poldanyelz looked on in horror.

Shawtarz crawled out from under the bed, where he had been becoming intimately acquainted with the succubus’ close-stool, and crept over to the fallen wizard. Dougal had meanwhile been pulling his kilt on. He followed the dwarf.

‘Is he gonna be alright?’ demanded Shawtarz over the noise of the golem and the succubus becoming acquainted. Dougal was slapping gently at the wizard’s face.

‘Och, how should I know?’ muttered the Highlander.

Rumblebum’s eyes flickered open. ‘What hit me?’ he asked weakly.

‘A death-crazed sex-golem,’ Shawtarz explained succinctly. ‘Look, those two are occupied; Poldanyelz is breaking his heart with the realisation that he married a teenage succubus... Let’s just tiptoe away and get the fuck outa here, okay?’

‘No,’ Dougal growled. ‘Got ta kill that thing afore it does some more damage!’ he bellowed. Grabbing his claymore, he turned to fling himself at the two struggling figures.

Shawtarz and Rumblebum exchanged glances, and nodded. As the Highlander headed for the succubus and the golem, they both grabbed hold of his kilt and pulled him kicking and screaming out of the chamber, through the corridors and up to the front door.

‘I gotta kill that golem, ya bastards!’ he screamed again as Rumblebum flung the door open and they dragged him out into the dark, rain-lashed night. They didn’t look back.

In the bedchamber, Poldanyelz watched disconsolately as the two demonic beings throttled and fucked each other into oblivion. Once they had both twitched their last, he got up, brushed his robe down, and wandered to the door. He took one last, wretched look at the rapidly desiccating remains.

‘Oh, well,’ he murmured. ‘Tomorrow is another day.’

He left.



# Edison's Conquest of Mars

## Chapter XVI.

The second night we could perceive ahead of us the electric lights covering the land of Thaumasia, in the midst of which lay the Lake of the Sun. The flood would be upon it by daybreak, and, assuming that the demoralization produced by the news of the coming of the waters, which we were aware had hours before been flashed to the capital of Mars, would prevent the Martians from effectively manning their forts, we thought it safe to hasten on with the flagship, and one or two others, in advance of the water, and to hover over the Lake of the Sun in the darkness, in order that we might watch the deluge perform its awful work in the morning.

The Giant Woman Drowned.

She, Like the Rest, a Prey to the Devouring Flood of the Canals.

Thaumasia, as I have before remarked, was a broad, oval land, about 1,800 miles across, having the Lake of the Sun exactly in its centre. From this lake, which was four or five hundred miles in diameter, and circular in outline, many canals radiated, as straight as the spokes of a wheel, in every direction, and connected it with the surrounding seas.

Like all the other Martian continents, Thaumasia lay below the level of the sea, except toward the south, where it fronted the ocean.

Completely surrounding the lake was a great ring of cities constituting the capital of Mars. Here the genius of the Martians had displayed itself to the full. The surrounding country was irrigated until it fairly bloomed with gigantic vegetation and flowers; the canals were carefully regulated with locks so that the supply of water was under complete control; the display of magnificent metallic buildings of all kinds and sizes produced a most dazzling effect, and the protection against enemies afforded by the innumerable fortifications surrounding the ringed city, and guarding the neighboring lands, seemed complete.

Waiting for the Flood.

Suspended at a height of perhaps two miles from the surface, near the southern edge of the lake, we waited for the oncoming flood. With the dawn of day we began to perceive more clearly the effects which the news of the drowning of the planet had produced. It was evident that many of the inhabitants of the cities had already fled. Airships on which the fugitives hung as thick as swarms of bees were seen, elevated but a short distance above the ground, and making their way rapidly toward the south.

The Martians knew that their only hope of escape lay in reaching the high southern border of the land before the floods were upon them. But they must have known also that that narrow beach would not suffice to contain one in ten of those who sought refuge there. The density of the population around the Lake of the Sun seemed to us incredible. Again our hearts sank within us at the sight of the fearful destruction of

life for which we were responsible. Yet we comforted ourselves with the reflection that it was unavoidable. As Colonel Smith put it:

“You couldn’t trust these coyotes. The only thing to do was to drown them out. I am sorry for them, but I guess there will be as many left as will be good for us, anyhow.”

The Crest of the Waters.

We had not long to wait for the flood. As the dawn began to streak the east we saw its awful crest moving out of the darkness, bursting across the canals and plowing its way in the direction of the crowded shores of the Lake of the Sun. The supply of water behind that great wave seemed inexhaustible. Five thousand miles it had travelled, and yet its power was as great as when it started from the Syrtis Major.

We caught sight of the oncoming water before it was visible to the Martians beneath us. But while it was yet many miles away, the roar of it reached them, and then arose a chorus of terrified cries, the effect of which, coming to our ears out of the half gloom of the morning, was most uncanny and horrible. Thousands upon thousands of the Martians still remained here to become the victims of the deluge. Some, perhaps, had doubted the truth of the reports that the banks were down and the floods were out; others, for one reason or another had been unable to get away; others, like the inhabitants of Pompeii, had lingered too long, or had returned after beginning their flight to secure abandoned treasures, and now it was too late to get away.

Engulfing the City.

With a roar that shook the planet the white wall rushed upon the great city beneath our feet, and in an instant it had been engulfed. On went the flood, swallowing up the Lake of the Sun itself, and in a little while, as far as our eyes could range, the land of Thaumasia had been turned into a raging sea.

We now turned our ships toward the southern border of the land, following the direction of the airships carrying the fugitives, a few of which were still navigating the atmosphere a mile beneath us. In their excitement and terror the Martians paid little attention to us, although, as the morning brightened, they must have been aware of our presence over their heads. But, apparently, they no longer thought of resistance; their only object was escape from the immediate and appalling danger.

When we had progressed to a point about half way from the Lake of the Sun to the border of the sea, having dropped down within a few hundred feet of the surface, there suddenly appeared, in the midst of the raging waters, a sight so remarkable that at first I rubbed my eyes in astonishment, not crediting their report of what they beheld.

A Woman Forty Feet High!

Standing on the apex of a sandy elevation, which still rose a few feet above the gathering flood, was the figure of a woman, as perfect in form and in classic beauty of feature as the Venus of Milo—a magnified human being not less than forty feet in height!

But for her swaying and the wild motions of her arms, we should have mistaken her for a marble statue.

Aina, who happened to be looking, instantly exclaimed:

“It is the woman from Ceres. She was taken prisoner by the Martians during their last invasion of that world, and since then has been a slave in the palace of the Emperor.”

Overtaken by the Flood.

Apparently her great stature had enabled her to escape, while her masters had been drowned. She had fled like the others, toward the south, but being finally surrounded by the rising waters, had taken refuge on the hillock of sand, where we saw her. This was fast giving way under the assault of the waves, and even while we watched the water rose to her knees.

“Drop lower,” was the order of the electrical steersman of the flagship, and as quickly as possible we approached the place where the towering figure stood.

She had realized the hopelessness of her situation, and quickly ceased those appalling and despairing gestures, which at first served to convince us that it was indeed a living being on whom we were looking.

Save the Woman from Ceres!

There she stood, with a light, white garment thrown about her, erect, half-defiant, half yielding to her fear, more graceful than any Greek statue, her arms outstretched, yet motionless, and her eyes upcast, as if praying to her God to protect her. Her hair, which shone like gold in the increasing light of day, streamed over her shoulders, and her great eyes were astare between terror and supplication. So wildly beautiful a sight not one of us had ever beheld. For a moment sympathy was absorbed in admiration. Then:

“Save her! Save her!” was the cry that arose throughout the ship.

Ropes were instantly thrown out, and one or two men prepared to let themselves down in order better to aid her.

But when we were almost within reach, and so close that we could see the very expression of her eyes, which appeared to take no note of us, but to be fixed, with a far-away look upon something beyond human ken, suddenly the undermined bank on which she stood gave way, the blood-red flood swirled in from right to left, and then:

“The waters closed above her face  
With many a ring.”

She, Like the Rest, Is Gone.

“If but for that woman’s sake, I am sorry we drowned the planet,” exclaimed Sidney

Phillips. But a moment afterward I saw that he regretted what he had said, for Aina's eyes were fixed upon him. Perhaps, however, she did not understand his remark, and perhaps if she did it gave her no offence.

After this episode we pursued our way rapidly until we arrived at the shore of the Southern Ocean. There, as we had expected, was to be seen a narrow strip of land with the ocean on one side and the raging flood seeking to destroy it on the other. In some places it had been already broken through, so that the ocean was flowing in to assist in the drowning of Thaumasia.

But some parts of the coast were evidently so elevated that no matter how high the flood might rise it would not completely cover them. Here the fugitives had gathered in dense throngs and above them hovered most of the airships, loaded down with others who were unable to find room upon the dry land.

The Martians Not Discouraged.

On one of the loftiest and broadest of these elevations we noticed indications of military order in the alignment of the crowds and the shore all around was guarded by gigantic pickets, who mercilessly shoved back into the flood all the later comers, and thus prevented too great crowding upon the land. In the centre of this elevation rose a palatial structure of red metal which Aina informed us was one of the residences of the Emperor, and we concluded that the monarch himself was now present there.

The absence of any signs of resistance on the part of the airships, and the complete drowning of all of the formidable fortifications on the surface of the planet, convinced us that all we now had to do in order to complete our conquest was to get possession of the person of the chief ruler.

The fleet was, accordingly, concentrated, and we rapidly approached the great Martian palace. As we came down within a hundred feet of them and boldly made our way among their airships, which retreated at our approach, the Martians gazed at us with mingled fear and astonishment.

We were their conquerors and they knew it. We were coming to demand their surrender, and they evidently understood that also. As we approached the palace signals were made from it with brilliant colored banners which Aina informed us were intended as a token of truce.

"We shall have to go down and have a confab with them, I suppose," said Mr. Edison. "We can't kill them off now that they are helpless, but we must manage somehow to make them understand that unconditional surrender is their only chance."

A Parley with the Enemy.

"Let us take Aina with us," I suggested, "and since she can speak the language of the Martians we shall probably have no difficulty in arriving at an understanding."

Accordingly the flagship was carefully brought further down in front of the entrance to the palace, which had been kept clear by the Martian guards, and while the

remainder of the squadron assembled within a few feet directly over our heads with the disintegrators turned upon the palace and the crowd below. Mr. Edison and myself, accompanied by Aina, stepped out upon the ground.

There was a forward movement in the immense crowd, but the guards sternly kept everybody back. A party of a dozen giants, preceded by one who seemed to be their commander, gorgeously attired in jewelled garments, advanced from the entrance of the palace to meet us. Aina addressed a few words to the leader, who replied sternly, and then, beckoning us to follow, retraced his steps into the palace.

Notwithstanding our confidence that all resistance had ceased, we did not deem it wise actually to venture into the lion's den without having taken every precaution against a surprise. Accordingly, before following the Martian into the palace, we had twenty of the electrical ships moored around it in such a position that they commanded not only the entrance but all of the principal windows, and then a party of forty picked men, each doubly armed with powerful disintegrators, were selected to attend us into the building. This party was placed under the command of Colonel Smith, and Sidney Phillips insisted on being a member of it.

#### A Nearer Sight of the Martians.

In the meantime the Martian with his attendants who had first invited us to enter, finding that we did not follow him, had returned to the front of the palace. He saw the disposition that we had made of our forces, and instantly comprehended its significance, for his manner changed somewhat, and he seemed more desirous than before to conciliate us.

When he again beckoned us to enter, we unhesitatingly followed him, and, passing through the magnificent entrance, found ourselves in a vast ante-chamber, adorned after the manner of the Martians in the most expensive manner. Thence we passed into a great circular apartment, with a dome painted in imitation of the sky, and so lofty that to our eyes it seemed like the firmament itself. Here we found ourselves approaching an elevated throne situated in the centre of the apartment, while long rows of brilliantly armored guards flanked us on either side, and, grouped around the throne, some standing and others reclining upon the flights of steps which appeared to be of solid gold, was an array of Martian woman, beautifully and becomingly attired, all of whom greatly astonished us by the singular charm of their faces and bearing, so different from the aspect of most of the Martians, whom we had already encountered.

#### The Martians' Beautiful Women.

Despite their stature—for these women averaged twelve or thirteen feet in height—the beauty of their complexions—of a dark, olive tint—was no less brilliant than that of the women of Italy or Spain.

At the top of the steps on a magnificent golden throne, sat the Emperor himself. There are some busts of Caracalla which I have seen that are almost as ugly as the face of the Martian ruler. He was of gigantic stature, larger than the majority of his subjects, and as near as I could judge must have been between fifteen and sixteen feet in height.

As I looked at him I understood a remark which had been made by Aina to the effect that the Martians were not all alike, and that the peculiarities of their minds were imprinted on their faces and expressed in their forms in a very wonderful, and sometimes terrible manner.

I had also learned from her that Mars was under a military government, and that the military class had absolute control of the planet. I was somewhat startled, then, in looking at the head and centre of the great military system of Mars, to find in his appearance a striking confirmation of the speculations of our terrestrial phrenologists. His broad, mis-shapen head bulged in those parts where they had placed the so-called organs of combativeness, destructiveness, etc.

Something Learned About Them.

Plainly, this was an effect of his training and education. His very brain had become a military engine; and the aspect of his face, the pitiless lines of his mouth and chin, the evil glare of his eyes, the attitude and carriage of his muscular body, all tended to complete the warlike ensemble.

He was magnificently dressed in some vesture that had the lustre of a polished plate of gold, with the suppleness of velvet. As we approached he fixed his immense, deep-set eyes sternly upon our faces.

The contrast between his truly terrible countenance and the Eve-like features of the women who surrounded his throne was as great as if Satan after his fall had here re-enthroned himself in the midst of angels.

Mr. Edison, Colonel Smith, Sidney Phillips, Aina and myself advanced at the head of the procession, our guard following in close order behind us. It had been evident from the moment that we entered the palace that Aina was regarded with aversion by all of the Martians. Even the women about the throne gazed scowlingly at her as we drew near. Apparently, the bitterness of feeling which had led to the awful massacre of all her race had not yet vanished. And, indeed, since the fact that she remained alive could have been known only to the Martian who had abducted her and to his immediate companions, her reappearance with us must have been a great surprise to all those who now looked upon her.

The Enemy Vanquished.

The Martians Succumb at Last, and Are at Our Mercy.

It was clear to me that the feeling aroused by her appearance was every moment becoming more intense. Still, the thought of a violent outbreak did not occur to me, because our recent triumph had seemed so complete that I believed the Martians would be awed by our presence, and would not undertake actually to injure the girl.

I think we all had the same impression, but as the event proved, we were mistaken.

Suddenly one of the gigantic guards, as if actuated by a fit of ungovernable hatred, lifted his foot and kicked Aina. With a loud shriek, she fell to the floor.

### Aina Attacked by a Martian.

The blow was so unexpected that for a second we all remained riveted to the spot. Then I saw Colonel Smith's face turn livid, and at the same instant heard the whirr of his disintegrator, while Sidney Phillips, forgetting the deadly instrument that he carried in his hand, sprung madly toward the brute who had kicked Aina, as if he intended to throttle him, colossus as he was.

But Colonel Smith's aim, though instantaneously taken, as he had been accustomed to shoot on the plains, was true, and Phillips, plunging madly forward, seemed wreathed in a faint blue mist—all that the disintegrator had left of the gigantic Martian.

### Swift Vengeance.

Who could adequately describe the scene that followed?

I remember that the Martian Emperor sprang to his feet, looking tenfold more terrible than before. I remember that there instantly burst from the line of guards on either side crinkling beams of death-fire that seemed to sear the eyeballs. I saw a half a dozen of our men fall in heaps of ashes, and even at that terrible moment I had time to wonder that a single one of us remained alive.

Rather by instinct than in consequence of any order given, we formed ourselves in a hollow square, with Aina lying apparently lifeless in the centre, and then with gritted teeth we did our work.

The lines of guards melted before the disintegrators like rows of snow men before a licking flame.

### A Terrible Battle.

The discharge of the lightning engines in the hands of the Martians in that confined space made an uproar so tremendous that it seemed to pass the bounds of human sense.

More of our men fell before their awful fire, and for the second time since our arrival on this dreadful planet of war our annihilation seemed inevitable.

But in a moment the whole scene changed. Suddenly there was a discharge into the room which I knew came from one of the disintegrators of the electrical ships. It swept through the crowded throng like a destroying blast. Instantly from another side swished a second discharge, no less destructive, and this was quickly followed by a third. Our ships were firing through the windows.

### The Power of the Disintegrator.

Almost at the same moment I saw the flagship, which had been moored in the air close to the entrance and floating only three or four feet above the ground, pushing its way through the gigantic doorway from the ante-room, with its great disintegrators

pointed upon the crowd like the muzzles of a cruiser's guns.

And now the Martians saw that the contest was hopeless for them, and their mad struggle to get out of the range of the disintegrators and to escape from the death chamber was more appalling to look upon than anything that had yet occurred.

It was a panic of giants. They trod one another under foot; they yelled and screamed in their terror; they tore each other with their clawlike fingers. They no longer thought of resistance. The battle spirit had been blown out of them by a breath of terror that shivered their marrow.

No Pity for Our Foes.

Still the pitiless disintegrators played upon them until Mr. Edison, making himself heard, now that the thunder of their engines had ceased to reverberate through the chamber, commanded that our fire should cease.

In the meantime the armed Martians outside the palace, hearing the uproar within, seeing our men pouring their fire through the windows, and supposing that we were guilty at once of treachery and assassination, had attempted an attack upon the electrical ships stationed round the building. But fortunately they had none of their larger engines at hand, and with their hand arms alone they had not been able to stand up against the disintegrators. They were blown away before the withering fire of the ships by the hundred until, fleeing from destruction, they rushed madly, driving their unarmed companions before them into the seething waters of the flood close at hand.

Chapter XVII.

The Emperor Survives.

Through all this terrible contest the emperor of the Martians had remained standing upon his throne, gazing at the awful spectacle, and not moving from the spot. Neither he nor the frightened woman gathered upon the steps of the throne had been injured by the disintegrators. Their immunity was due to the fact that the position and elevation of the throne were such that it was not within the range of fire of the electrical ships which had poured their vibratory discharges through the windows, and we inside had only directed our fire toward the warriors who had attacked us.

Now that the struggle was over we turned our attention to Aina. Fortunately the girl had not been seriously injured and she was quickly restored to consciousness. Had she been killed, we would have been practically helpless in attempting further negotiations, because the knowledge which we had acquired of the language of the Martians from the prisoner captured on the golden asteroid, was not sufficient to meet the requirements of the occasion.

The Emperor Our Prisoner.

When the Martian monarch saw that we had ceased the work of death, he sank upon his throne. There he remained, leaning his chin upon his two hands and staring straight before him like that terrible doomed creature who fascinates the eyes of every beholder standing in the Sistine Chapel and gazing at Michael Angelo's dreadful



painting of "The Last Judgement."

This wicked Martian also felt that he was in the grasp of pitiless and irresistible fate, and that a punishment too well deserved, and from which there was no possible escape, now confronted him.

There he remained in a hopelessness which almost compelled our sympathy, until Aina had so far recovered that she was once more able to act as our interpreter. Then we made short work of the negotiations. Speaking through Aina, the commander said:

"You know who we are. We have come from the earth, which, by your command, was laid waste. Our commission was not revenge, but self-protection. What we have done has been accomplished with that in view. You have just witnessed an example of our power, the exercise of which was not dictated by our wish, but compelled by the attack wantonly made upon a helpless member of our own race under our protection."

We Dictate Terms.

"We have laid waste your planet, but it is simply a just retribution for what you did with ours. We are prepared to complete the destruction, leaving not a living being in this world of yours, or to grant you peace, at your choice. Our condition of peace is simply this: 'All resistance must cease absolutely.'"

"Quite right," broke in Colonel Smith; "let the scorpion pull out his sting or we'll do it for him."

"Nothing that we could now do," continued the commander, "would in my opinion save you from ultimate destruction. The forces of nature which we have been compelled to let loose upon you will complete their own victory. But we do not wish, unnecessarily, to stain our hands further with your blood. We shall leave you in possession of your lives. Preserve them if you can. But, in case the flood recedes before you have all perished from starvation, remember that you here take an oath, solemnly binding yourself and your descendants forever never again to make war upon the earth."

We Show Mercy.

"That's really the best we can do," said Mr. Edison, turning to us. "We can't possibly murder these people in cold blood. The probability is that the flood has hopelessly ruined all their engines of war. I do not believe that there is one chance in ten that the waters will drain off in time to enable them to get at their stores of provisions before they have perished from starvation."

"It is my opinion," said Lord Kelvin, who had joined us (his pair of disintegrators hanging by his side, attached to a strap running over the back of his neck, very much as a farmer sometimes carries his big mittens), "it is my opinion that the flood will recede more rapidly than you think, and that the majority of these people will survive. But I quite agree with your merciful view of the matter. We must be guilty of no wanton destruction. Probably more than nine-tenths of the inhabitants of Mars have perished in the deluge. Even if all the others survived ages would elapse before they

could regain the power to injure us.”

The Martians Submit.

I need not describe in detail how our propositions were received by the Martian monarch. He knew, and his advisers, some of whom he had called in consultation, also knew, that everything was in our hands to do as we pleased. They readily agreed, therefore, that they would make no more resistance and that we and our electrical ships should be undisturbed while we remained upon Mars. The monarch took the oath prescribed after the manner of his race: thus the business was completed. But through it all there had been the shadow of a sneer on the emperor's face which I did not like. But I said nothing.

And now we began to think of our return home, and of the pleasure we should have in recounting our adventures to our friends on the earth, who were doubtless eagerly waiting for news from us. We knew they had been watching Mars with powerful telescopes, and we were also eager to learn how much they had seen and how much they had been able to guess of our proceedings.

But a day or two at least would be required to overhaul the electrical ships and to examine the state of our provisions. Those which we had brought from the earth, it will be remembered, had been spoiled and we had been compelled to replace them from the compressed provisions found in the Martians' storehouse. This compressed food had proved not only exceedingly agreeable to the taste, but very nourishing, and all of us had grown extremely fond of it. A new supply, however, would be needed in order to carry us back to the earth. At least sixty days would be required for the homeward journey, because we could hardly expect to start from Mars with the same initial velocity which we had been able to generate on leaving home.

In considering the matter of provisioning the fleet it finally became necessary to take an account of our losses. This was a thing that we had all shrunk from, because they had seemed to us almost too terrible to be borne. But now the facts had to be faced. Out of the 100 ships, carrying something more than two thousand souls, with which we had quitted the earth, there remained only fifty-five ships and 1,085 men! All the others had been lost in our terrific encounters with the Martians, and particularly in our first disastrous battle beneath the clouds.

Preparing to Return.

Among the lost were many men whose names were famous upon the earth, and whose death would be widely deplored when the news of it was received upon their native planet. Fortunately this number did not include any of those whom I have had occasion to mention in the course of this narrative. The venerable Lord Kelvin, who, notwithstanding his age, and his pacific disposition, proper to a man of science, had behaved with the courage and coolness of a veteran in every crisis; Monsieur Moissan, the eminent chemist; Prof. Sylvanus P. Thompson, and the Heidelberg Professor, to whom we all felt under special obligations because he had opened to our comprehension the charming lips of Aina—all these had survived, and were about to return with us to the earth.

It seemed to some of us almost heartless to deprive the Martians who still remained alive of any of the provisions which they themselves would require to tide them over the long period which must elapse before the recession of the flood should enable them to discover the sites of their ruined homes, and to find the means of sustenance. But necessity was now our only law. We learned from Aina that there must be stores of provisions in the neighborhood of the palace, because it was the custom of the Martians to lay up such stores during the harvest time in each Martian year in order to provide against the contingency of an extraordinary drought.

It was not with very good grace that the Martian Emperor acceded to our demands that one of the storehouses should be opened, but resistance was useless, and of course we had our way.

The supplies of water which we brought from the earth, owing to a peculiar process invented by Monsieur Moissan, had been kept in exceedingly good condition, but they were now running low and it became necessary to replenish them also. This was easily done from the Southern Ocean, for on Mars, since the levelling of the continental elevations, brought about many years ago, there is comparatively little salinity in the sea waters.

While these preparations were going on Lord Kelvin and the other men of science entered with the utmost eagerness upon those studies, the prosecution of which had been the principal inducement leading them to embark on the expedition. But, almost all of the face of the planet being covered with the flood, there was comparatively little that they could do. Much, however, could be learned with the aid of Aina from the Martians, now crowded on the land about the palace.

The results of these discoveries will in due time appear, fully elaborated in learned and authoritative treatises prepared by these savants themselves. I shall only call attention to one, which seemed to me very remarkable. I have already said that there were astonishing differences in the personal appearance of the Martians, evidently arising from differences of character and education, which had impressed themselves in the physical aspect of the individuals.

We now learned that these differences were more completely the result of education than we had at first supposed.

Looking about among the Martians by whom we were surrounded, it soon became easy for us to tell who were the soldiers and who were the civilians, simply by the appearance of their bodies, and particularly of their heads. All members of the military class resembled, to a greater or less extent, the monarch himself, in that those parts of their skulls which our phrenologists had designated as the bumps of destructiveness, combativeness and so on were enormously and disproportionately developed.

And all this, as we were assured, was completely under the control of the Martians themselves. They had learned, or invented, methods by which the brain itself could be manipulated, so to speak, and any desired portions of it could be specially developed, while the other parts of it were left to their normal growth. The consequence was that in the Martian schools and colleges there was no teaching in our sense of the word. It

was all brain culture.

A Martian youth selected to be a soldier had his fighting faculties especially developed, together with those parts of the brain which impart courage and steadiness of nerve. He who was intended for scientific investigation had his brain developed into a mathematical machine, or an instrument of observation. Poets and literary men had their heads bulging with the imaginative faculties. The heads of inventors were developed into a still different shape.

“And so,” said Aina, translating for us the words of a professor in the Imperial University of Mars, from whom we derived the greater part of our information on this subject, “the Martian boys do not study a subject; they do not have to learn it, but, when their brains have been sufficiently developed in the proper direction, they comprehend it instantly, by a kind of divine instinct.”

But among the women of Mars, we saw none of these curious, and to our eyes monstrous, differences of development. While the men received, in addition to their special education, a broad general culture also, with the women there was no special education. It was all general in its character, yet thorough enough in that way. The consequence was that only female brains upon Mars were entirely well balanced. This was the reason why we invariably found the Martian women to be remarkably charming creatures, with none of those physical exaggerations and uncouth developments which disfigured their masculine companions.

All the books of the Martians, we ascertained, were books of history and of poetry. For scientific treatises they had no need, because, as I have explained, when the brains of those intended for scientific pursuits had been developed in the proper way the knowledge of nature's laws came to them without effort, as a spring bubbles from the rocks.

One word of explanation may be needed concerning the failure of the Martians, with all their marvellous powers, to invent electrical ships like those of Mr. Edison and engines of destruction comparable with our disintegrators. This failure was simply due to the fact that on Mars there did not exist the peculiar metals by the combination of which Mr. Edison had been able to effect his wonders. The theory involved in our inventions was perfectly understood by them, and had they possessed the means, doubtless they would have been able to carry it into practice even more effectively than we had done.

After two or three days all the preparations having been completed, the signal was given for our departure. The men of science were still unwilling to leave this strange world, but Mr. Edison decided that we could linger no longer.

At the moment of starting a most tragic event occurred. Our fleet was assembled around the palace, and the signal was given to rise slowly to a considerable height before imparting a great velocity to the electrical ships. As we slowly rose we saw the immense crowd of giants beneath us, with upturned faces, watching our departure. The Martian monarch and all his suite had come out upon the terrace of the palace to look at us. At a moment when he probably supposed himself to be unwatched he shook his fist at the retreating fleet. My eyes and those of several others in the

flagship chanced to be fixed upon him. Just as he made the gesture one of the women of his suite, in her eagerness to watch us, apparently lost her balance and stumbled against him. Without a moment's hesitation, with a tremendous blow, he felled her like an ox at his feet.

A fearful oath broke from the lips of Colonel Smith, who was one of those looking on. It chanced that he stood near the principal disintegrator of the flagship. Before anybody could interfere he had sighted and discharged it. The entire force of the terrible engine, almost capable of destroying a fort, fell upon the Martian Emperor, and not merely blew him into a cloud of atoms, but opened a great cavity in the ground on the spot where he had stood.

A shout arose from the Martians, but they were too much astounded at what had occurred to make any hostile demonstrations, and, anyhow, they knew well that they were completely at our mercy.

Mr. Edison was on the point of rebuking Colonel Smith for what he had done, but Aina interposed.

"I am glad it was done," said she, "for now only can you be safe. That monster was more directly responsible than any other inhabitant of Mars for all the wickedness of which they have been guilty."

"The expedition against the earth was inspired solely by him. There is a tradition among the Martians—which my people, however, could never credit—that he possessed a kind of immortality. They declared that it was he who led the former expedition against the earth when my ancestors were brought away prisoners from their happy home, and that it was his image which they had set up in stone in the midst of the Land of Sand. He prolonged his existence, according to this legend, by drinking the waters of a wonderful fountain, the secret of whose precise location was known to him alone, but which was situated at that point where in your maps of Mars the name of the Fons Juventae occurs. He was personified wickedness, that I know; and he never would have kept his oath if power had returned to him again to injure the earth. In destroying him, you have made your victory secure."

## Chapter XVIII.

When at length we once more saw our native planet, with its well-remembered features of land and sea, rolling beneath our eyes, the feeling of joy that came over us transcended all powers of expression.

In order that all the nations which had united in sending out the expedition should have visual evidence of its triumphant return, it was decided to make the entire circuit of the earth before seeking our starting point and disembarking. Brief accounts in all known languages, telling the story of what we had done were accordingly prepared, and then we dropped down through the air until again we saw the well-loved blue dome over our heads, and found ourselves suspended directly above the white-topped cone of Fujiyama, the sacred mountain of Japan. Shifting our place toward the northeast, we hung above the city of Tokio and dropped down into the crowds that had assembled to watch us, the prepared accounts of our journey, which, the moment

they had been read and comprehended, led to such an outburst of rejoicing as it would be quite impossible to describe.

One of the ships containing the Japanese members of the expedition dropped to the ground, and we left them in the midst of their rejoicing countrymen. Before we started—and we remained but a short time suspended above the Japanese capital—millions had assembled to greet us with their cheers.

We now repeated what we had done during our first examination of the surface of Mars. We simply remained suspended in the atmosphere, allowing the earth to turn beneath us. As Japan receded in the distance we found China beginning to appear. Shifting our position a little toward the south we again came to rest over the city of Peking, where once more we parted with some of our companions, and where the outburst of universal rejoicing was repeated.

From Asia, crossing the Caspian Sea, we passed over Russia, visiting in turn Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Still the great globe rolled steadily beneath, and still we kept the sun with us. Now Germany appeared, and now Italy, and then France, and England, as we shifted our position, first North then South, in order to give all the world the opportunity to see that its warriors had returned victorious from their far conquest. And in each country as it passed beneath our feet, we left some of the comrades who had shared our perils and our adventures.

At length the Atlantic had rolled away under us, and we saw the spires of the new New York.

The news of our coming had been flashed ahead from Europe, and our countrymen were prepared to welcome us. We had originally started, it will be remembered, at midnight, and now again as we approached the new capital of the world the curtain of night was just beginning to be drawn over it. But our signal lights were ablaze, and through these they were aware of our approach.

Again the air was filled with bursting rockets and shaken with the roar of cannon, and with volleying cheers, poured from millions of throats, as we came to rest directly above the city.

Three days after the landing of the fleet, and when the first enthusiasm of our reception had a little passed, I received a beautifully engraved card inviting me to be present in Trinity Church at the wedding of Aina and Sidney Phillips.

When I arrived at the church, which had been splendidly decorated, I found there Mr. Edison, Lord Kelvin, and all the other members of the crew of the flagship, and, considerably to my surprise, Colonel Smith, appropriately attired, and with a grace for the possession of which I had not given him credit, gave away the beautiful bride.

But Alonzo Jefferson Smith was a man and a soldier, every inch of him.

“I asked her for myself,” he whispered to me after the ceremony, swallowing a great

lump in his throat, “but she has had the desire of her heart. I am going back to the plains. I can get a command again, and I still know how to fight.”

And thus was united, for all future time, the first stem of the Aryan race, which had been long lost, but not destroyed, with the latest offspring of that great family, and the link which had served to bring them together was the far-away planet of Mars.

(The End.)

## The Gods of Yesterday

‘Where are we?’ Eloise’s voice split the musty darkness beneath the tarpaulin. The other two stirred and muttered to themselves.

A couple of minutes earlier, Eloise had woken to hear sounds suggesting that the wagon on which they’d stowed away was being shunted into a siding. She wanted to know if they’d reached their destination yet.

‘Er, I’ll take a look.’ The nasal Scouse voice that replied was that of Nick, an unprincipled but not unpleasant crustie Eloise had met after running away from home. There was a brief blast of cold air and colder light as he heaved up the tarpaulin and stuck out his head.

‘Och, fuckin’ hell, man!’ growled Hamish, the Glaswegian skinhead who had attached himself to the other two. He too was a runaway, but in his case he was on the run from the police. ‘Put that thing back,’ he demanded, as the light shot across his unhealthy features.

Nick dropped the tarpaulin and turned round in the darkness.

‘Are we in Wales?’ Eloise asked.

‘Er, I dunno, like,’ Nick mumbled. ‘Looks like a goods yard to me.’

Eloise hissed impatiently. ‘Didn’t anyone stay awake?’

‘Not me,’ came Hamish’s voice. ‘Ah was out like a light, soon as we stowed away.’

‘I noticed,’ said Eloise dryly. ‘You were snoring all the way out of London.’

‘So were you,’ Nick said. ‘You were wheezing like a fuckin’ grampus after you fell asleep.’

‘I don’t snore!’ Eloise insisted indignantly. She shifted round to look at him. ‘Anyway, why didn’t you stay awake?’

‘I was tired,’ Nick said defensively.

They lay silently in the darkness.

‘I suppose we’d better go and find out where we are,’ Eloise said grudgingly.

‘Come on, then,’ said Hamish decisively, clambering over them. He lifted up the tarpaulin and climbed out. Less energetically, the other two followed.

They found themselves in a wilderness of rusting rails, empty goods wagons and yellowing grass. On one side was a dirty brick wall, on the other a fence divided the



yard from a brand-new superstore car park. The sky was lowering and overcast.

‘This could be anywhere,’ murmured Eloise, looking uncomfortably about her.

‘Well,’ said Nick encouragingly, ‘it’s got that just-about-to-rain look that Wales always has.’

‘Looks like Scotland to me,’ Hamish said in a gloomy voice.

‘But if it is Wales, is it anywhere near Caer Pedryfan?’ Eloise asked. She glanced down at her black skirt and brushed abstractedly at some dirt on it. With her smudged black make-up, pale skin and dark clothes, she looked as if she’d be more at home in a Goth club; unsurprising, since that was indeed her chosen youth cult. By religion she was a neo-pagan, a witch - a white witch, as she frequently insisted, which meant that she didn’t worship the Christian Devil, but was instead a votary of the Triple Moon Goddess. She and her two companions were attempting to get to Caer Pedryfan in North Wales, following up a note Eloise had read in the journal of a dead occultist in the West Country.

‘Maybe if we take a look around we’ll find out where we are,’ Nick suggested sensibly. ‘Let’s head for that car park over there.’

As they picked their way over the rails, a shout from behind them arrested them in their tracks.

‘Oi! What are you kids doing here?’

They looked over their shoulders to see a red-faced middle-aged man in the overalls of a fitter running towards them. Eloise groaned.

But it wasn’t the fact they were being pursued that made her curse to herself as they turned and ran across the yard. That was nothing new. It was the man’s accent; not Welsh, but Scottish.

Hamish reached the fence first and flung himself over it, landing in a stretch of small trees and wood-chippings at the corner of the car park. He turned to wait for his two friends.

Nick got there next, but stopped and waited for Eloise, who was finding running difficult in her long skirt. The Scouser grabbed her wrist as she reached him and assisted her over the fence, ignoring her complaints. Once she was on the other side, Nick shot a glance back at the pursuing fitter, and then heaved himself over the top.

‘See ya, taffy!’ he shouted and leapt down.

He landed among the small trees and looked at Hamish and Eloise.

‘Come on,’ he panted. ‘Welsh bastard’s still after us.’ He sped off down the slope of wood chips, Eloise and Hamish behind him and ran out onto the asphalt surface of the car park. The other two pursued him. Eloise grabbed him and pulled him back as a car

narrowly missed him.

‘Careful!’ she insisted. They set off across the car park.

A little later, they were standing at the front of the superstore. Hamish was staring at the building with a worried look on his brutal face.

‘Taff bastard hasn’t followed us,’ Nick said with gleeful racial animosity, pushing back his dreadlocks and thrusting his hands into the pockets of his German Army coat. His thin, pinched face was bright with the light of victory.

‘Come off it, Nick, it was only an old man.’ Eloise’s middle-class Sussex accent seemed out of place beside the crustie’s broad Scouse. ‘Anyway, he wasn’t Welsh. We’re not in Wales.’

Nick looked blank. ‘Oh. Where are we, then?’ he asked. Eloise sighed. Hamish turned round aggressively.

‘We’re in fuckin’ Scotland,’ he growled, indicating the sign above the superstore doors. It seemed they had some kind of promotional drive going on:

WELCOME TO KILCOLUM TESCO’S

it proclaimed.

‘Oh,’ Nick repeated. He shrugged. ‘Oh,’ he said again, blankly.

‘And everyone going past has a Scottish accent,’ Eloise said grimly. Nick looked defensive.

‘Never was any good with accents, was I?’ he complained.

‘Not much good with directions, either,’ Eloise persisted grumpily. ‘You said the train was heading for Wales.’

‘Well, it was,’ Nick replied. ‘Okay, so it was going to Scotland afterwards, but...’

‘Are you saying we went through Wales?’ Eloise demanded. ‘While you were asleep?’

‘While we were awe asleep,’ Hamish broke in. ‘Look, cannie we get away from awe these people?’ He was wearing a hunted look. ‘We’re only twenty miles from Glasgow. The polis round here know me.’

He led them hurriedly away.

It was dark by the time they found themselves a nice stretch of woodland to bed down in. They'd wandered the back streets of Kilcolum for an hour or two, with Hamish plunging into a fit of paranoia whenever a police car went past. They soon decided to head out of town and find somewhere to camp. Eloise hadn't liked it one bit. She was sick and tired of sleeping rough; she wanted a nice warm bed and a relaxing bath beforehand. She looked gloomily down at Nick with a pile of soggy wood and a lighter, struggling valiantly to get a fire going while Hamish crouched down nearby, keeping one eye trained in the direction of the road, about half a mile through the trees.

'There!' said Nick excitedly, as the kindling finally caught light. 'Yeah, if we get a nice bed of embers we'll soon have a fire going.'

'And we can sit round it singing "Ging-gang-gooly", I suppose,' Eloise said sarcastically. Her mood was not improving. Nick gave her a look of mild irritation, and then reached for some more kindling.

Just as a few flames started licking up round the wood, Eloise felt a drop of rain on her hand. She glanced up at the dark, cloud-covered sky.

'Nick,' she said quietly. 'It's starting to rain.'

'Oh, a bit of rain won't matter,' Nick said cheerily. 'Might be a bit of smoke, but... Hey! Anyone got any marshmallows?'

He looked up at his companions, begging silently for appreciation of the feeble joke. Eloise was staring grimly at the dark clouds; Hamish was still acting paranoid. 'Come on, everyone,' Nick said. 'Getting a nice blaze here.'

Thunder rumbled in the north. The heavens opened suddenly and rain began to pour down. Nick looked disappointedly at his fire as the rainstorm quickly and efficiently put it out.

'Shit,' he said.

Decisively, Eloise turned round.

'That's it,' she said. 'We're not sleeping rough tonight.'

Hamish looked at her strangely. 'Where are we sleeping, then? A custody suite?'

'I saw a ruined house back in Kilcolum,' Nick offered hopefully. 'We could squat there.'

'No,' said Eloise. 'We're going to find ourselves a B & B.'

The skinhead and the crustie looked at each other in despair.

A quarter of an hour later, they were sitting in a bus shelter on the edge of town. The

rain hissed down outside.

‘Look, Eloise, get real,’ Hamish was saying. ‘It’s a nice idea, but Ah’ve got just a couple of problems with it. Firstly, the scoobies round here are after me’ - the Glaswegian had run away from his home in Govan after murdering his girlfriend in a jealous fury - ‘and secondly, we’ve got no fuckin’ money, have we?’

‘Well, the first problem is your own fault,’ said Eloise, in no mood to be diplomatic. Ignoring the look on Hamish’s face, she went on. ‘And the second one - well, Nick’s got that jewellery to sell, hasn’t he? He could go to a pub and sell it to someone.’

Whilst illicitly in the house of the dead occultist Samaël Anghelides, not only had they found his journal, but Nick had lifted a secret stash of women’s jewellery.

‘Eloise,’ the Scouser objected. ‘You remember what happened last time I tried to do that. Some cunt shopped us to the bizzies and we had to go down the sewers before we could shake them off.’

The rain poured down, battering on the corrugated iron roof and streaming down the smeared glass. The three desperate teenagers stared out into the orange-lit street.

‘So, like Hamish says - nice idea but a bit impractical,’ Nick said eventually.

At that, the Scot got to his feet.

‘Fuck this,’ he said. ‘Eloise is right. We want somewhere decent to stay tonight. Ah’ll go and get us some money.’

‘But what about the police?’ Eloise said, concerned. The skinhead scowled.

‘Any Pig comes near me and...’

He left the rest unsaid.

‘But how are you going to get the money?’ Eloise demanded. He looked her in the eyes.

‘You don’t wanna know,’ he said grimly and strode out of the bus shelter.

‘Oh...’ Eloise said angrily as he disappeared into the rain. ‘Oh, fuck!’

Nick looked tenderly at her.

‘Come on, it’ll work out in the end,’ he said encouragingly.

‘Shut up!’ she blazed. He shut up.

‘Where is he?’ Eloise said, sneaking a glance at her watch. Hamish had been gone half an hour. Nick hadn’t said a word since she’d shouted at him. ‘He can’t take this long. What’s he doing, selling his body?’ she added.

‘You talking to me?’ Nick asked sulkily, like a Liverpudlian Robert de Niro. Eloise realised that she had hurt his feelings.

She sighed. ‘I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit grumpy recently,’ she said in the nicest voice she could summon. ‘It’s just that things have been getting me down.’

Nick looked at her.

‘Oh, that’s alright,’ he said in embarrassment. He swallowed and then it all came out in a rush. ‘Look, I was wondering - do you like Hamish? I mean, more than me?’

Eloise looked at him in surprise. She shrugged.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she said.

‘Do you like Hamish?’

Eloise bit her lip. ‘He’s not very nice,’ she admitted. To begin with, she had disliked him a great deal. His politics were wrong, his attitude was wrong and when she’d learnt about him killing his girlfriend she had been very scared and tried to avoid him. But since then, they’d been through a lot together, them and Nick. She’d come to find Hamish oddly... attractive.

‘So you like me more than him?’ Nick went on doggedly.

Suddenly Eloise got the idea. She smiled sadly, took his hand and looked him the eyes.

‘I like you a lot,’ she said. He grinned stupidly. ‘But not in that way,’ she had to add. ‘You’re... not my type. I’m sorry, Nick.’

He looked terribly hurt. ‘Is Hamish your type?’ he asked.

Eloise looked troubled.

‘He seems like a thug, I know,’ she started, ‘but I think beneath it he’s really quite nice. When you get him off-guard, he’s really very vulnerable...’

‘I’m very vulnerable,’ said Nick desperately.

‘But Hamish isn’t just vulnerable,’ Eloise said dreamily. ‘He’s strong and ruthless, but beneath it he’s sensitive, gentle, kind...’

Hamish loomed up out of the rain. He swaggered into the bus-shelter, sucking the

knuckles of his right hand. Grinning at his companions, he handed them a wallet.

‘Bit of money coming our way, thanks to a passing Paki.’

Nick glanced at Eloise. Her face had twisted into a mask of revulsion. He felt briefly gratified, but then it sank into him, what Hamish must have done. He stared at the smug skinhead.

‘What?’ Hamish demanded. ‘What’s the matter?’

They were silent.

‘Nothing,’ Eloise said tiredly. ‘Come on, let’s find somewhere to stay.’

Mrs. Dalrymple was an old-fashioned landlady. The looks she gave her only guests that night told them quite plainly what her opinion was of the muck-encrusted trio - dreadlock-headed Nick, black-clad Eloise and Hamish the skinhead. And when they asked for one room between the three of them - strictly in the interests of economy - she gave them an affronted glare and said in her broad Lowlands accent; ‘In my day, young ladies didnae travel around with young ruffians.’

Eloise felt herself go a little pink and she stared at her combat boots. Nick’s shoulders were shaking with the effort of not laughing. But Hamish, who was sitting in a position where Mrs. Dalrymple couldn’t see him, looked quite intimidated. ‘You all ought to look out for yourselves,’ their genial host continued. ‘If you don’t mend your ways, God’s judgement will fall upon you...’

‘Margaret...’

At that moment, a sepulchral voice droned out from behind the door on the far side of the parlour, interrupting her.

‘What’s that?’ Eloise demanded. The landlady was looking startled.

‘Och! - och, that’s just... Mr. Dalrymple. He... He suffered a stroke some years ago and hasn’t been the same since. Now, off you go to your rooms, the lot of you. You’re just doon the passage’ - she handed a key to Hamish, who accepted it with poor grace - ‘you’re next to him,’ she told Nick, ‘and you, young madam, are upstairs. Here are your keys.’

‘May I have a bath, Mrs. Dalrymple?’ Eloise asked sweetly, as the landlady turned to attend to the groans that were still coming from the next room. Mrs. Dalrymple looked back, surprised.

‘Och, of course ye can,’ she said, softening. She glanced at Eloise’s wet, muddy

clothes. 'Ah daresay you need one,' she added. She left the room.

'Fuckin' hell,' Hamish said in an undertone. 'She's exactly like my great-aunt Agatha.'

'Your great-aunt what?' Eloise asked incredulously. 'No, never mind,' she added, as Hamish started to repeat himself. 'At least we've got a roof over our heads.'

Nick was laughing quietly to himself. 'Bet you're thinking twice about it now, aren't you?'

Eloise shrugged and smiled. 'Which is worse, I wonder?' she murmured, 'Mrs. Dalrymple or the Scottish weather?'

'Och, Ah'm gaun to bed,' said Hamish suddenly and he walked out.

Nick shrugged. 'Yeah, I suppose I am too.' He glanced round the austere furnished room. 'Been hoping there'd be a telly here, but...' He shook his head. 'Well, I'm off.' He walked out.

Eloise sat in her armchair for a while longer, luxuriating in the warmth from the coal-fire. Then she remembered her bath. It made her toes curl in pure voluptuous pleasure.

She got up and went upstairs.

The room next to the parlour was even more Spartan than its neighbour. A large wooden table took up much of the space; on the far side from the entrance was a cellar door and beside it stood a small altar - unusually Romish for someone as devoted to the Kirk as Mrs. Dalrymple. She was on her knees before the altar, ending a conversation. Apart from her, the room was deserted.

'Yes, they will be,' she was saying. 'And that's final. No more this week, Lord. Ah cannie afford to.'

She stopped, as if her faith made her expect an immediate answer, but none came.

'Amen,' she added hurriedly.

She rose, wincing a little at her arthritis and shuffled over to the left-hand wall. There was a loose panel here, through which she could spy on anyone in the next room, to ensure they did nothing ungodly. She pushed it slightly aside and put her eye to the chink.

In the room beyond, she saw Hamish slipping off his T-shirt as he got ready to go to bed. He began to remove his jeans.

Mrs. Dalrymple watched a little while longer, until her guest was in bed. Then she replaced the panel and hurriedly made her way to the altar.

‘O Lord, forgive me,’ she murmured and took up a long leather whip. She began to undo her dress.

Hamish was just nodding off when his ears caught a distant noise; a repetitive series of cracks that brought back memories of his dad beating his mother. Had the landlady offended her husband? But by the sound of his voice, the man was barely capable of speaking, let alone taking off his belt.

Strangely disturbed, Hamish rolled over and put his head beneath the pillow.

Next door, Nick was thinking.

He’d never used to think much; more often, he would daydream and keep his thinking for when he had to get out of sticky situations. But these days he got into trouble pretty much every day and anyway, being constantly in the presence of Hamish and Eloise had really brought him out of himself.

But he was feeling embarrassed now. He had let on to Eloise rather more than he ought; he had let his feelings show. And now he didn’t know what she thought of him - she liked him, she said, but not in that way. She liked Hamish ‘in that way,’ but she seemed to hate him as well. Not surprising really, Nick reflected. The Scot had some seriously unpleasant habits and more often than not, it was him who got them into deep shit.

Still, there wasn’t much trouble the skinhead could cause in a bed and breakfast. And as long as they got away from the area as soon as possible, the police would never know he had been here...

Slowly, Nick drifted off into a worried sleep.

Eloise was feeling more comfortably sleepy as she lay in the bath and the water lapped slowly around her. The joy of it - her first proper bath in months! All she’d been able to do when she was with the travellers was to have an early morning wash and the attraction of that palled on cold days. And since she and her two friends had left the Convoy to head for Wales, she hadn’t had the chance.

She closed her eyes and leant her head against the back of the bath. She tried not to think about her companions. Nick’s revelation had really shocked her. She had assumed that they were just friends and it annoyed the hell out of her that she couldn’t have a male friend without him wanting to go out with her. Hamish was another matter entirely and her confused thoughts in that direction just made her even more tired... even more tired... even more...

The next thing she was aware of was Nick banging urgently on the bathroom door.

‘Eloise! Eloise, come quickly! Eloise!’



She glanced around. She must have dozed off, she realised muzzily. The water around her was freezing.

‘Eloise? Eloise!’

‘I’m coming!’ she shouted. She got out of the bath, hurriedly towelled herself and dressed. Then she unlocked the door.

Nick was standing there, his hair even more of a mess than usual, his face creased. He looked like he’d just got out of bed. Eloise glanced at her watch. It was 1:30.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked. Gods, he wasn’t going to proposition her was he?

Nick shook his head. His eyes were wild.

‘I don’t know...’ he stammered. ‘I woke up when I heard this clattering noise and I went into Hamish’s room. He wasn’t in there and all I could hear was a noise from the room beyond the parlour. I... I was scared. I don’t know why. But I came up here to get you, because I’m not going in there alone.’

Eloise looked askance at him.

‘Hamish has probably gone out for a walk, or something,’ she said in reasonable tones. ‘Stop being silly.’

‘A walk?’ Nick gawped at her. ‘Have you seen the weather outside? It’s worse than it was before.’

Eloise folded her arms. ‘Alright. I’ll come. But if we find out Hamish is screwing Mrs. Dalrymple on the kitchen table, it’s your fault.’

Nick didn’t seem to find this funny. He led her downstairs and along the passage. The lights were off in the parlour as they crept in and they could see a glowing line beneath the door to the other room.

Nick and Eloise exchanged glances.

‘Come on,’ Eloise said firmly. She strode across the room and rapped on the door.

It was opened by Hamish. His boxer shorts - the only garment he had on - were spattered with dark red specks. His face was distracted. Behind him, slumped against the blood- and brains-spattered wall, was Mrs. Dalrymple’s stiffened corpse.

‘Hamish,’ Eloise murmured. ‘Hamish what have you done?’

‘Ah was just...’ the skinhead shrugged.

‘Hamish - you’ve killed her!’ Eloise cried. ‘That nice old lady...’

‘She was a cow,’ Hamish said sullenly.

‘You’ve killed her!’ Eloise repeated. ‘What kind of a monster are you? You’re a psychopath, Hamish Wallis!’

‘Could Ah just...’

‘I don’t know why I don’t just ring the police this instant!’ Eloise went on, her voice rising to a shriek.

‘Because Ah could tell them about one or two criminal acts ye’ve participated in?’ Hamish suggested. ‘Look, just shut up you silly bitch and listen. I...’

‘Don’t tell me to shut up!’ Eloise shouted. ‘I...’ She put her hand to her head. She rubbed her face. ‘Alright then,’ she said in a tired voice. ‘What’s your excuse this time?’

‘Let’s just sit down and talk about this, shall we?’ Nick said suddenly, in a bright voice and with a diplomatic grin. He led them back into the parlour, flicking on the light. Eloise sank into an armchair. Nick sat by the breakfast table, resting his feet comfortably on its surface.

Hamish stood in the centre of the room, like a prisoner on trial.

‘Ah woke up a few minutes ago,’ he began. ‘Ah was a bit confused, because Ah wasn’t in bed. In fact, Ah was on the table in there and dear Mrs. Dalrymple was coming at me with a bowl and a kitchen knife. Well, it was a natural reaction; Ah pushed her away. A bit too hard, mebbe, because she fell against the wall and cracked her skull open. Terminally. But that’s what comes of trying to kill me.’

Eloise stared at him. She shook her head slowly.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t believe it,’ she said. ‘I think you just attacked her for no reason, just like you attacked the man you stole the wallet off!’

‘Ah didnae do that for no reason!’ the Scot barked. ‘Ah had two reasons for attacking him. And as far as this auld cow goes - come back in here and Ah’ll show you the proof.’

He swung open the door. They crowded into the room.

It was empty.

‘What the fuck... Where’s the corpse?’ Nick asked worriedly.

Hamish scratched his shaven head.

‘Ah... Ah don’t know,’ he said, disconcerted.

Calmly, Eloise went over to the place where she had last seen Mrs. Dalrymple’s

mortal remains.

‘Look,’ she said. The others came over to her. ‘There’s a trail of blood leading away... towards the cellar...’

They stared in trepidation at the cellar door.

‘Where’s Mr. Dalrymple?’ Nick asked suddenly. Eloise tore her horrified attention away from the door and darted him a look.

‘Who?’

Nick raised his eyebrows. ‘You know - her husband, who’d had a stroke and who we heard from the parlour.’

Eloise’s eyes widened.

‘I don’t know...’ she replied.

With blood-chilling suddenness, a howling scream seemed to burst out from all corners of the room and the three stared around them as the entire room seemed to fade away into phantom shades of darkness... Its outline was still visible, but they could see that beyond the walls...

...a dark, ethereal, mist-hung plain surrounded them and directly before them stood a ragged circle of stones.

Within this, dancing around a bonfire and leaping over the flames were a series of figures, carousing and making merry with wild heathen joy. Though the watchers could hear nothing except for the howl of a ghostly wind, they could see that the revelling, primitive figures were screaming in a Bacchanalian frenzy.

Then the scene changed and the revellers were confronted by a sober figure in long dark robes, with a golden crucifix around his neck. He seemed to be remonstrating with the debauchees, but they merely laughed at him, until he pointed towards the lowering sky and began to call down curses upon their heads. Then a massive figure, bedecked with a stag’s antler head-dress, rose from the staring crowd and savagely beat the priest to the ground.

Once the priest was dead guilt seemed to assail the revellers. They hurriedly buried him at the centre of the stone circle before melting away into the swirling mist.

Scene followed scene at high speed now; medieval peasants sacrificed oxen to a crude image of the butchered priest, while another man of the cloth looked benignly on; men in seventeenth century clothes appeared, smashing the stones and destroying the image. At last, a house was built over the desecrated holy site; a building the watchers recognised as their bed and breakfast.

People lived and worked in the house - devout people who prayed regularly, while down in the cellar, which was positioned exactly beneath the old stone circle,

something lurked; something that had gone old and rotten over the centuries; that had brooded for years over the cessation of its worship; that had long ago developed a taste for blood. They saw how events in the house had turned frequently to tragedy under the malign influence of the ancient thing; there was a suicide, a murder, nameless acts of cruelty...

Then the Dalrymples arrived and the place became a lodging-house. For many years, the strait-laced couple seemed to resist the dark urges that came from the loathsomeness below; until the day that Mrs. Dalrymple discovered her husband in a compromising position with a young female hiker. Then the floodgates burst. She smashed their skulls with an iron skillet, then buried them, her hands shaking with guilt, in the hard-packed earthen floor of the cellar.

But that was when her God appeared to her.

A rotting corpse, arms akimbo like a crucified messiah, had risen from the dark earth, soothing her fears of sin and giving her a fresh purpose to her stagnant life. Soon any lone guest - and even some who came in company - went to feed the blood-hungry thing that now writhed gleefully in the worm-haunted soil beneath the foundations, receiving once again, in more awful form, the sacrifices that had fed it throughout the dark centuries before the Dawn of Reason...

Finally, they saw confirmation of Hamish's story. Mrs. Dalrymple, with the strength of one possessed, dragged the snoring skinhead into the kitchen and prepared to despatch him, to feed the dark thing with his blood. But when he awoke, it was her own gore that stained the flagstones...

Abruptly, the howling wind died down and the visions vanished like shadows before the dawn. The three travellers looked at each other, wide-eyed.

Then, with a spine-chilling creak, the cellar door slammed open. Sepulchral laughter bellowed from the impenetrable darkness beyond.

'Feed me...' groaned the thing beyond the threshold. 'Feed me!'

Without looking back, Hamish fled the bloody room, followed hastily by Eloise and Nick. The skinhead charged across the parlour like a stampeding bull and flung himself head-first through the window. The other two leapt over the shattered glass and pursued him into the garden.

The storm was at its height and torrential rain lashed down from pitch-black skies. The wind howled and thunder rolled deeply in the south. But they were ready to face anything other than that blood-hungry abomination, the thing in the house.

They ran screaming into the roaring night, leaving the dark house to its own devices.

Sunrise found them cowering once more in the bus shelter. The rain had eased off to a

light, early morning drizzle. Hamish was shivering.

‘Ah need some cla’es,’ he said. His body was covered with minor cuts and bruises.

Eloise looked at him.

‘Maybe it’ll be alright to go back to Mrs. Dalrymple’s now,’ she murmured, her voice trembling slightly.

‘Och, well there’s no other way Ah’m gonna get ma cla’es back, is there?’ he replied miserably. He got to his feet and headed back up the road, wincing at the feel of tarmac on his bare feet. Eloise and Nick followed him wearily. A milk-float went past, its driver giving the semi-naked skinhead an odd look.

They turned the corner into Mrs. Dalrymple’s road. Eloise’s heart was pounding against her chest. What had happened last night? The grisly series of events had faded in her memory like a poorly recalled nightmare, leaving a feeling of overpowering dread and a vague conviction that Hamish’s amorality - even that of the human race as a whole - was as nothing to the evil of cosmic, Lovecraftian proportions that lurked beyond the boundaries of human knowledge.

But she knew that it had all been real.

She stopped and stared in shocked amazement at the house. An old, boarded-up ruin confronted them. Corrugated iron covered the gaping holes of windows and the door was nailed shut. Weeds grew in the once-tidy garden and there were slates missing from the roof.

They looked at each other in bewilderment.

‘Hello! Och, you look a bit lost.’ They turned and saw the milkman looking quizzically at them from the cab of his vehicle. ‘Can I help?’

‘What’s happened to Mrs. Dalrymple’s?’ Eloise asked, bewildered.

He frowned in confusion, then laughed uncertainly.

‘You’re a bit out of date, aren’t you? I remember a Mrs. Dalrymple who used to have a B and B here when I was a lad. But she died when the place was struck by lightning and burned doon. No-one’s lived in this place for twenty years.’

## Saga of the Ere-Dwellers

### Chapter 37 - The Slaying Of Arnkel.

The autumn after, at winter-nights, Snorri the Priest had a great autumn-feast, and bade his friends thereto. Ale drinking they had thereat, and folk drank fast and were very merry with ale.

Now the talk fell on pairing men together by their worth, and as to who was the noblest man in the countryside or the greatest chief, and thereon were men not at one, as oft it haps when the talk falls on likening man to man. To most of them indeed it seemed that Snorri was the noblest man, but some named Arnkel, and Stir forsooth.

But as they talked hereover, then Thorleif Kimbi answered and said:

“Why do men bicker over such a matter,” says he, “when all may see how it is?”

“What wilt thou say hereon, Thorleif,” said they, “if thou splittest the case into so many fragments?”

“Much the greatest do I deem Arnkel,” said he.

“What hast thou to back this with?” said they.

“That which is true,” says he. “For I call Snorri the Priest and Stir but as one man, because of their affinity; but of Arnkel’s home-men that Snorri has killed, none lie by his garth unatoned like as Hawk, Snorri’s follower, whom Arnkel slew, lies here by Snorri’s garth.”

This men deemed a big word, true though it were, since the talk had gone so far; but hereat dropped that talk.

But whenas men went from the bidding, Snorri the Priest chose gifts for his friends. He led Thorbrand’s sons down to their ship at Redwick-head; and as they parted Snorri went to Thorleif Kimbi and said:

“Here is an axe, Thorleif, which I will give thee; it is the longest handled of all I have, yet will it not reach Arnkel’s head when he stacks his hay at Orligstead, if thou heaviest it at him all the way from Swanfirth.”

He took the axe and said: “Deem well,” says he, “that I will not hang back in heaving this axe on Arnkel whenas thou hast wrought the revenge for Hawk thy follower.”

Snorri answered: “That methinks is due from you to me, sons of Thorbrand, that ye have spies out to watch for a chance at Arnkel, but blame me then if I come not to meet you when aught may be done if ye make me ware thereof.”

Therewith they parted, and both gave out that they were ready to plot against Arnkel’s life, and Thorbrand’s sons were to have a spy on his goings.

Early that winter was there much ice, and all firths were overlaid therewith. Freystein Rascal watched sheep in Swanfirth, and he was set to spy out an occasion against Arnkel.

Arnkel was a great man for work, and made his thralls work all day from sunrise to sunset. He had under him both the lands of Ulfar's-fell and Orligstead, for no one could be got to dwell on the lands for fear of the violence of Thorbrand's sons. Now in the winter it was Arnkel's wont to carry hay from Orligstead in the night in the new moons, because the thralls did other work at home by day. Nor did he heed if Thorbrand's sons were unaware of the carrying of hay. Now on a night of winter before Yule, Arnkel arose and waked three of his thralls, one of whom was called Ofeig. Goodman Arnkel went with them up to Orligstead. Four oxen they had, and two sledges withal.

The sons of Thorbrand were ware of Arnkel's ways, and Freystein Rascal went that night over the ice to Holyfell, and came there by then men had been abed for a space. He took Snorri by the foot and waked him, and Snorri asked what he would. He answers: "Now has the old eagle taken flight to his quarry at Orligstead."

Snorri rose up and bade men clothe themselves. So when they were clad, they took their weapons and fared nine of them altogether over the ice to Swanfirth. And when they came to the bottom of the firth, Thorbrand's sons came to meet them, and were six in company.

Then they fared up to Orligstead, and by then they came there, one of the thralls had gone home with a load of hay, and Arnkel and the others were busy on a second.

Then saw Arnkel and his folk how armed men came up from the sea, and Ofeig said thereon that unpeace was at hand, and there was nought for it but to get them gone homeward.

Arnkel answered: "Good rede can I give thereto, and now shall we each of us do what each best liketh. Ye shall run home and wake up my following, and they will come quickly to meet me, but here in the rickyard is a good place to make a stand, and from hence will I defend myself if they come in warlike wise, for that meseems is better than running; nor shall I soon be overcome, and speedily will my men come to me, if ye do your errands in manly wise."

So when Arnkel had thus made an end of speaking, the thralls set off a-running; and Ofeig was the swiftest, but so afeard he was that he well-nigh went out of his wits, and ran off into the mountain and fell into a force there and was lost, and that is since called Ofeig's-force. The other thrall ran home to the stead, and when he came to the haybarn there was his fellow- thrall before him carrying in the hay. He called to the thrall as he ran to help bear in the hay to him, and belike the thrall was nowise loth of that work, so he went to help him.

Now it is to be said of Arnkel that he knew how Snorri the Priest and his folk went there, and he tore the runner from under the sledge, and had it up into the garth with him. The garth was very high outside, and within it was heaped up high as well; and a

good fighting-stead it was. Hay was in the garth, but the garth-pieces of the stacks were cleared off.

Now when Snorri and his folk came to the garth, it is not told that any words befell there, but straightway they set on Arnkel, and chiefly with spear-thrust, which Arnkel put from him with the sledge-runner, and many of the spear-shafts were broken thereby, nor was Arnkel wounded; but when they had spent their shot-weapons, then Thorleif Kimbi ran at the garth and leapt up on to it with sword drawn, and Arnkel smote at him with the sledge-runner, and Thorleif dropped down away from the stroke out of the garth, and the runner smote against the garth wall, and up therefrom flew a piece of frozen turf; but the sledge-runner was broken at the mortice, and part thereof fell out over the garth. Arnkel had laid his sword and shield against a hayrick, and now he took up his weapons and defended himself therewith; but now he began to gather wounds, and withal they came up into the garth about him. Then Arnkel leapt up on to the hayrick, and defended himself thence for a space, but such was the end of the matter that he fell, and they covered him over there in the garth with hay; and thereafter Snorri and his folk fared home to Holyfell.

Over the slaying of Arnkel, Thormod Trefilson made this stave:

“Snorri the fight-strong  
Fetched for the wound-fowl  
Full feed with war-sword --  
Young he, and fame-fulfilled.  
O feeders of battle-fowl,  
Wild-fire of battle-storm  
Clave the life’s coffer,  
Where Snorri felled Arnkel.”

Chapter 38 - The Blood-Suit For Arnkel.

After the slaying of Arnkel, the heritage and blood-suit fell to women, and for this reason the blood-suit was not pushed forward so strongly as men deemed they might have looked for over so noble a man. But atonement was settled for the slaying at the Thing, and the only outlawry was that Thorleif Kimbi should abide abroad for three winters, because on him was laid the death-wound of Arnkel.

But because the blood-suit was not so seemly as men deemed befitted such a chief as was Arnkel, the rulers of the land made this law, that for the time to come no woman and no man under sixteen winters old should be suitors in a blood-suit. And that law has ever been holden to since.

Chapter 39 - Of Thorleif Kimbi And His Dealings With Arnbiorn.

Thorleif Kimbi took ship that same summer with chapmen who got ready in Streamfirth, and was a messmate of the masters. In those days was it the wont of chapmen to have no cooks, but the messmates chose by lot from amongst themselves who should have the ward of the mess day by day. Then too was it the wont of all the shipmen to have their drink in common, and a cask should stand by the mast with the drink therein, and a locked lid was over it. But some of the drink was in tuns, and was



added to the cask thence as soon as it was drunk out.

Now when they were nigh ready there came one forth upon the ledge of rock by the booths. This man was great of growth, and had a bundle on his back, and seemed to men somewhat uncouth. He asked for the ship-master, and he was shown to his booth. So he laid down his bag at the booth-door and went into the booth, and asked if the skipper would give him a passage over the sea.

They asked him of his name, and he called himself Arnbiorn, the son of Asbrand of Combe, and said he fain would fare out and seek Biorn his brother, who had gone out some winters before, and had not been heard of since he went to Denmark.

The Eastmen said that the bulk was bound down, and they deemed it might not be undone. He said he had not more faring goods than might lie on the top of the bulk. But whereas they deemed him to have great need of faring, they took him to them, but he found himself in victual, and abode on the forecastle.

In his bag were three hundreds in wadmal, and twelve skins for sale, and his victual.

Now Arnbiorn was of good help and a brisk man, and the chapmen held him of good account.

They had a fair passage out and made Hordaland, and took land at an outskerry, and dight their victuals on land.

Thorleif Kimbi was the allotted mess-ward, and had to make porridge. Arnbiorn was aland and made porridge for himself, and had the mess-kettle which Thorleif was to have afterwards. Then went Thorleif aland and bade Arnbiorn give him his kettle, but he had not yet made his own porridge, but stirred the kettle while Thorleif stood over him. Now the Eastmen called aland from the ship and bade Thorleif get ready the meat, and said that he was just an Icelander because of his laziness. Then Thorleif lost his temper, and caught up the kettle and cast out Arnbiorn's porridge, and then turned away.

Arnbiorn had the stirring-stick in his hand, and therewith he smote at Thorleif and caught him on the neck, and the blow was not great, but whereas the porridge was hot, Thorleif was scalded on his neck. Then Thorleif said:

“These Northmen shall not mock us, since we be here two fellow- countrymen together, that they must needs drag us apart like dogs; but I shall mind me of this when we are together in Iceland.”

Arnbiorn answered nought. So they lay there three nights before they had a wind for land; then they brought their goods ashore.

Thorleif gusted there, but Arnbiorn took ship with certain traders east to Wick, and thence to Denmark to seek for his brother Biorn.

Chapter 40 - Of Biorn, The Champion Of The Broadwickers, And His Dealings With Thurid Of Frodis-Water.

Thorleif Kimbi was two winters in Norway, and then went back to Iceland with the same chapmen as he had fared out with. They made Broadfirth and came to Daymealness, and Thorleif went home to Swanfirth in the autumn, and made much of himself as his manner was.

That same summer came out to Lavahaven-mouth those brothers Biorn and Arnbiorn, and Biorn was afterwards called the Champion of the Broadwickers. Arnbiorn had by then brought home a pretty penny; and as soon as he came aland that summer he bought him land at Bank in Lavahaven, and set up house there the next spring. That winter he spent at Cnear with Thord Walleye, his brother-in-law. Arnbiorn was not a man for show, and was of few words in most matters, yet the stoutest and manliest of men in every wise. But Biorn his brother was a very stately man when he came out, and fair was his mien, for that he had shaped himself after the customs of outland chiefs. A far goodlier man was he than Arnbiorn, and in nothing of less skill than he, and in hardihood far more proven, for thereby he had gained renown in the outlands.

Now in the summer, when these were new come out, was appointed a great meeting of men north of the heath under Howebrent, in from Frodis-mouth. So those chapmen rode thither all of them, in coloured raiment, and when they came to the assembly, there were many there before them, and Thurid withal the goodwife of Frodis-water, and Biorn went to talk with her; and no man laid a word on them therefor, for they deemed that it was to be looked for that they should have much to say to each other, so long as it was since they met last.

Now that day men gave and took wounds, and one man from the Northcountry-men was brought to his death, and he was borne into a copse that was on the ere, and much blood ran from his wounds, and there stood a pool of blood in the copse. There was the youngling Kiartan, the son of Thurid of Frodis-water, with a little axe in his hand; he ran to the copse, and dipped the axe in the blood.

But when the folk from the south side of the heath rode south from the meeting, Thord Walleye asked Biorn how things had gone in the talk betwixt him and Thurid of Frodis-water. Biorn seemed well pleased thereabout. Then Thord asked Biorn if he had seen that day the youngling Kiartan, the son of Thurid and Thorod and them all together.

“Yea, I saw him,” cried Biorn.

“In what wise didst thou deem of him?” said Thord.

Then sang Biorn this stave:

“The young tree I saw there, the eager-eyed sapling,  
The youngling, the very own image of her,  
That gem-bestrewn table; he ran to the tree-grove,  
Whence the brook of the Wolf, even Fenrir, was welling.  
They who waste wide the flame of Morn’s river, meseemeth  
Have been hitherto heedful to hide from the stripling  
The name of the father who erewhile begat him,

He who speedeth the steeds of the streams of the Ocean.”

#### Chapter 41 - Of Thorleif Kimbi And Thord Wall-Eye.

That same spring at the Thorsness Thing, Thorleif Kimbi fell to wooing a wife, and prayed for Helga, daughter of Thorlak of Ere, and sister of Steinthor of that ilk; and Thormod her brother pressed this forward most, he who had to wife Thorgerd, daughter of Thorbrand, and sister of Thorleif Kimbi. But when the matter came before Steinthor, he took it up coldly, and must ask counsel of his brothers. So then they went to Thord Wall-eye, and when the matter was laid before him, he answered thus:

“I will not put this affair off on to other men, for herein may I be the shaper; so this I have to say to thee, Thorleif, that first must the porridge spots on thy neck be healed, wherewith thou wast burnt when thou wast beaten in Norway three winters ago, or ever I give thee my sister.”

Thorleif answered: “I know not what my fortune may be therein; but whether that be avenged or not,” says he, “my will it is that three winters pass not ere thou be beaten.”

Thord answered: “I sit without fear in despite of thy threats.”

But the next morning men had a turf-play beside the booth of the sons of Thorbrand, and as Thorlak’s sons passed by, forth flew a great piece of turf, and smote Thord Wall-eye under the poll, and so great was the stroke, that he fell heels over head; but when he arose, he saw that Thorbrand’s sons were laughing at him hugely. Then Thorlak’s sons turned back and drew their swords, and they ran to meet one another, and forthwithal they fought together, and some were wounded, but none slain.

Steinthor had not been there, for he had been in talk with Snorri the Priest. So when they were parted, folk strove to bring about peace; and so it was settled that Snorri and Steinthor should be umpires in the matter. So the wounds of men and the onset were set one against the other, but the remnant over was atoned for; and all were called at one again whenas they rode home.

#### Chapter 42 - Thorbrand’s Sons Make An Onslaught On Arnbiorn.

That summer a ship came out into Lavahaven-mouth, and another to Daymealness. Snorri the Priest rode to the ship at Lavahaven, and fourteen men with him; but when they came south over the heath to Dufgusdale, six men all-armed rode after them, and there were the sons of Thorbrand. Snorri asked whither they were minded to fare, but they said they would go to the ship at Lavahaven-mouth. Snorri said that he would do their errands for them, and bade them go back home and not raise quarrels betwixt men; and he said that often little was needed for that matter among those who were unfriends together already, if they should chance to meet.

Thorleif Kimbi answered: “It shall not be told of us that we durst not ride through the countryside because of the Broadwickers; but thou mayest well ride home, if thou darest not to ride on thy ways when thou hast an errand.”

Snorri answered nought, and so they rode forth over the necks, and so forth to

Templegarth, and then west over the sands along the sea; but when they came anigh to the Mouth, Thorbrand's sons rode from the company up to Bank; and when they came to the homestead they leapt off their horses and were minded to enter, but might not break open the door. Then they leapt up on to the house, and fell to unroofing it.

Arnbiorn took his weapons, and warded himself from the inside of the house. He thrust out through the thatch, and that became woundsome to them. This was early in the morning, and the weather was bright and clear; and that morning had those of Broadwick arisen early, with the mind to ride to the ship; but when they came west of the shoulder of the fell, then saw they a man in coloured clothes up on the house-roof at Bank, and they wotted well that it was not the attire of Arnbiorn. Then Biorn and his folk spurred on their horses, and turned their way thitherward.

But when Snorri the Priest was ware that the sons of Thorbrand had ridden away from his company, he rode after them, and by then he and his came to Bank were those others working at their maddest for the unroofing of the house. Then Snorri bade them begone thence, nor work any unpeaceful deeds in his company, so whereas they had got no entrance there, they even gave up the onset as Snorri bade, and rode thereafter to the ship with Snorri.

Now those of Broadwick came to the ship that same day, and either side went with their own band, and great ill-will there was, and cross looks enow, but neither side set on another, yet the men of Broadwick were the most in number at the market. Snorri the Priest rode in the evening south to Templegarth, whereas Biorn dwelt as then with his son Guest, who was the father of Templegarth-Ref. The folk of Biorn the Champion of the Broadwickers offered Arnbiorn to ride after those of Snorri the Priest, but Arnbiorn would not have it so, but said that each should have what he had got. Those of Snorri rode home the next day, and the sons of Thorbrand were worse content with their lot than heretofore. And now the autumn began to wear.

#### Chapter 43 - Of Egil The Strong.

Now goodman Thorbrand had a thrall who was called Egil the Strong, the biggest and strongest of men, and he thought his life ill in that he was no free man, and would oft pray Thorbrand and his sons to give him his freedom, and offered to do therefor any such work as he might. So one evening Egil went with his sheep out to Burgdale in Swanfirth, and as the evening grew late, he saw an erne fly from the west over the firth. Now a great deerhound was with Egil, and lo, the erne swooped on the hound, and took him up in her claws, and flew back west over the firth straight for the howe of Thorolf Haltfroot, and vanished there, under the mountain; and a foreboding of tidings Thorbrand deemed this.

Now it was the wont of the Broadwickers in autumn, about the time of winter-nights, to have ball-play under the shoulder south of Cnear, and the place thereafter was called the Playhall-meads, and men betook themselves thither from all the countryside, and great play-halls were made there, wherein men abode and dwelt there a half month or more. Many chosen men there were as then in the countryside, and it was thickly peopled. Most of the young men were at the plays, except Thord Wall-eye; but he might not deal therein because of his too great eagerness, though he was not so strong that he might not play for that cause. So he sat on a chair and looked

on the play. Those brethren withal, Biorn and Arnbiorn, were not deemed meet to play because of their strength, unless they played one against the other.

That same autumn Thorbrand's sons fell to talk with Egil that he should go to the ball-play and slay some one of the Broadwickers, either Biorn or Thord or Arnbiorn, in some wise, and that he should have his freedom after therefor; and some men say that that was done by Snorri's rede, and that he had so counselled that the thrall should try if he might get into the hall by stealth, and thence whereas he lurked do somewhat for the wounding of men; and he bade him go down the pass which is above Playhalls, and go down thence when the meal-fires were kindled; for he said it was mostly the way of the weather that a wind would blow off the lava in the evening and drive the smoke up into the pass. So he bade him abide his time to go down till the pass should be full of smoke.

Egil betook himself to this journey, and went first west over the firths, and asked after the sheep of the Swanfirthers, and made as if he were going a sheep-gleaning.

Now whilst he was on his way, Freystein Rascal was to watch the sheep in Swanfirth. So in the evening, when Egil had gone from home, Freystein went west over the river to the sheep, and when he came to that scree which is called Geirvor, and which goes down west of the river, he saw a man's head lying trunkless there and uncovered, and the head sang this stave:

“With man's blood Geirvor  
Is reddened over,  
The skulls of men-folk  
Shall she cover.”

#### Chapter 44 - The Battle In Swanfirth.

Snorri the Priest had sent word to his neighbours that they should bring their boats under Redwick-head; and he went thither with his home-men as soon as Steinthor's messenger was gone; and he went not before, because he thought he saw that the man had been sent to spy over his doings. So Snorri went up Swanfirth, and had nigh fifty men with three keels, and came to Karstead before Steinthor and his men. But when folk saw the coming of Steinthor and his men, the sons of Thorbrand cried out to go meet them, “and let them not get entry into the home-field, for that we have both a great company and a goodly.”

Now they who were there were eighty men. But Snorri said: “Nay, we will not ward the homestead from them, and Steinthor shall have the law, for peaceably and wisely will he fare in his redes. So I will that all men abide within, and let no man cast any vain words at them in such wise as that the troubles of men be eked thereby.”

With that all men went into the chamber, and men sat on the benches. But the sons of Thorbrand walked up and down the floor.

Now Steinthor and his folk rode up to the door; and for him it is said that he was in a red kirtle, and had pulled up the front skirts through his belt. A fair shield he had, and a helm, and was girt with a sword that was cunningly wrought; the hilts were white

with silver, and the grip wrapped round with the same, but the strings thereof were gilded.

Steinthor and his folk leapt off their horses, and he went up to the door, and made fast to the doorpost a purse wherein were twelve ounces of silver. Then he named witnesses to the thrall's-gild being brought home according to law. The door was open, and a certain handmaid stood thereby, and heard the naming of the witnesses. Then she went into the chamber and said:

“Yea, both things are true, that Steinthor of Ere is a manly man, and moreover that he spoke well when he brought the thrall's-gild.”

But when Thorleif Kimbi heard that, he ran out with the other sons of Thorbrand, and then all went forth who were in the chamber. Thorleif came first to the door, and saw where Thord Walleye stood before the doorway with his shield; but even therewith Steinthor went forth into the homefield. Thorleif took a spear which stood there in the doorway, and thrust it at Thord Wall-eye, and the thrust smote his shield and glanced off it unto the shoulder, and that was a great wound. After this men ran out and there was battle in the home-mead, and Steinthor was of the eagerest, and smote on either hand of him. But when Snorri the Priest came out he bade men stay the unpeace, and bade Steinthor ride away from the homestead, and said that he would not suffer men to ride after them. So Steinthor and his folks fared adown the mead, and men parted in such wise.

But when Snorri the Priest came back to the door, there stood Thorod his son with a great wound in his shoulder, and he was then twelve winters old. Snorri asked who had brought that about.

“Steinthor of Ere,” said he.

And Thorleif Kimbi answered and said: “Now has he rewarded thee in meet wise, for that thou wouldst not have us chase him; but my rede it is that we part not thus.”

“Yea, so shall it be now,” said Snorri, “that we shall have more dealings with them.” And he bade Thorleif withal tell the men to follow after them.

Now Steinthor and his folk were come down from the field when they saw the chase, and therewith they crossed the river and turned up on to the scree Geirvor, and made them ready for a stand; for a good fighting-stead was that because of the stones. But as Snorri's company came up the scree, Steinthor cast a spear over Snorri's folk for his good luck, according to ancient custom; but the spear sought a mark for itself, and in its way was Mar, the kinsman of Snorri, who was straightway put out of the fight. So when that was told Snorri the Priest, he answered: “It is well that men should see,” says he, “that he is not always in the best case that goeth the last.”

So then befell a great battle, and Steinthor was at the head of his own folk, and smote on either hand of him; but the fair-wrought sword bit not whenas it smote armour, and oft he must straighten it under his foot. He made most for the place whereas was Snorri the Priest.

Stir Thorgrimson set on fiercely with Steinthor his kinsman, and his first hap was that he slew a man of the folk of Snorri the Priest, his son-in-law; but when Snorri saw that he cried to Stir:

“Thus, forsooth, thou avengest Thorod, the son of thy daughter, whom Steinthor of Ere has brought unto death; the greatest of dastards art thou.”

Stir looked on him and said: “Speedily I may atone for that;” and he shifted his shield withal, and turned to the side of Snorri the Priest, and slew another man, but this time a man of Steinthor’s band.

Now even herewith came up from Longdale the father and son, Aslak and Illugi the Red, and sought to go between them. Thirty men they had with them, and to that company joined himself Vermund the Slender.

So then they prayed Snorri the Priest to let stay the slaughter of men, and Snorri bade the Ere-dwellers come up and make a truce. Then Aslak, he and his, bade Steinthor take truce for his men. So Steinthor bade Snorri reach forth his hand, and he did so; but therewith Steinthor raised his sword aloft and cut at Snorri’s arm, and great was the clatter of the stroke, for it smote the stall-ring, and well-nigh struck it asunder, but Snorri was nowise wounded.

Then cried out Thorod Thorbrandson: “No truce will they have! Well then, let us set on, and stay not till all the sons of Thorlak are slain.”

But Snorri the Priest answered: “Turmoil enow it would bring to the countryside if all sons of Thorlak were slain, and the truce shall be holden to if Steinthor will, after the word aforesaid.”

Then all bade Steinthor take the truce; and things went so far, that a truce was declared betwixt man and man until such time as they came back each one to his home.

Now it is to be told of the Broadwick folk that they knew how Snorri the Priest had fared with a flock to Swanfirth. So they take their horses and ride after Steinthor at their swiftest, and they were on Ulfar’s-fell-neck whiles the fight was on the scree; and some men say that Snorri the Priest saw Biorn and his folk as they came up on the hill’s brow, whenas he happened to turn and face them, and that for that cause he was so easy in the terms of the truce with Steinthor and his men.

So when Biorn and Steinthor met at Orligstead, Biorn said that matters had gone even after his guessing. “And my rede it is,” said he, “that ye turn back now, and drive them hard.”

But Steinthor said: “Nay, I will hold to the truce I have made with Snorri the Priest, in whatso ways matters may go betwixt us hereafter.”

Thereafter they ride each to his own home, but Thord Wall-Eye lay wounded at Ere. In the fight at Swanfirth five men had fallen of Steinthor’s company, and two of Snorri the Priest; but many were wounded on either side, for the fight had been of the

hardest. So says Thorrood Trefilson in his Raven-lay:

“The feeder of swans  
Of wound-wave, in Swanfirth  
Made the erne full  
With feeding of wolfs’ meat.  
There then, let Snorri  
Of five men the life-days  
Cut off in sword-storm:  
Such way shall foes pay.”

#### Chapter 45 - The Battle In Swordfirth.

That summer, before the fight was in Swanfirth, a ship had come to Daymeal-ness, as is aforesaid. Now Steinthor of Ere had bought a ten-oarer at the ship; but when he was to bring it home there fell on him a great gale from the west, and they drave east past Thors-ness, and landed at Thinghall-ness, and laid the keel up in Gruflunaust, and went thence afoot over the necks to Bank, and thence fared home in a boat; but the ten-oarer he had not been able to go fetch through the autumn, so it lay still at Gruflunaust.

But one morning a little before Yule, Steinthor rose early, and said that he would go fetch his craft that lay east at Thinghall-ness; and there betook them to faring with him his brothers Bergthor and Thord Wall-eye, whose wound was by now pretty much healed, so that he was meet enow to carry weapons. Withal in Steinthor’s company were two Eastmen, and they were eight in all.

So they were ferried over the firth into Dairyhead, and they went afoot in towards Bank, and thence came Thormod, their brother, who made the ninth of them. Now the ice stretched from Templesteadwick right up to Much Bank, and they went up along the ice, and so over the neck to Swordfirth, which lay all under ice. Such is the way of it, that when the sea ebbs, it leaves it all dry, and the ice lies on the mud at the ebb; but the skerries that were in the firth stood up above the ice, which was much broken about one of them, and the icefloes sloped down steeply from the skerry. Loose snow withal had fallen on the ice, and very slippery it was thereon.

Now Steinthor and his folk went to Thinghall-ness, and pushed out the boat from the boatstand, and took out of her both oars and deck, and laid them down on the ice, together with their clothes and the heaviest of their weapons. Then they dragged the craft in along the firth, and then west over the low neck to Templesteadwick, and right out to the edge of the ice; and then went after their clothes and the other matters. But as they went back into Swordfirth, they saw six men going from the south from Thinghall-ness, who went a great pace over the ice, and made for Holyfell. Then Steinthor and his men misdoubted them, that there would be going the sons of Thorbrand minded for the Yule-feast at Holyfell. Then Steinthor with his folk went swiftly out over the firth to the place where lay their clothes and weapons; and so it was as Steinthor had deemed, and these men were the sons of Thorbrand.

So when these beheld men running down the firth, they deemed they knew who they were, and thought the men of Ere were fain to meet them. So they fell to going at a



great pace, and made for the skerry with the mind to make a stand there; and in this wise each came nigh to meeting the other, yet the sons of Thorbrand reached the skerry first. But as Steinthor and his folk came forth past the skerry, Thorleif Kimbi let drive a spear against their flock, and it smote Bergthor, son of Thorlak, in the midst, and straightway was he put out of the fight. Then he went away out on to the ice, and lay down, and Steinthor and his folk set on toward the skerry, but some went after their weapons. The sons of Thorbrand warded themselves well and in manly wise, and a good fighting-stead they had there, because the floes sloped steeply from the skerry and were wondrous slippery; thus wounding went slowly betwixt men, before those came back who had gone to fetch the weapons.

Steinthor and his men set on, six together, on the skerry, but the Eastmen went out on to the ice within bowshot, for they had bows, and there with they shot against those on the skerry, and gave many a wound.

Thorleif Kimbi cried out when he saw Steinthor draw his sword: "White hilts dost thou still wield aloft, Steinthor," says he; "but I wot not if thou raisest yet again a soft brand withal, as thou didst last autumn at Swanfirth."

Steinthor answers: "Ah! I will that thou prove ere we part whether I bear a soft brand or not."

Now slow work was the winning of the skerry, but when they had been thereat a long while, Thord Wall-eye made a dash at it, and would thrust at Thorleif Kimbi with a spear, for he was ever the foremost of his men. The thrust smote the shield of Thorleif, but even as Thord Wall-eye laboured over the blow his feet failed him on the slippery floe, and he fell on his back and slipped headforemost down from the skerry. Thorleif Kimbi leapt after him to smite him dead before he could get to his feet again, and Freystein Rascal followed Thorleif, and he had shoe-spikes on his feet. Then Steinthor ran thereto, and cast his shield over Thord even as Thorleif fetched a blow at him, and with the other hand he smote at Thorleif Kimbi, and smote the leg from him below the knee; and while that was a-doing Freystein Rascal thrust at Steinthor, aiming at his middle; and when Steinthor saw that, he leapt up aloft, and the thrust went between his legs, and these three things, whereof we have told even now, he did in one and the same nick of time. Then he ran to Freystein, and smote him on the neck with his sword, and loud was the clatter of that stroke. So he cried withal: "Art smitten, Rascal?"

"Smitten forsooth," said Freystein, "but yet no more than thou didst deem, for no wound have I therefrom." For in a hooded hat of felt was Freystein, with horn sewn into the neck thereof, and on that had the stroke fallen.

Then Freystein Rascal turned back skerryward, but Steinthor bade him run not, since he had no wound, and Freystein turned him round on the skerry, and now they made at each other hard and fast. Steinthor was in great risk of falling, for the floe was both steep and slippery, but Freystein stood firm on his spiked shoes, and smote both hard and oft; but such was the end of their dealings, that Steinthor brought his sword down on Freystein above his hips, and smote the man asunder in the midst.

Then they went on to the skerry, and stayed not till all Thorbrand's sons were fallen.

Then cried out Thord Wall-eye that they should go betwixt head and trunk of all the sons of Thorbrand, but Steinthor said he had no will to bear weapons on men who lay alow.

So they came down from the skerry, and went to where Bergthor lay, who scarce had might to speak. So they brought him with them in over the ice, and so over the neck to the boat, and rowed in the boat out to Bank in the evening.

Now a shepherd of Snorri's had been at Oxbrents that day, and saw thence the fight at Swordfirth. So he went home straightway, and told Snorri the Priest how there had been a meeting that day at Swordfirth nowise friendly. So Snorri and his folk took their weapons, and went into the firth nine in company; but when they came there, Steinthor and his men had gone their ways and come aboard off the ice of the firth.

Then Snorri looked to the wounded men, and there was none slain save Freystein Rascal, but they were all nigh wounded to death.

Thorleif Kimbi cried out to Snorri, bidding go after Steinthor and his folk, and let no one of them escape. So Snorri the Priest went there whereas Bergthor had lain, and saw there great gouts of blood. Then he took up in his hand together blood and snow, and crushed it up, and put it in his mouth, and asked who had bled there. And Thorleif said it was Bergthor who had bled. Then Snorri said it was life-blood. "Like enow," said Thorleif; "from a spear it came."

"Methinks," says Snorri, "that is the blood of a doomed man; so we will not follow after them."

Then were Thorbrand's sons brought home to Holyfell and their wounds bound up. Thorod Thorbrandson had so great a wound in the back of his neck that he might not hold his head straight; he had on hose-breeches withal, and they were all wet with blood. A home-man of Snorri the Priest was about pulling them off; but when he fell to stripping them he could not get them off. Then he said: "No lie is that concerning you sons of Thorbrand, when folk say ye are showy men, whereas ye wear clothes so tight that they may not come off you."

Thorod said: "Belike thou pullest slovenly." And therewith the home-man set his feet against the bed-stock and pulled with all his might, but yet gat them off none the more.

Then Snorri the Priest went thereto, and felt along his leg, and found a spear stuck through his leg between the hough sinew and the leg bone, that had nailed together the leg and the breeches. Then said Snorri that the thrall was a measureless fool not to have thought of such a thing.

Snorri Thorbrandson was the briskest of those brothers, and he sat at table beside his namesake that evening. Curds and cheese they had to meat, but Snorri noted that his namesake made but little play with the cheese, and asked why he eat so slowly.

Snorri Thorbrandson answered that lambs found it the hardest to eat when they were first gagged.

Then Snorri the Priest drew his hand down his throat, and found an arrow sticking athwart his gullet and the roots of the tongue. Then Snorri the Priest took drawing-tongs and pulled out the arrow, and then Snorri Thorbrandson fell to his meat.

Then Snorri the Priest healed all the sons of Thorbrand. But when Thorod's neck grew together his head sat somewhat drawn backwards on his trunk, and he said that Snorri would heal him into a maimed man. Snorri said that he deemed the head would come straight when the sinews were knit together; but Thorod would have nought but that the wound should be torn open again, and the head set straighter. But all went as Snorri had guessed, and as soon as the sinews were knit together the head came right; yet little might Thord lout ever after. Thorleif Kimbi thenceforth went mostly with wooden leg.

#### Chapter 46 - The Peace-Making After These Battles.

Now when Steinthor of Ere and his men came to the boatstand at Bank, there they put up their craft, and the brothers went home to their steading, and the body of Bergthor was covered over with a tilt for the night. It is told that goodwife Thorgerd would not go to bed that night to Thormod her husband. But even therewith a man came up from the boatstand and told how Bergthor was dead; and when that was known she went to bed, nor is it said that any quarrel fell out betwixt them afterwards.

Steinthor went home to Ere in the morning, and no more fighting there was thenceforth through the winter. But in the spring, whenas time wore on to the days of summoning, men of good will bethought them that things had got to a sad plight, inasmuch as those men were unappeased and at strife together, who were the greatest in the countryside. So the best men who were friends of either side so brought it about that it came to seeking for peace betwixt them. And Vermund the Slender was chief of these, and with him were many men of good will, such as were allied to one side or the other, and thereof it came afterwards that truce was settled and they were brought to peace, and most men tell that these cases fell under Vermund's dooming; but he gave forth the award at the Thorsness Thing, and had with him the wisest men who were come there.

Now it is told of the peace-making that the slayings of men and onslaughts on either side were set off one against the other. The wound of Thord Wall-eye at Swanfirth was set against the wound of Thorod, son of Snorri the Priest. Against the wound of Mar Hallwardson and the stroke that Steinthor fetched at Snorri the Priest, were set the slayings of three men who fell in Swanfirth. The manslaughters which Stir made in either band were equalled; but in Swordfirth the slaughter of Bergthor and the wounds of Thorbrand's sons were set one against the other. But the slaying of Freystein Rascal met the death of one of those unnamed above who fell in Swanfirth out of Steinthor's company. Thorleif Kimbi had atonement for his lost leg; but the man who died out of Snorri's company in Swanfirth was set against the onset wherewith Thorleif Kimbi had set the fight agoing there.

Then were the wounds of other men set against each other, and what was deemed to be left over was booted for duly, and so men parted from the Thing appeased.

And that peace was well holden while Steinthor and Snorri were both alive.

#### Chapter 47 - Of Thorod Scat-Catcher And Snorri And Biorn The Champion Of The Broad-Wickers.

That same summer Thorod Scat-catcher bade Snorri his brother-in-law to a homefeast at Frodis-water, and Snorri went thither with eight men; but while Snorri was at the feast, Thorod complained to him that he deemed he had both shame and grief from the goings of Biorn Asbrandson, wherein he went to see his wife Thurid, the sister of Snorri the Priest, and said that it was Snorri's part to find rede for that trouble. So Snorri was at the feast certain nights, and Thorod led him away with seemly gifts. Snorri rode over the heath thence, and gave out that he would ride to the ship in Lavahavenmouth; and that was in summer at the time of mowing in the home-field. Now when he came south unto Combheath, then said Snorri: "Now shall we ride down from the heath unto Comb; and I will have you to know," says he, "that I will make an onset on Biorn, and take his life if occasion may serve; but not set on him in his house, because here are strong houses, and Biorn is brave and hardy, and we have but little strength. But

hard have such great men as he is been to win in their houses, even when they were set on with more men; as the case of Geir the Priest and Gizur the White shows well enow; for with eighty men they fell on Gunnar of Lithend in his house when he was all alone, and some were hurt, and some slain, and they must needs draw off till Geir the Priest by his cunning found that Gunnar's shot was spent. Now, therefore," says he, "if Biorn is without, as is like, since the day is dry and good, I will that thou, kinsman Mar, fall to work on Biorn, but take heed of this first, that he is no mannikin, and therefore a greedy wolf will have a gripe, whereas he is, if he get not such a wound at the first onset as will speedily work his bane."

So when they rode down from the heath to the stead, they saw that Biorn was without in the home-mead working on a wain, and no man by him, and without weapons, save a little axe and a big whittle, with which he was widening the mortices of the wain; the whittle was a span long from the haft down.

Now Biorn saw how Snorri the Priest and his men rode down from the heath on to the mead, and straightway knew the men. Snorri the Priest was in a blue cape and rode first.

Such hasty rede took Biorn that he caught up the knife and turned swiftly to meet them, and when he came up to Snorri he caught hold of the sleeve of his cape with one hand, and held the knife in the other, in such wise as it was handiest to thrust it into Snorri's breast if need should be.

So Biorn hailed them when they met, and Snorri took his greeting; but Mar let his hands fall, because he deemed that Biorn looked like to do Snorri a mischief speedily if aught were done to break the peace against him.

Then Biorn turned on the road with Snorri and his folk, and asked for the common tidings; and still kept the hold he had got at the first. Then he fell to speech: "So it is, Goodman Snorri, that I will not hide that I have played such a game with thee that ye may well hold me guilty, and it is told me that thy mind is heavy against me. Now

best it is to my mind,” says he, “if ye have any errand with me other than folk who go their ways hereby, that ye now show it forth; but if that be not so, then will I that ye say yea to my asking for truce, and then will I turn back, because I will not be led about like a fool.”

“So lucky a hold thou hast of me in this our meeting,” says Snorri, “that truce must thou have as at this time, whatever my mind was erst; but this I pray thee, that thou keep thyself henceforth from the beguiling of Thurid, for the wound betwixt us will not be healed if thou abidest as thou hast begun therein.”

Biorn answered: “That only will I promise thee which lies in my might; nor do I wot if I have might enow for this, if Thurid and I are in one country together.”

Snorri answered: “Nought holds thee here so much as that thou may’st not well take up thine abode away from this countryside.”

Biorn answers: “True it is, even as thou say’st, and so shall it be, since thou thyself hast come to meet me thus; and whereas our meeting has gone in such wise, I will promise thee that thou and Thorod shall have no more grief of heart from the meetings of me and Thurid for the next winters.”

“Then doest thou well,” saith Snorri.

Therewithal they parted, and Snorri rode to the ship and then home to Holyfell. Next day Biorn rode south to the ship at Lavahaven, and took a berth for himself there that summer. Somewhat late ready were they, and they fell in with a northeaster, which prevailed long that summer, and nought was heard of that ship for long after.

#### Chapter 48 - Of Thorbrand’s Sons In Greenland.

After the peace between the men of Ere and the Swanfirthers, Thorbrand’s sons Snorri and Thorleif went out to Greenland. After Thorleif is called Kimbi’s Bay in Greenland, betwixt the jokuls. So Thorleif lived to be old in Greenland, but Snorri went to Vineland the Good with Karlsefni, and in battle with the Skraelings in Vineland there fell Snorri Thorbrandson, the bravest of men.

Thorod Thorbrandson abode behind in Swanfirth, and had to wife Ragnhild, daughter of Thord, son of Thorgils the Eagle, who was the son of Hallstein, the Priest of Hallstein-ness, the thrall- owner.

#### Chapter 49 - Of The Coming Of Christ’s Faith To Iceland.

Next it befell that Gizur the White and Hiallti his son-in-law came out to preach Christ’s law; and all men in Iceland were christened, and the Christian faith was made law at the Althing. And Snorri the Priest brought it chiefly about with the Westfirthers that Christ’s faith was taken of them; and as soon as the Thing was over, Snorri let build a church at Holyfell, and Stir, his father-in-law, another at Under-the-Lava. Now this whetted men much to the building of churches, that it was promised them by the teachers, that a man should have welcome place for so many men in the kingdom of Heaven as might stand in any church that he let build. Thorod Scat-catcher withal let

make a church at his homestead of Frodis-water, but priests could not be got for the serving at the churches, though they were built, for in those days but few mass-priests there were in Iceland.

#### Chapter 50 - Of Thorgunna And How She Came To Frodis-Water.

The same summer that Christ's faith was made law in Iceland, a ship came from over the sea to Snowfell-ness, a keel of Dublin, whose folk were Erse and South-islanders, and a few Northmen. They lay off the Reef long through the summer, biding a wind to sail in over the firth to Daymeal-ness; so many men of the Ness went to chaffer with them. Now among her folk was a South-island woman named Thorgunna, and of her the shipmen told that she had such things among her faring-goods that the like of them would be hard to get in Iceland; but when Thurid the goodwife of Frodis-water heard thereof, she became exceeding wishful to see those fair things, for she was very fain of glitter and show. So she fared to the ship and found Thorgunna, and asked her if she had any woman's attire, something out of the common way. She said that she had no goods for sale, but let out that she had certain fair things, which she might show without shame at feasts or other meetings of men. Thurid prayed to see her fair things, and she granted it to her; and the wares seemed good to Thurid, and exceeding well shaped, but not beyond price.

Thurid offered to deal for the goods, but Thorgunna would not sell them, so Thurid bade her come dwell with her, for she knew that Thorgunna was rich of raiment, and thought to get the goods at her leisure.

Thorgunna answered: "I have good will to go dwell with thee, but I give you to know that I am loth to pay much for myself, because I am exceeding handy at work, and willing enough thereto; but no wet work will I do; and I myself too shall rule what I am to pay for myself from the wealth that I have."

So Thorgunna talked it all over unyieldingly enough, but Thurid would that she should go thither none the less, and her goods were borne from the ship: a great locked ark and a light chest, and they were brought to the house at Frodis-water.

So when Thorgunna came there she prayed to have a bed, and a berth was given to her in the inward part of the hall. There she unlocked her ark, and drew thereout bed-clothes all excellently wrought.

She covered over the bed with English sheets and a silken quilt, and took from the ark bed-curtains and all other bed-gear withal; and so good an array that was, that men deemed that of such goods they had never seen the like.

Then said goodwife Thurid: "Put a price for me on thy bed-gear."

But Thorgunna answered: "Nay, I will not lie in straw for thee, courteous though thou be, and grand of array."

That misliked the goodwife, and never after did she bid for the goods.

Thorgunna worked at the weaving day by day when no haymaking was, but when it

was dry she worked at the saving of hay in the home- mead, and let make for herself a rake, which she alone must handle.

Thorgunna was a woman great of growth, thick and tall, and right full of flesh; dark-browed and narrow-eyed; her hair dark-red and plenteous; of exceeding good manners was she in her daily ways, and she went every day to church before she went about her work; yet not easy of temper was she, or of many words in her daily conversation. Most men deemed that Thorgunna must have come into her sixth ten of years, yet was she the halest of women.

In those days was Thorir Wooden-leg come to be harboured at Frodis-water, and Thorgrima Witchface his wife with him, and things went somewhat ill betwixt her and Thorgunna. Kiartan the goodman's son was the one with whom Thorgunna would have most dealings, and she loved him much, yet was he cold to her, wherefore she was often cross-grained of mood. Kiartan was by then of thirteen or fourteen winters, and was both great of growth, and noble to look on.

## The Ruin of Britain

As Walwain reached the top of the dilapidated city wall, he heard a sound that froze him in his tracks.

It was an eerie, thin, wailing noise that drifted out across the ruins of Londinium. Walwain crouched down, gripping the crumbling stonework, and as the cry came again he scanned the derelict streets. With a chill, he remembered the stories the peasants had recounted last night when he told them he intended to enter the dead city. Stories saying that Londinium was cursed, that it was haunted.

The cry came again, a third time. It was difficult to locate amidst this sea of overgrown rubble but as far as Walwain could determine, it was coming from the southwest quadrant of the old Roman city. He couldn't tell if its source was human or not, but according to the peasants' tales the city was dangerous only at night. They should know; after escaping the invading Saxons they had settled within the walls only to flee once again, those who survived a mysterious onslaught after sunset, to found a settlement on the outskirts.

The eerie wail died away and this time it did not return. Emboldened, Walwain made his way cautiously down the tumbledown city wall and into the overgrown streets. Ruined buildings loomed on either side like crumbling cliffs. Birch trees and oak saplings grew from the shattered paving stones and soon Walwain found himself forcing his way through thick undergrowth that hid a scree of uneven rubble. Two generations had passed since Londinium's citizens abandoned the city and they had been unsettled years for all the people of Britannia. Walwain's own nation had contributed to this chaos at one point. But now the Britons faced another foe: Hengest's Saxons.

Coming out into a more open area, the remains of some square or forum, he paused as the wailing sound broke out again, from nearer this time. He surveyed the desolation in indecision but eventually moved on.

Walwain was making his way down an overgrown street in the southwest quarter of the city when he heard the clatter of running feet. He hid himself in the shadows of an archway and waited as the sound grew closer. A girl turned the corner at high speed.

Walwain stepped from the arch. She cried out, her moan mingling with that other distant wail. He seized her as she tried to run away.

'Where are you going, girl?' he asked. She struggled to free herself and gently he let her go.

Walwain regarded her appraisingly and she returned the look. She was young and slim, no more than eighteen summers to Walwain's mind; she wore the old fashioned *stola* of a Roman woman and her long dark ringlets were in disarray. Her strangely colourless eyes gleamed as she stared at Walwain.

'I thought you were a Saxon,' she said at last. 'But now I see that you are another



breed of barbarian!’

Ruefully, Walwain considered his own appearance. Although he was not much taller than the girl, his flame red hair and the intricate tattoos that covered his skin marked him out as a Pict from the hills of Caledonia. He must seem a fearsome prospect for the girl.

‘I’m a Pict, aye,’ Walwain replied. ‘But I’m not your enemy. I’m the Count of Britannia’s man and a Christian.’

‘A Christian?’ the girl said disdainfully and Walwain wondered why. ‘What is your name, then?’

Walwain introduced himself. ‘And you are...?’ he added.

‘I am Claudia,’ she replied. ‘My grandfather is *flamen* of the Temple of Diana. If you are not a barbarian, if indeed you fight for a Roman, then you must help me!’

Once more the wailing cry drifted across the ruined city. Walwain saw Claudia’s face wracked with horror. ‘What is that noise?’ he asked urgently. ‘The peasants who sheltered me last night said that the city is haunted.’

Claudia shook her head. ‘The Saxons... They have my grandfather. That is him!’

‘What are they doing? Torturing him? Why?’

‘They want to enter the vault beneath Diana’s Temple,’ Claudia replied. ‘They think that only my grandfather knows the location of the secret entrance...’

She broke off as two savage figures appeared down the street. Abruptly Walwain thrust Claudia into the cover of the archway, turned, and drew his sword.

The two Saxons were large, well built and tall, with long fair hair. One wore an iron helmet; both carried spears and shields. The nearer one halted at the sight of Walwain.

‘A Pict?’ he rumbled. ‘What brings you to this haunted city?’

‘My business is my own, Saxon,’ Walwain replied, circling them slowly. ‘Why do you follow the girl?’

‘We can’t have her escaping!’ said the other Saxon. ‘News might spread of our presence here.’

‘I might have something to say myself,’ Walwain replied. ‘Don’t you know that Londinium belongs to the Count of Britannia, Ambrosius Aurelianus?’

The first Saxon spat. ‘Count of Britannia! Hengest will rule Britain! Hand the girl over. You are a Pict. Surely you have no loyalty to the Britons!’

He tried to brush past Walwain, but the Pict came at him with his sword.

With his shield the first Saxon deflected Walwain's thrust and jabbed at him with his spear. Walwain brought his right foot up to kick the Saxon's shield away but before he could follow this with a sword cut, the second Saxon attacked. As Walwain regained his footing he took a spear thrust in the thigh. The Pict turned and brought his sword hacking down. The spear shaft broke and the Saxon stumbled on the uneven ground.

Then the first Saxon came back in with his own spear but Walwain dodged it deftly and thrust his blade under the man's half-uplifted shield. The Saxon's eyes rolled in their sockets and he collapsed, sprawling on the paves gushing blood from a belly wound. His fellow took one look before turning to run back up the street. He had got no more than ten yards when Walwain scooped up his comrade's fallen spear and flung it like a javelin. For one horrific instant, it protruded from the fugitive's back as if he had begun sprouting branches. Then the Saxon fell to the paving stones and was still.

Walwain turned to Claudia, who had watched the struggle in horror and revulsion. 'I think you need to tell me more,' he said quietly. He tore a strip of linen cloth from the first Saxon's cloak and used it to bandage his wounded thigh.

Claudia opened her mouth, but then they both heard the wailing cry that Walwain now knew to be the voice of her grandfather.

'Oh, come with me!' she gasped.

As they hurried through the streets, Claudia asked Walwain, 'Why did you come here? You say you are the Count of Britannia's man. Who is he? I thought the tyrant Vortigern ruled us.'

'Vortigern has been deposed by Ambrosius Aurelianus, who styles himself Count of Britannia,' Walwain replied. 'I joined Ambrosius in his fight against Vortigern, who had my father murdered and sent Saxons to ravage my realm. Now Ambrosius hopes to secure his hold over the Britons by having himself crowned High King, in the old style.'

Claudia scowled. 'I thought him a Roman! There have been no kings in Britannia since it joined the Empire. Vortigern was almost a king and he opened the floodgates to the Saxon Terror.'

'There were High Kings before your people came here,' Walwain replied. 'And it was in this city that they were crowned. The story is, their crown lies in the vaults beneath the Temple of Diana.'

Claudia turned to look at him in bewilderment. 'But the Saxons are trying to get in there!'

Walwain nodded thoughtfully. They turned a corner, and he saw the ruined portico of a temple looming over a wide square ahead of them. He seized Claudia by the wrist and dragged her into cover.

Peering out at the temple steps he saw a small group of figures surrounding an old Roman who lay pinioned on an altar stone. A brazier blazed nearby and as Walwain watched, one of the figures – a Saxon by his fair hair – took a white-hot iron from its flames and thrust it against the old Roman's chest. As the old man cried out, a haughty, heavily accented female voice called out:

*'Tell us what we want to know and you will save yourself pain. Where is that vaunted Roman stoicism?'*

Walwain's eyes widened. He knew that voice.

'There's my grandfather!' Claudia hissed. 'Save him!'

Walwain laughed humourlessly. 'To fight two Saxons is one thing,' he said. 'To go alone against the personal guard of Hengest's daughter would be more than foolhardy.'

Claudia stared at him in betrayal. Her grandfather's cries grew louder. 'You won't help me?'

'I didn't say that,' Walwain said. 'But I'll achieve nothing by throwing my life away like a fool. I need to think. There must be some way to deal with the Saxons. And I think my own mission requires it.' He glanced at Claudia. 'Tell me about yourself. You and your grandfather don't live in these ruins, do you? Don't you fear the place as the peasants do?'

'My grandfather is *flamen* of the Temple of Diana,' the girl said, distractedly. 'Our family have provided the temple priests since Rome first conquered Britannia.'

Walwain sardonically inspected the dilapidated temple. 'What kind of congregation do you get these days?'

Claudia glowered. 'The temple was ransacked in the dark days before the legions departed, when the new religion spread like a plague throughout the Empire. Shortly afterwards, the citizens deserted Londinium. But my family remained, dwelling in a villa nearby, and we came to the temple to perform the rites as we always had. There has been a Temple to Diana since before the Romans came – it was founded by Brutus the Trojan in the Age of Bronze, and built by the indigenous tribes of Gog and Magog who were enslaved by his comrade Corineus.'

'That would explain why the crown of the High Kings is kept in the vaults beneath the temple,' Walwain mused. 'Is that what Renwein wants?'

'Renwein?' Claudia asked. 'You mean the woman who leads them?'

Walwain nodded. 'Renwein, daughter of Hengest, the Saxon leader. Our paths have crossed before. Does she want the crown for her father? So he can call himself ruler of Britain?'

‘Just as your Ambrosius wants to be High King,’ Claudia said. ‘But this doesn’t matter. You must free my grandfather before they kill him.’ She looked about her. The sun was descending now and shadows were pooling around them. ‘We don’t want to be within the city precincts after dark.’

Walwain was about to query this when he started. Cold steel had suddenly been pressed against his back. It felt like a spearhead. He turned slightly and a voice with a Saxon accent said, ‘Don’t move!’ Another Saxon came into vision and seized Claudia by the wrists. As she cried out, a third man appeared and tore the sword from Walwain’s belt. Their leader came into view, menacing Walwain with his spear.

‘We’ve found the girl,’ he said harshly, ‘and something more. Move!’

‘My lady,’ he said a few minutes later, as his men dragged Walwain and Claudia up the temple steps, ‘my men found the old Roman’s granddaughter. And with her was this Pict.’

Renwein turned, puzzled. Diminutive, fair haired, wearing a night-blue kirtle, she was exactly as Walwain remembered her from their meeting in Viriconium. Her eyes widened and Walwain knew that the recognition was mutual.

‘And what brings you here, Walwain the Pict?’ she asked.

Walwain looked down at the old Roman who lay pinioned by two Saxons. Burns and sear marks covered his bare, wrinkled flesh. ‘Easy to see why you’re here, daughter of Hengest,’ he replied. ‘Perhaps we’re after the same thing. But my methods are different.’

Renwein came closer, brushing up against Walwain as she gazed searchingly into his eyes. ‘You come looking for the crown of the High Kings? Ha! Would you make yourself king of Britain?’

Walwain laughed. ‘Why not?’ he said easily. ‘I’ve been a king before.’ He had ruled a tribe of Picts until he was defeated by this woman’s brothers.

‘Let my grandfather go!’ Claudia demanded. ‘You’ll kill him!’

Renwein arched a perfect eyebrow. ‘Indeed, he is a stubborn one,’ she said. ‘Saewulf here is afraid that your grandfather will die before he tells us how to enter the vaults.’ She tapped her lips and eyed Claudia. ‘But perhaps we have the means to persuade him now that you’ve returned.’ She moved over to the old Roman. ‘Look, priest. We have your granddaughter. She has returned!’

Claudia’s grandfather raised his head weakly and his eyes focussed. Walwain saw that they were as colourless as his granddaughter’s. ‘Do you still torment me? I have sworn by Diana herself that I shall never reveal the entrance to the vault. I shall take the secret to my tomb.’

Renwein struck him across the face and Walwain winced. ‘Do you not understand?’ the Saxon woman said venomously. ‘We have your granddaughter! Tell me now or

she dies!’

The old Roman looked out across the square where the shadows were lengthening. ‘It will be night soon,’ he murmured.

‘Never mind that,’ Renwein hissed. ‘Listen to me!’ She produced a wide bladed dagger and placed it against Claudia’s throat. ‘Tell us how to enter the vault or the girl dies!’

He took a breath as if to compose himself. Silence hung over the ruined temple and shades of night stole up as the Saxon woman menaced Claudia. Walwain could see no way out. There was nothing he could do, a prisoner and surrounded by so many hostile warriors. If the old Roman betrayed the secret then the crown of the High Kings would fall into Saxon hands, foreshadowing Britannia’s fall under barbarian rule. And if not, Walwain was sure that Renwein would cut Claudia’s innocent throat without a second thought.

At last the old Roman spoke.

‘You thought you could get the secret from me by torture, now by threats. But I have doomed you all; my granddaughter too, sadly. I hoped you would escape before nightfall, Claudia. I told you to run.’

‘But I had to rescue you,’ Claudia gasped.

The old Roman wheezed hoarsely. He was clearly close to the end and Walwain marvelled that he still refused to betray his secret. ‘You will die with all the others,’ he told Claudia. ‘It is my only regret... Now you will atone for your disobedience...’ His head slumped back.

Renwein thrust Claudia into a Saxon’s arms and stalked forward to shake the old Roman. She cursed in her own tongue. ‘He’s dead,’ she breathed.

Walwain laughed harshly. ‘Your men killed him. He was a weak old man.’

‘He should have talked! The old fool.’ Renwein paused. ‘I must get into that vault. Girl! Can you help us?’

A Saxon menaced Claudia with his sword. ‘Yes!’ she cried out, her colourless eyes wide with fright. ‘I know the secret. My grandfather thought I did not, but I once spied upon him at night when he went down there.’ She gave the old man’s corpse a last, pitying glance.

Walwain sighed. There had been no option for the girl but she had betrayed a sacred trust stretching back into antiquity, into the legendary days before the Roman conquest. She had betrayed her grandfather. She had betrayed the Britons. If only there was something that Walwain could do.

Claudia led them up the temple steps. At a nod from the Saxon woman, Walwain’s captor brought him with them.

In the darkness of the inner sanctum, Claudia depressed a moulding on the edge of a fresco that depicted Diana and Actaeon. The wall slowly rumbled open to reveal a flight of rough-hewn steps leading down into darkness. At an order from Renwein, two of her Saxons produced resin-soaked torches and lit them. Then the group followed the Roman girl down the steps into the vault.

Walwain looked around in astonishment at the natural cavern illuminated by the torches. Ancient treasures, gold and jewels, sceptres and orbs, arms and armour, all lay heaped in piles on the rocky floor. On one low rock near the centre of the chamber was a circlet of bronze. Claudia led them towards it.

‘Brutus the Trojan wore this crown when Corineus brought captives to build the city of the Trinovantes, later known as Londinium,’ she told them. ‘The Archdruid of the Island placed it upon the head of Dumnoualos the High King, who later reunited the Britons in the Age of Iron. Cassivellaunos concealed the crown in this vault when he went to fight Caesar, knowing that this marked the beginning of the end for the Kings of the Britons.’

Renwein slipped forward and seized the circlet. ‘And now it shall sit upon the brow of my father, Hengest, who shall be ruler of Britain,’ she said with a smile. The Saxons crowded round her, laughing and jubilant.

‘Claudia!’ Walwain said. ‘You have betrayed us all!’

Claudia smiled regretfully. ‘Only if these Saxons escape the city,’ she said. ‘It will be night outside by now.’

‘What’s that?’ Walwain asked urgently. His captor had left him to gawp at Renwein and the crown. ‘Why shouldn’t they escape? Escape what?’

‘This city is haunted,’ Claudia said, ‘by the tribes of Gog and Magog, indigenous inhabitants of Albion who built this city as slaves and whom Corineus then imprisoned with a spell within the precincts of Diana’s Temple. In former days they were restricted to the sacred precincts, but since Theodosius’ agents desecrated the temple, the spell has been weakened and they roam the city at night, though they can get no further than the walls. They hunt down all living beings within the city.’

‘What’s that?’ Renwein hurried over, clutching the bronze circlet. ‘Do you hope to scare us with tales of spooks?’ Her Saxons were muttering superstitiously.

‘My grandfather was patient,’ Claudia said. ‘He endured your abuse until he knew that night was near. Now we are all trapped.’

‘We must leave,’ Renwein said. ‘It is not far to my father’s encampment in Thanet. No one will follow us there.’

At that, several of the Saxons bolted and ran up the steps, vanishing from sight, despite Renwein’s angry cries. Walwain heard their footsteps as they crossed the inner sanctum. A few seconds later, screams rang out.

Walwain turned to Claudia in horror. 'What is it out there?'

'The tribes of Gog and Magog,' she replied. 'The beastmen slaves who built this temple. They will tear us apart before the sun rises.'

'This is insane,' Renwein said. 'Walwain, you can't be a party to this. You want to live just as much as I do. We must escape from whatever it is out there!'

'I don't want to die either,' Claudia replied. 'I wish I had obeyed my grandfather now, and fled to safety. But Gog and Magog's people will hunt us all down.'

Walwain eyed the circlet in Renwein's hands. 'It's vital that the crown does not remain here,' he said.

'I'm glad we are agreed upon that!' The Saxon woman laughed. 'But how can we escape these beastmen?'

Walwain indicated himself, Claudia, and the remaining Saxon warriors who had clustered in a terrified huddle. 'Surely they cannot kill all of us. Strength of numbers will prevail. If we can make a mass breakout...'

'Agreed,' said Renwein.

'We'll approach this like a military manoeuvre,' Walwain said briskly. 'We'll have the main part of your men in a wedge formation at the front. Then you, and the crown, in the middle. Then another group as the rearguard.'

Renwein laughed throatily. 'And where will you be, brave Walwain?' she asked. 'In at the forefront?'

'I'll be at your side,' he told her grimly, his eyes on the circlet in her hands.

A few moments later, the Saxons burst out into the inner sanctum with their spears at the ready. Walwain, Renwein and Claudia were in their midst as they reached the pillared portico.

'Look!' Claudia pointed at the huddled forms lying beyond the entrance. Walwain hurried forwards. Several of Renwein's warriors lay there, their throats torn out. He looked around him, studying the silent darkness, picked up one of the swords that lay there and returned to the others.

'Something killed them,' he said. 'Just as they were leaving the temple.'

'They're waiting outside, then,' said Claudia. 'The tribes of Gog and Magog.'

Renwein lifted a hand for silence and Walwain listened. A stealthy padding came from outside the temple.

'No other way out,' Renwein said. 'We could stay here and see if we can last out the

night...’

‘If they enter, we’ll be trapped,’ said Walwain. ‘Better we force our way out.’

Renwein looked at him thoughtfully. ‘You realised that few of us will survive, if any?’

‘Come on!’ Walwain said impatiently. He led them from the temple.

As they charged into the square, burly forms loomed up out of the darkness. Walwain glimpsed massive, brawny, fur clad beastmen that set upon the Saxons, tearing them to pieces. Claudia shrieked and Walwain grabbed her hand.

‘Run!’ he shouted, brandishing his sword.

They sprinted across the square, dodging beastmen, followed by the surviving Saxons. The flagstones boomed as the huge figures blundered after them. Walwain became aware of Renwein running at his side, still gripping the circlet.

The night was alive with screams as the beastmen hunted them down.

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An hour later, Walwain had lost the Saxon warriors among the overgrown, unilluminated streets of the ruinous city. Only Claudia remained, still clutching his hand. He no longer knew the location of the city wall.

‘Listen,’ he hissed. Muffled but still audible, eerie howls floated across the darkness around them.

‘Where are they coming from?’ Claudia frowned.

‘It could be anywhere,’ Walwain replied.

‘But which direction?’

They listened again. ‘That way,’ said Claudia, pointing ahead.

‘That way,’ Walwain contradicted her, pointing to the right.

The noises seemed to be getting louder, as if the beastmen were approaching.

‘I think it’s behind us,’ Claudia whispered nervously.

They crouched in silence, listening to the slowly approaching sounds. Claudia shifted. ‘They know where we are. Let’s leave.’

‘We’re going nowhere in this gloom,’ Walwain said. He put his hand on the hilt of his sword, sat on a stone and glanced around at the dark that trapped them. He looked at Claudia, who was shaking.



The howl of the beastmen rang out, deafeningly loud, frighteningly close. Claudia bolted and ran.

Walwain cursed and dashed after her. As he bounded through the dark over the unstable rocks that lined the overgrown streets, he cast anxious glances around him. There was no sign of anyone in the pitch blackness. He kept on running, drawing his sword as he did so.

Slithering round a ruined wall, he dodged back quickly, seeing something beyond. He peered out again.

A figure came into view, lurching down the overgrown street. Walwain clutched his sword hilt. Then the figure collapsed sobbing to the ground.

Cautiously, he rose and approached. 'Claudia?' he hissed.

The figure lifted a face, a white blob in the dark until he came close enough to recognise Renwein. The once-proud Saxon woman's hair was in disarray, her kirtle torn. Scratches ran down one side of her face.

'Where are your men?' he asked, helping her to her feet. She drew back from him with something of her old pride. He saw that she still clutched the circlet of bronze.

'You left us to our fate, I see,' she said bitterly. 'Those things... I was running forever... they killed Saewulf and many more... I thought I was the only one left.' She sobbed to herself.

'You haven't seen Claudia, then?'

'Your little strumpet escaped you, then?' Renwein taunted him weakly. 'I expect they've torn her to pieces.'

Walwain ignored this. 'She said that Corineus' spell binds the beastmen to the city. If we can get across the walls, we'll be safe. Are you coming?'

'Very well,' Renwein said, and limped after him.

Screams rang out ahead of them. Walwain drew his sword. 'That's her!' he exclaimed. 'Come on!'

'Leave the little whore!' Renwein shrieked. 'We can't go back for her!'

Walwain ignored her and ran towards the screams. Cursing, Renwein followed.

He came out into an open space beyond which loomed the tumbledown city wall. A female figure lay at its foot, menaced by several beastmen. As Walwain and Renwein appeared, the creatures turned to face them.

Without thinking, Walwain attacked, swinging his sword back and forth. He sent one

flying with a split skull but two more flung themselves at him, trying to drag him down. Claws sank into his flesh and blood ran. He kicked one savagely and it fell back, whimpering, but the second was more tenacious; Walwain hacked at its furry form with his sword to no apparent avail. Renwein shrieked encouragement from the sidelines as another beastman leapt upon Walwain's back and sank its talons into his scalp. Then the first beastman sank to the ground as Walwain's attacks began to tell and the Pict turned, flinging his second attacker to the turf. It bounded away into the cover of a building as he brandished his bloody blade.

Shaking his head to clear his sight, Walwain reached out to help Claudia to her feet.

'That thing will have gone to get more of its kind,' she told him. 'We have to get beyond the city wall. I tried to climb it but it is too steep here!'

Renwein pointed towards a broken-down gate a few hundred yards down the line of the wall. 'Look!' she said. 'We can get out that way...'. She hurried towards it but as she did more beastmen loomed out of the darkness. Although he was still weak from his previous fight, Walwain staggered forward, sword drawn. Renwein, struggling in the grasp of her attackers, dropped the bronze circlet that she had clutched so faithfully. But to Walwain's despair, it hit a paving stone and rolled into the mob of beastmen.

Now he would never get it. There were too many of the creatures for him to rescue either the crown or the Saxon woman. As the beastmen dragged Renwein's screaming form into the gloom, Walwain turned despairingly and pulled Claudia towards the gate.

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They halted in a grove of trees half a mile from the city walls. Walwain took stock of the situation. They had survived, though he would be laid up for some weeks with his wounds.

'My grandfather did not die in vain,' Claudia said, lying beside him on the soft turf, her colourless eyes glinting in the starlight. 'Even that Saxon woman did not escape. And the circlet remains in the city. Will you return for it?'

Walwain shook his head. 'I think it's gone for good, and the kingdom of the Britons with it. But at least Hengest didn't get it. Britannia will face its future without clinging to the past. Londinium will lie waste until a strong king can rid it of the tribes of Gog and Magog. Something new will grow from the ruin of Britain.'

He led her from the grove.

## Herbert West: Reanimator - Part Three

### III. Six Shots by Midnight

It is uncommon to fire all six shots of a revolver with great suddenness when one would probably be sufficient, but many things in the life of Herbert West were uncommon. It is, for instance, not often that a young physician leaving college is obliged to conceal the principles which guide his selection of a home and office, yet that was the case with Herbert West. When he and I obtained our degrees at the medical school of Miskatonic University, and sought to relieve our poverty by setting up as general practitioners, we took great care not to say that we chose our house because it was fairly well isolated, and as near as possible to the potter's field.

Reticence such as this is seldom without a cause, nor indeed was ours; for our requirements were those resulting from a life-work distinctly unpopular. Outwardly we were doctors only, but beneath the surface were aims of far greater and more terrible moment—for the essence of Herbert West's existence was a quest amid black and forbidden realms of the unknown, in which he hoped to uncover the secret of life and restore to perpetual animation the graveyard's cold clay. Such a quest demands strange materials, among them fresh human bodies; and in order to keep supplied with these indispensable things one must live quietly and not far from a place of informal interment.

West and I had met in college, and I had been the only one to sympathise with his hideous experiments. Gradually I had come to be his inseparable assistant, and now that we were out of college we had to keep together. It was not easy to find a good opening for two doctors in company, but finally the influence of the university secured us a practice in Bolton—a factory town near Arkham, the seat of the college. The Bolton Worsted Mills are the largest in the Miskatonic Valley, and their polyglot employees are never popular as patients with the local physicians. We chose our house with the greatest care, seizing at last on a rather run-down cottage near the end of Pond Street; five numbers from the closest neighbour, and separated from the local potter's field by only a stretch of meadow land, bisected by a narrow neck of the rather dense forest which lies to the north. The distance was greater than we wished, but we could get no nearer house without going on the other side of the field, wholly out of the factory district. We were not much displeased, however, since there were no people between us and our sinister source of supplies. The walk was a trifle long, but we could haul our silent specimens undisturbed.

Our practice was surprisingly large from the very first—large enough to please most young doctors, and large enough to prove a bore and a burden to students whose real interest lay elsewhere. The mill-hands were of somewhat turbulent inclinations; and besides their many natural needs, their frequent clashes and stabbing affrays gave us plenty to do. But what actually absorbed our minds was the secret laboratory we had fitted up in the cellar—the laboratory with the long table under the electric lights, where in the small hours of the morning we often injected West's various solutions into the veins of the things we dragged from the potter's field. West was experimenting madly to find something which would start man's vital motions anew after they had been stopped by the thing we call death, but had encountered the most ghastly obstacles. The solution had to be differently compounded for different types—what would serve for guinea-pigs would not serve for human beings, and different human specimens required large modifications.

The bodies had to be exceedingly fresh, or the slight decomposition of brain tissue

would render perfect reanimation impossible. Indeed, the greatest problem was to get them fresh enough—West had had horrible experiences during his secret college researches with corpses of doubtful vintage. The results of partial or imperfect animation were much more hideous than were the total failures, and we both held fearsome recollections of such things. Ever since our first daemonic session in the deserted farmhouse on Meadow Hill in Arkham, we had felt a brooding menace; and West, though a calm, blond, blue-eyed scientific automaton in most respects, often confessed to a shuddering sensation of stealthy pursuit. He half felt that he was followed—a psychological delusion of shaken nerves, enhanced by the undeniably disturbing fact that at least one of our reanimated specimens was still alive—a frightful carnivorous thing in a padded cell at Sefton. Then there was another—our first—whose exact fate we had never learned.

We had fair luck with specimens in Bolton—much better than in Arkham. We had not been settled a week before we got an accident victim on the very night of burial, and made it open its eyes with an amazingly rational expression before the solution failed. It had lost an arm—if it had been a perfect body we might have succeeded better. Between then and the next January we secured three more; one total failure, one case of marked muscular motion, and one rather shivery thing—it rose of itself and uttered a sound. Then came a period when luck was poor; interments fell off, and those that did occur were of specimens either too diseased or too maimed for use. We kept track of all the deaths and their circumstances with systematic care.

One March night, however, we unexpectedly obtained a specimen which did not come from the potter's field. In Bolton the prevailing spirit of Puritanism had outlawed the sport of boxing—with the usual result. Surreptitious and ill-conducted bouts among the mill-workers were common, and occasionally professional talent of low grade was imported. This late winter night there had been such a match; evidently with disastrous results, since two timorous Poles had come to us with incoherently whispered entreaties to attend to a very secret and desperate case. We followed them to an abandoned barn, where the remnants of a crowd of frightened foreigners were watching a silent black form on the floor.

The match had been between Kid O'Brien—a lubberly and now quaking youth with a most un-Hibernian hooked nose—and Buck Robinson, "The Harlem Smoke". The negro had been knocked out, and a moment's examination shewed us that he would permanently remain so. He was a loathsome, gorilla-like thing, with abnormally long arms which I could not help calling fore legs, and a face that conjured up thoughts of unspeakable Congo secrets and tom-tom poundings under an eerie moon. The body must have looked even worse in life—but the world holds many ugly things. Fear was upon the whole pitiful crowd, for they did not know what the law would exact of them if the affair were not hushed up; and they were grateful when West, in spite of my involuntary shudders, offered to get rid of the thing quietly—for a purpose I knew too well.

There was bright moonlight over the snowless landscape, but we dressed the thing and carried it home between us through the deserted streets and meadows, as we had carried a similar thing one horrible night in Arkham. We approached the house from the field in the rear, took the specimen in the back door and down the cellar stairs, and prepared it for the usual experiment. Our fear of the police was absurdly great, though we had timed our trip to avoid the solitary patrolman of that section.

The result was wearily anticlimactic. Ghastly as our prize appeared, it was wholly unresponsive to every solution we injected in its black arm; solutions prepared from experience with white specimens only. So as the hour grew dangerously near to dawn,

we did as we had done with the others—dragged the thing across the meadows to the neck of the woods near the potter's field, and buried it there in the best sort of grave the frozen ground would furnish. The grave was not very deep, but fully as good as that of the previous specimen—the thing which had risen of itself and uttered a sound. In the light of our dark lanterns we carefully covered it with leaves and dead vines, fairly certain that the police would never find it in a forest so dim and dense.

The next day I was increasingly apprehensive about the police, for a patient brought rumours of a suspected fight and death. West had still another source of worry, for he had been called in the afternoon to a case which ended very threateningly. An Italian woman had become hysterical over her missing child—a lad of five who had strayed off early in the morning and failed to appear for dinner—and had developed symptoms highly alarming in view of an always weak heart. It was a very foolish hysteria, for the boy had often run away before; but Italian peasants are exceedingly superstitious, and this woman seemed as much harassed by omens as by facts. About seven o'clock in the evening she had died, and her frantic husband had made a frightful scene in his efforts to kill West, whom he wildly blamed for not saving her life. Friends had held him when he drew a stiletto, but West departed amidst his inhuman shrieks, curses, and oaths of vengeance. In his latest affliction the fellow seemed to have forgotten his child, who was still missing as the night advanced. There was some talk of searching the woods, but most of the family's friends were busy with the dead woman and the screaming man. Altogether, the nervous strain upon West must have been tremendous. Thoughts of the police and of the mad Italian both weighed heavily.

We retired about eleven, but I did not sleep well. Bolton had a surprisingly good police force for so small a town, and I could not help fearing the mess which would ensue if the affair of the night before were ever tracked down. It might mean the end of all our local work—and perhaps prison for both West and me. I did not like those rumours of a fight which were floating about. After the clock had struck three the moon shone in my eyes, but I turned over without rising to pull down the shade. Then came the steady rattling at the back door.

I lay still and somewhat dazed, but before long heard West's rap on my door. He was clad in dressing-gown and slippers, and had in his hands a revolver and an electric flashlight. From the revolver I knew that he was thinking more of the crazed Italian than of the police.

"We'd better both go," he whispered. "It wouldn't do not to answer it anyway, and it may be a patient—it would be like one of those fools to try the back door."

So we both went down the stairs on tiptoe, with a fear partly justified and partly that which comes only from the soul of the weird small hours. The rattling continued, growing somewhat louder. When we reached the door I cautiously unbolted it and threw it open, and as the moon streamed revealingly down on the form silhouetted there, West did a peculiar thing. Despite the obvious danger of attracting notice and bringing down on our heads the dreaded police investigation—a thing which after all was mercifully averted by the relative isolation of our cottage—my friend suddenly, excitedly, and unnecessarily emptied all six chambers of his revolver into the nocturnal visitor.

For that visitor was neither Italian nor policeman. Looming hideously against the spectral moon was a gigantic misshapen thing not to be imagined save in nightmares—a glassy-eyed, ink-black apparition nearly on all fours, covered with bits of mould, leaves, and vines, foul with caked blood, and having between its glistening teeth a snow-white, terrible, cylindrical object terminating in a tiny hand.

