THE CRYSTAL SKULL

& OTHER TALES OF TERROR

THE BALROG AWARD WINNING FANTASIST!

ARDATH MAYHAR

THE CRYSTAL SKULL
& Other Tales of the Terrifying and the Twisted

By
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INTRODUCTION

To look at me, you would think I am a sweet little old lady without a mean bone in her body. You would be dead wrong. I grew up on a farm in East Texas, dealing with the worst that nature, cows, varmints, and weather could hand out. Those didn't manage to kill me, so they made me strong and tough and mean as a wet wasp, when circumstances call for it. They also honed my imagination to a wicked edge. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) I look harmless. Perhaps if I looked to match the stories I write I might have been lynched early on, leaving some toe-curlers of tales untold. And it may be that when you read some of these stories you may justifiably turn to your companions and say, "Get a rope!"

Sometimes I shock myself!

Ardath Mayhar
2004

DOWN IN THE BOTTOMLANDS

(My Dad raised English setters – indeed, I grew up with a litter and pointed my first covey of quail at the age of two and a half. Mitzi, the setter bitch, backed my point, by the way, and Dad kicked up the birds just where I was pointing. Bird hunting was a part of my childhood, and this weird tale came ambling along one day from some dark thicket in my subconscious.)

I'd been warned that it would be rough going, but being young and hard-headed I put on my brand-new hunting boots, took my brand-new shotgun out of its case, and loaded my brand-new English setter into the car. We started off in high spirits, for I'd been told that partridge were thick as fleas in the Nichayac Bottoms.

That was where I wanted to hunt. The codgers who had warned me about the brush and the sawvines were short on wind and heavy on their feet. I could go where they couldn't, I knew. I was young and strong and eager, and they were just old poops.

I found my way fairly easily, but I ran out of road several miles before I got to the bottoms themselves. That didn't surprise me – in East Texas you can run out of roads and a lot of other things, when you get down into the boondocks. I've met old nesters, out on my rounds selling cattle feed, who still use kerosene lamps for light and a well and privy for conveniences.

A good few of those look as if they never have come out to see what the Twentieth Century looks like. But a lot of the old ones have died in the past few years. Now their gray board and batten houses sit in the woods and the abandoned fields, melting back into the red dirt among rampant berryvines.

I stopped my car at the end of the road, beside just such a house. Beyond was a cow-trail, leading off into brush. Old Rock, my setter, bounced out of the car as soon as I opened the door and began sniffing around the jungle that used to be a yard.

I loaded the gun and put on my hunting vest and jacket, feeling to make sure my extra ammunition and my lunch were in the proper

pockets. Then we set off along a path Rock found, which soon led us into a cornfield that was a perfect hell of broken-over stalks tied together with bindweed and more berryvines. I began to understand what the old fellows meant by rough going.

Beyond the field, we found cut-over woods. It was an obstacle course of discarded treetops and sawvines and young huckleberry and hawthorn. Rock was nosing around, his tail quivering the way it did when he smelled birds, but he didn't find a covey. It was perfect territory for quail, but we worked our way through it without raising anything but a big hawk.

By then I was sweating. It was a damp, cloudy December day, chilly at the beginning but warming up later. I took off my jacket and tied it around my waist. I could feel sweat around the band of my cap, and the walking didn't get any easier at all. The new boots were chewing up my feet by then, too.

Then Rock hit a pretty fair path, a nice foot-wide trail leading right through the tangled mess. A crow called overhead, and I looked up, trying to see him. By that time I was in a stand of young pine and couldn't, but I paused and listened. There wasn't another sound, after the caw died away. Not a chickadee or a cardinal ate seeds in the brush. No woods-noise could be heard, even the ones so regular and natural that you don't realize you're hearing them.

It was spooky. I whistled to Rock, and he crashed through the brush to my side. I was glad of the noise – all that quiet was really lonesome.

The deeper we went, the quieter that patch of woods got. If I hadn't hated the thought of going back through that cornfield, I might have turned around and gone home. But by then my feet were like hamburger.

They tried to tell me about wearing new boots for an all-day hunt, but I was too bull-headed to listen. Now I had to find a place to sit down and take them off, come what might.

So we went on, following the path. Rock pattered ahead of me, not even trying to sniff the undergrowth. I could see by the way his ears twitched that the silence was getting to him, too.

It was almost noon, by then. I was ready to stop and eat lunch and get those boots off, but you never in your life saw a place as likely to hold copperheads as that woods. There wasn't even a stump or a rock to perch on.

By the time I was ready to plump down in the middle of the path, we came around a clump of huckleberries and found ourselves looking at a house. You might not have called it that – shed, maybe. I've seen smokehouses that were solider.

The yard was scraped clean down to the sand, which told me that an old-timer lived there. Pock-marked slopjars sat along the porch, holding frost-killed plants. Whitewashed tires held what had been ferns, and big bunches of herbs hung from the porch roof.

Everything was neat as a pin, though almost ready to fall down. I stopped at the fence and called, for out here that's the safe and polite thing to do.

Something was cooking. Well, maybe that isn't the right term for it. I smelled something, which didn't make the mouth water but definitely was steaming. I felt certain my peanut butter sandwiches would be much better, and I hoped the owner of the shack wouldn't ask me to lunch.

A step inside made the porch roof wobble. The doorway was filled completely with a huge man. He stepped out onto the porch and looked down from the three-foot elevation. Some six and a half feet of his own put his head over a yard above my own. I felt like a pigmy.

"Howdy," he said. He waited for me to take up the conversation.

I stepped into the yard and said, "Hello. My name's Wilson Clevenger, and I've been bird hunting. Back there." I waved back toward the woods. "Would you mind if I sat on your steps to eat my lunch? It looked too snaky to risk it, back in the trees."

He moved onto the rickety steps. They sagged alarmingly beneath what must have been nearly three hundred pounds. "Full of copperheads," he agreed. "Not safe to sit. Mighty-nigh not safe to walk, either. Not without good new boots like yours. Sit. Water?"

"Thank you." I had a thermos of coffee, but to refuse hospitality, with these woodsy people, wasn't polite.

I ate my sandwiches and drank clear, cold water from his well, which tasted faintly of the cedar bucket holding it. I threw in a comment, now and again, and he gravely tossed back a monosyllable of reply.

As I finished, he sighed. "Been a long time since I been able to hunt. Gun's wore out. Dog died. I'm too heavy to get around. Used to love to hunt." He stared at me, his head tilted as if sizing me up.

"It's a young man's sport," I said. "My Dad used to go every year, but once his legs went out on him he couldn't do anything but give me advice."

He rose from his perch on the edge of the porch. "You got to have some of my brew," he said. "Been wanting company, and sure enough, the minute I get it finished, here you come. It don't taste near as good when you drink it by yourself."

I didn't want anything he had cooked up, particularly if it was moonshine, and most particularly if it was the stuff I could still smell. But it isn't polite (or safe) to refuse such an offer. Not from someone who would make two and a half of you. I smiled and reached for the cup he brought from the shack.

The taste surprised me. Not bad at all, it was even a bit alcoholic. It tasted sort of greenish, too, but spicy. Its heat made me sweat, and the breeze cooled me down considerably.

"Not bad," I said, handing the cup back.

He grinned like a jack-o'lantern. "Just the ticket to put you in shape for hunting. There's a covey down toward the river. Been keepin' an eye on them all fall. You just sit back while I put on my beat-up old boots, and I'll show you where to go."

The way my luck had been running, I couldn't turn down his offer. I called Rock and sat back, leaning against a porch post. My eyes seemed very heavy, and I yawned. I relaxed ...

When I opened my eyes again, the sun was just about to go down behind the woods to the west. Rock lay at my feet, looking tired to the bone. My gun leaned beside me, smelling like powder, as if it had been shot again and again. I shook my head and sat up.

"What in the name of ..."

My host stepped to the door. "You sure did have a spell of good luck," he said. "Thanks for the mess of birds ... you didn't have to do that. I was glad of your company. You was welcome to hunt my land."

I shook my head, and it felt as if all my brains had come loose and were jangling around like the works of a broken clock. As I moved, I felt weight in the bird pouches of my hunting vest. Reaching back, I felt feathers. A lot of feathers.

"How many did I get?" I asked. I couldn't recall ever rising from my seat on the step.

"An even dozen. I'll savor the four you gave me. It's been a long time since I et quail and gravy. You best be starting back, though. Gets hard to find the way in these woods at night. Wouldn't want you getting lost."

I rose hurriedly. My feet felt even worse than they had when I sat down with the gun and my dog. My legs ached. As I hefted the shotgun, I found my shoulder painful from the kick of the twelve-gauge. No way could I have slept through firing a shotgun!

Rock rose wearily, as I stood looking up at the elderly giant on the porch. "Enjoy your birds," I said, in as innocent a tone as I could manage.

The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened, as he grinned. A faint hint of the smell of that brew still lingered in the air, and I could detect its aftertaste in my mouth.

The sun eased under a layer of cloud, and the woods stood still as death around us. "Don't take too long in the woods," he said. "Things come out at night, you know."

I didn't want to know. Without another word, I turned on my painful feet and forced my bone-weary legs away from that falling-down cabin into the dusky wood. An owl hooted behind, as we crossed the pine woods and plunged through that hellish cornfield. We made it to the car just before full dark.

You can't speed much on a washboard dirt road. That's probably a good thing, for I was shaking too hard to steer competently.

I had it figured out, finally. He hadn't just borrowed my gun and my dog for his evening's hunt. He had borrowed me.

I doubted I'd ever hunt partridge again. Particularly not in the Nichayac Bottoms.

(East Texas Outdoorsman, Feb., 1989)

LONESOME CANEFIELD BLUES

(I have cut cane on many a hot summer day, back in the Forties when my family farmed in East Texas. A better place for an ambush never existed, and snakes abound, particularly mean-tempered water moccasins.)

"It's too hot to breathe," sighed Hibiscus, fanning hard with the ancient cardboard advertising piece that a long-dead snuff salesman had given her grandmother, a generation before. The wicker handle, which had been restapled many times to the faded fan, wiggled dangerously as she waved it.

"Old High-Biscuits found somethin' she can't handle?" her sister asked from her perch on the porch steps. "Thought you could do great things and catch wild cucumbers, since you finished that Yankee college. You don't mean this little old hot spell has got you down?"

Hibiscus sighed again, more deeply. She'd thought nothing could be worse than staying here, working in the canefields, probably marrying Jim, and never learning anything about the world. But now she had caught a glimpse of what existed beyond the fields. Tantalized by her reading and the trips she managed to make to New York and Boston and Philadelphia, she hungered for more.

Sunny, however, had never needed or wanted to see anything farther off than the county seat or more complicated than the Saturday night dances at the community center. Her sister was not the material from which scholars were made, and that was dandy. She was just where she wanted to be.

Yet Hibiscus, newly graduated Magna Cum Laude from a prestigious New England college to which she had earned a full four-year scholarship, found herself tied again to the tenant house and the rented farm. Her brand new wings were drying and shriveling, never having been allowed to unfold in the air of the academic world.

There came a groan from inside the house. She rose hurriedly and went into the kitchen, taking a bowl of cold water from the rusty

refrigerator, a cloth from the line strung from cupboard to corner. An air conditioner would have been such a mercy to her father.

She pushed the thought away and went to wash his sweaty face. The sheets were sweaty, too, and she changed them after she washed his wasted body, which was taking so very long to die.

"Pearlie?" His eyes were trying to focus on her in the dim light of his shuttered room. "Pearl?"

"Yes, Baby, yes," she crooned, though her mother had been dead for a decade.

"You just take your medicine and go back to sleep, Daddy. You'll feel better directly." She took the vial of painkiller Doctor Barry had given her and held it up to the light.

There were maybe three doses left. Would he give them some more or would she have to leave Sunny in charge of Daddy and go back to the fields to make enough to buy it?

She took the needle from the aluminum pan, shook the water from the barrel and put the thing together. By the time she gave her father the shot he was ashy-blue with the pain. He needed to be in the hospital, she knew, but there was no money, no insurance, and he wasn't old enough for government help.

She cleaned the needle again and put it to boil on the propane stove for precisely five minutes. The extra heat in the tiny kitchen almost made her feel faint.

The porch felt relatively cool when she returned to it. The sun was all but down. The shadows of the trees along the creek reached long fingers toward the paintless house. Sunny was sitting on the step, her blue-flowered cotton skirt swirling out around her creamy brown legs, giggling at some thought in her pretty, empty head.

"George says he goin' to marry me!" she said casually. Her slanted eyes sparkled as she looked sideways at her sister. "Ain't goin' to have him, no way, no how!" She giggled. "But he sure is mad. I told him Sat'day, and he didn't like it even a little bit."

Hibiscus, sitting again in the creaky swing, straightened, feeling a dim alarm. George was huge and jealous-hearted. When he got mean-crazy, he could be dangerous.

She had known, when Sunny kept leading him on, that the girl was asking for trouble, but that was Sunny's problem, now. She had all she could handle with Daddy.

Sweat trickled down her back and her arms, beneath her breasts. The heat, instead of declining, seemed to be intensifying. It was enough to drive you crazy, without worrying about anything else.

She listened ... Daddy's breathing was quiet and even, his pain submerged in a tide of painkiller. Yet, beyond that familiar sound, there was another. Someone was walking on the grass outside the fence. She rose and went into the house. She was in no mood to make small talk with anybody. Not tonight.

The sound of the cane-knife hacking into flesh shocked her still. There couldn't be any mistake. She'd heard it once before, when she was ten and Big Eddie had gone crazy and killed his wife right there in the field where the family had been working. Hibiscus grabbed the hog-killing knife from its rack and moved toward the porch.

Sunny was on the porch. Hibiscus felt her panic ease ... what could she have heard? Then she saw a bare foot, its pale sole upward, beyond the last step. She was beside Sunny in one convulsive leap.

The cotton dress was now patterned with scarlet poppies among the pale blue cornflowers.

She heard the sound again, this time from inside the house. From the bedroom.

"Daddy!" she shrieked. She was answered by a laugh, quiet and amused. It was more frightening than anything she could recall since that terrible summer when she was ten and Big Eddie killed his wife.

Without pausing, she ran as hard as she could toward the canefield beyond the creek. Once inside the eight-foot barrier of stalks and knife-edged leaves, she might be able to elude any pursuer.

The hog knife was no match for a cane knife in length and breadth, not to mention lacking the wicked hook on the leading edge. Still, it was better than nothing.

She cleared the creek in one leap, startling a spatter of frogs into the water, protesting and yelping. A water moccasin slid away before her

pounding feet. She shivered, remembering how many snakes usually hunted the canefields at night.

The field came almost down to the line of trees along the creek. She tore into the thick growth, and in three strides her skin was a network of tiny cuts from the leaves.

Her hands went up to shield her eyes, and she looked down past her palms to the ground where her feet must land. To step on a moccasin now was to suffer a worse death than even George could inflict.

She had cut cane in this field all her life. She knew every hummock, every hollow. She knew the place on the far edge where the crop always grew so thickly that it was almost impossible to find room to swing a cane-knife to cut the stalks. If she could wriggle into that jungle of plants, deep in where you couldn't walk and could hardly crawl, she might escape George's notice.

She was all but sliced to ribbons by the time she crossed the field. Her dress hung in tatters around her, and her arms and legs streamed blood from the cuts and scratches. She dropped into a panting heap at the place where the cane grew too heavy to penetrate.

Lying on her side, she slipped between two thick stools of canestalks. Beyond that were more and still more.

She was covered with mud and sweat and blood and green stains from the weeds by the time she thought she'd gone deep enough to escape discovery. Then she had time to think, for the first time since she heard that terrible whack from the porch.

She was shaking, her teeth chattering, but she was also so hot she felt she might burst. There was no breeze almost no air – down at the roots of the cane. Then she understood what shook her. Fury, not fear or cold, had set her to shivering.

She had lost, in those few moments, her entire family. She suffered no grief for her father – George's knife had saved him many weeks of suffering. But Sunny was young and healthy and full of life. Dumb, yes, but if that were a hanging offense almost everybody would be lined up at the gallows.

She gripped the wood handle of the knife, its wicked curve satisfying something deep inside her. Her mother used to rip open a

hog's belly as easy as cutting butter with that thing. If she could get within reach – but George's arms were twice the length of hers. The cane knife added a good yard or so to that. She would never get close enough.

Something slithered behind her in the litter of dropped cane leaves. She went still, her shaking forgotten. A moccasin didn't have to get within arm's reach of anyone. He stayed down low, where your feet would step, and if you didn't watch you could step right onto one of the stinking creatures.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She was educated, heir to the entire tradition of western culture. She need not panic, now that she was hidden. She had time to think and to plan, even if George did intend to kill the witness to his double murder.

She had read many things outside the normal course of study. She had read the works of Hawking, who was taking physics outside the realm of normal reality. Studies of the brain, she remembered, hinted at tremendous possibilities.

And her own people knew that you could make things happen, if you willed it strongly enough and had the stomach for it.

Hibiscus smiled, feeling the muscles of her cheeks tense in a grimace. Even as she relaxed, she heard the noisy progress of someone in the canefield, crunching and rustling and stomping and cursing.

Moving smoothly over the cane roots and around the stools, she slithered to more open ground. Rustles in the weeds marked the moccasins fleeing her progress, but she paid them no heed.

She rose to her full height with her head up and her shoulders back. The knife in her hand was almost invisible in the twilight.

She moved toward the source of the sounds, compelled by something outside herself, as well as a surge of will from within. Her brain throbbed in her skull, forming a vision that she was bringing into focus.

Her bare foot came down on a snake, and she felt the electric tension of the muscle rings as the serpent fled from beneath her

weight. It didn't coil, and it didn't bite, for she was now the snake's sister.

George heard her movements. He paused and called, "Woman! You come out here and talk to me. I won't hurt you, but you better come out." He chuckled quietly, and she chuckled, too, knowing that he thought he had deceived her.

Now it was almost dark. The palest glimmer of a moon rode above the western trees, giving just enough illumination to allow her to see his eyes glinting and his white teeth grinning amid the cane.

"Why, here you come, Honey. That's a good gal. Right to me ... yes, Ma'am!"

She felt his arm rise, saw in her inner vision the cane knife poised to slice through her. But she came more swiftly than he dreamed she would, and the hog knife slid under his ribcage. She jerked it up, just as she had seen her mother do so many times.

Something warm covered her hands. The cane-knife fell through the leaves, swishing down until it thudded into the damp soil. George stood stiff, his shape a blot of blackness against the darkness of the cane. Then he toppled, face down, amid the whispering leaves.

"George," she said softly. "George?"

There was, of course, no answer. She turned toward the house, wiping her sticky hands on her skirt. After a bit, she began, very quietly, to laugh.

(Published "New Mystery," Summer 1991)

COON HUNT, WITH DISTRACTIONS

(My brother was a coon hunter, and though I never engaged in that activity, I helped him skin many a coon. The sound of a coon dog trailing a big boar coon through the thickets was wildly exciting, and I often wondered what would happen if he found himself pursuing a bear ... or worse.)

The hound gave a yip and took off through the moonlight. I sighed and sat under a hollow sweetgum tree and listened to Old Rupe go hollering through the thickets. That was no way to coon-hunt, really, but I had nobody to go with. There wasn't even another dog to run with Rupe.

But the fall nights were just too fine to spend indoors, no matter what Becky-Sue thought about it. Women just do not understand coon hunting.

Rupe was a fine dog, old of course, but that just meant he made up in smart what he lacked in stamina. He might not be able to run clean out of the county and keep up with a young pack, any more, but let him tangle with a big old boar coon and you'd see the fur fly.

I could hear him, his voice belling clean and sure, as he trailed. The hills flow low and rounded between the river and the new freeway off to the west of my little farm, and sound carries for miles, the way the woods lie. I'd be able to hear when he treed the coon, and I was feeling just vinegary enough to go and smoke the animal out, if it took me all night. The moon was full, and I felt fit for anything.

Almost anything.

It was coming up on midnight when Rupe's voice changed. Instead of the regular "Here I am and I'm going this way" peals, he sounded shrill. Almost frightened. Now his voice was telling me to come quick ... he had hold of something he couldn't figure out what to do with.

I stood and shook the stiffness out, and then I headed toward the river. Rupe was still yelling for me to come, and all my years of schoolteaching hadn't made me as slow as you would think. I did a lot

of hunting and fishing. It made Becky-Sue furious, but I'd left teaching because I refused to spend my weekends in a suit and tie, toadying to trustees.

That was why I left the job and came back to the farm. It took Becky-Sue six months to decide that she'd rather come with me than stay there in town all by herself, teaching. She'd never admit it, but she had a bellyful of teaching, too. She's no idiot, and that seems to be what they want, nowadays.

Now I was running through the woods as if I was still twenty-five, instead of a good ten years older. I did my best, though, and the faster I ran, the harder Rupe yelled. I high-tailed it down the animal tracks and through the thickets as if it was a jogging trail, which it wasn't. Not by a long shot.

I hadn't a gun – never carried one on my coon hunts – and as I ran I wondered if he'd found a big old granddaddy coon that was too big and smart for him to handle. I kept watch for a stout hickory sapling, because I knew there was no way I could lick one if Rupe couldn't. Getting mauled by a coon is no joke – they can tear you to flinders. Not to mention what they can do to a dog.

I cut through a pine thicket toward the sound of Rupe's voice. Just beyond it was a tangle of huckleberry, and I got hung up in that, which slowed me down. By then Rupe was whimpering and yelping and crying and yipping by turns. I couldn't figure out what in tunket he had got himself involved with. If it had been a skunk, I'd have smelled it by now, I was sure, because I was getting pretty close.

I left part of my sweater and a good chunk of my religion in the bushes, but at last I was out and found a good clear trail that somebody's cows used to go down to the river to drink. Right ahead was Rupe, and he made enough noise for a whole pack of coon hounds.

I slowed to a walk and went softly the last few yards. My Dad saw the last bear that was in these woods, I thought, but I didn't want to take a chance that they'd made a comeback. And then I smelled something.

You take rotten. That can be nasty. Skunk is awful, but it's a clean smell, sort of, like burnt coffee. Spoiled canned goods can turn your stomach. Put all those stinks together, and add a pinch of something that made your hackles rise, and you'd have the stink I was smelling.

I was too far under the cover of the woods for the moon to do much good. My hand-generated flash was in my sweater pocket, and I dug it out and began pumping the handle. That bluish light pulsed into the black shadows, making the dust of the path shine like snow.

Rupe was a dark blot on that pale track. I swept the flickering beam up the path, toward the spot where Rupe was staring. It touched a dark bulk that was no bush.

That thing was BIG. Not even a bear would have been that size. A pair of eyes glinted red in the light, as I stood, stunned. Then the thing turned and took off up the path, ambling along as if it wasn't a bit afraid of me. That was when I saw that it wasn't nearly as hairy as a bear. Patches of skin showed between taggles of scroungy fur.

It's a good thing it left, for I couldn't stir. I stood there for several minutes, squeezing the flash to keep from being in the dark, but I wasn't able to stir a foot. Rupe brought me to when he started shivering against my leg. He had more sense than to chase anything like that.

He licked my hand, and that brought me to. Rupe whimpered and looked off into the brush. Then he looked at me again, into the brush again ... when he looked at me again I could see impatience in his eyes.

I wasn't really anxious to find anything else that night, and I certainly didn't want anything to find me. But I knew Rupe. He knew something was in that patch of sawvines, and he wouldn't quit fussing until I found what it was.

I refused to go into any brush patch armed with a flashlight. I hunted around and found that sapling I needed, broke the top off across my knee, and then, armed with a very iffy weapon, I started into the dark tangle of stickers and brush.

First there was the glint of metal under my light. It resolved itself into a gun barrel – a curved gun barrel. There was a whitish blur

behind it, and when I turned my light on it the most god-awful face I ever saw stared back at me from dead eyes. I'll have nightmares about that forever.

There was worse. That face was split half in two, down the middle. I looked at the gun barrel. That had done the job, and it was very, very messy. Whoever had used it had twisted that gun into a pretzel and flung it down beside his victim and left. Or had he? I remembered the size of the creature I had met on the path.

I backed out of the patch, my shoulderblades feeling a cold spot right in the middle. I shook all over, thinking of what might come back down that trail and be waiting for me. But the path was clear, except for the dark dabs of cow manure.

Rupe was shaking so hard against my legs that I had a hard time standing. It felt as if a hundred miles lay between me and any human help. The slim pulse of light from my flash didn't comfort me at all.

When I was a boy, I knew that country like my own barnyard. Things had changed a lot, since I was a boy: Farms had been sold and resold; families had moved away and left empty houses and fields lying fallow. There was a house, I knew, toward the freeway, but that would have meant going in the same direction as that Whatever. No way!

My home was five miles or so to the south, and I didn't want to go flying through those thickets again. My best chance was to follow the river downstream, for there was a big automated dairy there. It would have a phone and probably a crew with a man in charge. I hoped he owned a shotgun.

It was almost as light as day, once I reached the path along the river. The moon was just past the zenith, and the rocks in the streambed sparkled amid a glimmer of ripples. I felt better there, and Rupe did, too. We went down faster than I'd have dared in full summer, when the water moccasins were out. We fairly flew along.

After a bit, something that had been nagging me worked up to the top of my mind. The air held a taint of that smell I'd found on the path in the woods. It was growing steadily stronger. I stopped for a minute, and there came a rustle in the woods. It halted almost as

quickly as I did. I moved again and stepped to clear a muddy patch in the trail. Then I froze.

At the edge of the mud, etched clearly in shadow by the moonlight, was a footprint. Half again as big as mine, bare, with a strange sort of mark where the toes had gripped the ground like fingers. A gorilla, I thought, might make a mark like that.

There was another sound, and my heart raced for a moment. Then I relaxed, for it was my own breath, whistling in my throat. I forced myself to settle down. We were being tracked, off in the woods, by one or more of the things I had seen. Rupe knew it, too. He was snarling so deep in his throat that it was almost inaudible.

I had no weapon but the sapling. I was trapped against the river, for I felt certain the thing could swim faster than I could; I could think of only one move to make. I had to go on downstream, fast enough to keep ahead, not so fast the things would begin chasing me.

Then I looked down at Rupe. I've said he was smart, but that leaves a lot unstated. He was well-nigh human, when it came to understanding. On the days when Becky-Sue got up on the wrong side of the bed, he was a model dog, and I took my cue from him. For days before I knew it myself, he knew when I was going hunting.

I could tell him anything reasonable, and if he felt like doing it, he would. But this was going to be the most complicated thing I had ever tried to get across to him.

I waited until we hit a wide patch of beach, curving out into a bend of the stream. I followed it out until we were a good thirty yards from the edge of the trees. Then I paused and knelt, fiddling with a bootlace, while I said to the hound, "Go downriver, Rupe. Go find a man. Find a man, boy! Bring him!"

I was going to be right behind him, if I was let. I figured the critters would let him go – he wasn't as big as I was and he was a hell of a lot faster. His scraggly tail waved back and forth; his tongue lolloped out in a quick grin, and he was gone.

Once he was out of sight, I felt lonelier than I ever had before in my life. Now there was nothing but me and the thing – or things – in the

woods. Even Rupe's shivering against my knee had reassured me that there was one thing in the world more scared than I was.

I moved onward, my pace deliberate. When I hurried, my unseen companion edged closer through the underbrush, the deep whoosh of its breath audible. When I went too slowly, I could see the brush rippling as it pushed through, and that didn't comfort me a bit.

It seemed like hours that we went down the path, the moon seeming to be glued in the same spot in the sky. Time seemed not to be passing as fast for that moon as it was for me. Then, far ahead, I heard a sound – a dog's high-pitched bark. Rupe. The blast of a shotgun followed on the heels of that cry, and I could hear a hubbub. I lit out running as hard as I could, forgetting the stalker in the woods.

That thing was fast! It was after me instantly, but sheer panic gave me more speed than ever before. I stayed ahead of it around two bends. Then I saw light ahead – the glare of lanterns and the white flare of flashlights. A speeding shape bulleted into me, knocking me flat just in time for a load of buckshot to zing over me.

There was a startled grunt, off in the brush, and I rolled clear of the path to let a mess of snarling Dobermans go tearing past. There was a terrific crashing and growling in the woods, and I figured that those devils would take the thing down, if anything could.

Then there was a shriek you wouldn't believe could come out of a dog, and the whole pack went screaming back the way they came. They almost ran down the burly fellow leading the men with the lights and guns.

"What in the blue-toenailed hell is going on?" he yelled.

I rose up almost under his feet, with old Rupe tying himself in knots around my legs. "That thing's been following us through the woods. Your dogs tangled with it. There's a dead man upriver, if I can find him again, and if I can't Rupe can. I saw what killed him, I think. That thing, or one just like it." I shivered hard.

The men had gathered around me, now, their faces grim.

"There it stood in the middle of the path, seven feet tall if it was an inch. Face on it like nothing you ever saw, hair all over with skin showing through. It walked away as if I wasn't worth bothering with.

And then Rupe showed me the corpse. Its head was split open with its own gun.

"The thing followed us, and I sent Rupe ahead to get help." I was chattering too much, and my teeth were beginning to join in, but the big man put his hand on my shoulder.

"Damndest dog I ever did see," he said. "We were getting ready to go to bed, when that hound ran against the door like he was going to bust right in. Gage looked out and give him a cussing and let off a round of shot, but that didn't faze him. He set in the yard and raised Cain till I got the gun and went out to shoot him. He come right up to me and grabbed my pants leg and tried to haul me off upriver.

"I don't claim to be awful bright, but I know a good dog when I see it, and this 'un was telling me something just as plain as he could, so I called out the crew and turned the dogs loose, and here we come. But what in tarnation could scare those devils?"

"Believe me, you don't want to find out. Just come with me and help me find that body. I don't know if the thing will come back and eat it or bury it or haul it off, but we might hurry, just the same."

The trip upriver was far more cheerful than the one down had been. Hal Bartley, the big foreman of the dairy, knew that river like the fisherman he was. He knew just the cow trail that ran down to the water. And once we found that, the rest was only very messy details.

I got home with the dawn. Becky-Sue was in the kitchen, listening to the coffeepot bubbling and thinking up mean things to say to me when I came up the path through the back yard. But I fooled her. The foreman sent me home in a pickup, and Gage let me off at my front gate.

I staggered up the flagged walk, followed by Rupe, who was even more beat than I was. I let the front screen bang shut, and Becky-Sue was out of the kitchen and up the hall in half a shake, her checkered shirt-tail popping in the breeze.

She halted in the door, her gaze going from Rupe to me and back again. "What happened to you two?" she asked.

I told her, while she dished up bacon and flapjacks and Rupe gobbled a bowl of oatmeal (his favorite dish).

"You mean to tell me that there is a monster like that wandering down there in the woods?" she asked.

"More than one, I think. Two, I feel sure, stalked us down the river path."

"And who was the dead man?" She was busy wiping down the stovetop.

"Bartley knew him. He was part-time help at the dairy, and he'd gone squirrel hunting. His gun had been fired, but squirrel shot couldn't possibly have stopped that thing. He would have been better of if he'd been like me with not even a stick that looked like a gun. I suspect those things have gotten wary of firearms, if they've met many hunters in the woods."

I finished my coffee and looked up at her. "I've just about lost my taste for coon hunting. When Rupe and I get an itch to run in the woods, we're going to do it in the daytime. And not downriver. Okay?"

She grinned. "In one month, you'll both be down there hunting that whatchamacallit," she said. There wasn't a trace of doubt in her tone. "I've already seen you cutting your eyes around toward the gun rack, wondering if the thirty-ought-six will stop it. If you score the slugs across the ends of the lead to make them spread on impact, they just might. But those things have a right to live, too, Bruce Williams. You think about that, before you go hunting them."

I looked down at my plate. Becky-Sue may not appreciate coon hunting, but she has me down cold. She was right. I was already thinking about going after the thing that had scared me so.

I listened close to the radio and the TV news for a few days, while the sheriff's men combed the woods around the spot where the body was found. They came up with some mighty strange tracks, but that was all.

They also came and questioned me more than once, but anybody looking at what was done to that gun, not to mention the skull of the dead man, could see that a middle-aged ex-schoolteacher simply couldn't have done either one, even if he'd had a motive, which I hadn't.

After a while things calmed down and no more investigators roamed around in the woods. That was when I took Becky-Sue's advice and scored some rounds across the ends of the slugs and set off with Rupe again.

By now the moon was dark, and I took with me a big handlight we used around the farm. It weighed a ton, but it was mighty bright and the battery lasted for a lot of hours without running out of juice.

This wood wasn't the clean place I knew back when I was a boy. Once I got off our land and into the cutover forest, it was a mad tangle of vines and saplings; dead tops left by loggers were grown up with persimmon sprouts, and it held hidden traps where the log trucks got stuck, winched out, and left deep holes that later weeds and brush grew over and covered up.

I could have gone the way I went before, of course, but I reckoned that the critter I'd seen wasn't going to be within miles of all the activity there had been there. I put myself in his place and decided I would be up in the logging company plantation, which was well grown but not ready to cut. It was the nearest good cover for miles.

I talked it over with Rupe, and while he looked pretty doubtful when I got through to him what I wanted, he set off, his tail low and his ears looking droopy. I followed him. Animals know things that people have forgotten, and he went pretty straight toward the place I'd picked.

I didn't go in the dark, did I mention that? I might be out after sundown, which is why I took the light, but I wasn't such a fool that I'd hunt one of those monsters by night. No, I intended to check out tracks and trails for footprints, and once I located those I had my plans pretty well made.

Rupe was a master hand at finding what he looked for, and before full dark he'd sniffed out a deer trail and started giving his "Here it is, why don't you come ahead and look at it?" yelp.

There were those oversized prints, all right: two sets, one smaller than the other. There was even the barest hint of overpowering stink left on the bushes alongside the trail. We were in the right place, and it was just on the edge of getting very dark indeed.

I cast around to find one of the big hardwoods they sometimes left among the pines, and sure enough there was a hickory tree at the fenceline, its heavy branches black against the last light in the sky and bending over the path where the tracks appeared. I hitched my rifle around my shoulder, tucked the torch in my pack, and went up it, groaning all the way. The climbing you do so easily at ten is a lot harder in middle age, believe me.

Then I waited. Rupe was settled into a clump of huckleberry off to one side of the path, and I knew he'd let me know the minute anything walked up the trail, so I let myself rest, even doze a bit, once I had the spotlight hitched to a branch above my head and the rifle laid along the limb on which I was sitting, my back to the heavy trunk of the tree.

I woke when my head nodded forward. The pines rustled in a light breeze, but otherwise the night was quiet. An owl, way over toward the creek, gave a quavering cry, and a killdeer whimpered sadly as it flew.

Then Rupe gave a growl, just barely loud enough for me to hear. I sat and hefted the rifle. My left hand was on the button of the light, and when Rupe gave his "Here they come!" bark, I pushed it down and looked along the path.

They were almost just below me, staring up toward the brilliant light as if it blinded them, freezing them in place. I had the rifle at my shoulder before I realized what I was seeing.

The big one was ugly, true, but those eyes, shining like a dog's in the beam, seemed somehow puzzled and anxious. Its arm was around the shoulders of the smaller one, and I took a good look at it, too. Damn! It was just a kid, its hair almost downy compared to that of its ... father? Those eyes shone silver, and the awkward shape shrank against the other's side as if for protection.

All of a sudden it hit me. We humans had cut out the woods for miles all around the river. Who knows how many centuries these creatures had lived in the deep thickets, never being forced out where people would see them or pose a danger to them? And now that we had pushed them out of their natural place, we wanted to shoot them.

That man they killed over by the river had been, I was willing to bet, aiming to shoot the one that wrapped his gun around his head. Self defense has always seemed to me to be the only rational reason for killing anything, now that we don't have to hunt for food. By that measure Old Ugly, there, had been perfectly justified in what he'd done.

I looked down at the gun in my hands. They weren't any danger for me. I sure as hell didn't want to eat them. Why was I here in a tree like some sort of silly owl, intending to kill something that belonged here far more than I did?

I clicked off the light. Rupe gave an inquiring snuffle, but I didn't hear anything at all. I gave them five minutes to move before I lit the torch again. The path was empty except for Rupe, who was looking disgusted and staring up at me, his eyes red in the beam.

I stayed in that tree all night. I wasn't any threat to the Whatchamacallits any longer, but they didn't know that, and I did have a gun. It was obvious that they knew what guns could do, and I didn't want any accidents like the one that had killed that dairy hand.

When first light touched the treetops to the east, I went down, stiff and sore and wondering what sort of madness had put me up there in the first place. Rupe came out of his nest in the bushes and wagged alongside as I headed for home.

I wondered what Becky-Sue would say when we came home with our story. Then I grinned into the dark woods of my own place, which were uncut, except for carefully chosen firewood, for generations. They might visit me here, sometime, wanting real forest instead of cutover crap.

Whistling, I went toward the lane leading home, Rupe dancing along ahead of me as if he was a young dog again. We both felt better, I think, than we had for days.

Becky-Sue would be proud of us.

(Weirdbook, Autumn, 1997)

THE CRYSTAL SKULL

(I have always been fascinated by those crystal skulls found in Central America early in the last century. This story just formed around the more precisely accurate of the two artifacts, a beautiful piece of work of unknown use [I do not entirely accept anthropologists' speculations.])

The old man shook his head and gulped his beer. When he had wiped his mouth on his sleeve, he stared into Cartray's eyes intently. "It's a miserable-ugly thing for sure, grinning and shining up there at the top o' the stair. Not one of the young 'uns of my crew will clean there. Old as I be, I've got to polish that long flight of marble, under those creepy eyes. There's not a one who's not like to wet his pants at night, there."

Cartray leaned forward and filled the janitor's glass again. The bartender glanced to make certain they were not running short, but Cartray nodded him away.

"Amazing!" His tone was filled with awe. "I used to visit the museum, when I was younger, but they hadn't such a thing, then. Doctor Winship must have done wonders for the pre-Columbian collection."

"That place is crammed to the walls with frowning stone critters, hunkered onto their haunches with their arms folded over their bellies. Not a pretty crew! But I can put up with 'em. It's that skull makes my nights too long for comfort." Nat sighed gustily and took another pull.

"I certainly would like to see it." Cartray's tone was wistful to a carefully calculated degree. "But I have been visiting my mother, and she wants me there as much as possible. Tomorrow I leave for New York ... and I never got to see the skull!"

Old Nat's eyes brightened with a predatory gleam. "I be due at work in an hour," he said. "And I'm supervisor. I have the keys on my ring, all except those the specialists see to. If it be worth my while, I could give ye a private peep."

Cartray managed to look surprised. "I hadn't thought it was possible!" he lied. "But yes ... I could pay a bit say fifty? – for a chance to see the thing. The one in Europe isn't nearly so fine or so lifelike."

Nat nodded, while folding the proffered twenties and ten into his greasy wallet. "Best I get on. It's almost time to open up for the crew. You be at the back door in forty-five minutes, and I'll pop you in, neat and quiet, before anybody comes. You can slip away while they work their way up."

So it was that Cartray found himself standing in the chill of a New England fall evening, waiting for Nat to make his appearance. The museum staff had been gone for an hour, and now it stood dark, except for the night light gleaming through the pebbled glass of the door.

A touch at his elbow brought him around. Nat stood there, a conspiratorial expression on his bleak face. "Nip in, cozy as a cat," he whispered. "It's at the top of the stair, and once you're there nobody but me'll come nigh you. T'others hate it like poison."

Cartray smiled. "I'll slip up and take a look. I might even glance around to see what else is new, but I'll be gone without any trouble. Thank you."

"Might be ... as you'll be there anyway ... you'll do me a favor?" The creaky voice was hesitant.

"Of course."

"There's a bit of black velvet inside the pedestal. If you'd put it over the skull for me, I'd be grateful. I mislike it most as much as the younkers do, if truth be known. I cover it up before I clean the stair, and in the morning the staff take it off. It would be a kindness."

"Think nothing of it. I am glad to help." Cartray's heart was leaping. Opportunity was playing into his hands, as if by preordination. He hurried away along the echoing corridor, recalling his investigations about the place. He had never been there, of course, but he had studied it closely, and he thought he could find his way about the old-fashioned building. The crystal skull had drawn him as surely as metal to magnet.

The front stair was bathed in light that came from above. As he started up it, he looked up at the severe black pedestal at the top ... and he paused, frozen in place by the enigmatic crystalline gaze that met his own.

"God!" he breathed. Two agonizingly bright points of light almost concealed the crystal of the skull as they glared through the prisms in the eyesockets. Light, coming from a concealed fixture behind the thing, penetrated the crystal, refracting compellingly. The effect was ghastly, and yet, in a frightening way, knowing.

He felt that some consciousness looked out, penetrating his thoughts as if his own head were as transparent as the skull. He shook his head and laughed. That effect was intentional, but he couldn't blame the 'younkers' for being nervous on the stair.

He went on up and approached the pedestal. The skull was perfect, polished, anatomically accurate. The other one he had seen was insignificant beside it. He reached to touch it. It was cold ... colder than the air, and his finger tingled.

But it was no time to become fanciful. He glanced about, seeking something roughly shaped like the skull. A pottery jar was too large. One of the lumpy figures was too square. But there was a rounded vessel shaped enough like the skull to give the right impression, once it was covered. He set it on the floor beside the pedestal.

The skull was heavier than he would have thought. Solid rock crystal – it made sense. He placed it carefully in the velvet bag from his overcoat pocket. The vessel, once beneath the black cloth, looked completely convincing. Nat would never know, until it was too late, that fifty dollars had been entirely too small a bribe.

Even then, he could never reveal that he had any idea what had happened. His job would be forfeit at once. And even if he should tell, it had been years since Cartray had been traceable. There was nothing to link his present identity with the town ... only the skull had brought him, and he had an eager buyer waiting.

He lifted the bag and listened. There was a slight stir from downstairs, as the crew moved about. He nodded and tucked the bundle under his arm.

His soft-soled shoes made no sound on the stair. A peep down the corridor revealed nobody, and though he could hear clinkings and swishings, there was no one to dispute the way with him as he fled into the frosty night.

He adjusted the bag holding the skull, making sure that if anyone passed and noticed him they would see only something dark beneath his arm. Then he moved rapidly, though not suspiciously so, the six blocks to his hotel. The desk clerk did not look up as he handed him the key. Cartray gained his room without a single glance of curiosity following him.

He turned on the lamp, after locking the door. Then he slid his prize from the bag. There was a sardonic glint as the light caught the prismed eyes, but he set it on his dressing table and admired it. It was an incredible piece of work, and no person now living had been found capable of reproducing it. He hated to cover it, but that was necessary. It was too dangerous to keep it, uncovered, in his room.

He ordered supper and ate it; he tried to read, but his excitement was too much for concentration. This was his greatest coup, not because of any great danger but because of his personal fascination with the thing. At last he closed his book and went to bed. He could sleep anywhere, under any conditions.

He craved cold fresh air, but the window was sealed shut. He made do with opening the draperies before getting into bed. Light from the street made a dark bulk of the velvet as he drifted into sleep.

He woke fully, with a jerk. Moonlight filled the room, defeating even the flicker of the neon across the street. Something ... something had waked him, rousing his old instincts that had safeguarded him through jungles and battlefields.

The door was still closed. He turned his gaze toward the dressing table. "What?" he gasped.

The skull was shining through the enveloping bag as if the tough velvet were transparent. Two brilliant points of light stared at him, freezing him into place.

A low-pitched voice vibrated the bed and the room. The pitch rumbled deeply, and the words – he recognized the words! He had heard similar ones in Yucatan, on the trail of the skull, years before.

"U tem kam uuch noocal Ka-tray..." the sound of his name shook him. His studies of the Maya language began to surface, however, and he began to understand.

He struggled, but he couldn't move. As the voice chanted, the skull gleamed brighter, and a terrible weight began to press against his chest, thrusting him down against the mattress.

Even then his neck was cocked up, so that his eyes could remain fixed on the skull, which now was completely visible through the bag.

He felt as if he were suffocating. He gasped, as his lungs were compressed by the invisible, intolerable weight that grew worse every second. But the voice was still chanting ... something about a crushed man ... about an altar ... his ribs began to crack.

"Help!" he gasped, but it came out as a sigh. There was no air left for audible sound. He raised his hands, at last, trying to find and push away the weight that was smashing his ribs, but they had no strength. At last they fell back, numbed and chilled.

Cartray felt his eyeballs bulging. Blood – there was blood on his lips. He knew that his life was seeping out of him, as the pressure increased inexorably.

He turned his gaze back to the skull, his lips pleading wordlessly. Pain filled him, and fear, and the growing nearness of death.

The prisms glowed with a cold fire, mocking and aloof. Behind the deliberate intonations of the Maya chant, there was the faintest possible hint of laughter.

ARTIFACT RECOVERED

Man found dead

The body of Raymond Cartray, 45, of Petaluma, California, was found this morning at seven a.m. in a room in the Ambassador Hotel. The death was listed by local police as possibly the result of foul play, though the room was locked tightly from within. Among papers

found in the possession of the dead man were a passport in the name of Donald Singleton, though the photograph was that of the deceased.

Police are asking that anyone recognizing this photograph contact them at once. The presence of the crystal skull stolen last night from the Dunstan Museum may indicate that a group of thieves specializing in stolen antiquities might be at work in this area. Any lead will be helpful.

Further investigation is being pursued in this case, and there are no suspects in custody as yet.

(Eldritch Tales, 1990)

THE EIGHT WHO HATED

(My Dad grew up in Mississippi. His description of a lynching he witnessed when he was a child haunted him (and me) for almost a century afterward. The effect it must have had on the family of the man lynched can only be imagined.)

In the dimness of the cabin, her voice droned the old story, every word unchanged from telling to telling. The children sat listening, their gray and brown and green eyes gleaming in the lamplight, their small white teeth showing between parted lips.

"The rope went tight. Then it started to jerk ... your Daddy was kicking, and I knew when he died. He wet his pants. They let him hang there all night, all alone. Wouldn't let me near him to cut him down. Come dawn, the seven of 'em took off the white sheets and hoods and left.

"Then the real folks came out of their houses and cut him down. You all were too little to help dig his grave, but every one of those people took turns and did it. Dick had done somethin' for every one of 'em, at one time or another, and they hadn't forgot it. They knew why he was killed, too; our land was where the railroad wanted to go."

Sarah looked across the table at those seven faces flickering in the lamplight. Not small, scared faces, now, but those of men and women. Even young Scat was no longer a child. Every face was set in the lines she had molded: the reflection of her own hatred stared out at her from those seven sets of eyes.

She took up the well-worn tale again. "Most expected me to run away from this place, to be scared to stay after they murdered your Daddy. But we had our own piece of ground, our house, the cows and the mules. The railroad went another way, but I hung on here. No way was I goin' to take you young'uns to some strange place where we hadn't anything at all. No way was I goin' to let the folks who wanted your Daddy's land get their hands on it. Besides, I had the Plan."

There was a concerted sigh. "The plan ..." mused Elbert, the oldest. His freckled face gleamed in the yellow light, reminding her strongly of his father's.

"Yes, the Plan," she said. "The night after he was buried, I started working on it, and you helped me with it, too. You were all little, then, so it took us a year to get the first of them. Jagoe Granville. But we got him. Yessir, we got him, at last."

Sulie smiled, the flickering light making it seem a grimace. "He taken sick and died with dip-theria," she gloated.

Sarah nodded. "And who came next?" She glanced down the line of faces.

Scat rubbed his hands together on the table. "Elder Simmons. Took just under a year. We were older, then, and stronger. He died of strangling – a goiter choked him to death."

Dub laughed, his high chittering giggle cutting through the dimness. "Then came old man Sothern. Got all tangled up in his plowlines, and the mule drug him to death. Choked him, too."

"You got stronger and stronger," she said. "The hate got stronger, too. That one just took us eight months."

"But the next was the hardest," Elbert reminded her. "That took years. Cajun Henry was a tough one."

"Three years. But asthma is tricky. I wouldn't have chose that, myself, but it was what God sent him. And it did the job," Sarah said.

"Or the devil sent it." That was Junior, the next to youngest of the four boys. "I don't really know, Mom Sarah, whether we done a good thing or not, all this time. I knew Sam Catchmun. He wasn't a bad man. Kind of dim-witted, but not really bad. Didn't deserve what he got. No man ought to have to drown in his own well."

"He was the one that held the rope," Sarah said. "Dimwit or not, he was there, and he held the rope, and he didn't say a word to save your Daddy."

Fredda, her eyes even wilder than usual on this special night, leaned forward, her tangle of brown curls standing on end with the electricity of her excitement. "Carson Green, he jerked away the box. He was the one that let our Daddy swing. And he swallowed crooked and

choked to death. Too easy, Mom Sarah! He ought to have gone harder than that."

Her mother shook her head sternly. "We don't choose the ways, daughter. We just give the hate that brings 'em to their ends. And tonight we have the last of the jobs to do, and the hardest. The very hardest."

Seenie looked up from her hands, which were clenched tight together in front of her. She'd been staring down at them since she cleared the dishes and set the lamp in the middle of the table.

"He's a preacher," she whispered. "Tonight, we're goin' to kill a preacher, all guarded about by God's holy angels." Everything about her seemed hopeless, limp, despairing.

Sarah snorted. "No angels around that man. My hands and my feet wouldn't do to count the poor folks' women he's raped. And the black women ... you couldn't count them on both hands. He killed them if they fought him. Just the fact that he's smart and everybody's too scared to tell the rich people about what he does lets him go on standin' up in that church on Sundays and talking like he sits on God's right hand."

Her tone was bitter. "He come after me, one night. Dick would've fought him to keep him away from me, but I knew that would get him killed. I went out in the back and got it over with while Dick was watching out the front. That's the reason Scat's the last of our young'uns ... he hurt me somethin' awful, beat me, broke me up.

"I waited to get him, after your Daddy was killed. Waited till we had our full strength, all our hate polished up bright as fire. And now it's time."

The seven pairs of eyes shone in the seven dim faces. The lamp sputtered; then the flame steadied.

Sarah sat slowly, her arthritic joints popping. Her eyes focused on the lamp. Her forehead creased as she concentrated, and all the eyes turned toward the dim flame behind the sooty glass. As they stared, the flame grew more brilliant.

Sarah felt her heart thumping in the ancient rhythms that her mother and her mother's mother had taught. Secrets from the old world,

treasured and hidden, the ancient words came to her, but she left them unspoken. They were dangerous, and she felt that not one of her offspring had the maturity to deal with them.

Yet the children were there, directing her rage. She felt the surge of power that told her they had built their inner fires high, as their hatred fled, along with hers. toward its object. Fire! Fire!

She could see flames bursting high, a tall house collapsing. A man, tall and black-clad, staggered backward into the midst of the conflagration. A timber fell, pinning him by the throat, choking out his life even as he burned.

The oil in the lamp was almost gone. The flame was smoky-red, as she sighed and shivered. She felt cold, for all the warmth of the evening. Her energies drained away, leaving her chilled and raw-feeling.

Sarah looked about at her young, as their eyes opened. Sulie smiled her secret, crooked smile. Elbert seemed exhausted. Scat was almost gray, Junior closed in on himself, brooding. Seenie was holding Fredda's hand, and both girls were trembling. Dub shivered and closed his eyes again.

"It's done ... or will be. Tonight or tomorrow night. You all saw? The fire and the beam falling?"

They nodded. Sarah drew a long breath. "It's finally done ...the last of them. Every one. We've hated good, children, and we've hated strong. We've hated every last killer of your Daddy to his grave." She felt suddenly sleepy, almost tranced, as she stood and pushed back her chair.

"Time for rest." Her mind was whirling. She felt disoriented, lost. What came now? The focus of her life was gone, and there was nothing left to hold her family together, with this last task completed. She had taught them nothing but hatred, which could not bind them together once its focus was gone.

What would or could they do? The farm would keep them alive, she supposed, but what could hold them as a unit? Could she have chosen another way to give Dick's children a better path to follow?

She shook herself. No; death cried out for company. The guilty were now punished, or would be soon. She moved to the table that held the dishpan and began scraping dishes, setting them into the hot water from the kettle on the wood stove.

Seenie came to stand beside her, taking the cracked plates, the handleless cups and setting them on the shelf. Fredda came, too, though usually she hated to help with such things. Now her big green eyes were deep and secret, glowing with something unspoken.

"Get you some drinkin' water?" she asked.

Sarah was touched. Fredda was not thoughtful, ordinarily. She nodded. "I'm all dried out," she said.

The girl stooped to the low shelf where the water bucket sat, along with lye for making soap, the soap itself, and kerosene for starting the fire. Sarah dried her hands on the flour sack towel and stared into the darkness outside the small window. Fredda's touch on her elbow brought her back to herself.

She smiled, taking the glass from her daughter. Perhaps she was wrong. Maybe her children had developed a bit of love inside them, along with all the dark things she had taught. Fredda was a good girl, at heart.

She took a deep draught of clear liquid, and flame poured down her throat, searing her mouth. She gasped, but she had no voice with which to cry out. Her eyes stared up desperately into the laughing ones of her daughter.

Fredda nodded, very slowly. Sarah felt her insides burning away in the heat of the lye, and she slid to the floor, making animal noises of anguish. Fredda bent over her, those secretive eyes glinting with amusement.

"You, too, Mom Sarah," she said. "You, too."

Now Sarah knew that the old words carried with them a painful price, tribute that she had earned the duty to pay. As the agony burned her life away, she almost welcomed the death she could feel coming.

Perhaps, now, her children could go free of hatred, free of guilt. But that, she realized with her last breath, was nothing she could control or guarantee.

(69 Flavors of Paranoia on-line, 1998)

FOOTPRINTS

(I like women who are as independent as hogs on ice, even if they do attract ghosts.)

The weather, which had been perfect, turned sour immediately upon Selena's arrival at her beach house. The bay roared and growled and chewed at the edges of her little beach. Fog rolled in on the gale and stayed, though the wind eventually died away.

It was too bad. She'd looked forward all winter to her first visit of the spring. When friends and co-workers voiced worries about her being alone so far from civilization, she had smiled internally, buoyed up by the thought of two weeks without another human near. No demands. No assignments. No telephone blasting her our of sleep in the middle of the night to go chasing off in pursuit of a fire or a scandal.

Last year, that had not been true. Vince had gone with her to the beach house. The thought almost, but not quite, spoiled her mood. He'd walked into her house – her own special place since her parents first brought her there as a child – as if he owned it. Without asking, he had made changes that were hard to rectify.

The warm glow that had marked their relationship had cooled rapidly, as he thundered about, axe or hammer in hand, attempting to alter everything she wanted left unchanged. She had endured that for two days.

Their final quarrel had been bitter on both sides. She had found that for all his size and his seeming assurance, Vince had insecurities she had never suspected. She'd hammered away at those, in her fury, far more cruelly than she had intended.

His shocked and wounded look still haunted her.

That spoiled her enjoyment for the time being. She hadn't returned to the beach house at all last summer, though she had arranged with a local handyman to restore her house and grounds as nearly as possible to their original condition.

The passing of time, coupled with the fact that she heard nothing from Vince since he stalked dramatically from her house with all his things, eased her feelings. Now she was filled with anticipation.

Slocum, who kept things shipshape at the cottage, had the winter debris cleared away, even on the beach. Through the fog, his fresh paint job gleamed, defying the corrosive action of the salty winds. She walked around the cottage, admiring the trim lines, the huddled, wind-defeating design. This, she had always thought, was her father's best design, not those towers he used to build in cities around the world. In this hideaway he created for his family, he had perfected his art.

Vince's ravages were gone. Slocum had done an excellent job. She strolled down the flagged path on the first afternoon after the rain stopped, heading toward the gate separating the garden from the beach.

Her mother's hardy perennials were thrusting their buds against constraining sheaths. The warped old shrubbery that Selena had just barely saved from Vince's marauding axe leaned landward. Even in the fog, she could feel the gales that had shaped them over the years. They were old friends. Much of her time, as a child, was spent secreted among those thick trunks, hidden by branches and leaves.

The house was miles from anything. No other stood within walking distance. No stroller ever intruded upon the beach. No chance automobile ever came down the lane ending at the gate before the house. Privacy from the world was what he had sought.

His daughter appreciated that even more than her father had. She clicked open the gate, hearing the familiar sound with delight, and stepped onto the foggy beach. Wisps of mist swirled gently as she approached the water, which now moved in oily swells onto the beach as the tide came in.

She huddled her shoulders and thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her Mackintosh. It was chilly. The damp seemed to penetrate her bones more than it had in the past.

I must be getting old, she thought. Then she laughed. At twenty-eight? Not likely! It was cold today, spring or not, and the damp

could penetrate younger bones than hers. She had just come from the city, and her body hadn't had time to adjust. Tomorrow the sun would shine! She would stride down the beach toward the standing rocks, where in summer the seals sometimes came to rest.

She turned without going farther. Now she needed a fire and something hot to drink. There was something depressing about the fog-ridden sands and the grumbling tide. She almost felt as if someone might walk out of the mist and speak to her. She laughed and closed the gate behind her.

Once the driftwood was sparking on the hearth and a pot of tea steeping in her mother's Chinese teapot, she felt better. It was disappointing to have her first days weathered in, but she'd never been one to let things get her down.

She sat on the hearthrug and poked blazing chunks, where blue and lilac and orange flames curled. Here in her own kingdom she was as safe as anyone could be in this uncertain world. She could almost feel her parents' presence, Mother in the kitchen or the study, Father out checking the roof...

She sipped the tea, basking in the feeling of home. After a bit, she put her cup on the hearth and leaned her head against the sofa. Her eyes closed.

When she woke, darkness was making mirrors of the windows. The fire burned low. She sat up, somehow troubled, though she could not quite recall her dream.

Still, she was sure Vince had been in it. Strange. She had kept him out of her thoughts for months, now. It must be returning to the scene of their painful parting that brought him back into her mind.

She forced herself to rise and go into the kitchen. Food should help her mood, she thought. After supper, she found that she was unable to read, though she had brought a case of books. So she sat for a while, staring into the flames. Then she sighed.

"Selena Bartley, if you can't read, and it's too cold to walk in the fog, then you ought to go to bed. The doctor was right. You're tired to the bone," she said aloud.

Morning found the sky a bit lighter, though fog still wrapped the world, limiting visibility to a few yards. She felt much refreshed and finished her skimpy breakfast in good spirits. She washed her dishes, remembering her mother's admonitions, straightened the small disarray in the house, and looked about with satisfaction.

"I have earned a walk," she said to the cuckoo clock. It chuckled the quarter hour in reply.

The garden, though damp, shone with sunlight. She stooped to examine buds, touched the trailing branch of one of the shrubs. Then she opened the gate and stepped onto the beach.

She could see her own wind-blurred tracks, stopping short of the tide line. That was from the evening before. Yet there were other prints there, big, deep, fresh ones. They came up the beach, out of the fog, ending at the gate. No returning prints marked the beach.

"God!" she whispered. "A prowler."

She turned and sped for the house. Conditioned to city living, she had locked everything tightly last night, but she knew she wouldn't be satisfied until she checked every inch of the house and grounds. She opened the cabinet in the kitchen to take out her father's revolver, still loaded as he had left it. She hoped the green-moldy cartridges would fire, if she needed to.

The lock on the door had been untouched, she was sure. Every room, every closet was empty. The windows were all firmly latched, and the front door was barred on the inside. The dead-bolt that Slocum had installed was fastened, too.

She stood in the living room and looked around her. "Nobody got in, that's certain," she said, her voice sounding a bit thin, even to her.

At that moment, she looked at the hearth. On the rug where she had sat the night before, there were two dampish smudges.

She went closer, bending to look. Two rapidly drying prints, side by side, decorated the middle of the hooked rug's pattern of roses and ivy.

Her breath caught. She set her foot into one of the prints. The outline was twice the length of her own foot.

She and Vince had laughed often about his immense feet. He made jokes about 'the bigger the foot, the bigger the brain.'

She shivered. "Vince?" she called, her voice tentative. "Vince, are you here?"

She didn't expect an answer, and there wasn't one. The house had been tightly locked with new locks, installed that spring. Even if Vince had kept his keys, they couldn't admit him now.

She gritted her teeth, a habit that had annoyed her father, and moved back into the yard, where a careful examination of the ground produced no evidence of any alien foot. "I am imagining things," she said loudly to the fog.

"I am over-tired. My nerves are on edge. The fog and the cold and nervous strain have made me notional. I refuse to think nonsense!"

She closed the kitchen door and locked it from the outside, securing the key on the ring in the pocket of her Mackintosh. She moved onto the beach and walked into the fog, moving in the direction from which the footsteps had come. The tracks were losing definition, as the sand was blown into them by the breeze from the sea.

The standing rock loomed ahead, its outlines still half hidden by the fog. She could hear gulls quarrelling ... one swooped into sight and out in an instant. She swung along, feeling her blood grow warm with exertion.

What an idiot I was, she thought. Letting a set of footprints get me into a flap! Someone was walking up the beach and cut through our garden to get to the road. Simple.

Now the biggest rock was in sight. She moved more quickly until she reached the tumble of boulders lying about its foot, making a crazy causeway into the water. Two gulls rested on the top, and they took off with squawks when she shied a pebble at them.

From old habit, she scrambled among the boulders on the landward side of the monolith, moving into a maze of broken and eroded rock. Only Vince had ever been here, except for herself. She brought him, on their first morning there together, wanting to share with him one of her most precious secrets. He had not been impressed.

She reached the last tortuous bend and ducked to enter her secret cavern. Two huge segments of stone had settled together to form a natural cave. Here she used to keep her diary, her first pack of cigarettes, those private things a child squirrels away from the eyes of prying adults.

It was dark inside, the fog diminishing the light that penetrated the maze. She flicked her lighter.

The soft leather case Vince bought for their last trip sat against one of the sloping walls. Grit and debris covered it. It was obvious that no hand had touched it for a long time. Selena sank onto her haunches, her eyes wide, and brushed off sand.

Beside the case was a signet ring, topaz and yellow gold. Vince's. His watch, the flexible gold band caked with grit. A pocket knife. A chain with keys. A few coins. His billfold. All the things he had carried in his pockets.

A sob rose into her throat. She controlled it. "We had a fight!" she pleaded to the quiet air. "That's all. We never claimed to be a permanent match. You didn't want that any more than I did. You hurt me, and like a child I hurt you back. That was nothing to die for ... was it?

"You're too bright to do this. You have work you love and are good at. I wasn't necessary to you, any more than you were to me. Why, Vince? Why?"

No answer would ever come. And now he haunted her private Eden, spoiling it forever with his presence. He had no right there!

With sick certainty, she knew she could never come back to her beach house again.

(Fiction Quarterly, 1997)

GRIMM'S WAY

(The old patriarchal system ruffles my feathers. This is my revenge.)

Ahead of him, the magpies began quarrelling in the treetops. Behind, the very dust of his horse's hoofs swirled up into angry columns of grit, as if to pursue and subdue the rider who was the cause of their formation. Grimm did not notice, and if he had done he would have laughed.

Not that he laughed often. His reddish face and his burnished hair and beard blended together into a sort of wrathful sunset. Those who met him upon the road turned aside and picked imaginary stones from their steeds' hoofs or goaded their lazy oxen to get past him more swiftly. He did not invite the courtesies of the highroad.

Today he was in a hurry. The bailiff of a distant farm (inherited from his wife who had managed to die, being unable to turn aside from him or to spur past) had failed to deliver the rents upon the date when they were due. Grimm did not brook such failures. Floods? More like excuses. He'd make the fellow's ears sing, when he arrived. And the backs of those tenants who lived by his whim would now smart to the tune of his whip, if they did not produce the necessary halving of their crops.

The horse's gait flagged, and he used his spurs impatiently. He bought only the best in horseflesh, and he expected only the highest in performance from his beasts. The struggling breaths of the animal aroused no pity in his heart. When Grimm hastened, suffering was the lot of any creature concerned in his haste.

Even so, it was almost dark when he arrived at his destination. Lamplight gilded the hoofs of the beast as he halted with a groan in the doorway of the bailiff's stone cottage. Through the open door Grimm bellowed, "Jakob! Come out to me!"

There was a long silence. Then a mutter of whispered talk. Then the sound of steps on the stone floor. Light steps. Dainty steps. Not those of Jakob's heavy feet.

The shape in the doorway was certainly not that of the heavy-set bailiff. A tall girl, slender as a birch, stood there with a lamp in her hand.

"My father cannot come. He lies within, folded into his winding-sheet. He drowned today in the floods while trying to rescue a small group of sheep that had taken refuge on a knoll amid the waters. If you wish, I shall go up to the House and light a fire for you. My mother will bring what food she can prepare at short notice, if you will be patient." The quiet voice held no doubt that any sane soul would have patience in such circumstances.

"Dead? Jakob? Nonsense! Stop this dilly-dally, Girl, and send him out to me!"

She lifted the lamp higher, and Grimm saw her face, pale now with grief but so lovely that it set his craggy heart to thumping in his chest. "My father serves a better Master now than he was blessed with in life. If you cannot believe my words, come into the cottage and see with your own eyes."

He was unused to such straight talk. Bemused, he dismounted and went into the low doorway, along the short hall, and into a tiny sleeping-chamber, where a corpse lay on the bed, surrounded by cheap tallow candles. A shadow on the other side of the bed moved, and Grimm saw that it was a woman whose very shape breathed grief like an odor.

He felt his color rising even higher in his face, but he thumped forward and touched the still face beneath the sheeting. It was cold as wax. Beneath his rough touch, the cloth slipped aside, and the sculpted visage beneath ignored him with an indifference that felt insulting. A better Master, indeed!

But there was nothing that he could do to punish Jakob for dying. He could, however, make life less comfortable for the wife and the daughter, and he proceeded to do so.

"Fires, at once, in the House. Call Wilhelm from the stables to take my beast. A hundred gulden, and he wheezes like an old woman after a day's hard riding! Food, as quickly as can be done! Move, the two of you! Do not think that Jakob's death frees you from my mastery!"

As he turned away he caught the full benefit of a glance from the girl. It would have curdled new milk... but the eyes from which it blazed were large and the darkest of blues, the shade of certain pansies after rainfall... Grimm shook himself and stalked away into the darkness to his own door, some yards up the lane of poplars.

Fires were lit, food brought, but not a word more passed the young woman's lips. Grimm found himself trying to provoke her to speech, even if it required the most brutally unfeeling of comments to do that. He felt unaccountably angry. More so than late rents and the death of a valuable servant should warrant. And when Grimm was angry, anyone caught within range of his tongue or his fist blanched and fled.

Except for the girl. Her name, if he recalled it rightly, was Truda. He kept calling her for trifling services, nagging at her because the damp kept the fires from burning well.

She seemed not to hear, beyond what was necessary to serve his wishes. The pale oval of her face was calm, indifferent as that of the corpse had been. There was no flicker of that blaze he had surprised in her, back at the cottage. The more he tried to rouse her to anger, the more serene she seemed. It was unnatural. Even the men who served him quailed at such treatment, and his late wife had wrung her hands and twitched at her gown and worked her shriveled lips when he began it with her. She had run out of tears, much to his relief, long before she managed to twitch her way out of her life.

This woman treated him with the calm control that one used with a willful child. Not by so much as the compression of her lips did she take note of the cruelty of his words or the anger that was aimed directly at her head. The more he cut at her, the less she noticed him.

At last, worn out with both his long journey and his frustration at his lack of success, he took himself off to his unaired bed, where the old woman had put hot bricks to warm away the chill. That in itself fueled his wrath. He would have preferred that she forget, so that he could rake her skinless with his tongue for it.

The next day brought no relief. There had, indeed, been floods. Fully half the sheep had drowned, despite Jakob's efforts. Fields ready for harvesting were deep in water, the grain spoiled and

bursting. There was nothing to be had there. Even he could not leave his tenants totally without sustenance, and there was little enough of that. His anger grew monumental.

He appointed another bailiff and took great pleasure in evicting Truda and her mother from the cottage. And when it came to his attention that the new and younger man had asked Truda to be his wife, thus securing the home still for her and her dam, that set fire to the oil of Grimm's spirit.

"Truda will come with me. My wife being dead, I need a woman to serve my needs. The old woman can warm your bed for you, if you insist upon it, but the girl goes back with me!" he shouted at the dumbfounded man.

There was nothing to be done but to go, and Truda packed her scanty belongings into a kerchief and mounted the pony he ordered up for her to ride. Not by the twitch of an eyelid could he tell her feelings in the matter. There were no tears, no lamentations at being parted from her only remaining parent, nor any for her separation from the man she had agreed to marry. The snowcapped mountain above the valley held more expression than her face, as they set out (at a more moderate pace than he had adopted before) for his great house in the next valley.

There was less cause for travelers to avoid his course on the return trip, but, after glancing at his face, they drew as far to the side of the road as was practical. The dust that swirled after the horse's heels took its usual forms...

only to be broken up and blown away by the passage of the pony bearing Truda. The magpies quarrelling ahead of them seemed more subdued than they had upon the outward journey. And Grimm noticed. He did not laugh.

It was dark when they reached the gates of the mansion he had gained with the hand of his wife. Torches burned in sconces on the tall stone arch, and they rode beneath in silence. He had determined at last that it was undignified to continue trying to elicit talk from the girl, so he, too, had fallen silent for the last half of the day.

Journey or no, he insisted that she serve him his food, pull off his boots, make ready his chamber for the might. As he watched her move smoothly about the room, his wrathful soul rejoiced. At last he would wring some response from her, of hatred or pain, if nothing more. He reached for her as she turned to leave the room, and she slipped between his fingers, as if she had been a wraith, ignoring the command he flung after her.

It was late, and he was weary. Too weary, he told himself, to trouble with pursuing her and bringing her back to his bed. Besides which, it was undignified for the master of the house to chase after wenches, however beautiful. He knew that his men would snicker after him, should they see what was happening. So he let her go, for the time, but promised himself that she would suffer doubly when the time came for reckoning.

When he rose and went to find his morning meal, she was waiting, remote and cooperative as usual, to serve him. He did not know where she had slept, or how she had managed to find a clean gown, but she had done both, for her eyes were clear and unblurred with weariness. There was something else. In the hard morning light, she had a familiar look to her... it fretted at him as he ate and drank and cursed her.

There was much business to do, for his absence had left matters to wait his return. He turned his mind to other things, but he promised himself that the night would find matters far different from the last. That thought warmed him all the day, as he haggled and connived and cheated those he dealt with in his accustomed way.

After meat, that evening, he sent her to prepare his room. Following her there, he locked the door and set the key in a secret place while she was busied about her work. His temples throbbed with pressure as he waited for the moment to come. Whether lust or anger was uppermost in his mind he could not tell. But he was determined to make the girl suffer the consequences of all his frustrations for the past days, if she died of it. She would not be the first... or, by all that was holy, the last.

When she drifted past him, he caught her wrist in one huge hand. The door was immovable. She did not struggle, though he had hoped she would. She said nothing, as he dragged her toward the big bed, whose canopy hid the rich coverings she had just turned back. She moved pliantly, without digging in her heels or making any unseemly commotion. Her face... damn her! Her face was calm as if she slept at her mother's breast.

He reached the bedside and turned her in his huge hands to face him. He shook her fiercely, but her head did not flop on her shoulders, her hair did not become disarranged. He might as well have shaken a wax image.

She was cool in his grasp. Not cold but remote, withdrawn, untroubled. He felt that nothing he could do, brutal ... even fatal ... could reach into the core of her being and open what was closed against him. She was immune to him!

The thought made him boil inside. His skull throbbed with the pressure of his wrath. He pushed her down onto the bed. She fell into a modest and graceful position and looked up at him serenely.

Her eyes were familiar. Even as he watched they changed from her darker eyes to Helga's cornflower-blue ones. The face ... it, too, was changing. No longer young and smooth, it was wrinkling, re-forming into a shape so well-known that his heart thudded thickly in his chest.

The faint scent of herbs that had always hung about his wife came to his nostrils. His hands seemed paralyzed, hanging at his sides.

The withered lips were moving, speaking. "I was afraid, in life, to thwart you in anything. Death removes all fears, did you ever guess that? You would have taken Jakob's daughter from her mother and her husband-to-be. I felt her tears, even in the grip of death as I was. And it came to me that this did not have to be. I could prevent it... I knew it without doubt. I took her shape, Grimm. I deceived you and her people. Even now she is celebrating her wedding plans. For you brought me with you, all this way. You will have me with you for the rest of your life... it is what you deserve."

She laughed, a shrill grating cackle that had always set his nerves on edge.

His throat seemed to swell. His head pounded with the pressure of his anger. "No, Helga!" he shrieked. "I am rid of you!"

His fingers, freed of their paralysis, closed about the sagging throat. A terrible pain shot through his head, and his hands began to numb again. The candlelight was tinged with scarlet... black.

He loosened his grip, heaved upward to catch at the canopy. It pulled loose with the screech of tearing satin and fell after him as he dropped, quite dead, upon the empty bed.

The shape standing beside the bed wavered for a moment, bending over the body as if to make certain that he was dead. And then a dreadful smile crossed the dimming face; the hands reached again, as if to catch something that darted desperately to escape.

Then she was gone, like a wisp of smoke, and a soft chuckle lingered for an instant in the room, where the smell of death was already beginning to make itself known.

(Nocturnal Classics, March 1993)

THE ORPHAN

(This one of my meaner tales.)

My mother was eaten by wolves. I watched the whole process, hidden in that tight cranny in the rocks into which she had thrust me at the last moment. Even the dark night couldn't hide what went on from my terrified young gaze. Snowlight provided more than enough illumination, and I couldn't manage to close my eyes. Not even when they rolled her over, and her almost fleshless face stared directly into mine.

A kind Providence sent heavy snowfall before they were done. Though I could hear the snapping and grating of teeth on bone, along with an occasional ominous cracking, it was far better than seeing what they did. And that snow must have hidden my own scent to some extent. That, or else the beasts were too full of Mother to scramble among the stones after me. As it was, they snuffled and grunted and growled about the spot until almost dawn. Then they left, shadowy in the white-on-white landscape.

I was, you must understand, no infant. That would have been as fatal as the wolves, in the circumstances in which I now found myself. No tiny child could have survived that night and found its way through the heavy forest, floundering in snow that was neck-deep in places. But I was a sturdy ten-year-old, tall and strong for my age. She had often remarked upon that.

So I struggled with death through a night and a day, and I came at last to a woodsman's home. Though it has become fashionable to refer to such dwellings as huts or hovels, Mischa's house was neither. And Mischa was no serf.

I have thought since that he must have been the eccentric son of some noble, choosing to live on the remote edge of a great family estate. His house would have been a good one, even in a town. Though it was not large, it had no need to be, for he lived there alone. Still, it held comforts beyond my small imagination.

I found it by accident, literally knocking my head against it as I staggered, head-down, through a fresh fall of snow. That thump must have been loud enough to rouse Mischa from his winter torpor, for I fell upon the doorstep, too exhausted to cry out. When the door opened, I looked up and up and up into a pair of sparkling black eyes that seemed totally surrounded by a fierce black beard, black hair, black moustache. All curled rampantly about those eyes and a rather stubby nose with a hint of rosiness to it.

"What now?" rumbled that deep voice that was to become so familiar. "Who comes falling upon my door on such a morning?" He bent and lifted me as if I had been a hare.

The interior of the house seemed overly warm, after that night of dire cold. My face felt as if it might burst, though my hands and feet were quite numb. My impromptu host seemed to know what to do; he brought a small tub of cold water and laved my limbs until they tingled. Then he brought warmer water. It seemed as if icicles were growing outward through my flesh, but he soothed me and dried me and gave me, at last, a cup of tea so hot that I had to sip very slowly.

When I was able at last to be attentive, he set me on a settle piled with scarlet cushions and sat opposite me on a hassock. This brought our faces into some alignment, and he looked me over carefully.

I must admit that I did the same to him, but my first impression was never bettered.

He grunted, in time, and asked in as gentle a voice as his rumble would muster, "And what is yourr name, youngling? Where is yourr home? Who is yourr father?"

The last was a question I hated to be asked. I had asked it of my own mother until she had forbidden the issue. My grandfather seemed sad when my paternity was mentioned ... sad and almost afraid. So I learned to keep my peace, though I knew that my name was Dmitri Petrovitch Orlov. My mother's had been Anna Grigorievna Spasleva.

"His name was Peter Orlov, I think," I answered, taking the last question first. "My mother would not talk of him. Grandfather shook his head and sighed when I asked of him. I think he must have died a long time ago."

"Verry likely." The giant put his bushy chin in his hand and looked at me even more closely. "And yourr motherr?"

"My mother is now a wolf. Or part of several wolves. They ate her, last night. You see her father was Grigor Spaslev, of the village Bulenki. He died a week ago, and we were sent to my Uncle Dani. But the men took our money and left us alone in the forest to die." I glared into that bushy face. "I lived! And when I grow up I will hunt those men down and kill them." I'd made that resolution while I crouched amid the stones, listening to the crunch of Mother's bones.

His great laugh boomed until the loops of sausages danced against the ceiling of the kitchen. There was an inquiring snuffle, and a great boarhound crawled from beneath the settle and looked at him, then at me.

I should have been petrified with fear. He could have swallowed me with two snaps of his huge jaws. But he held up his nose, and I touched it with a tentative hand. We were friends, as simply as that, a matter that only death ended.

"So you are now an orrphan?" Mischa asked. "And I am alone herre in these grreat woods with none to talk with except Boris. Perrhaps you would like to live with me? I take it that none of yourr own will come looking?"

I shook my head. "Uncle Dani didn't truly want us. He has many children. But Mother was his sister, and he had to take us in. No, he will not look for us, I think."

So it was that I became Mischa's adopted son. I had longed for a father, there in the cramped town where every boy seemed to have one. Yet I had never dreamed of living in a vast forest, of learning to hunt and track wounded beasts, to read hints in the sky and the scents of the wood and the activities of birds and animals. Most of all, I had never dreamed of anyone as complex, as interesting as ... frightening ... as Mischa.

Nobody ever came near his house. Once or twice in the year, he went to the nearest town to buy things he might need. It took days to go and days to return, and he did it as seldom as possible.

There was no road nearby, not even a track. The soldiers of the Tsar did not come into the forest, for there was no one here but Mischa, and he troubled no one and had no money for taxes ... at least I assumed so. I had thought the tax-gatherers came wherever there was money, however far and dangerous the road might be.

Not only did I learn woods-lore. Mischa could read! The fact stunned me. And he had books. That threw my theory about his lack of money into disarray, for books were matters only for the rich. Everyone knew that. Yet those books became my companions, for my foster father taught me to pronounce the letters, to form them into words. Suddenly the pages unlocked, and I found myself looking into far places that I had never dreamed of or entering worlds that Mischa assured me existed only in the minds of the men who had written down their descriptions for others to marvel at.

My mind grew even faster than my body. I asked thousands of questions, many of which Mischa could answer. Now that I am an adult, I realize he must have seen some of the world outside Mother Russia. Perhaps he attended one of the great Universities that he spoke of. His mind was filled with many rich things.

Yet there were times when he answered no questions. He would grow surly and angry. Even Boris would slip quietly from his path at such times, and I learned to be seen and not heard. This did not happen often .. it was at least a year after I came to him that I noticed it first.

Once I had experienced the moodiness, I realized that it came upon him only once a year. Usually it was in mid-winter, but occasionally in the summer. He would begin looking haggard and feverish. In about a week he would fling out of the house without a weapon. He would not return, sometimes, for three or four days. At such times, Boris would whimper and slink and seem terrified of him, though the dog adored his master otherwise.

As long as I was very young, these fits shook me more than I cared to admit, even to myself. As I matured, it came to me that it might be these very seizures that had sent Mischa to live in the forest. Without

them, he might not have been where he was at the time I needed him most.

At last I grew old enough (and foolish enough) to indulge my curiosity about his actions during these times. When one is eighteen, few things are frightening and nothing can be allowed to be forbidden. One mid-winter day, when Mischa had gone into his yearly mystery, I donned my furs, took Boris and my gun (Mischa had bought it for me on his last trip into town), and followed his trail. I waited until he was well out of sight before beginning this rash venture, and once on his track I found he was traveling very fast. I had to use every bit of skill he taught me, just to make certain he did not elude me.

The forest was very thick. In these days, when so much of the timber has been taken to build cities for the Tsar, it is hard to make one realize how very thick the forests were, then. Only natural fires or windstorms thinned the great trees, in those days. And it was through one of those natural thin spots that Mischa had set his course. Young trees, bushes, fireweed made a tangle for miles, yet he kept to that rough way instead of turning aside into the untouched forest on either hand.

Even with the thick layer of snow, it was hard to keep to the trail. A time came when I stood and stared down at something I could not explain. His track ... the right boot ... was indented, clear and fair, in the deep snow. Then there was a scuffed spot. The track of a wolf went away from that.

One wolf. No single wolf, I knew in my heart, could match Mischa, yet he was not here. No man-track went away in any direction. I remembered the whispers I had heard at other boys' hearths, in my childhood. Things that told of men who became wolves – or wolves who became men. My hair prickled on my neck. Boris sniffed at the wolf-track, howled once pitifully, and fled toward home.

I followed him, very slowly, very sorrowfully. For two days we waited for Mischa's return.

He came, as usual, at dawn. His face was drawn, his cloak full of burrs and tangles. He found us waiting for him, and he seemed to sense at once that something had changed, finally and forever.

"Do you become a wolf, Mischa?" I asked him, though I knew the answer.

His eyes filled with tears that spilled into his beard, where gray streaks now marked the black curls. He sat suddenly and wiped his mouth on his cloak, and I could see dark stains on the fur.

There came a deep sigh. I did not hurry him but sat on the settle where he had put me so long before and looked across at his deep chair before the fire.

"So you, my little one, have seen? And you know my terrible secret, which drrives me into the haunts of beasts, forr I am not fit forr those of men!" The tears now flowed freely, glistening in his beard and dropping onto his hands.

"All those years ago ... were you there when they ate Mother?" This was the burning question that had kept me wakeful all the days of his absence.

He took away his hands and looked into my eyes. His gaze was dark and sorrowful. "I may have eaten herr myself!" he shouted, covering his face again.

So I killed him. It was not difficult, for I remembered the method the grandmothers whispered about in the chimney-corners. He seemed glad to die, and we buried him, Boris and I, in the forest that he loved.

No person ever inquired for him. Not one living soul missed him, except for Boris and me. We grieved for months, and I miss him to this day. We lived, the dog and I, in his house, hunted his forest, visited his grave. When Boris died, I buried him beside his master, that neither might be alone.

It was impossible to stay there, then. Only his affliction had forced Mischa to do that. I came out into the world again, a better man than I might have been. Educated. Understanding of suffering. Tender with children and animals. I love and suffer for the world.

But I have begun to wonder about my father. Sometimes in mid-winter I find myself beginning to have strange cravings. Hair has begun to grow between my fingers. I hunt no more, for the scent of blood intoxicates me.

Who – or what – was Peter Orlov?

(Augury)

YHITAGH

(Traveling home to Oregon with my family, after a vacation, we were driving into the west as the sun went down. Cloud formations piled up ahead until they looked like mountains. As we were climbing toward the Cascade Range at the time, we soon felt as if we were actually moving up into the heights. The illusion was amazing. Naturally, I turned it into a story.)

Hurn sat in the back of the cart, wrapped in a blanket. Between its drab folds, his hawklike face seemed too sharply defined, even though thousands of lines and milky, sightless eyes attested to the fact that he was very old and quite blind. Yet the tilt of his head, the attention upon his face told also that he was aware of every ell of every mile of this new and dangerous journey.

Even past the bundling folds of the woollen cart-cover enclosing him and the clinking and chattering of a multitude of cookpots and harness parts, weapons and clutter that was the whole of his family's possessions, he could hear the low-voiced conversation of his daughter and her man. Burly Yahirn, he knew, would be handling the reins and prodding the slow oxen, while her wizened spouse kept his keen gaze sweeping round and round, searching the sea of grassland for sign of any marauders, who had disrupted the regular seasonal rhythms of their nomadic lives.

"The mountains yonder," Yahirn was saying, "should shelter us well enough. There will be forest for concealment and fuel, with good pure water in the streams. I wonder why no tale ever came to us in the south of such a goodly range."

Hurn missed the man's reply, for he was remembering furiously. Only once in all his long life had he defied the iron rule that bound all his folk. When he was seventeen, wild as a young bull, he had left his family's cart-train to ride free over the savannahs that formed the entire center of this, his world's only continent.

He had traveled farther south than any had gone, and there were mountains there, two chains of them that came together, forming a

funnel-like passage to the sea. He had ridden in a great arc from east to west, and there he had seen the beginnings of the ranges dwindle to mere hills as they neared the northerly reaches.

He had gone north, even to the place where the snows never melted, and there had been no mountains there. Only flat white reaches, broken by ragged ranks of hillocks, had formed that spare and inhospitable land.

Now, he reckoned, they must be some third of the distance between the southern sea and the northern waste. He had felt and smelled and sensed all this land for more than seventy years, and he could tell any who asked exactly where his group was at any given time. Though their yearly round had lain from mid-southwest to mid-southeast, looping in lean arcs back and forth with the cycling year, his own trained senses and the infallible memory of the illiterate placed him as surely as a gull locates himself in the sky.

He knew they were headed northwest. The angle of the sun on his hand that lay on the tailboard of the cart told him that. They had traveled for twenty days since the marauders struck their number, burning one cart with all its folk and sending the other three hastening away in desperation. Behind them, he had heard his daughter say, the smokes of great fires smudged the horizon by day and lighted the sky to sullen splendor by night.

To the northwest there lay no mountains. Either his practical daughter and her no-less-practical man had lost their sanity, or something was badly amiss with the world he remembered so acutely.

Slipping off his blanket, he groped forward among the homely items of the load. His bones ached badly in the chill of this northerly climate, and the joints of his long fingers cried out when he bumped them against boxes and bundles, on his way. At last he touched the rough wall formed by the back of the driver's seat. Then he found the strength to stand, swaying to the motion of the vehicle, and touched his daughter's shoulder.

"Ta-Hurn?" she asked, her voice crooning as she had when her children were young.

Her father bit back a sharp reply. "You say there are mountains ahead of us?" he asked. "Describe them to me."

"They are only a dim line of blue, so far, Ta-Hurn. There are trees, for I can see tufty spots that can only be forest along the crests. Krin says he can make out individual trees, but either he is a great liar or his vision is better than any known to man. At all odds, they offer us more hope than we have known since we were forced from our route into these unpeopled places. There might even be others there, so we could trade and tinker as we have always done."

Hurn's voice was harsh when he replied, "Daughter, long since, I rode these lands. I recall the scent of thornweed touched by frost. I remember the touch of the wind, holding a hint of snowfields far up in the northern waste. I remember the cries of the dark birds of prey that even now circle above us, though they are quiet now.

"Look behind us, to the east. Due east, mind you. Is there a roll of yellow-gray hills there?"

Her head-kerchief whispered against her shoulder as she turned her head. "Ai," she said in a patient voice. "There is a low line of hills there."

"Very well," her father said. "I know that I am not out in my reckoning. Now listen – there are no mountains in the north. I have traveled this land from north to south, from east to west. No mountains rise where you see that blue line. I do not doubt that you see it, yet I know it must be a thing of enchantment, for mountains do not rise up in the short span of a man's life and cover themselves with forest."

He heard Krin sigh. For an instant he battled an impulse to aim a blow at the man's head. Yahirn, however, said in that patient voice, "Do not trouble yourself, Ta-Hurn. No longer need you worry yourself with the management of the family. We will lead them well and take them to shelter. Wrap yourself in your blanket, for you are shivering."

It was not cold but wrath that made him shiver, but he turned without another word and fumbled back to his nest among the household goods. They believed, those who had their beings because

he had lived, that his lack of sight must carry with it a lack of wit. They did not believe him. They would continue into whatever entrapment the blue line held. Then they would be helpless, for they had not traveled, as he had done, to see new things and learn new ways.

All he could do was wait, feeling that cold line of not-mountains grow closer with each day's travel. Even in his waiting, Hurn was busy, turning over in his mind every scrap of lore held in his orderly memory. Each tale told by a chance-met peddler, every charm or curse ever bartered for with a village wise-woman or shaman, he examined again for possible usefulness.

He rummaged out that wild journey of his youth, day by day, almost hour-by-hour. He explored southern cities again, reliving the wonder he had felt at the many folk who anchored their lives to wood and stone. He rode up the westward range until it sank into the savannah. He retraced the long arc across the farmlands and the grasslands to the eastern slopes, whose endings came a bit farther north than those ranges in the west.

He followed the traveled ways, spending again a week with a caravan of jongleurs, a month with drovers. Hurn re-examined long lost conversations with hedge-wizards and journeying philosophers, tough men and women who had lived and learned to survive even the travails of the mind. He gleaned, here and there, a word or a phrase or an incantation that he stored away carefully for possible use.

On the fourth day after they sighted the mountains, Hurn had relived much of that journey in rather more orderly fashion than the original. Each night he settled into his blankets by the largest fire, feeling the eyes of the terrible white stars staring down. He did not sleep. He journeyed.

That journeying seemed to provide him with a meager portion of his lost stamina. Each day saw him rise a bit more easily and move more strongly. Every night saw him eat with better appetite, and the lean contours of his face filled out a bit. His daughter seemed to wonder at his renewed authority when he spoke to her.

Now the mountains loomed over them, as Hurn could feel through his skin. The oxen began to grumble their slow way up the tumble of foothills now before them. The cart tipped this way and that, its contents slipping back bit by bit as it climbed.

Cold foreboding lay in the old man's belly, but he lived that old journey to its end. There in the words of a crone who lay dying after being trampled by a runaway herd, he found what he hoped was the secret he needed.

There came a day when Krin called back to him, "Ta-Hurn, we are starting a steep climb. Hold fast."

Then came the whish-chack, whish-chack of Krin's handblade. Hurn knew he was cutting a way through thickets of young trees, so the carts could climb beside the stream that muttered beside the cart. The oxen, groaning and wheezing, struggled as their hooves slipped in a scurf of dead leaves and old forest mulch. Yahirn's whip cracked wickedly, though her father knew she would as soon set lash to herself as to the patient beasts she drove.

Up they went, and up, until the old man lay exhausted, simply from listening to the laboring of the oxen. When he had lost hope of reaching an end, the cart stopped.

There was no sound. Hurn strained to hear the breathing of his people, the panting of the beasts, the chatter of the stream, but there was only silence so deep it felt his ears were stuffed with wool. Cautiously, quietly, the old man sat up, then stood. With sure movements, he made his way to the tail of the cart and climbed out. The soil beneath his feet was spongy with old debris. The breeze touching his cheek was rank with the smell of ancient forest and high places.

There came a rumble in the air and the earth. The mountain underfoot quivered, and Hurn felt his daughter's hand on his arm. "Ta-Hurn," she said, her voice that of a frightened child, "the light has turned purple, and the clouds are rolling down upon us, yellow and green. The land trembles, and the trees shake their branches at us. What have we come to?"

Now Hurn could hear the family, the smallest whimpering softly and being shushed by their elders. He could smell their fear. He could smell his own, for that matter, but he paid no heed.

A terrible voice roared down the mountain. "Welcome," it thundered.. There was devilish laughter in the tone. "It has been long since I was fed upon so choice an array of man-flesh. Your fear is incense to my nostrils, and your blind trust in what you see has provided me with mirth for many a long year to come. I will keep some alive for generations, feeding upon them at my pleasure."

Yahirn tugged at Hurn's arm, but he stood firm as the tree beside him. "Get my old staff," he said. "The one your mother feared. Hurry!"

In a moment, she laid in his hand the familiar wood given him by that dying woman, so long ago, together with another gift he now knew to be the most valuable one he had ever had.

"Gather together," he said to his daughter. "Set the young amid their elders. Look out and up with brave hearts, for we are not timid folk, we of the road. When this thing is done, if any live and if the mountain still stands, take it as your own. It will have been earned."

He turned his face toward the heights. Staff in hand, he walked away from his family, and no one tried to follow or to stop him.

Now the voice rolled down again. "Who is so foolhardy as to meet me in my own place?"

Hurn did not reply.

Thunder crashed so near that it all but shook him from his feet, but he clung to the staff, feeling the runes carved into it print themselves into his hand. Now he spoke to the crone who had died in his arms, all those lost years ago.

"You were of the Wise, old woman. You knew even then that a time would come when I would have need of your gifts. Soon we will meet again, but I would have my thanks go before me."

The way was steep, but his feet found a little path, and he struggled upward. A strong wind now began to blow in his face. He called out, "Thanks be to you, my host. Your breath will lead me to you."

The wind faltered, and a puzzled quite reigned for a time, as the old man moved up and up, feeling the breath burn in his lungs and the muscles cramp in his legs. Yet Hurn had led his people for more than fifty years. Their lives were his own immortality, and he was responsible for their fate. Only his will took him up that mountain, and when he drew near the top he felt the freezing flame, the burning chill of the being who waited.

"You do not fear me?" cried the voice, now touched with what might not be doubt but that lacked the awful certainty it had before.

"I fear you," Hurn said. "That is irrelevant. I know your name. It is dreadful, full of woe. I know what you fear, and that is even more dreadful.

"I stand upon my own death, by my own choice, and I call you by name ... YHITAGH!"

There came a rumbling and roaring fit to shake the mountain to its root. Though Hurn could not see, he knew that lightnings played around his withered body. He felt its tingle upon his skin, and his hair strained at the roots with the energies loosed upon that mountain-top.

A fell power gripped Hurn, closed about him, and he cried at the top of his strong old voice, "Yhitagh, Arr-igharaith! Yhitagh! Emm-arrhaith! Yhitagh! Ehmfallor!"

Hurn felt the stone of the peak split beneath him, as his spirit was wrenched free. Even as he went, he knew he was accompanied, for the dark thing that was Yhitagh moved before him up the narrow way of death.

* * * *

Yahirn stood with her man and her kin. About them were fallen trees, buckled stones, great crannies opened in the soil of that weird mountain. The cart was level, untouched, and the folk stood where Hurn had left them.

As the looked, the cloud moved upward, a thin gleam of pale sunlight rifting through it. The foliage glowed greener than life, and the stream took up its old song.

There was a new avenue, where trees had stood before. The top of the mountain was cleft, its rocky peak shorn away. No voice moved

on the height except for their own. The only wind was a little breeze that flitted among them like a butterfly.

"Hurn is gone," said Kirn. "He has left us a goodly place in which to live. Gather the children together. We will make fire and cook food and live here in safety as long as we wish."

Yahirn looked at her man with love and sadness. Then she bent to gather fallen branches, and the wind lifted her head-cloth, as if in a caress or a farewell.

(Pub. Eldritch Tales, #2, 198)

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

(This one grew out of a dream. I do have interesting dreams!)

A swirl of oak leaves danced out of the wood, across the road, and slapped pettishly at the windshield. For an instant, the cool October moon stared through their mottling shadows into my face. Then they blew on, and the road shone dimly in the glare of the headlights.

It was familiar, yet there was a difference. The sharp curve that my hands were braced for had turned into a gentle arc, banked to hold a car on the road. The uphill grade was cut down. I no longer would have had to shift into second to keep the engine from clattering, though my powerful Lincoln took any grade without a problem.

The cut that had lowered the road left banks rising as high as the top of the car on either side. There it was dark, for the moon was still low and it was early evening. At the darkest point, something pale and small flashed through the cone of light and was gone. A cat? Perhaps the umpteenth great-grandchild of the Angora that my mother had doted on and tormented?

Then I was at the top of the hill, looking out across clear space that had been thick stands of oak and ash and pine, when I left home. The house shone in the moonlight, tall and commanding. Mama always resented the forest that hid her imposing home ... she must have had it cut at last.

I wished it back with all my heart, but the shorn meadow glimmered mockingly as the moon rose higher and the stars stared down. The house stared, too, from bleak, malicious windows.

I eased off on the gas, slid the lever into neutral. The car eased to a stop. How many years was it since I left that house behind? Almost thirty ... I had left my girlhood behind me, since last standing here. It was no rebellious nineteen-year-old who now returned to claim the heritage she never wanted and would never have possessed except for the deaths of two well-loved brothers.

Sitting there, sheltered from the pitiless moonlight, I thought of Ed and Vance. My big brothers, always sources of pride and frustration

to me. Kind, off-handedly patient with my unfeminine presence, they bridged, to some extent, the hostile gap between my helpless smallness and Mama's powerful will. They meant me well, even while leaving me out of plans, ignoring my questions and comments – and me. I never quarrelled with either of them, and now I was grateful for that. That unforgiving house could not charge me with disliking my brothers!

I shook myself from that dazed recollection. Fanciful notions, for one considering herself a skeptic! Now I owned that tall house, lock, stock, and barrel. I could burn it down, if I chose, for the insurance had lapsed while the lawyers tried to locate me to hand over this unexpected and unwanted heritage. They had had no cash to pay insurance or upkeep. There had been barely enough to bury Vance decently.

I smiled, thinking of the way in which my brother had enjoyed the wealth Dad had killed himself acquiring for Mama. He spent it to the last dime, and I was glad of it.

I paid the lawyers' fees myself and didn't begrudge a dime of it. I made more than enough, in the first half of my life, to entertain any fancy I chose during the last half, even if it meant a cash loss.

Making that success refuted, in my mind, Mama's assessment of me, which had been a mix of fury at my plainness and frustration at my wrongheaded love of adventure and business. Before she died, I let her know, by way of Ed and Vance, that I had more than made good. Rags to riches described my career, though the rags had been Mama's idea, when I resisted her steamrollering of my life.

Not that Ed and Vance submitted to her. They had that easy grace that agrees tacitly with anything you say without betraying the fact that they intend to do whatever they damned well please when the time comes. I had been too honest ... or perhaps pig-headed was the best word for it.

Centuries ago, if I had been a boy, at the age of nineteen I would have sewn a cross on my cloak and found a Crusade to follow. I wanted conflict, challenge, a cause to give my life meaning. Mama gave me conflict enough, that was true, for we had been at daggers'

points for a year when at last I left, dramatically and on foot, bearing my few possessions on my back in the best fairytale tradition.

I laughed, sitting there in the Lincoln and thinking of the night I walked down this road, the trees on either hand making dapples of moonlight across the gravel. I cranked the engine and eased forward, toward the house. Then I was full of fury, determined to prove myself. Now I could only wish that someone was left who might care if I proved anything. My victory was empty.

The house was empty, too. A daily cleaning woman had done for Vance, in contrast to the teams of servants who came and went under Mama's hard-handed rule. The daily maid had cooked for him, which was fortunate. If no one had invented pork and beans, Vance would have starved, if left on his own.

I pulled around the circular drive and into the portico at the back. No limousine had ever pulled into its shelter to discharge important guests for a function over which Mama presided. If Dad had lived, it might have happened, but Mama was too impatient. She heckled him to his grave, I always believed, and by dying he only gave her more cause to complain.

I killed the engine and stepped out of the car. Sweeping away below, in all its splendor, was the view that Dad had found and built his house to enjoy. In the moon's chilly light, the forest stretched away, broken only by distant twinkles marking Gallatin, far to the north, and Venusia, almost below and fifteen miles away. Occasional sparks showed isolated farms. Mama always hated that view, which was the reason for her isolation from a world just waiting to worship at her feet.

My case was light. The bigger ones and the books I left in the car, as I unlocked the heavy door, whose stained glass inset was only a black glimmer in the darkness. The big brass key turned crankily, and the door swung open, letting me step, after so many years, into the impressive back corridor of my home. I shivered suddenly and touched the light switch.

Blast! I sent money for the necessary connections, but the lawyers had not reconnected the electricity. I wondered suddenly if the oil

tanks had been filled before Vance died. We were too remote for natural gas or any water supply except our own. If there was oil in the huge container in the cellar and water in the tanks on the roof, I might be able to survive until something could be done. The water pump to resupply the roof tanks would have to wait. I hoped the tanks had been filled recently.

I set my case in the hall and went to check the nearest bathroom. The tap turned stiffly, allowing a stream of water to run into the basin. It tasted a bit flat and galvanized (from the tank, of course), but the pressure was good.

The old lamps still should be in the kitchen, I suspected. Nothing ever changed in Mama's house, whether she was there or not. And, sure enough, they sat on their high shelf, together with a two-gallon can of lamp oil.

I set one on the kitchen table, and when it was lit the mellow glow softened the clinical look of the room. I had always hated the kitchen, and so had all the cooks in the long roll of those who came to work for Mama. They usually lasted from a week to a month, as I recalled.

"It may be modern and sanitary," one had snorted at Mama upon leaving. "But it's like working in a confounded morgue. You can almost smell disinfectant!"

You still could, though it was obvious the place had not been scrubbed up thoroughly for a long time. I wondered suddenly about food ... I had been so distracted at the thought of coming here that I had never thought to pick up supplies.

I blessed Vance as I checked the pantry. Though the refrigerator and freezer were bare and clean, in the pantry shelves were row upon row of canned goods. An entire shelf of pork and beans took me back in time to our campouts – the rare ones that admitted a small sister to the complement. I could smell the smoke of the fire, taste the slightly ashy beans, the tin spoon ... I brought myself back to the present with an effort. The second shelf held canned beef, vegetables of many kinds, soup, potato chips in cans. There was enough to do me well for as long as I wanted to stay, if I didn't become too weary of canned food. I had never been even as much of a cook as Vance.

The house was cold, chilled with the damp of an unoccupied house in late fall. I tried the furnace, pumped the pilot – then remembered that the fans required electricity. Knowing my Mama, I knew the old oil heaters were probably in the cellar, beside the new furnace. I felt certain that there would be enough oil left in the tanks, even unfilled ones, to fill one for days. Those big tanks had never been completely empty in all the years I lived here.

It took a lot of bumping and swearing, but at last I got the bulky heater into the library. There I cursed the lack of care that left Dad's valuable books to the mercies of damp and insects. I brought a couple of the lamps, as well, and when all were alight, the room began to warm, and the light chased away unwelcome memories.

I cleaned up in the nearby bath, in cold water, of course, put on my flannel pyjamas and my woolly robe, and returned to sit in the deep chair that Mama had consecrated to Dad's memory. I had never sat in it once in my entire life. Her smaller armchair was set at an angle beyond the marble topped table holding the lamp.

I could almost see her there, her gray hair tied into an uncompromising knot, her black eyes snapping as she charged me with some unforgivable sin that no proper daughter would ever dream of committing.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Then I stared around the room. The fireplace was sealed, as it had been since Mama put in the furnace ("inefficient!" Mama had said). The mantel was still filled with delicate jade sculptures, which had been Ed's treasures. I ached suddenly, seeing his big brown face, his huge hands tenderly cradling one of the pieces.

On the library table were Vance's sailing ships, twenty-five of them, each the product of months or even years of work. Some he carved from ivory he found in antique shops; some he made of woods, and some of filigreed metal. All were lovely and fragile ... as gossamer as Vance had been tough and square-hewn.

I had seemed to be the gentle, sensitive one, but inside I was tough and determined. Of the three, I was the only one to tackle and conquer the giant Money. I sighed.

Something moved at the edge of the pooled lamplight. Pale and furry, it looked like ... a cat? But the house had been empty for months. How could one have survived without help and alone?

Mama's Angora had borne me no malice. Indeed, it had cuddled in my lap, when we could fine a private moment free of Mama, before she called "Ginni! Ginni! Where has that cat got to?" and that sent the animal scampering. She, too, knew the penalty of crossing Mama.

"Kitty-kitty!" I called. I felt foolish. How could there possibly be a cat here?

There was no sound, no hint of motion. I settled back in Dad's chair and looked in the direction I'd been avoiding all evening. Mama's portrait, hanging over the long table, had been painted by the foremost painter of her day, at the height of her early beauty. She had believed with all her might that her talented husband was going to pull her, along with him, to the height of social and political power.

Even I could see that she was lovely, then, though to my knowing eye the beginning of the domineering curl had already touched her smiling mouth. There was the hint of hardness in the dark eyes. Yet she seemed, there in oils, all grace, tenderness, and beauty.

I used to come into this room, as a child, to look at the picture and to wonder what fairy had stolen away that lovely woman and substituted the mother I knew. The contrast between the person the artist had seen and what that woman had become still puzzled me.

She had great determination. Her talents varied from a competence in business to a genius at manipulating people. Why had she not gone out, after Dad died, and used his wealth and her wits to make her own place in the world?

I had been too young to wonder, at the time, but I did so now.

Then I shuddered. Something touched my ankle, and I stared down into an inquiring Angora face. Smiling, I scraped the remnants of my corned beef onto a saucer and slid it beneath the chair, wondering how the beast had survived. The mouse population must be down to nothing ... and how had it gotten water? Then I recalled the toilet in the bathroom. Its lid was open.

I didn't watch, for Ginni had hated being observed when eating. Instead, I rose and took my dirty plate and cup back to the kitchen. Nothing could have made me leave it until morning, for Mama might return from her grave to call me a slob.

The hall was lit dimly by the lamps in the library as I returned, picking my way between small Persian rugs. I froze in place as a voice called from above, "Ginni! Ginni! Where has that cat got to?"

The shrill tone scraped along my nerves. My ears rang with it. Suddenly I recalled what Ed had written me, shortly after Mama's death.

'We knew for some time that she was failing. You remember Ginni, the cat? She still had an Angora, this one called Ginni, too. Three days before she died, Mama called in Dr. Allison and asked him point-blank if she was dying. He didn't try to deny it.

'After he was gone, she called Ginni and Vance and me into her room. We thought she was going to say goodbye – give us some sort of last instructions – maybe ask us to find you. At least something that normal people do when they die. Not Mama. She strangled the cat and handed it to me.

'"Go bury it in the garden," she said. And I did, but I have to admit that for the first time I realized that you were right about Mama. I suppose my memories went back to when Vance and I were little, and she was still a human person.

"Now I know why you left, Berna. I understand a lot of things. I'm going to move away, for I can't seem to bear it here any more."

He did leave, and he died four years after that, though he was only thirty-six at the time. Vance had shared Mama's money with him freely, but he didn't enjoy it, and he just drifted away in Mama's wake.

Now I was in the hall where I had stood so many times, hearing her call her cat. That small sad shape in the library – was it or was it not a living animal?

I hurried into the room and looked under the chair. The saucer of food had not been touched, though a long pale hair clung to the upholstery of the flounce edging the slipcover.

The voice came nearer, as if Mama were coming downstairs. "Ginni!"

My hand touched something under the chair, soft and tenuous. Almost not there, yet tangible. I closed my fingers about the furry shape, and something not quite invisible came into the light with my hand. There was the ghost of a purr.

I stood, feeling my knees shake beneath me. I felt myself turn pale, and I had to admit that I was cold with terror. I had feared her alive. How could I face her, dead? The thing in my hand squirmed about, as if trying to hide against me.

I spent years in trying to escape from the house and Mama. I had achieved the impossible again and again, believing that it would free me from her. But it had not.

Tucking the cat beneath my arm, I stepped forward and kicked over the stove, spilling blazing oil over the Persian carpet. I thought of the books ... a pity, but necessary.

In the hall, I caught up my case and my purse. My jacket came out of the closet, with the keys of the car in a pocket. I went quietly and not too quickly down the hall toward the rear entry.

There came a screech behind me. "You! Berna! I always knew you were no good! Where's my cat? Ginni! Don't take her away!"

I was at the door, leaving it open behind me to the rising breeze. The car started with the ease of expensive engineering, and I pulled around the circle and down the drive. Where the woods had been, I stopped and stepped out to watch the house burn. It was like a beacon. They would see it in Gallatin. Trucks might well come up from Venusia, but they would be too late. Mama and her house were going up in flames.

Would I be free at last? I was taking with me something, not a living, visible creature, but something, that had feared Mama as much as I had. I saved Ginni, at last, from her murderer. Something in that act also saved me. Maybe now I could go on and live a life, find someone to share the rest of it. Make two or three more fortunes?

The wind freshened in my face. The cold October moon shone overhead. Against my chest there was the tremulous hint of a purr.

(The Horror Show, Winter, 1988)

BARE BONES, BARE BONES

(Children and ghosts go together naturally, it seems to me. This was fun to write.)

The swing creaked. "The chains need oiling," Robby's grandfather said. "That's another thing to do. Your Great-Aunt Hester liked to boss, not to work."

Robby sighed. Every time he finished a job another one hopped up. He'd never have time to explore the farm.

"Time to put on the kettle," Grampa said. "Butter the toast; I'll slice the ham and cheese. Quicker we get supper over, sooner we can rest. Having Hester trying to get custody of you makes things hard."

Everything about moving was hard, Robby decided. Besides losing Mom and Dad, it meant coming to this farm he'd inherited from his mother. Why Aunt Hester wanted her parents' run-down place he couldn't imagine; she had been angry when it went to his mother. Now it was his.

They hadn't started real cleaning, though every room in the house looked like a horror movie. He'd gone to bed the night before tired to his bones.

"Grampa," he said suddenly, "did you hear anything last night?"

"Just that swing making noise." The old man set out a plate of ham, rummaged in the refrigerator for pickles, and turned. "There we are. Supper fit for a king. We'll get some vegetables later on."

By the time they washed up, Robby's eyes were feeling heavy, and Grampa sent him upstairs to bed. "And don't forget to wash," the old man called after him. "We can't give Hester anything to gripe about when the custody hearing comes up."

Robby agreed. His mother said her Aunt Hester hated children. When he'd met her, if he'd been a snake, she couldn't have looked any more disgusted.

Robby fell onto his narrow bed and was asleep at once. The wail woke him again. Definitely not the squeak of the swing, it seemed to be coming from the barnlot.

He should be able to see from the room opposite his, he thought, as he crept across the hall. The room was dark, and he felt strands of cobweb on his face as he made his way to the window.

It was dark outside; no street lamp brightened the black farmyard. The wail came again, and Robby's hair stood up on his neck. This time it was inside, closer, with a sorrowful hiccup at the end, like a little kid crying hard.

Robby had never been really scared before. Oh, he'd been lost in the woods once. But terror that made you freeze to the floor was something he hadn't felt.

Now he did.

"Grampa?" His voice sounded weak, and Grampa slept very soundly.

"Squee-honk!" came from Grampa's room. No, he wasn't going to wake up.

Now the wail subsided into sobbing, coming nearer. It was upstairs, now. Robby tried to move, but even his eyelids seemed frozen. The sound reached the door behind him. That hinge squeaked, so he'd know if it entered.

But the hinge made no sound. Now the sobbing was in the room. The wail rose almost at his elbow, "Coooold! Bare bones, bare bones!"

Robby felt his hair stand up; it felt as if it pulled his ears up with it. "Who's there?" he whispered.

Then he wondered, What if something answered him?

There was a moment of stunned silence. A chill breeze fluttered the blanket and moved away. The retreating wail sounded as frightened as he was.

Robby wiggled a foot and found he was able to run, heading for Grampa. His grandfather didn't even mumble as he boy crept into bed and pulled the quilt around his ears.

When he woke, Robby couldn't recall why he was in Grampa's room. Then he remembered, and he sat up. His grandfather had already gone, and by the time Robby started downstairs he had decided that telling Grampa might not be a good idea.

It might have been a dream. Aunt Hester had tried, ever since his folks were killed, to get him away from Grampa. He didn't want to give her a handle on him, no matter why she wanted him. He certainly hadn't inherited any money, just this dilapidated farm. He went into the kitchen looking as cheerful as possible.

Grampa turned. "Nervous in this house, are you?"

Robby took down cereal bowls. "No, I just got cold. There must not be any insulation."

"Not a bit. Your Gramma used to freeze, before they got gas heat. We're going to have to live in the kitchen in cold weather, or we can't pay the bill." The old man took out milk and the generic cornflakes that tasted like cardboard.

By night they had the rooms they intended to use scrubbed and dusted. The rest could stay dirty. "Can we take tomorrow off?" Robby asked. "Monday I have to go to school, and I need some rest."

"Tomorrow you can explore the barns and sheds. You might find some old saddles or farming tools there. Anything you find I'll help you sell. Give you a bit of spending money."

Robby read for a bit; at last he grew sleepy and put the book aside. "You mind if I put my sleeping bag in the kitchen tonight?" he asked. "Maybe I'll be warmer."

"Go ahead. But wash first, you hear? I think I'll go up myself."

The gas heater burning in the kitchen kept the pipes from freezing. Robby dropped quickly into a snug doze and then into sound sleep.

The wail woke him. "Cooold!" it cried. "Bare bones!"

Robby's eyes popped open. For a moment he lay still, waiting for the thing to go upstairs again. Instead, it came through the wall. Again it sobbed, "Cold!" Suddenly Robby felt more sad than afraid.

What had happened to this kid, anyway?

Robby murmured, "Hello. I'm Robby. Can I help you?"

The whimpering paused, as if the child were thinking. "Harry," came the reply. "Harry. Cold. Only bare bones."

"Where?" He didn't know quite where that question came from, but it seemed right. "Where are your bones, Harry?"

Without a sound, the ghost was gone. For a long moment Robby lay quietly in his sleeping bag, thinking. Even as he relaxed, the wail rose behind the house.

Tomorrow he would explore. Maybe he would find a reason for Harry's misery.

On Sunday morning, Robby made his way over the frosty grass toward the barnlot. Inside the barn he found a lot of metal that could be sold. Harness straps and parts of farming tools hung on the walls.

He moved through the sheds, but he found nothing. Disappointed, he ducked into the last. A slanting roost, white with ancient droppings, leaned against the wall. A dirty yellow egg lay amid the crud on the floor.

Near the egg was something thin, knobbed on the visible end – Robby felt his chest go tight. A finger-bone. Harry's? Why would someone hide a dead child, unless he had been murdered?

He found a piece of metal and dug, uncovering more bones, small and fragile. Robby backed away. "Grampa!" he shrieked, turning toward the house. "Come quick!"

Sheriff's deputies dug up everything. They found nothing anyplace else, but there was certainly the skeleton of a child under that chicken house.

"About seven years old," Deputy Williams told Robby. "How did you happen to find him?"

"I was looking for old farm tools to sell," Robby said. "I saw a finger-bone. Then I dug a bit, and there it was."

"Been almost twenty years since anybody lived here," Williams said. "No missing kids along then that I recall. But we did find this." He held out a dirt-crusted brooch with HESTER engraved on it.

Robby caught Grampa's eye. His grandfather said, "I think I know who that child was. Harry Tollman was the son of the farmhand. Hester, my wife's older sister, ran things here when her folks had to have help. John Tollman was the cheapest to be had, but Hester hated his son. Hated kids; always did.

"The boy disappeared thirty years back. The folks wrote my wife, all upset, when no sign of the boy could be found.

"Hester said he'd run away. Now I know why Hester never wore the brooch Mary gave her.

"There it lies. And that's the woman who wants to get custody of my grandson, so she can get hold of this farm and nobody would go digging around and turn up the child she murdered.'"

The deputy looked sick. "You won't have to worry about her," Williams said. "I'm going to look into that. I think we can guarantee Miss Hester Crawford won't bother anybody for a long time."

As the car pulled away, Robby wondered if a proper funeral would comfort Harry. Following Grampa back into the house, he felt he would find out tonight. Maybe Harry would never wail again, he thought as he headed for Hester's room.

(Pub. Weirdbook, # 30, Summer, 1996)

THE CHILDREN BENEATH THE STONES

(Driving to a writers conference some years ago, I came to a section of highway that was being resurfaced. After waiting for some time, traffic was allowed to move onto the new asphalt, and there, laminated to the surface, was a small furry animal. Aha! I thought. The sacrifice to the Road Gods has been made! Hence the following.)

The first was purest accident. Flavius was as shocked as the slaves, who were in the process of dropping the stone into place, when the child lost her footing and slid, screaming, into the leveled roadbed. The wet crunch of the falling pavestone was echoed in his own belly, as he signalled a halt to the work.

The other children lowered their waterbags and cups, their pale faces and their gray eyes blank, as they stared at the spot where their companion had died. That look – it still made Flavius uneasy as he thought about it. The men and women who had been inching forward, one stadium at a time, building this road in the gods-forgotten north of Britannia, looked the same, their eyes going blank, their bodies freezing into position. Even the whips had been hard put to get them into motion again, leveling roadbed, cutting and hauling stones, setting them into place according to the specifications of the engineer.

He shivered and rose from his blanket. The season for roadbuilding was over, now. Soon the snows would join this chill rain, covering the ground. The season had freed him from this distasteful task. Battle was a thing he savored, but this slow and disgusting process of roadbuilding was not acceptable to one with his ambitions. Surely the Decurion would relent! Surely he would be returned to the maniple, where he belonged!

He had not become a Legionary willingly, but his father had succeeded in buying a place for him suitable to his station. He had distinguished himself in battle, and it was only the worst of luck that the wrong person found him sporting in the bushes with the wench the general favored. That, of course, caused his removal to the road-

building detachment and to his eventual distasteful duty as official child-catcher.

And that was the fault of the engineer. After that first accident, the weather had miraculously turned fair. The conscripts, though they glowered and said nothing, had worked to better purpose. The gods seemed to smile on this toilsome road, and the engineer did not fail to notice that.

When they finished some ten stadia and the weather turned foul again, Praecipius had called in Flavius. "Go and find another child. We cannot afford to use another of ours, for their parents would object, but if you can catch a wild one in the hills, that should suffice."

Flavius still felt the shock that burned through him, as he stared into the engineer's small eyes. They glittered at him like bits of coal, and the ugly face wrinkled into a smile that would have shaken a Gaul.

"You intend ... you deliberately plan to murder a child, just to find if that will improve the weather?" he had asked, feeling a hollow space inside his spirit that told him the madman did, indeed, intend just that.

The smile grew wider, the wrinkles forming a mask that might have been the face of one of the old gods of nastier habits and inclinations. Without another word, Flavius had turned and gone out to catch a child.

That had been the first of many, for it had worked. Strange as it might seem to one who had polished his logical faculties upon the words of Socrates, every time a Celtic child was dropped into the roadbed and crushed flat by the next stone, matters improved dramatically for something like ten stadia. After that – Flavius sighed, staring out into the gray morning – the entire thing was to do over again.

Except, of course, for the Celts. The slaves, naturally, were watched and guarded too closely to allow any rebellion, but those wild men in the hills were another matter. There was battle enough to suit the most bloodthirsty, as the guardian Legionaries patrolled the countryside around the building site. Ambushes of the most exquisite

subtlety were made, taking several of the best soldiers of the lot through wounds or death.

Stragglers were shot from cover, arrows skewering them like hedgehogs, as they lay kicking in their blood. It became unsafe for any Roman, or even for a Celt enslaved by them, to go far from the campus, and the latrines had to be dug too near the main camp for even the least sensitive noses. Even then, a sufferer from diarrhea sometimes fell in the night, quilled like a pheasant from incredible distances.

His work of child-catching had become not only sickening and difficult but actively dangerous. He had gone armed, with a guard of ten, just to keep him alive. Even then, he often returned with only a handful of those who went out with him, the others having disappeared, screaming, as they rummaged through bushes or down ravines.

Some had been found, flayed and dripping. Others had never been seen again, though their voices had sung evil songs in the darkness. The parents of those sacrificed children were unhappy, he knew. He would have been unhappy, himself. Their mothers and fathers were stalking the Roman builders, and he wondered where this insane adventure would end.

Now, however, the weather had closed in for winter. The day dragged past, and the night of the bonefires was beginning, and fires were already lit on the tops of the surrounding hills; sounds of dim drumming could be felt in the bones as much as heard by the ears. He shivered.

The thing was done. By spring, surely he could talk the Decurion into returning him to duty fit for a soldier! He would never again have to carry a wriggling, screaming child in his arms to its death.

As evening drew in, the drums grew louder.

The engineer came into the tent and shook the damp from his cloak. "The barbarians are chanting, up there. I can hear their voices, though not the words. We should never have let the slaves go. They have joined their brothers, or I know nothing of such animals."

"We could never feed them and the troops, too, through the winter," Flavius objected, his tone milder than it would have been with one who was his junior. "We have stripped the fields of grain and the hills of game. We will be on short rations, ourselves, before spring."

"We will retreat southward, now," the engineer admitted. "The winters are harsh in this place, and we will join the troops in their winter camp, soon. Perhaps it is as well that we do not take those stubborn Celts with us." He grunted, as a wail called thinly through the gathering gloom.

Flavius went, for the hundredth time, to peer out through the doorflap. Now the fires above were showing up brightly against the cloud-darkened sky. He was glad that a cohort guarded the road-building crew, for those bright-haired people on the hills were fighters to be feared. Three hundred and sixty men were not too many for the task. Even the blue-painted Picts feared the tall, fierce people of the hills.

Even as he thought that, there came a shriek from the direction of the stream beyond the guardpost. Another rose from the opposite direction, as he seized his short sword and pulled his cloak about him.

"There is an attack!" he told the engineer, who was already addled with the wine he drank steadily from day's end to day's end.

The man took a step and fell over the stool he kept beside his sleeping place. He was grinning, too drunk to know or to care that the barbarians might soon be roasting his bones over their Samhain fires.

The watchfire at the end of his row of tents lit a scene of furious activity. Shapes moved abruptly into and out of sight, struggling, stabbing. Flavius ran to help someone in armor – but when the man turned, he saw the flash of pale eyes under the metal helmet, and before he could stop he found himself caught between three men, all taller than he, all stronger and smelling of rage.

Then something struck the back of his head, and everything went completely dark.

Flavius woke abruptly, his eyelids springing wide and his body attempting to sit. That, however, was impossible, for he found

himself bound securely to a complicated structure made, he thought, of tree branches.

He could see nothing. It was still night – or another night. He could not be certain.

In the darkness, he heard a groan, and the voice was familiar. "Praecipius?" he whispered. "Is it you, Engineer?"

"Ummm," came the moan, in reply.

Flavius struggled with the bindings about his hands, but the leather thongs were tight. His hands, in fact, felt swollen and numb. Even if they had been free, he was sure that he could not have untied the rest of him, without working life back into his recalcitrant fingers first.

The drums were louder. Much louder. He realized that he must now be up on one of those forbidding hills, separated from his fellows and beyond the protection of mighty Rome. He and the engineer, it came to him in a sickening flash of understanding, were about to pay for all those Celtic children they had crushed beneath the stones of the road.

The freed slaves had told their fellows in the wild, of course. Among all the alien people down in that encampment, with its rigidly straight lines of tents and its praetorium set on a slight knoll commanding the entire complex, there could have been no way for these people to pick out so unerringly just whom to blame for the loss of their young ones.

"Praecipius!" he said into the darkness. "They are about to serve us as we did them. What do you think of that?"

There was the sound of rough breathing beside him, and the noise of a struggle. He laughed silently. He knew the security of those bonds, and Praecipius would no more succeed in loosing them than he had done.

Rank smoke came to his nostrils through the openings in the rough shelter that he could now see looming about him. The light of a fire striped the wall above his head, where it trickled through the slatted sides. His skin was ridged with gooseflesh, from fear as much as from the cold.

He would not live to see the great work completed, the road connecting the strongpoints, the wall holding out the wild men from the north. He would not see Lavinia again, or his father's villa overlooking Mare Adriaticus.

He believed in no gods, Roman or others. He certainly did not believe in the ancient and primitive deities that these people worshipped. He only believed in pleasure and pain – and death. He felt that he was about to make the acquaintance of that last, very soon.

Praecipius groaned again. "Flavius?"

"Yes."

"They have us, then?"

"They do."

"You were right, you know. We should never have killed the children. Some of the slaves, perhaps, might have been better."

Flavius almost laughed. "If you truly believe that, you are even more stupid than I thought. We are about to die, Engineer. Think about that." He closed his eyes and listened to the chanting in that alien tongue. It mingled with the sound of wind whistling evilly between the slats and the pelting of the rain. How did the fires burn, in all that rain?

A sound at the door brought him to instant alertness. He could see faces, striped with ash and shadow. Hands seized him roughly, hauling him upright, as a cold blade cut the ties holding him to the litter.

When they were outside, he could see the faces, pale blots amid wildly blowing hair that ranged from white-gold to almost crimson. Men and women alike, regardless of the cold, wore only loincloths and short cloaks. All carried knives, some of stone, some metal ones stolen from his own kind. His belly cramped, and he bent over and vomited in the mud at his feet.

They tugged him to the fire, where he saw a tall stone of the kind that seemed to stud this countryside. It stood with two more in a rough triangle, in the middle of which burned the fire. The stones sheltered the spot, so that when he stood near the flames he hardly felt the wind and the damp.

A howl made him turn his head. Praecipius sagged between two Celts, a man and a woman. Both were painted with stripes of ash, and Flavius thought they might be the grieving parents of the last stolen child.

At the back of the stone toward which he faced was a dark well of shadow, deeper than it should have been. He realized, even as the engineer was dragged to the edge of the spot, that it was a trench, dug into the muddy soil at the foot of the megalith.

The woman worked about Praecipius for a moment, binding him fast from neck to heels. Then she and the man held him over the hole, extending their burdened arms as if he weighed nothing, and let him drop. He hit with a thump and a wail.

As Flavius watched, his stomach heaving again, yet empty of anything more to lose, two more of the barbarians began levering the bottom of the stone beside the grave. It had, he saw now, been excavated to some depth, and the levers were making the tall shape totter already. It moved, the soft mud letting it lean slowly, then more swiftly, and at last it began to fall.

It seemed to take forever. The angled top wavered in the fitful light, as the wind moaned about it, and at last it moved downward, the foot kicking up a bit of soil as the thing fell with a thump that shook the hill. Any cry Praecipius might have made was smothered beneath the noise and the weight of the thing.

Flavius tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. Would he be served the same?

Now the fire was dying, and those standing about it did not renew its fuel. Instead, they turned shining eyes toward the Roman, and he felt his bladder release its burden, wetting his legs and his tunic. What would they do to him, who had carried their weeping children away to be killed?

The ash-striped woman approached, her hair glinting like copper in the dying firelight. Wind swirled strands of it about his face, as she pushed him against the stone at his back. With deft speed, the others wrapped bindings of leather about him, tying him securely to the enigmatic stone.

The woman looked into his eyes, and she spoke in his native tongue. "Flavius Decius, you will speak to the old god you have helped to wake. This is not the Mother, who nourishes the land. It is not one of your tame Roman gods who want only to drink and to wench. This is one of those old ones who had gone to sleep with time.

"We have made sacrifice to it. The children's blood gave it an appetite for more, and your friend should satisfy it for years to come. But you we leave to speak to it. Tell it, Flavius Decius, to sleep again. To dream again!"

She turned away, and he croaked after her, "But why should it listen to me? I am an outlander and an alien. I believe in no gods at all!"

She turned back, her gray eyes shining with a reddish light. Her lips curled wryly, as she said, "But you will, Flavius Decius. You will believe, before you go free from this stone."

Then they were gone into the shadows, leaving him to stare into the coals, which were being quenched quickly, now that there was no fresh fuel added. Tears ran down his face, mingled with the cold rain, and he felt snowflakes beginning, as well.

He would freeze soon. That was, he had heard, an easy death. He might have lain on his back, watching that monolith crush down onto his unprotected body, as Praecipius had done. He was fortunate ...

And then he heard the laughter, mocking and wicked, rising from the ashes. Something swirled there, evil and hungry, turning toward the sacrifice that had been made.

"Oh, god of the ancients!" Flavius cried, "spare me! I am ignorant of your ways. I have done nothing but good for you, providing you with the blood of infants ..."

But that was the wrong thing to say. Eyes that were eddies of mist turned toward him, examining him, and a bulging head of fog nodded softly, once.

Fear filled him. Belief grew in his heart, as the thing neared his helpless body. He cried aloud to the gods his dead mother had revered – but that did him no good at all.

The hunger he had helped to create in that ancient sleeping thing found him, now, to be a satisfying offering. Neither his cries nor his prayers affected it at all, for it believed in no god but itself, and now it was freed into the world again, to feed as it would on Celt and Roman alike.

(Eldritch Tales)

CONCERTO

(Vampires interest me, particularly those who do not conform entirely to the "rules" established by Bram Stoker, et al. Here is a most unusual batch.)

When you are trussed up in braces and prosthetics, confined to a wheelchair, life is never easy. When, in addition, you need to find an apartment in which you can get around in your chair, with room for a piano and neighbors of more than human patience to endure a resident composer, it makes things even harder.

Once I got out of the hospital, I rather expected that my friends and acquaintances would drop me pretty quickly. A concert pianist whose hands have been damaged too badly to stand up to the demands of practice and concertizing is pretty much a dead issue, even when he has had some success as a composer.

But, aside from my fiancée and my professional friends, my Aunt Gwen took over, deciding to coddle me. She couldn't understand, after a while, that she was smothering me. A concerto that I had begun, just before the plane crash, was struggling into life, and coddling didn't help anything.

I was, after all, twenty-eight years old and nobody's infant. I needed my own place, though there was no way I could go out and look for it, as things stood. But I found that friends filled the gap, rallying around instead of backing away. My agent did even more than the rest. He assured me that David Eichermann the composer was worth as much or more than Eichermann the pianist. Among the bunch, they managed to find a suitable place for me, to Gwen's dismay.

I hated to upset her, but when a call came from Ted I was ready. "Listen, Dave," my agent said, "I think we've found the very place. Ground floor – it's a sound old building being renovated. Side entrance, near your own door, with a ramp for your chair. No other tenants above you, yet, but the place is so solid that you probably wouldn't bother anyone who lived above you. The super ... you are

not going to believe this! ... is a classical music nut. Has all your recordings. In an emergency, he'll be there like a shot."

My heart thumped beneath the crosshatched metal and leather that held me together. "If there is room for the piano, I'll sign the lease right now."

He laughed. "I'll bring it, and my secretary will witness it. Callahan, the super, says the paint will be dry by Monday, and you can move right in. I'll call the movers and get your stuff out of storage. We'll all get together and get you moved."

I leaned back in my wheelchair, amid a creaking of braces. "Ted, that's above and beyond the call of duty. How will I ever thank you?" I looked down at the tangle of metallic exoskeleton that held my shattered body in order. "You know I'm not in any shape to do much."

"I'm going to work your ass off," he chuckled. "I knew before the crash that you had more in you than simply playing. 'Sinfonia, With Roses' made a real splash, when Bernstein used it as his season opener. I knew then you had found your real strength. You're going to make us both rich."

I laughed. "Okay. I'll tote dat bar, lif' dat bale. Go hire your van and get me out of jail!"

Which was neither kind nor fair. Gwen had been glad to take me anyplace I was able to go, had done everything she could to make me comfortable. But I still felt like a prisoner whose parole was coming up.

When Millie, Ted's secretary-cum-strongarm-cum surrogate Mom, together with my aunt, finished unpacking, arranging, and getting rid of cartons, the apartment was already licked into shape. They had even vacuumed the nice Aubusson-reproduction rug. We looked around at the white painted wainscoting, the satin-stripe paper, the high ceilings. My antique piano, which had been my mother's, looked right at home.

Once my helpers had worn themselves out and gone, I was alone for the first time in almost a year. Independent at last, thanks to the elaborate equipment Ted kept finding that would help me with things like taking baths and getting into and out of bed. It felt wonderful.

I turned out the lights with some regret, for I would have loved to pitch into the concerto, then and there. When I woke, it was with a surge of energy that I thought had been lost forever. It was a joy to hoist myself into my chair, scoot on my own to bath and kitchen.

Gwen had equipped the kitchen for my convenience, and I cooked and ate a huge breakfast. That done, I didn't even take time to dress.

I wheeled to the piano, where Ted had left a table at hand, holding music paper, pens, and the harmonica I sometimes used to work out my frustrations. I let down the movable arms of the chair and touched the keys.

Music flowed into my mind, the joyful early theme, composed before the accident, rising to a crescendo, then dying away into a simpler, sadder melody. Shifting to a minor key, it became a blend of melancholy and nostalgia. The months of pain and depression had touched it, but all of it fitted together.

The morning passed in a mist of music, though to a casual visitor it would not have sounded like music at all. The process of composition is not pleasant to hear. Yet the thing was coming into focus, getting onto paper at long last.

I settled into a schedule. Every morning either Ted or Ev, who would have been my wife by now, if not for the accident, came by to check on me. Sometimes Ted brought papers from the insurance company for the airline. I would be taken care of for the rest of my life, financially, but that didn't stop me from working steadily every afternoon.

I stopped by five, when I began listening for Ev's steps in the corridor. It hurt to think about her ... she still wanted to marry me. I couldn't let her do that, for it would be a travesty of a marriage, and we both knew that. Still, that didn't stop us from loving each other. Nothing could keep her away, and if she managed to do that I would probably have withered up like a dried bug.

She was tall and cool and quiet, and she soon made a habit of bringing supper with her, from one of the ethnic places near her office. Then we'd pretend we were old married folks with years of

happiness behind us and a comfortable old age ahead of us. Silly, n'est pas?

After a few weeks, I felt as if I'd lived there for years. Callahan was my good right hand. Anything I couldn't manage, he was willing to tackle. Built like an economy-sized King Kong, he had the face of an amiable bulldog, and behind that battered mug lived a mind that reveled in the precise mathematics of Mozart and Gabrieli and Bach.

When tenants moved upstairs, at last, I wondered if they might object to the sound of the piano. I tried to compose only by day, but sometimes the concerto possessed me by night, as well. But no protest came. At last I asked Callahan about the newcomers.

He squinted as he talked. "Oddballs. Never see 'em in the halls or the elevator. Pay in cash the first of the month. Not a word of complaint from them in three months they've been there. They don't go out to work, but they seem rich enough."

I was intrigued. "What sort of family?"

"Andrei Haslip is the father of the family. Pretty old, too, but big and strong. White hair. Palest eyes you ever saw and a big deep voice like a bass viol. Wife's name is Hazel, but it doesn't fit her. Skinny dame. Good legs, great big teeth in a little dried-up face. Dresses in caftans that'd knock your eye out at a hundred paces. The girl's about fifteen, boy's seventeen or so. Nothin' special about 'em, except they never go out. And that's weird."

"They never make a sound," I put in. "I'd almost welcome a loud party, just to know they're alive."

He grinned. "That's the house. When this baby went up, they built solid. You'd have to hammer hard on the floor, up there, to make it heard down here. A scream wouldn't make it."

Oddball neighbors were fine, as long as they didn't object to music at all hours. I forgot about them, for the climax of the concerto was building. Something eerie was stealing into the themes, too ... some of the harmonies made my skin goose-pimple, but it all felt right. I was making something unique.

Then came the Braseltons. They were on the other side of the house, fourth story, but they complained to Callahan about everything

they could think of. And when someone told them there was a musician downstairs, they started complaining about music they couldn't possibly hear.

That made me wonder again about the Haslips. Surely they heard me when the windows were open! I asked Ev, one day when she stopped by at lunchtime, to go up and ask them, for I couldn't bear to think of people suffering through the hellacious sounds of composition, because they were sorry for a poor cripple.

She came back and shrugged. "They're not there. I knocked and rang, both, but there was no answer."

I had to be satisfied that I had done what I could. I forgot about them in the throes of the concerto. I was in a fever – a physical one, as well as a creative one. I was allergic, it turned out, to the metal of the braces, to the stuff they used as an alternative, and only when I invested in solid silver did the itching and sweating stop so I could complete my work.

At noon on July tenth, I finished the last note, wrote in da capo al fine, and leaned back. A mixture of triumph and regret filled me. I felt at once exultant and antsy.

Callahan photocopied the sheets and mailed a set off to Ted. I settled down to wait the hours until Ev would come, but I couldn't relax. I hadn't yet played the thing in full. Without the orchestra, it would sound a bit thin, but I flexed my painful hands and tore into it.

I listened as I played. It was good. Damn good. It was neither classical nor atonal. It went its own way, creating new sounds, new harmonies, new rhythmic patterns. I would probably get as much flak as Beethoven had from the critics, but I knew that this thing broke new ground and would last and set new trends.

My hands felt like murder, before I was done, but I didn't pause to ease them. I went through the tolling depths of the last movement, the final motif. Eery and strange, it sang itself to silence.

There came a tap above my head. Someone was rapping hard on the floor, trying to get my attention!

I looked at the clock. Ev was going to be a bit late, tonight. Callahan had some errands. Nobody could see what the Haslips might need, unless I could manage.

I snapped on the light, for twilight had crept into the room as I played. I maneuvered the chair to the door and saw the elevator waiting, doors open. It was wide enough for the chair, and I realized that I could make the trip upstairs for myself. Filled with daring, I wheeled into the cubicle and pushed the second floor button.

That floor was just like the first. I found the door above my own and pushed the bell. A voice, forbiddingly deep, asked, "Who?"

"David Eichermann, from downstairs. I heard a thump on the floor, and I wondered if someone needs help."

The door opened. Haslip was just as Callahan had described him, and his eyes shone as he saw me. "Ah, but come in! We have so enjoyed your music, over the past months. We do not say, for we are recluses, even the young ones. But we listen with wonder to your composition. Now it is done, we must thank you. Come and meet my family ... " he wheeled me into the room.

Suddenly, I didn't want to go. The chamber was filled with the odor of incense, through which Mrs. Haslip's tight little face appeared, split into a toothy grin. Two more faces swam into view in the subaqueous light.

I touched the reverse to back the chair. "I don't want to intrude," I began, but the chair didn't move. Something was braced behind a wheel.

"Nonsense! We want to tell you about our admiration for your work. Our family were musicians, long ago. Erica! Dohrn!"

The young ones sat on a huge sofa, beside their parents. They looked like a row of – not crows. Vultures.

I shivered inside my barricade of braces. "I was worried that the music might bother you," I croaked.

Mrs. Haslip reached to take my hand into fingers as clammy as dead fish. "Indeed, no. Our joy in your work fills us with gratitude. What have you titled it?"

Before I could reply, Erica smiled, her teeth bright in the dimness. "We have the recording of Sinfonia, With Roses. This new one – a concerto, I think? – needs an equally intriguing title."

"It is untitled, as yet." I wondered how many kids her age could recognize a concerto when played without orchestra. Or even with one.

"Mrs. Haslip's cold hands tightened. "It should make a pair with the first. Possibly ... Concerto, With Vampires?"

They laughed, and what blood I had left chilled. That was no joke!

I jerked my hand free and backed the chair, but they were standing, now, moving to either side of me. Their smiles were impossibly wide. I strained my arms, pushing the wheels to augment the chair's capacities.

Haslip bent over me. "You will not suffer. You will compose forever; at night, of course." He leaned toward my throat, and I jerked convulsively.

He screamed with agony.

His wife tore away my shirt, revealing my withered chest, meshed in a webwork of silver crosses from throat to waist. His fangs had scored my skin only lightly, but his lips seemed seared, as if burned. Eight bright eyes focused on my blood. Those accidental crosses could not possibly hold off these creatures!

There was a firm rap at the door. The Haslips froze, trying to put their faces into order, but Ev had touched the panel; it swung open, revealing the strange tableau.

She took one swift look, darted in, pivoted my chair and tore away down the hall in a heartbeat of time. The elevator was waiting, but the doors were beginning to close. I jammed an elbow between their padded lips, and she wrestled the doors open again. As the rubber gaskets lipped together, something bumped outside. But we were on our way down.

She stared down at me. "Were those really ... ?"

I nodded. She was examining my shirt and bleeding neck when the doors opened. Callahan was turning into the corridor, and he stopped,

staring at us. Ev grabbed him and hustled him into my apartment. They patched me up while I told them my tale.

They glanced at each other, from time to time, and I wondered what they were thinking. But Ev pushed me to the piano. "Play!" she commanded. "Something quiet, classical, religious. NOT the concerto. And don't worry."

Callahan turned toward the door. "I'll go talk to the priest. He has what we need, and he trusts me."

When the two left the apartment, twenty minutes later, their arms were filled with paraphernalia. I couldn't stop them, no matter how I argued.

"You are supposed to disable them by day!" I shouted after them, but they didn't pause. The elevator whined upward.

I could hear hurried sounds from above, thick though the floor might be. Furniture scraped and things thudded on the hardwood floors. Someone was packing up in a rush, I thought.

Ev and Callahan should be getting there just about now. There's the knock ... it would have been inaudible to ears less anxious than my own. I am beginning to play 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' as I try to recall the prayers I was taught as a child.

Why knock at a vampire's door, when you are going to destroy him? Ridiculous. I play a bit louder.

There is a crash ... Callahan must have kicked in the door. Why didn't he use his key? Not as dramatic, I suppose. I play louder, still.

God!

Who said you couldn't hear screams through those solid floors?

(Weirdbook # 30 Feb., 1997)

THE LITTLE FINGER ON THE LEFT HAND

(My grandfather crushed the little finger on his left hand, many years ago. He swore he never would have believed he used it at all, but once it was injured he realized he never used anything else. But at least he didn't have something unidentifiable nibbling on it.)

It wasn't the pain ... that was controllable, even without the medication they insisted on shooting into me every time I opened my mouth. I mean, it isn't as though I'd been any marshmallow. In the house-wrecking business, you get more than your share of knocks and cuts and bruises, even if you're super-careful.

No, it wasn't the pain. Maybe most of it was the inactivity.

For a man who spends most of his life on his feet, when not asleep or making love, this lying flat and staring at the antiseptic white ceiling was enough to make me crazy.. For the first time in my life, I was grateful that Dad forced me to graduate from college. Bits and pieces of the things I'd learned kept coming back to me. Oddball scraps of stories, poetry, formulas, history – that helped me pass the time a bit. Not enough, but a bit.

Yet it wasn't entirely the boredom and the pain that got to be worst. It was that damned little finger on my right hand –the one that isn't there any more.

With all my broken bones and contusions and whatnot, received when a stone wall fell on me, you'd think the loss of that finger wouldn't even be noticeable. God knows, I had enough to groan about without that. And it isn't as if you use your little finger much, even for typing you can get along without it.

Of course, I can't use anything much, right now, being strung up like a wounded mummy. Yet that finger was the only part of me that was entirely missing when they dug me out from under a couple of tons of rocks. And it was that tiny bit that seemed to be giving me hell.

Dr. Yoshida came to see me, once I regained consciousness enough to say something about how it was bothering me. "The nerves are still

there, Mr. Carstairs," he told me. "They send signals to your brain, even though they lead no place, any longer. After such trauma, they send rather scrambled signals, also, which is why you have that gnawing sensation, as well as the sharp pains.

"After a time, they will heal at the severed ends and the worst will be past, though I must admit that I have had patients who had itches in missing limbs for years after losing them. However, right now you can call for sedation when it gets too painful.

"I'm sure you need that for rest, too. By the time you are able to move about, the worst should be over."

That made sense, and I believed him. But I'm not one who wants to be doped up, any way, any time. I just lay there and felt those sharp teeth gnawing away until I was ready to scream. If it hadn't been for Lola, I'd have gone out of my gourd.

She came in every day for as long as they'd let her stay. I kept reminding her that if she had said yes when I asked her to marry me, she might have stayed as long as she liked. She grinned, because she didn't exactly say no, she said in four months, when she got her degree and had time for a husband and a new job.

Anyway, she kept looking at me, those first few days, as if she could sense that things weren't as hunky dory as I tried to pretend they were. Finally she asked me, right out, "Hamp, you're hurting, aren't you?"

I had sworn never to lie to her, and I meant it, too. So I nodded. "Some."

"More than some. What is it? The back? The neck? You're so wrapped up, I can't tell what might hurt the worst."

I felt silly. I stared up at her, and she fixed me with those big brown eyes that demand the truth and nothing but the truth.

"It's that little finger. The one that's gone. That thing is driving me wild ... it feels as if mice with saber teeth are gnawing it to rags."

"Ghost pains," she said, nodding. "They told me you'd have them, but I don't think they realize how bad it is for you. They're used to people losing arms and legs, and I think they didn't expect a small part like a finger to give you so much trouble."

There was nothing to do about it, so she sympathized, and that helped a little. When it got so I was trying to turn off the TV with thought waves, she read to me or told me funny stories about her classmates and professors, her boss and the technicians at the lab where she worked. It helped.

But when she was gone! After dark, when the hospital quieted down to its nightly routine, there was nothing left in the world but that little finger on my right hand.

Rog, the foreman on the crew, came in to see me, when they took the sign off my doors. I felt funny about asking him the question I'd been saving up, but I finally found the nerve.

"Rog, that house. The one that fell on me. Is it all the way down, yet?"

He looked at me sort of funny. "Not yet. They got the contractor out there and some engineers. It's a funny set-up. If had had any idea of the problems we'd find, we would have done that first and never begun demolition the way we did. Might have used a wrecking ball.

"The whole building is so unstable it stinks. It looked solid as Gibraltar, remember? It's still sitting there with only the one wall down. They can't figure out why it fell and the rest didn't. All you did was to chip an anchor-point for a towline. Whammo! Down she came, right on top of you. I never was so scared in my life, let me tell you. We thought you'd bought it for certain."

Hmmm. That brought me to my second question. "Did anybody ever look around for the finger I lost? I guess they couldn't have spotted it in all the mess, though."

He shook his head. "They won't let us near the thing, any more. Once you were out, they put up a fence with padlocks and all the trimmings. Why?"

That was the question I didn't want to answer. "Just wondered," I said. "After all, it isn't every day you lose a piece of yourself." I turned it aside as a joke. That didn't help, either. I thought of that bit of flesh and bone lying in all the rubble, and felt that mice were probably stripping it down to the bone. Someway, I could feel it happening. The thought preyed on my mind.

Then I remembered the movement I had seen, back in the first floor corner where I had to anchor the towline. Something a lot bigger than a mouse – or even a rat – had been in that room. I'd thought it was a cat, at the time, and I hadn't thought of it again. But I had heard the ghost of a growl. And now I thought I recalled the glint of sharp teeth.

"Hamp Carstairs," I said aloud, "you will drive yourself round the bend, if you lie here making up stories. Go to sleep!"

With the help of a nurse with a shot, I did just that. But the next day I was all raw nerves. Sedatives made me worse, until it seemed the skin would crawl right out from under the casts and bandages and make off down the hall.

Lola was beside herself. She tried talking, reading, but I lay there in a cold sweat, trying to keep from screaming. She could see it in my eyes, which was just about all of my face she could see.

"Hamp!"

I had closed my eyes, so she could get some rest. I opened them to see her bending over me.

"Hamp, it's that damned finger, isn't it? I am going down to that brownstone and dig around until I find it. I'm going to bring it back and put it in a jar of formaldehyde, right on that table, so you can see that nothing's chewing on it. It may not help you, but then again it might."

It was hard to talk well through all the bandages, but I almost yelled, "Lo, listen! That place is a deathtrap. Rog says they have locked it up, it's so dangerous. It's not going to help either of us if you get smashed up, too. I want all your parts in working order, when I get out of this cast!"

She didn't listen, of course. I should have kept my trap shut and never hinted at the problem the finger was giving me. She left, and I could see determination coming out of her pores. And before I could have somebody call the company, the nurse gave me a shot that zonked me out entirely.

Lola didn't come back that afternoon. At bedtime, there still hadn't been a call. I began to sweat. I had the nurse call Rog at home, but he

didn't know of any trouble out at the work site. They were working on the second house down in the row on the other side of the street, and there had been no trouble at the unstable one.

I knew Lola had an early morning class, before her shift at the lab. I had no hope of seeing her before noon, and she had no phone. I kept right on sweating, which at least had taken my mind off that finger.

At ten o'clock, the door of my room opened and she came in, though she should have been at work. There was a bandage on her hand ... the left hand. In her right, she carried a small jar.

She set it on the table with a thump, and I could see something bobbing around in the liquid it contained. I cut my gaze around and stared. It had been, I thought, a finger. All the flesh was gone, and the bone was scored with gnaw marks.

I looked up and couldn't even raise my eyebrows, not so it would show.

"Have you been bothered by your finger, this morning?" she asked.

I thought about it. I'd been so worried that I hadn't thought about the finger at all. I felt for it now, but there wasn't a twinge, nor even the faintest tickle.

"No." I sounded puzzled, even to me.

She grunted. "Something had it, back in that half-wrecked room. Something furry and bright-eyed and mean. I beat it off with my purse and got the finger bone away. But it ... got even. She held out her hand. "It got mine, in exchange."

"Lo, I told you not to go in there. You might have been killed. The thing could be rabid ... anything might happen."

She looked at me. I saw deeply into her eyes for the first time since she had arrived. I recognized the pain there. Oh, did I ever recognize it!"

"You? Now? It got yours in place of mine?"

She nodded. "But, Hamp, I'm in a lot better shape to cope with it than you are. I can move around and stay busy. I'm not trapped in a cast, wrapped up in ninety yards of gauze. It's ... it's not such a bad swap, you know. Not really." She smiled.

I could see the tiny lines at the corners of her mouth. I knew ... but, God! what a girl!

She didn't stay long. She was due at the lab ... had swapped out with another girl so she could come in and relieve my mind. Once she left, I was alone again to think about the thing that lived in that abandoned brownstone. And about what Lola was going through.

It's not the pain, you see. It's wondering about what's causing it.

(Weird Tales 1990)

IN THE GREEN SAND

Getting what you truly deserve has to be the worst kind of horror!

Behind us, the desert was sinking into shadow. The coppery sun was halving itself on the knife-edge of the horizon. Gheir sank to his knees, gulping the cooling air as if it might be the water we both craved.

I turned to look over the back trail. Nothing moved. I'd have grinned at Gheir, but my cracked lips were too sore and stiff, so I gestured vaguely toward the direction from which we were fleeing. "No sign of `em," I croaked. "The wind is erasing our tracks as quickly as we make `em. We're home free!"

His black eyes studied me from the folds of his antique leather face. "Oh? Free to go where? To do what? I think, Akroy, that we would have done well to risk their justice, whatever it is, rather than to dare what we may find out here. True justice is a terrible thing. And the thing we did... I wish there had been no children involved... deserves the worst that justice can deal us. Death in the desert is no joy, and there are things even worse."

"I know deserts, Gheir. I'll keep us alive, believe me."

"This is not Terra. Your lore may fail you here."

I looked toward the west. Night raced up behind us, and the setting sun cast ridges of shadow toward us, making mountains of the dunes and cities of the tumbled piles of rock. I shivered, then controlled it.

"As long as I'm alive, I'll believe that I can make it," I said. "Now we have to find shelter. You must rest, and it will be cold soon. We've pushed ourselves too hard. Your kind doesn't stand that sort of thing as well as mine." I shifted my pack more comfortably and started off directly into the sun's disc. Gheir's steps rasped after me. We said nothing, as the purple night of Eldorsin overtook and swallowed us.

The darkness was relieved by a pale wash of starlight, for Eldorsin had no moon. I set my gaze upon the one cluster I recognized and moved onward, as nearly as I could judge, toward the largest pile of

rock that we had seen before darkness fell. If we could dig into the warm sand at the foot of the stone, taking advantage of its ability to hold heat, perhaps the chill of the desert night would have less opportunity to get into our bones.

The pile was huge and still very hot. I dropped my pack and felt about for a spot in a cranny, out of the wind. The sand was soft and easily scraped aside.

"Here," I said. The sound of my voice was somehow startling in the silence.

Gheir dropped beside me. "A good place... and you found it in the dark!" His tone was a compliment.

We dug quietly until we had a good deep burrow, into which we crawled. Then we sat for a long time without speaking.

I found myself listening to the anonymous whispers of sound about us. A slithering... reptiles? On this world, I wasn't certain. Wind sighed about the rocks. Things less identifiable hissed and clicked... very rasping on the nerves.

I rested well, though I didn't sleep. After a long time the rock became damp with condensation. I nudged Gheir awake, and we licked the gritty moisture from the rock. It was too little to measure, but it relieved our parched lips and throats a bit. When we were done, we rose, still without words, and went forward again toward the invisible mountains that should lie beyond the horizon.

The way was now rough, with tumbles of squarish rocks blocking our way. We groped through rubble, barking our knees and falling over buried obstacles. At last we had to stop and wait for the blast-furnace sun to light us.

When the sky grew light, we looked forward and stared incredulously. A city stood there. The piles of rough litter had been outlying suburbs, fallen to ruin. The walls of that city loomed above us, unbroken, though the gates hung open on loosened hinges. Centuries of wind-blown sand was piled against their massive hinges.

Gheir's yellow face held doubt. "This is not a good place, Akroy. You have no trust in instinct. You prefer proofs and testings, but my people have abilities that have kept us alive for millennia. Those tell

me that we must turn our backs upon this city and go to meet the mountains... or our deaths."

I laughed. I'd always derided Gheir's beliefs, though they had often been too accurate for comfort. Now I was caught in the trap of my own conditioning. Also, I was curious to a fault. I could no more pass that city without looking into it than I could retrace my steps ... or retract that deed that had sent me fleeing into the wastes.

"Wait here, then," I told him. "I'll take part of the supplies. If I find water, I'll come back for you."

"Even if you find water, do not come for me," he said. He had known I would explore. We'd been together too many years for him to have any doubt of that. He parceled out the concentrates we had stolen from our ship's stores before deserting. With a grunt, he sank onto the sand to watch me go.

As I moved, I could hear his heathen chant rising into the morning. Those K'hari! Superstitious to the end!

The wall was not as near as it had seemed. That was an illusion caused by its enormous size. Once beneath the arch of the gate, I leaned there to catch my breath, to find that the great panels were sheathed in metal, which had preserved the wood.

I stepped inside. The place must be incredibly old... it was not even a myth, as far as I could recall from my conditioning-tapes on the trip to Eldorsin. Now those people neither built nor lived in cities. Only their sophisticated technology assured my own kind that they were not primitives.

Who had built this structure? It was formed of a metal that I, a fair metallurgist, could not identify. I leaned back to thump one of the gates with my fist. It rang with a bell-like note. It was not a known alloy. Not among my kind, at least.

I uncased my beamer and tapped with its butt on the rim of decorated metal around the edge of the portal. A series of musical tones followed my taps, hanging in the air in a chord that built about me. Strange. As I listened, another note found me... a deep commanding tone from farther inside the city. With a shuddering groan, the ancient gate-leaves tried to move in their imprisoning sand.

I paused, thinking hard. An empty city, long deserted and untenanted, was one thing ... This was something else again.

A row of tall buildings faced the gate. Tightly shuttered, as was every other structure I could see, those houses hinted at treasures sealed inside them. Why else should the doors be closed so firmly, or the shutters be made of metal?

I am a born scavenger, among other, less respectable, things. I moved into the street and looked up and down it. Nothing moved. I could see only locked houses. The sand in the street was tracked only by wind-riffles. Doorsteps were drifted deep, and the ridges of the metal shutters were lined with sand.

Now the sun had lighted the sky to yellow, though it had not yet topped the wall. The colors of the city glowed about me, green sand, copper-bronze colored shutters, purple-gray stone. I went along the street, which soon became a tunnel of smaller structures. Not a single door or window was ajar.

It seemed as if the tenants of the city had gone into their houses, one night, and locked themselves in, never to come out again. I wondered what had happened to them. Failure of the water supply? There was no trace of the scars of battle.

I had been keeping watch for a well or a fountain. Emerging into a small plaza, I spied a stone structure in a sort of cul-de-sac opening off the main way. The walls were of fretted stonework. It was domed with an ornate openwork roof. A well?

Beneath the roof was a carved basin. I peered into its depths. A glint of reflection came up a shaft... there was water there. The scent of water on stone was sharp in the dry air.

It was too deep to dip up, but there was a metal wheel set into one wall. I turned it, with considerable difficulty. At last I had it going... three turns, four. A gush of clear water poured into a small trough at the foot of the basin.

I grubbed out my Standard Tester from my pack and poured a few drops into it. It was hard to count off the necessary sixty seconds, but the verdict, when it came, was good. "No contaminants, chemical or

biological. Safe for humanoids, except for Alla'h'bi. Safe for most non-humanoid species. Toxic for Zeeramun."

I dipped in my hands and brought up a brimming puddle. I was shaking, but I sipped a bit, letting it trickle down my throat. Then I went to signal to Gheir.

I could see him, tall and oddly jointed, still sitting where I had left him. He didn't look up. He didn't answer my whistled signal. Grumbling, I moved out of the gates, toward him.

"Gheir! Water! Come on!"

He didn't answer. I touched his shoulder and bent to look into his face. What I saw shook me. He had gone into death-mode. His fragile K'hari frame had suffered from the heat and lack of water far more than my tough human one. I had thought he had some strength left, but now I realized that only his will had brought him this far. Now his body had taken over. That will hadn't been enough to stop the automatic process.

He was light, which was lucky. I struggled back to the gate with him slung across my shoulders. I almost ran with him to the well. Laying him flat on the stone, I cushioned his head with my pack.

It isn't easy to reverse the death-mode. Once before I had tried it with a K'hari partner. I hadn't succeeded. This time, I was determined to change that.

By the time he swallowed a cup of water, I had put every scrap of cloth we had over him and soaked all with water. I changed the layers as his fevered flesh dried them. He seemed cooler. His eyes lost the unresponsive blankness and flickered with recognition. At last he was looking up at me, knowingly. Sadly.

"You have brought me into the city," he said.

"I had to, Gheir. You were dying. It was the only way..."

"I must die, Akroy. There are worse things than death, though your kind resists that knowledge. What lies in this city is one of those things. Cruel. Terrible. Completely just. I will not face justice, Akroy. I will go into death." The eyes closed. His face contorted and relaxed, and the eyes slitted open again. He was gone.

Damn K'hari superstitions! Tears formed in my eyes, but I blinked them back. He looked so insignificant, lying there. He had been my partner for years, through straight and crooked, profitable and dangerous games. Even that last terrible thing we had done to the children ... but I shut out the memory of that. I covered his face with a damp shirt and straightened my back to look out at the city.

There was valuable stuff here. Scavenging would be good. Those shutters and doors concealed something... and what men could lock away, I knew that I could find a way to reveal.

I left the packs with Gheir and went away through streets now filled with warm light, though their arrangement deflected the direct rays of the sun. They were also laid out to funnel the breeze. It was comfortable enough, even in mid-morning.

I wandered through circuitous streets, circular courts, spacious marketplaces. At last I came to a low wall with a decorative doorway. Inside was a park.

Trees were still living there... some more-than-clever subsurface irrigation system must still be in operation. They were huge things, with trunks of tremendous girth and bastions of roots bracing them. Some ornamental shrubbery still lived, too, though it had run wild. The stone-curbed beds in which they had been planted were crumbling, and about their roots were matted layers of dead twigs and foliage.

The purple-gray stone was laid as paving, looping about pagodas with seats and tables, sunken pools with lotus-like plants still blooming on their stagnant waters. The water system must have been plentiful and well-laid to keep a level in those shallow basins. Beyond the pools the walk led between ranks of statues. Some of the figures were like present-day Eldorsin. Some were rather humanlike. Some were even like Zeeramun, strange as that might seem, for the city had to predate space travel by millennia.

At the end of the path, there was a temple. It was severely plain, in contrast to the buildings in the outer city. Built of tapered slabs of stone, it was in the shape of a truncated pyramid. Below the protruding lintel, a door stood open.

I was drawn to it, though something inside me hesitated. I thought of Gheir's last words and paused before the door.

Each massive leaf was cut from a single stone. The facing was grooved, and matching tongues had been cut into each panel. The weight had to be enormous. That last priest, on leaving, must have lacked manpower to close them.

Inside, it was dark and cool. I had no fear that any stray breeze might close the doors behind me, so I went forward. The interior formed a room so large that the farther wall was dim with distance. At its center, there was the lip of a pool made of stone, scalloped high and pierced with star-shaped holes.

There was no water in that pool. A stair led down the inside in a curve. It, too, was of white stone, and there was no dust there, no debris of ages. It looked very dark, down there.

I returned to the park and found enough dead wood to make a torch. There was probably enough power left in my beamer to kindle it, I was sure. When the thing was ready, I went down the shallow steps, curving into the depths until the stair ended in a passage... and there was light there. I couldn't find its source.

There were no doors in the white stone walls, except for a single set at the farther end. A white door was set into the walls, surrounded by beaded moldings.

I touched it softly. It swung into the darkness beyond ... but the air was fresh. The glow from the hallway showed another door in an opposite wall. It was open, and I moved across and through it. There was real light there.

Golden light streamed up from a well in the middle of a low-ceiled chamber. It bathed the walls and turned the circle of statues about it into golden shapes.

I paused to stare; then I started. One of those statues had turned its head to stare back at me.

It sat in a throne-like chair amid the standing figures. It was squat, broad, its flesh golden. It did not seem to breathe, though I knew it to be alive.

I went forward and looked across the pool of light at the frog-like being. It rose, emerald gaze turned toward me. The impact of that gaze rocked me on my heels. It pierced all the inner defenses that I had built up through a lifetime. It exposed all the lies I had told myself, and the things I refused to remember.

That green gaze winnowed me to the bone. Then the creature nodded, once. As if it had found something admirable. I wondered what that could possibly be.

Its assessment done, the thing sat again, grasping a ruby knob on the armrest of the chair. It spoke. I expected to hear a croak, but it was a voice as pure as a glass bell. Speaking in Terranglo!

"So you come to the Neem at last, Edward Ackroyd. We have watched your peregrinations among the worlds with interest, knowing that you must come, at last, to us. For your judging."

What was it that Gheir had said about justice? I shuddered. "I came to see the city. No more. Now I will go away."

It laughed. "The Eldor did not pursue you, did you know that? They take no revenge, even for such a wrong as you did to their children, addicting them to madweed. They know that the guilty, once they find this world, can flee in only one direction. That is their nature, as it is that of water to run downhill. You are not the first of your kind to come to us for judging. Your friend was not the first K'hari, though they are a kind less prone to wrongdoing than is yours."

"And what do you propose to do to me that the desert hasn't already done?" I asked.

It laughed. "The wicked always think of justice in terms of pain or death. There are other things ... worse things." It half-turned toward a small table at its elbow and took from it a book. It flipped through the pages, running a many-jointed finger down each one. "Had you left that last deed undone – the corruption of children is the one thing we cannot forgive – you might have fared better. Theft harms the thief, murder the murderer, each carrying its own punishment in the diminution of the spirit. But that last deed was one we do not forgive."

It stared at me intently. "I might have sent you into the desert, but that would be too quick and easy. I might feed you to our spawn, but that, too, is too fast. Your last deed earned you long suffering. One thing only prevents my sentencing you to the worst punishment we can give. Your love for your companion is the single leavening I find in your heart.

"I sentence you to the city. A house will open to you. Think long, Edward Ackroyd. You will have the time for that."

An alien will gripped me, marching me up from the temple, the park, past Gheir's body, to a house, whose door stood open.

A human hand came through the opening to jerk me inside. "Hurry, Fool! Help me seal up the door. They will get in! Help me push the bars!"

We set metal bars into heavy loops and sealed the doorway with wax about the edges. The very breeze was stopped out of the house. Then I had the chance to look at the bearded man who had admitted me.

The big room in which I stood was brightly lit. Some dozen beings, human, K'hari, even Zeeramun, lurked about its walls in deep chairs. They seemed to be listening; their eyes were fearful.

Then I, too, heard the sounds from beyond the walls. I recognized individual voices... voices long stopped with dust. I heard the cries of children in the grip of Nephros-weed. I knew the soft weeping that was my mother's. Every crime I had ever done, every ill thought I ever entertained is there, outside.

I wish most devoutly that I had left that last deed undone. That Gheir and I had drunk ourselves into stupors and been hauled back to the ship and away. Gheir knew... there is nothing so terrible as justice.

For all my sins are prowling about this house, hissing at the shutters, prying chilly fingers about the sealed door. All my sins will besiege me... for the rest of time!

HALLIMORE'S DOG

(Here's another bird hunting story, with a nasty twist and also including my favorite English setter.)

I swear to God I didn't mean to do it. It happened so fast – the dogs flushed a covey of quail, I swung my twelve-gauge to follow them, and Clay Hallimore's big red face loomed up in my sights. It was so easy. So accidental!

The gun barked, and his face exploded into hamburger. I was as surprised and sick as if it had been completely an accident, one of those awful hunting mishaps that always happen to somebody else. My belly turned over, and I threw up right where I stood. The deputies found it later and it counted in my favor.

Clay's setter came running back, his little black eyes on me all the time. He was a fine retriever, and he'd been looking for shot birds, but you'd have thought he was a bloodhound the way he went for me. It was like he knew I'd finally got even with Clay ...

I had to kill him, or he'd have killed me. He went down with a load of shot in his head, but he kept moving toward me, and it took two in the heart to stop him. Then I had to get rid of him before I called the sheriff. Shooting his master might seem like an accident, but there was no way to explain shooting the dog, as well.

I caught him by ears and tail, to keep blood off me, and carried him down the draw into a dry wash, where I kicked dirt over him. Nobody was going to worry about a dog, with everything else going on.

When I went back to start putting on my act, that damn Hallimore was moving. You can shoot a man once, by accident, but twice has to be murder. I couldn't finish him off without putting my own tail in a crack. But the way his head was all torn up, I couldn't see him living long; if he did, surely he wouldn't be able to say anything.

So I went into my act, yelling for help, bending over him to beg him to be all right. It was too far for anyone to hear, of course, so I broke into a staggering run toward the store on the county road and

screamed like a stepped-on cat. Old man Benedict called the sheriff, the doctor, and even the preacher.

Then Mrs. Bonine, the storekeeper's wife, took me to their living quarters in the back of the store and made me lie down. By then I needed to. I'd convinced myself I'd lost my oldest friend, and I had a serious case of hysterics.

The county cars came skidding up before long, and I got up and went to show them where Clay was. Bonine and Mr. Benedict had gone on ahead, of course, to take care of Clay while the law got there, but the deputies were from the other side of the county and had to have a guide.

They treated me mighty tender, and once we got in sight of the mess they left me in the car while they went across the cornfield to the men hunkered down around Hallimore. After a while an ambulance screamed up, and I had myself a real good and genuine cry. First time in my life! That didn't hurt me a bit with the law, either.

Clay was in the operating room for hours, and they told his wife he wasn't going to make it. Then they said he might make it. Then, by God, he lived, but he couldn't see or hear or speak. Probably never would, they said.

Lizzie was a kindly woman, and she told my wife, "You tell Jock not to worry. He hasn't killed my Clay. Maybe that'll comfort him some. I know he's suffered something awful."

Well I had, but not from what she thought. I was scared to death somebody would dig back into the past and remember the old tale about Clay and my Pa. Of course nobody but me ever put everything together and understood that Clay could have missed running over Pa, even if it was dark, on a twisty road, and Pa was drunk as a boiled owl.

Still, a man lying in the middle of a sand road shows up as a dark patch, however dark the night may be. The Hallimores had itched for years over the fence-line that Pa disputed and won in court. I figured that Clay saw his chance and got even without risking anything.

The same as I had done.

But nobody called to mind what happened twenty years ago, and nobody doubted that I was shattered over shooting a fellow I'd grown up neighbors with. After a few weeks I let myself get better, a bit at a time, and went back to work at my winter job at the John Deere place, mechanicking.

I'd got away with it, slick as a whistle.

Over the next six months, I decided something was wrong with my eyes. I kept seeing something, just off the edge of my vision. Then it began to come into focus. Damned if a dog wasn't following me when I walked across my own land. I'd put in a corn crop that spring, and it kept me busy thinning it. I was out a lot, and off to one side there was always a black dog, watching me.

One morning, with white mist on the ground and the sun just coming up, I saw him plain, sitting in the ditch. I whistled at it. Lots of bird dogs get lost, but this one didn't come running.

When I got within six feet of it, I saw it was that setter of Hallimore's. The marks of my birdshot were all over his head and chest.

He couldn't be there, but I aimed my twenty-two. Before I could pull the trigger, he was gone, popped like a bubble.

Damn!

From that day on I never took a step outside that I didn't hear the pad of paws in the trail behind me. Sometimes I saw him; most often there was nothing there, just those quiet sounds in the dust.

It got to me. I made a pretty fair crop, and my boss in Dalby let me off for a week in the middle of September. Said I looked peaked and needed a rest.

I did, at that. We went to Galveston, stayed in a nice hotel, and laid around on the beach doing nothing much in particular. There was no black setter there, and I felt a lot better.

Quick as we got home, though, there he was again. I never hunted any more, just went out when I had to fix fence or tend the cattle or go to work. The dog came closer, clear up to the house. I could look out at night and there'd be two bright eyes shining and a row of white teeth. His black coat didn't show up against the dark.

Then it started talking to me. Not so my wife could hear, but in the night, real soft, after I went to sleep. It talked in Clay's voice, that was as familiar to me as my own Pa's.

"Jock," it'd begin, "you just don't know how black it is. Nothing comes in. Nothing can get out. Silence and darkness, that's all. If it wasn't for old Whiz, I'd go teetotal crazy, but he's the best dog anybody ever had. He didn't go wherever dead dogs go to. He came to me. He's the only one can hear me or carry word for me."

I woke up in a cold sweat and looked out my window. Whiz was looking right back at me, through the glass. I scootched down and hid my face against Trudy's back, but that didn't stop the dog.

"You're the only one can see and hear us, Jock. Proves what a good friend you are. The only person in the world I can get through to. We're grateful you let us come visit you. It gets so lonesome, here in the dark. We'll be your friends forever, Jock. You'll never have to worry about being lonely. We'll see to that."

Didn't the fool know I shot him on purpose? But he sounded as if he meant every word. The dog knew – why couldn't he make his master understand I tried to murder him? But maybe the communication only went one way.

I tried talking, confessing, out in the woods while the dog padded along behind me. I went back to hunting, because there was no security inside the house any more, and I talked and talked while we trudged through the fields. Nothing helped. I had nothing but gratitude till it made me plumb sick.

I stood it for a year. When I couldn't take any more, I went and finished off Clay. Wasn't hard – I just crept into his hospital room one night and shut off his oxygen for a minute. Then I turned it back on, hid till the nurse went back around the corner, and left. They expected him to die anyway, and nobody was surprised.

It didn't help a bit. By then he and his damn dog were so used to trailing after me they didn't know how to quit.

Which is why I'm writing this letter. I want Trudy to know that I'm not killing myself because of anything she's done. She's been true

blue all the way. I just can't live with my ghosts any more, and I want her to understand that.

I don't give a damn about anybody else.

Signed:
Jock Falls Wyndom

(Dead of Night, Spring, 1995)

LIKE MOTHER USED TO MAKE

(I love weird westerns – my friend and colleague Joe Lansdale got me hooked on those. This is weirder than most.)

He rode into town lank as a winter wolf and mean-tempered to boot. When he stalked into the saloon (the inevitable Silver Dollar), he dropped three neat whiskeys into his empty belly and turned to the bartender.

"I been eating my own cooking until I'm ready to quit eating entirely," he growled. "I don't want no restaurant nonsense. I don't want no fly-specked bar goodies. I want real FOOD, like Mama used to make. Is there one single person in this flea-bit town that takes in boarders and feeds 'em as if they was people instead of hogs?"

The man behind the sticky bar gave a half-hearted swipe with a dirty rag and pursed his mouth. "There's Miz Peabody ... but her cookin' ain't just the thing. Miz Grueber takes in a roomer, now her man's dead and gone, but she's already got the schoolteacher there. Hmmm." His brow wrinkled painfully, as if it hurt him to think.

Then his eyes cocked up at Mark Shaftoe as if sizing him up. "Course, there's Emmy Whittle. But she's...she's real special. Don't like nobody rowdy or that cusses a lot. Don't take many drifters"... he stared hard at the dust on Shaftoe's shoulders and pants legs.

"She treats her folks like they was kin. She sort of mothers 'em, y'see? Course, she really likes her boarders to like their vittles, too. She hates a skinny man. Can't wait to fat him up, when one comes along. If you intend to stay around for a while, you'd be just her cup of tea. She'd have that big old iron stove of hers goin' like a steam engine, gettin' stuff fixed to fill out them bones of yours."

Shaftoe was leaning forward over the bar. "Aim me at her," he said. "I need just that sort of place for a month or two."

As he followed the man's directions, leading Yellowbone, he watched the street closely. Nobody there gave him a second look ... men at loose ends were nothing extra, here in Packsaddle Stop, it seemed.

There was no sign on Emmy Whittle's boarding house. Evidently she took only those boarders sent to her by word of mouth. That told Shaftoe a lot – she probably had all the business she could manage. And if she was the sort of cook the bartender hinted at ... he sighed with anticipation. It would purely hurt him to have to rob and kill her, once he got ready to go on. Still, that was the way he did things, and he didn't break his own rules.

The house was tall and narrow, with a porch that ran all the way around it, front to back. A line of rocking chairs sat there, and it was late enough for most of them to be filled.

Shaftoe nodded as he clinked up the steps onto the porch. Banker, the steadier sorts of cowhands, drummers, four old ladies in black dresses and little shoulder shawls, a really obese Chinese in yellow silk, waving a little fan before his perspiring face ... a motley bunch. Ripe for the picking, it looked as if.

He smiled politely at the skinny young woman who elbowed the door open as she came out with a tray loaded with cups. He slid past her into the cool dimness of a wide central hall. He could smell something heavenly – roast beef, perhaps. And apple pie with cinnamon. And fresh-baked bread ... his mouth began to water.

Someone called from the back ... the kitchen, he thought, "Who's there? Come here so's I can see you!"

He stalked down the polished boards of the hall and stood in the door of a big room that was dominated by a cookstove of Herculean proportions. From it came an array of odors that almost made him faint with hunger.

The woman who stood there was large and fair, her body sturdy without being fat. She had wiped her hair back with a floury wrist, for there was a streak of white across her forehead. Her round cheeks were flushed, and her cornflower eyes surveyed him shrewdly.

"New boarder?" she asked, her tone neutral.

"The man from The Silver Dollar advised me to come here. Just in case you might have room for me," he said. He made his eyes shine, as he had trained them to do, and his expression showed nothing but

trustworthiness. "He said that you're the best cook this side of the Mississippi." Which was a lie, but couldn't do any harm.

She looked him up and she looked him down. She frowned for a moment as if trying to find a spot in which to put his skinny frame. Then she smiled and held out her floury hand.

"Emmy Whittle," she said. "Welcome to my house. You look as if you could stand a little home cooking. Staying long? I don't like to take in short-timers. Less'n a week, and I can't be bothered."

Mark Shaftoe sighed and grinned. "I intend to stay until you run me off, if I can find me some kind of a job to keep me goin'. At least a month, if I can't. That all right with you?"

Emmy turned back to the oven, which was filling the kitchen with heartbreaking smells of bread and cake and pie. She opened the door, revealing a space in which she could have baked half an ox, and pulled out a rack of pie-pans with an iron hook. Sliding them onto a marble-topped cook table, she closed the door and turned back to Mark.

"Get washed up for dinner. The folks on the porch is havin' coffee, right now, but it'll be time to eat pretty soon. First door on the left at the very top of the stairs. Top, mind you – that's the onliest place I've got left, and it's pretty small."

Mark went back to Yellowbone and took down his packs. A small boy was pretending to play marbles in the dust of the road, but he was really watching the newcomer. Mark flipped him a dime.

"Take my horse over to the livery?" he asked. "Tell the man I'm staying here at Miz Whittle's and I'll be over after supper."

The child grabbed the coin and the reins almost at once. He tugged the tired beast across the dusty street and into the dark maw of the stable. Shaftoe watched them go, feeling oddly restful. It had been years since he had found a place where he could put up his feet and really relax, and this one seemed just that sort. A shame... but he shrugged away the thought and went to find his room.

Fall came in with gusting winds and a flurry of early snow. Shaftoe rode in from his piddling little handyman job huddled in his heavy jacket. He was feeling smug – this was the first winter in years that he

would be warm and well fed. His plan to finish his business in Packsaddle kept getting put off and put off, for he never had been so comfortable in his life.

Not to mention the fact that his belly had moved away from his backbone. While he didn't have a paunch, exactly, he was getting a bit of flesh round the middle. Have to watch that ... but Emmy's cooking made it mighty hard. He even, once in a while, toyed with the thought of marrying her instead of murdering her. But he shook that away as unworthy of him. He had, after all, his professional standards, and they were strict.

He washed up on the back porch, and Prue, Emmy's handy-girl, had hot water waiting in a can for him. He slicked back his hair and went into the hall, smelling the food that was already being put onto the long table in the dining room.

"Oh, Mr. Shaftoe," fluttered Miss Filligan, the youngest of the old ladies, "You're late tonight. We were worried about you." Her faded eyes brightened as he took her arm gallantly and ushered her into the dining room to join her two sisters and cousin at their usual end of the table.

Wang, the Chinaman, bent his head slightly in greeting. His little fan lay on the table beside his plate, and his pudgy fingers kept playing with the silk cord on its handle as they waited for their hostess to join them. He had grown fatter in the months Shaftoe had lived in the Whittle house. It was a wonder that even the stout mahogany chairs could hold his weight.

The banker and the single drummer entered and sat, and at last Emmy Whittle made her entrance. She always dressed fresh for dinner, and she looked cheery and bright in a dress patterned with scarlet poppies. But she looked sad, and her gaze kept turning toward Wang as she served the plates.

Before they rose from the table, at last, she tapped on her glass with a teaspoon. "My friends," she said in her light soprano, "I have some saddening news. Our friend Mr. Wang will be leaving us this week. We will miss him, but he says that his business here is finished and he must return to San Francisco. I can only hope that he and our Mr.

Wingate have prospered, and that he will come again, one day, to stay in our home."

Wang was beaming. His small black eyes shone as he struggled to his feet and bowed as well as a perfectly round figure can manage to do.

"Is great pleasure to say, will return when can," he said. Instead of sitting again, he went out with Wingate to the parlor, leaving Shaftoe to finish his dessert and follow more slowly.

Emmy caught him as he left the dining room. "You are looking so well, Mr. Shaftoe," she said, her tone arch. "I feel that I have been able to improve your health, during your stay. Do you think you will continue until Christmas with us? We do have such a jolly time, then, with a feast that will astonish you."

He bent over her hand in a courtly manner he hadn't used in a decade. "My dear lady, I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

He went up to his room and lay on his narrow bed, boots carefully propped on the foot rail. He was becoming puzzled as to his best move. Rules were all very well, but when it meant hurting yourself to go by your principles ... he was more and more tempted to marry Emmy and let the whole business go.

The week passed slowly, with nasty weather delaying Wang's departure. At last one morning Emmy greeted those at breakfast with the news that he had left very early.

"He said that he was already late, and there was a wagon going to Denver that could take him and all his things. He said to tell you all goodbye and that he hopes to see you again." She looked chipper, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed.

There was a murmur around the table, and Mark found he was going to miss the colorful shape of Wang about the house. He was a note of Oriental splendor you didn't often see in a town like Packsaddle.

If he'd had any idea of leaving before Christmas, it dissipated in the next several weeks. The food, which had been good, became superlative. Emmy seemed excited and pleased, and the house was

filled with cheerful voices and bright faces. A sort of Paradise, Mark thought as he went in and out about his small job.

Then he found the fan. It was purely accidental – the thing had been kicked beneath the heavy settee in the parlor, where Wang's imprint still marked the plush upholstery. Mark's lucky dollar rolled under, as he flipped it, and he got onto his hands and knees to retrieve the thing. It had been given him by his aunt, who was the first of his victims, and he had a sentimental attachment to it.

The room was empty, for everyone had gone to the church for a carol-singing. Mark took the fan upstairs to his room and sat for a long time on the bed. Wang might well have dropped it and been unable to find it. He couldn't, obviously, crawl under after it as he had done.

The Chinaman might have had more than one, in fact. But somehow Mark felt that he would never have gone away and left the bauble behind. He pushed away the thought that kept trying to creep into his mind. Emmy ... was Emmy. The thought was absurd.

But he went downstairs before day, the next morning, and crept cautiously into the back yard. He wanted a look at the smokehouse, where Emmy hung the meat she butchered herself. He wanted to know, surely and certainly, if he had been eating Chinaman for the past several weeks, though he had to admit that if so, it was the best meat he had ever put a tooth into.

The door was padlocked, but that didn't slow him more than a minute.

There was a side of meat hanging in the chill darkness. The scent of smoke was thick in the little room, but the smoulder under the meat didn't give any light at all. Mark found a sulphur match and struck it. He found himself looking into Wang's eyes – upside down and open.

His stomach heaved. Something that felt ridiculously like righteous indignation filled him. What a horrible thing he had discovered! He must go to the sheriff, get a warrant, have Emmy Whittle arrested for murder. For cannibalism. For... but what about him and the others? Did they share in her guilt? What would the law say about that?

As he stood in the darkness, pondering the situation, the solution came to him in a flash. He need only go through with his original plan. To kill Emmy now would be a just and necessary thing. To rob her was only what she deserved.

He turned toward the door, but there was a shape there. Something glittered in its hand.

"Oh, dear," said Emmy Whittle. "I wanted to save you for New Year's, and now I'll have to go ahead. But the weather's plenty cold... you shouldn't spoil."

She moved toward him, and Shaftoe stepped back and back, until he felt Wang's cold nose against his neck. Then she swung the cleaver, and he never worried about anything again.

(Horizons West, August, 1990)

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