

A BRIDGE TO FARTHING

On behalf of those gathered here, I thank you, Dr. Quentin, for sharing your story. I would have to say that you and your fellow adventurer Cracker Jack Smith are lucky indeed to have faced [The Colossus](#) and lived to tell the tale. You having mentioned a tormented village and a terrible monster reminded me of an adventure of my own, one that took place not so very far from here. For as you see, there are monsters born of nature and monsters born of the madness of men. And then there are monsters born of something else altogether. But I digress; allow me to start from the beginning:

Having invested a bit of coin and a quite a bit of labor into a motorized dirigible of my own design, I set out from Middlesborough with the intent of giving the newly-christened *Caelum Puppis* an uneventful maiden flight.

It was a beautiful afternoon, clear and bright with no omens of what the day would eventually bear. The *Caelum Puppis* performed admirably, its side rotors giving it far more maneuverability than your average balloon and the motor allowing me to achieve speeds approaching three knots. I was especially pleased that I was able to operate it with just the assistance of my right-hand man, Cyrus. Even the late inclusion of my dog Stripe didn't complicate matters as he contented himself with peering out the port-side window and barking at the occasional bird.

I had initially planned on swinging the craft toward Skelton to trace the shoreline and perhaps even hazarding a short excursion over the ocean. But we were not more than a mile from the North Sea when disaster struck. As I maneuvered the steering pedals to bring the airship seaward, a flock of geese suddenly turned toward the craft, sending dozens of feathered missiles directly into our path. Unable to avoid this avian interference, I braced for what I assumed would be minimal impact. Unfortunately one of the birds found its way into the aft motor, jamming the gears and rendering it useless. An impetuous gale pushed the ship south and east. Vain were our struggles to navigate northward. After a brief consultation with Cyrus, I decided to put the *Caelum Puppis* down before my investment was further damaged.

Those of you familiar with Northern England have already plotted my course and have no doubt come to the same conclusion I came to that fateful day. A glance out the viewport confirmed my fears: as far as the eye could see, stretched out before me like some shimmering gray-green spectre sprawled the legendary North York Moors. We'd have to land the craft in the marshy mess below.

My primary concern was the safety of the *Caelum Puppis* and I sought to put her down on a spot as flat and free of foliage as possible. The task was made tricky by the devilish crosswinds, and Cyrus struggled mightily with the ballasts before we finally brought the airship down with an unceremonious clatter. We jumped out and worked quickly to reduce the hydrogen levels in the dirigible's sack so that we could use the tacking ropes to lash the airship to the ground.

The craft secured, I opened the aft hatch and watched Stripe bound out. He yelped happily, pranced about for a moment, but suddenly stopped and slunk low to the ground. He whimpered and crept to my side. I commented to Cyrus that this was most unusual behavior, Stripe usually being the sort of hound to immediately take to investigating his surroundings.

“He must be a bit woozy from the harsh landing,” offered my assistant. “It rattled my bones as well.”

“I’m sure he’ll be right as rain presently.” I glanced up at the darkening sky. “It looks like we’ll have to set out on foot. Prepare the packs.”

We’d only planned on taking a day trip so our provisions were meagre. Cyrus assembled some tack bread and of course the makings for tea. Fortunately, I am always prepared for adventure. I unpacked two Martini-Henry .45 caliber carbines and a box of like ammunition, and patted my side where I wore – as is my custom – my Webley service revolver.

Having gathered our provisions, we took stock of the situation. I adjusted my bowler and pulled my collar up against the sudden cold. “We could set out for the coast and hope to find a blacksmith with the tools we require.”

Cyrus shook his ugly head, his unkempt whiskers covering his scowl. “We’ve blown a good five miles into the moor; on foot, we’d not make it out before sundown. And these moors are not to be negotiated with any faith after dark.”

“We could camp here, seeking shelter in the cabin of the *Caelum Puppis* and hope she’s spotted tomorrow.”

He shook his head again, a habit I was beginning to find most grating. “Not many folk travel the moors, sir, and the type that do you don’t want to come across, especially not at night.”

“Well then Cyrus, you’re a northerner and I am but a midlander,” I said with subtle irony I assumed would be lost on him. “What do you suggest?”

He spat a bit of snuff juice onto the ground at my feet, earning a low growl from Stripe. “There’s a village, shouldn’t be too far from here. It’s peopled by sturdy moor folk and not often visited by strangers. But I’ve been there a time or two; if we ply them with coin I suspect they’d be inclined to help us.”

“Very well then, lead the way.”

As we traipsed along in the gloaming I paid mind to our surroundings with a more discerning eye. The ground was uneven, with dense scrubby bushes and a smattering of bent trees. With the sun slipping toward the cloud-covered horizon, coils of fog crept out the bog. On the other horizon a low moon hung half-hidden in clouds.

I looked at Stripe, slinking along at my side. Ordinarily he'd be bounding ahead of us, sticking his curious snout into every bush and heather. Instead, the pitiful hound skulked and whimpered, never more than a foot from my side as he reluctantly plodded along.

We made our way down a small hill and came upon a rough path. "This way to the village," noted Cyrus.

It wasn't much of a trail – one never would have seen it unless specifically looking for it. "How much farther?"

Cyrus scrunched up his lips, causing snuff juice to trickle out of the corner of his mouth. "Not more than a half-mile. There should be a bridge along here presently..."

So there was: a narrow wooden structure with no rails, scarcely wide enough for a horse. It spanned a stream—in truth, more of a marsh. In the darkness I could not see any moving water, only oily pools reflecting the dim moonlight. Reeds and small, bent bushes poked feebly skyward here and there; frogs burped and insects chattered. It seemed as remote a place as any on Earth and I voiced my doubts about a village being nearby. Cyrus merely pointed to a post near the bridge on which hung a piece of rough wood hacked into a primitive fingerpost, pointing toward the other side, bearing in crude letters the missive: FARTHING.

"Farthing," he said. "The name of the village."

We began to cross, first Cyrus then I, followed closely by my unhappy hound. Just then a tormented wail shattered the eerie silence, freezing us to the spot. The hair stood up on my neck and Stripe whimpered as the horrid howl faded. Cyrus looked back over his shoulder and muttered: "Wolf."

It bore only the slightest resemblance to any lupine bay I'd ever heard but I said nothing. I reached down to pet poor Stripe and found his hide shivering. He licked my hand and looked at me with knowing eyes.

Cyrus began plodding forward again. "We best keep moving – t'is dark as the devil out here, and cold too."

We eased across the rest of the bridge under the darkening mantle of clouds. At the far side, my boots slipped on a soft bed of moss and mud and I righted myself with the butt of my carbine.

After another quarter hour of trudging along the scant trail I glimpsed a dim light ahead. Cyrus waited until I was alongside. He produced a flask of whisky, took a draught, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and nodded ahead. "Farthing."

And thus we came upon the village moments later, though I hesitate to use the term 'village,' for it was no more than a collection of rough, wooden buildings clustered around an overgrown square, which housed not a fountain nor a bandstand, but a gallows. A lone pole bore a flickering gaslight which meekly fought the incoming fog. And though it wasn't yet 7:00 in the evening, not a single window was lit, save one at the end of the dirt road.

We made for this lone light, Cyrus striding along as if he walked down King's Road; I, on the other hand, was much more aware of the shuttered windows. I wondered who lurked behind them, watching us with unseen eyes.

"I seem to recall a smithy here of considerable skill," Cyrus said as he approached the lighted house. "I'm sure yonder villager will know which house is his. Perhaps a few coins will persuade him to open up his shop at this late hour."

He knocked on a door of crooked pine boards; it rattled on its hinges like a coughing rheumatic. He waited a dozen seconds before laying to it a second time. Stripe growled and pawed the moist earth. Presently it opened and I braced myself for the sight of the grizzled visage of some old denizen of the moor, a bent and shriveled gnome with toddy on his breath. Instead my nose caught a whiff of perfume and as Cyrus abruptly bowed and took off his felt cap, I peered around him to see a most unexpectedly lovely face.

"May I help you?" she said in a perfect Oxford accent.

I stepped past Cyrus, sweeping off my bowler. "A thousand apologies for this untoward intrusion, m' lady. My name is Nelson Stanfield." I reached into my jacket and produced a card.

She took it in one hand and wrinkled an attractive little nose as she read, her other hand still holding the door half closed. "Artificer and Adventurer?" She looked me up and down. "What a most unorthodox occupation."

I found the unforeseen scrutiny of such a lovely lady unsettling. "Well, yes...we each have our calling." I swallowed. "Perhaps I could speak to the man of the house, your father or your..."

"I have no husband, Mr. Stanfield, thank you very much for your presumption. And my father is...not at home right now. Now perhaps you two...*adventurers* can tell me what brings you to my door at this late hour."

Cyrus stepped in and saved me. "We've had a mishap in the moor and we are in need of some tools and technical assistance. If you could point us toward the local smithy we'll leave ye to your nighttime ruminations." He bowed again, his faux Soho charm as ill-fitting as his wool britches.

The young lady smiled; if she'd found my manner brusque, she seemed to find Cyrus possessing of a certain cowboy charm. "Miles Baskerville is our smithy – you'll find his house three down on the left. But be careful knocking upon his door – you might see the wrong end of his old blunderbuss. The villagers are all a bit jumpy, with what has been going on lately."

"We've not heard of any troubles, Miss," I said. "Perhaps we could be of assistance."

She looked at Stripe and then at our rifles. "Perhaps you could. Though I warn you, it could be more dangerous than even an *Artificer and Adventurer* might care for."

I looked at Cyrus. I couldn't tell if his crooked grin was because he was game for the challenge or if he merely enjoyed her sarcasm. To save face I assumed the former.

"My lady," I said while executing another bow, "we are at your service."

She looked doubtful for a moment, then she stepped aside and let us in. For the first time I able to get a good look at her. Pretty, to be sure. Her body was pleasantly angular and she had beautiful blue-black hair pulled up off her brow; she wore no hat. Her face seemed chiseled from the finest ivory; her cheekbones were swept high and regal, and her piercing blue eyes bespoke of intelligence and curiosity.

"My name is Mary Talbot," she said a tad too formally. "And I'd like you to find my father."

"Your father? Has he run off?"

Her look threatened to wither me. "No, Mr. Stanfield, he didn't *run off*. He was taken. But I am getting ahead of myself. Please sit down and let me get you something to drink."

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"It all started several months ago," she was saying a few minutes later, as we sat at a small table in the kitchen, taking tea and biscuits. "That's when the disappearances began."

I stopped with piping hot earl grey at the edge of my cup. "Disappearances?" You mean there's been more than one?"

"Yes, five in all, my father being the first. People taken in the middle of the night, right from their homes."

"Taken you say? By whom?"

"Not by whom, Mr. Stanfield, but what."

I set my tea cup down. Even Cyrus stopped assaulting his crumpet and looked at the lovely lady with arched eyebrows. "I thought you said they were taken from their homes."

"They were. Even right from their beds, near as we can tell."

"Hardly sounds like the work of some beast," said Cyrus.

A gleam came into her eyes, giving them an almost ethereal intensity. "Not just some beast, good sir. A lycanthrope."

Stripe whimpered under the table; she reached out and patted his head.

Cyrus looked puzzled. "A what?"

"Miss Talbot here is saying that a werewolf has been terrorizing this village," I said. "Young lady, how did you arrive at such an outlandish conclusion?"

The dim candlelight scarcely cloaked the gleam in her eye. “I grew up here on the moor; my great-grandfather used to tell me stories about a monster, half-man half-wolf that terrorized the village many years ago. The graves in the cemeteries were unearthed and the bodies snatched away. Grown men and women disappeared on the moor. Children were carried off in the dead of night, never to be seen again. And hunters reported seeing a creature walking upright like a man but wild about the face, long of fang and feral of eye, covered head to toe in fur.”

“And of course these sightings and violent events all occurred while the moon was full, correct?”

She ignored the sarcasm in my voice and nodded her head vigorously. “Yes! And the same is true now. On each full moon over the last five months someone in our village has gone missing, vanished without a trace. I always thought the old stories were merely meant to scare the children, but...what if there *is* something out there?”

“Miss Talbot,” I said calmly. “Judging from your lexicon and diction you are an educated woman. Why would you believe old stories told by superstitious locals and frightened fools? There is no evidence that creatures such as werewolves and vampires exist at all. This is an enlightened age. We’ve all moved past that nonsense. Even in the northern countries where such beliefs have long persisted it has been widely accepted that such monsters only exist in the imaginations of the illiterate.”

“Not everything can be explained by science, Mr. Stanfield. But I see you are partial to facts. Very well then. It is *fact* that someone or something has been terrorizing this village. It is *fact* that someone or something has abducted my father and four other villagers. And it is *fact* that I am asking you to help us. To help me.”

I drew in a deep breath and looked at Cyrus; he merely shrugged. “I need to talk to the smithy about repairing my machine – I can’t very well leave it lying about the moor. Once I have secured the *Caelum Puppis* perhaps Cyrus and I can look into this matter.”

“Very well then, but I must press upon you the urgency of the situation.” She reached across the table and put her silk soft hand atop mine. “Sir, have you looked at a calendar today?”

“I do not need to, good lady, for I am well aware that it is Thursday the 28th.”

“I think she speaks of the moon,” said Cyrus. He walked over to the window and pulled the heavy drapes aside. The silver light of a full moon filtered into the room.

She squeezed my hand so hard I almost winced. “Please help us, sir. Or the blood spilt will be on your hands.”

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Two hours later I left the smithy’s shop minus more than a little silver. Although the price had been steep, he appeared to have the necessary tools in his shop and I was cheered by the prospect of having the *Caelum Puppis* back in the air on the morrow. But now it was getting quite late and the little village

of Farthing was locked up tight. The streets were empty and the buildings all dark, but the town was lit well by the large bonfire burning in the town square, its orange flames giving the town's structures a blood-red glow. Atop every rooftop sat villagers armed with various weapons, including the blunderbuss Ms. Talbot had previously mentioned, a musket or two, a bevy of pitchforks, stones and even sharpened sticks.

"It looks to be a vigilant lot out there," I said as I stepped into her cottage.

Miss Talbot nodded solemnly. "Aye, they are determined not to be victimized yet again."

"Only a supernatural creature could breach the impressive show of force I witnessed on the rooftops," I said, giving her a wry grin. I hung my jacket up on the coat rack and leaned my rifle against the wall.

"Now that the village is secure, let's talk about your father. You say he was taken out of this very house in the dead of night?"

"That's what the villagers have told me." She looked particularly pretty in the low light from the lantern. "I was away at Oxford and didn't arrive until the next day. I tried to assemble a search party but found no able-bodied men willing to leave the village. Nor would anyone loan me a horse, so I could not set out alone. Each day since, I have prayed for his return--to no avail.

"But my father was just the beginning. Each month thereafter, under a full moon, someone was taken from their home and never heard from again. I was struck by the similar circumstances in their disappearances." She ticked them off on her elegant fingers. "Always a single person. In the dead of night. Under a full moon. Vanished without a trace."

"And that's when you decided these disappearances were the work of a...ah...werewolf?"

She produced several large tomes from behind her and set them on the table, her eyes aglow. "Yes. And I am not the only one who has come to that conclusion. It appears that my father also suspected that a werewolf was loose upon the moor."

"Odd. I thought you said he was the first one to go missing."

"And he was. At least the first we know about. But there must have been others. In his study I found books and handwritten notes, the results of the research my father was doing at the time of his disappearance. Here." She pointed to a stack of books and loose papers on the small desk behind us. "Events such as these have taken place for centuries, all across Europe, not just here in the moor. The legend speaks of a creature both man and wolf, transforming when the moon is full into a monster whose strength is only matched by its bloodlust. My father knew something was going on, something strange and evil. He writes of a curse of ancient origins and it seems as though he'd dedicated all his time to trying to find a way to battle this evil."

She started to open one of the books but I stayed her with a hand on the shoulder. "I am well versed in the legend of the lycanthrope, Miss Talbot. And while I find your enthusiasm refreshing, I am shocked at the pliancy with which you have given in to such superstitious nonsense. I don't doubt that there is

some creature out there in the moor; I believe we heard its howl when we approached the village. But it is only an animal, not some hirsute horror of magical origins.” She started to argue but I shushed her by gently speaking over her objections. “And to prove it, on the morrow, Cyrus and I will track and kill the beast and bring you its hide.”

“And my father?”

“Should we find any evidence of what---”

I was interrupted by a shout, followed by the retort of a musket and then outright cacophony. I grabbed my coat and my rifle and nearly ran into Cyrus coming in the door as I was running out.

“Excitement, Cyrus?”

“Aye.”

“Where?”

“Over yonder, from the sound of it.”

We ran, covering the short distance in scant seconds. Nearly the entire village had gathered around a small shack on the edge of town. I corralled a youth by the shirtsleeve. “You there, boy, what’s the clamor about?”

“John Garnier spied somethin’ jus’ when it was creepin’ in the widda Endore’s house! Says he shot it with his musket too!”

We muscled into the crowd. Down in a gully behind a plain wooden cottage several men were poking around by the light of a lantern. “Right here, blood!” shouted a young man with a still-smoking flintlock in the crux of his arm. “I told you: I shot the fiend!”

A murmur of excitement went up from the gathered villagers. I talked over them with a calm but stern voice. “I don’t see a carcass. Perhaps your aim wasn’t as good as you claim. Or perhaps what you saw was merely a shadow.”

He blinked up at me from the gully, the pale lantern light illuminating his scant whiskers, his words coming in an exuberant utterance. “I was naught but 12 yards from it, sir. It lurked in the shadows but I saw it sure enough – t’was nearly as big as yon house! I squeezed off a fine shot, I did. And I hit it square between the shoulders, I swear it!”

I made my way down into the gulley and examined the earth at his feet. I took off my glove and touched the dark spot on the ground and put my fingers to my nose. “It’s blood, sure enough,” I said to Cyrus. Then louder, to the rest of the crowd: “Something’s been wounded here, to be sure, though if it be man or beast I cannot say.”

A chorus of excited shouts broke out among the villagers, with the general consensus of the din being that it was most certainly a werewolf and that the monster should be pursued now, while it was hurt.

“You might not want to go chasing an injured animal through the moor at night,” I said loudly. “If Mr. Garnier’s claim is true, then the beast has most likely crawled off to die.”

“We appreciate your advice, stranger,” said Garnier. “But it’s not been your kin what’s been dragged out into the darkness never to be seen again. I say we track the creature and kill it now, lest it heals itself and returns to torment us yet again!”

This suggestion was met by an excited chorus of cheers. The stouter men in the group began gathering lanterns and weapons while the women and young boys cheered them on. They were in the process of assembling hounds to follow the scent of the wounded prey when Cyrus and I returned to Miss Talbot’s bungalow.

We found her on the front stoop, a man’s overcoat pulled over her nightclothes. “What was all that commotion about?” We told her about the alleged shooting and the posse being assembled. “And you’re not joining them?”

Cyrus shrugged with typical lassitude. I stepped past her into the house. “It’s a wild goose chase; they’ll either find a wolf dead in the brambles or find nothing at all.”

“And what of your promise to find my father?”

I set my rifle against the wall and poured myself a cup of tea. “I don’t see what that has to do with the fool’s errand underway over yonder.”

“Don’t you see, Mr. Stanfield? The answer to what happened to my father lies at the end of that bloody trail. Will you not go out with those men and see what they find?”

I glanced at Cyrus, who gave a predictable shrug. I swung my eyes back to Miss Talbot standing there in her bedclothes, her crystal blue eyes sheened with tears, looking so beautiful and so vulnerable. “Very well then.” I gave a short whistle and Stripe came out from his napping spot by the stove. I picked up my carbine. “We’ll be back.” I gave her a quick bow. “And that my lady is the only promise I can make.”

She rushed over to me and kissed me full on the lips. “Thank you...thank you so much.”

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Upon returning to the edge of town we discovered that the ragtag posse had left some minutes before. We set out after them, following their trail easily, for they cut a swath through the undergrowth as wide as several hansom cabs. Heading onto the moor, we slowed to cross the bridge and I marveled at the utter blackness of the night. I knew that somewhere above the mantle of clouds shimmered a full moon, but I could no longer see indication of its glow. The shadows seemed to be competing with each other to absorb what little light there was. But we made good time despite the darkness and we closed quickly on the posse. After 15 minutes of hiking we could hear their excited voices. In another moment these were drowned out by the clamoring of their hounds.

Apparently they’d found something.

We broke into a trot, with Stripe finally shaking his fear and trying to bolt ahead. Cyrus reached a big arm down to grab the dog, a motion I gave little mind to at the time. Just then I heard horrible howling and screams, animal or human I could not discern. This went on for perhaps a dozen seconds then quite suddenly the cacophony stopped, save for the excited voices of the nearby posse. Then a triumphant howl rang through the night, so near it rattled my bones. Cyrus and I broke into a run; we rounded a clump of trees to see the men scrambling up a small hill.

“Good God.” Garnier had been the first to scale the rise. Now he stood with his face frozen in horror. The rest of the posse joined him, with Cyrus and me two steps behind.

We looked upon a small clearing, bordered on the sides by rough trees and bushes, in front by the ridge on which we stood and along the back by a considerable boulder. But none of our eyes fell upon these commonplace trappings of the moor. Instead we stared in silent shock at the grisly scene before us. I had counted a half dozen hounds gathered at the village to track the beast and had I not, I could not begin to say how many dead and mangled dogs lay in the clearing, so rent and destroyed were their bodies. Limbs and body parts were strewn everywhere, with enough blood to stain the ground; bits of fur still hung in the air.

The men stood there astounded, their weapons slack by their sides. Those of a Catholic persuasion silently crossed themselves while I imagine Protestants among the lot uttered a prayer beneath their breath. Any non-believer in their midst surely doubted his atheism at that moment.

Finally a few muttered in disbelief:

“Ripped limb from limb!”

“What manner of beast could do this?”

“None that I’ve ever seen the likes of.”

“T’is a werewolf, for sure, or the work of the devil himself.”

Garnier stepped forward. “We must avenge the deaths of our friends, family and these poor hounds. The monster is close, gentlemen, let us strike now while it is wounded and spent from fighting.”

Some stood ready and eager; others looked about with doubt and fear in their eyes. I cleared my throat and put a friendly hand on Garnier’s shoulder. “Good men, the battle is done for this night. It’s dark and late, and the womenfolk are awaiting your return. Let us look upon these horrors from the keener vantage of daylight, after a few hours sleep and a hot meal.”

My words brought forth the lingering doubts of the meek and quelled the unthinking bloodlust of the bold. One by one we turned away from the carnage and began the trip back to the village.

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It was nearly three in the morning when we arrived back at the bungalow. We were cold and hungry, and I wondered how I would manage to explain to Miss Talbot that we had no answers for her, while at the same time asking her to allow us to sleep under her roof. I needn't have bothered rehearsing my words, for when I knocked on the door I found that it swung open on its own. The little house was empty.

"Where could she have gone off to at this hour?"

"I fear the answer to that question, Cyrus. Go quickly to the square and inquire if she's been seen."

"And where are you off to?"

"I've a hunch; one I pray is not true."

A mere three minutes later we were back at the cottage, and Cyrus reported that no one had seen Miss Talbot. But his news was inconsequential, as I explained while we jogged toward the stables with Stripe in tow.

"She's stolen a horse and headed out onto the moor."

"Alone? Why would she do such a thing?"

I'd already pondered that question, musing the reasons for such a rash and dangerous move, realizing that the motivations for finding out the fate of her father might run deep indeed. But all I offered to Cyrus was: "With women, one can never know."

He grunted his agreement as we burst into the stable. The poor stableman I had roused just moments ago stood sleepy-eyed between two quarter horses. "They're saddled and ready for you, sir. They're good horses, sure of foot and smart, too – the best I've got."

"Very fine, but I'm holding you to the price you quoted." We were pressed for time and I was in no mood for further haggling. Further, my purse had already been depleted by my trip to the smithy.

We mounted, stowing our rifles in the crooks of our left arms and guiding our horses away from the now-smoldering bonfire, Stripe loping along behind us. We sped down the darkened street, under the shadow of the gallows and out into the night. We slowed as we approached the bridge, dismounting and carefully guiding our mounts over the bog one by one. At the far side, Stripe set out ahead of us at a full sprint.

"Do you think he's after Miss Talbot or the beast?"

"Cyrus my friend, I fear either scent will bring us to the same dread place."

We followed along as best we could in the pervasive dark, which seemed to intensify after we'd crossed the bridge. Our journey was much hampered by coils of fog and mist which rose up out of the moor like ghosts escaping their graves. Broad columns had formed like thick grey curtains, swirling around us,

leaving our clothes and horses covered with a fine mist. It was as if the bog itself wished to warn us off our quest.

We kept our eyes ahead, trusting our steeds to pick their way over the uneven ground. Suddenly both horses drew to halt, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads – it was all we could do to stay in our saddles. We exchanged worried glances, but before we could speak, out of the brush before us rushed a horse, sans rider. It pounded over the ground at a full gallop, its eyes wide with terror, its saddle half hanging off its side. I called to it but its terror would not allow its pace to slacken, and it vanished into the fog behind us.

“Miss Talbot’s mount, I presume.”

“Well reasoned, Cyrus.” I gave my horse a kick. “Now ride, man, ride.”

We bolted off with no regard for the perilous ground or swirling fog. Even when the torch fell to the earth we continued riding hard, until a hideous howl split the night sky. We pulled up in a small clearing for a moment and tried to discern from whence the hellhound’s call had come. Then we heard a more familiar animal sound: the near-rabid barking and growling of Stripe. And then another growl, much more terrible and very much not of this earth. And very close by.

“This way,” said Cyrus, spurring his mount forward. I readied my rifle and followed close behind, over a small rise and into a clearing. The scene before us was scantily illuminated by the full moon, which had crested through an opening in the clouds in time to let us match with our eyes the horrors our ears had heard.

I first saw Miss Talbot, crumpled on the ground. Then Stripe, growling and snarling as if standing guard over her prone figure. And there, rising out of the darkness like Cerberus of lore came the beast. If erect, it would surely have been nearly seven feet tall, but instead it hunkered about on four legs, eying Stripe with red eyes. It glanced at us, then turned back toward Stripe and opened its horrid mouth to give a howl which chilled my blood and made the horses dance in terror. The fangs bared in its hideous mouth were nearly a foot long and its oversized paws each sported five talon-like claws.

Before we could fire our weapons, Stripe charged. The beast dropped lower to the ground, gnashed its teeth and met Stripe’s challenge with the casual swipe of a massive foreleg. Stripe sprawled backward, slamming off a boulder behind the monster. Before he could right himself the beast pounced on Stripe with a terrible scream, picking up my poor dog with its mouth and shaking his body like a cat would a mouse. Without a word we both fired. The creature shook from the impact of our bullets and tossed us a red-eyed glare. We cocked and fired again and again the beast’s body shuddered with the impact of our fusillade. It dropped Stripe from its mouth, let out another hideous howl and then leapt atop a large outcropping with a speed and agility I’d never seen the like of. It stopped for a half-second, gave us one more hate-filled glare then disappeared into the darkness.

We dismounted and slid down into the clearing. I hastened over to the prone form of Miss Talbot, taking her shaking frame in my arms.

“Oh Nelson, you came for me.”

“Of course I did; I can’t have you getting killed the very day we meet.” I stroked her hair. “Are you harmed?”

She shook her head. “I...I don’t think so.”

“Why in God’s good name are you out here alone?”

“I-I...I know it was stupid but I thought that while you all were occupying that...that thing that maybe it would be safe to look for my father.”

“Out here? Alone and unarmed? I ought to leave you here to teach you a lesson.” I squeezed her again and winked. “Now tell me what happened.”

“Oh Nelson, it was dreadful, just dreadful! The beast came upon me so suddenly, so terribly. It startled my horse and I was pitched to the ground. I landed and rolled and looked up. And there it stood, glowering over me. I crossed myself and prepared to die. But instead of attacking immediately it stared at me, moving towards me slowly. I was of course too terrified to move. It looked at me with those awful red eyes and I swear even though those orbs glowed with hatred and hunger, there seemed to be something almost...human in their depths. It put its horrible snout inches from my face and...sniffed me. Then it opened that terrible mouth and... and well just then Stripe came into the clearing and---oh dear, poor Stripe!”

We both glanced over at Cyrus, standing where the dog had fallen. He shook his head.

Miss Talbot began to sob. “Brave dog, he saved my life.”

“Insolent cur,” I said to mask the tears I felt forming. “Never could say no to a lady.”

When she’d recovered her wits, I helped her to her feet. Meanwhile Cyrus had scraped out a shallow grave and laid poor Stripe’s mangled body in it, covering it with dirt and leaves. “Lest the hellhound return,” he said with feigned practicality.

By the time he’d finished, I’d managed to stop Miss Talbot’s shaking and soon she had the presence of mind to dust off her skirts and even adjust her hair. “What of the monster?” she asked me while I prepared my horse to carry us both.

Cyrus answered her. “The creature has taken four bullets from our rifles. I reckon it’s dead already. Were it not, we’d be hearing its baleful howls even now.”

Miss Talbot shuddered. “Let’s hope so. As I recall, everyone thought it would die when it was shot earlier.”

I finished adjusting the saddle and sent her a gentle smile. “Not to worry, dear lady. I suspect that Mr. Garnier’s claims were as spurious as his aim. Even so, perhaps a beast could survive bearing a musket

ball between the shoulders but you witnessed with your own eyes the effects of our expert marksmanship and superior firepower. Trust me, the beast is dead or dying.”

She allowed me to assist her into the saddle. “And what of my father?”

“My dear, I fear we may never know what fate befell your father, but logic would say he has fallen victim to the monster.”

She burst into tears, leaving me standing horse-side with nothing to offer her. I glanced at Cyrus who merely shrugged and mounted his steed. I too mounted, sliding into the saddle in front of her. She immediately put her arms around my chest, ostensibly to stay in the saddle, and thus I offered her the comfort she needed without having to say another word.

We made our way back through the moor and toward the village, exhausted and saddened but with a sense of relief and slight feeling of closure. And as if at the behest of some unseen theatre director, the fog lifted a bit and the full moon shone through again, revealing all about us the mysterious landscape through which we’d previously stumbled.

Miss Talbot remained quiet, and not much save alcohol loosens Cyrus’s tongue, so we moved on in near silence. A few birds chattered in the trees and as we approached the bridge I could hear frogs chortling and belching below. But as we drew nearer a complete silence fell upon the moor and a chill went down my spine.

Miss Talbot shivered behind me. “W-why’s the air so cold all of a sudden?”

I dismounted and offered her my hand. “Move quickly!” She started to say something and I grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her off the horse. “Now, woman, move!”

Cyrus had already dismounted. I set Miss Talbot beside him, calling to let her move past. Just then a terrible howl shook the land and every hair on my neck stood at attention.

“T’is the beast,” said Cyrus.

“Aye. And this time we’ll finish it.” I stopped halfway across the bridge and shouldered my weapon. Cyrus did the same.

Miss Talbot stopped just a step from the far side. “What are you doing? You’ll be killed!”

“Keep moving, woman! We’re sending this creature back to hell.”

At that second it broke through the underbrush, an angry aberration of foaming fangs and demon red eyes. We fired in the same instant. The loud retort shocked my horse and it reared up and kicked high, catching Cyrus in the head and sending him crashing off the bridge. My eyes remained fixed on the monster. Just before the planks of the bridge it sagged, lolling its eyes, its mangy fur covered in its own blood and that of its many victims. I fired again, this time watching as my bullet found its mark: the

savage brute's heart. It reared up, let out a blood-chilling howl of anguish and pain and then dropped in a pile on the far shore.

I called down into the gully below. "Cyrus! Are you hurt?"

"I've been better, sir, but I'm in one piece just the same."

I looked down the length of the bridge to where Miss Talbot was just arriving upon the other shore. She smiled at me, a tired grin that spoke of our victory. But as I gazed upon her I watched as the smile melted off of her face and that pretty visage twisted into a masque of fear. She must then have screamed in terror but I didn't hear it – her yell was drowned out by another anguished howl.

I turned to see it coming across the bridge in huge strides, eyes blazing with hate, teeth bared and glistening with blood-flecked spittle. With a push from its massive haunches it leapt at me. I tossed my rifle over the edge and fell down on the bridge's slats, pulling my six-gun at the same time. As the beast bore down upon me I fired. And fired! And fired! I discharged all six bullets into the hellhound while it was in midair, turning its bulk hurdled past me into the swirling fog of the bog below.

I rose on shaky legs, the smell of sulfur mixing with the odor of burnt flesh as I breathed in a few precious breaths.

Miss Talbot ran over to me, as much as anyone could run on that old bridge. "Nelson, are you harmed?"

"A bit shaken but otherwise unharmed." I graciously accepted her embrace. "Cyrus!"

"Sir?"

"Do you see the beast?"

"Aye sir. And rest assured it is indeed dead. But—"

"But what, good man? Out with it, I say!"

"You best come down here and see for yourself."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Aye, safe and sound save for a bit of mud. Ye best watch your step coming down."

I holstered my pistol and started to lead Miss Talbot to the other side. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Taking you to where you'll be safe."

She hugged herself and shivered. "If you don't mind, I'll be sticking close to you. Seems the safest place to be."

I couldn't say no to those admiring eyes. "All right then, but stay behind me and beware the mud."

We made our way carefully down the steep slope. Below the bridge we moved through mounds of scruffy grass, around scraggly bushes, past high columns of reeds and through ankle-deep pools of icy water. I found Cyrus directly under the bridge, squatting on his haunches and completely covered in mud.

“You’ve never looked better, old boy.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Where is it?”

He spat a stream of snuff juice and gestured with his head. I made my way over to the other side of the bridge and there it lay, an unmoving mound of fur. “Looks dead enough.”

“Aye, that it is. Have yourself a closer look.”

I bent down and gazed at the thing in the mud, covering my nose with my scarf. “This is naught but a wolf, Cyrus. A large wolf, but only a wolf.”

Miss Talbot had been keeping her distance but now she stepped closer. “But it was *much* larger than a wolf. And it had those claws, those almost human-like claws.”

I nodded. “And yet what we have here is merely a wolf.”

“But how?”

This time Cyrus and I both shrugged.

“What will we tell the villagers?”

I unsheathed my knife. “We’ll tell them the truth. We tracked down and killed a large wolf, the same wolf that has been terrorizing the village.” I bent over the beast’s torso and began to cut with my blade.

Miss Talbot frowned at my grisly task. “What on earth are you doing?”

I grimaced as I hacked into the wolf’s chest cavity. “Retrieving my bullets. Silver isn’t cheap you know.”

She came closer still. “Silver bullets? But...how?”

“I had the smithy melt down some coins and fashion them to my specifications.”

“But why? You said you didn’t believe in werewolves.”

“So I did.” I reached into the carcass and pulled out the last of the projectiles. “But I figured silver would kill as well as lead.” I pocketed the shells. “Perhaps better still.”

She was quite close now, staring in turn at me and then the carcass. She walked around it slowly, as if it still might leap up and strike her down. “Regular bullets scarcely slowed it down. Its deadly pursuits only ceased after you emptied your revolver into it. Your revolver loaded with *silver bullets*.”

I shrugged again, beginning to understand why Cyrus found the gesture so useful. “And yet we have no evidence to suggest it was ever anything but a large wolf.”

She continued to stare, as if her glare might coax a confession out of the dead pile of fur at her feet. Then that perfect mouth creased with a frown. "But I still don't know if my father fell victim to this beast or not. I don't even know for sure that he's dead. Why, he could be out there somewhere in the moor right now, injured or lost or---"

I took off my bloody gloves and gently pressed a finger to her lips. I held her shoulders for a moment and looked down at the wolf. "My dear, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I am quite convinced your father is dead."

She looked at me with eyes like saucers. "But how can you be so sure?"

I looked at Cyrus and he looked at me, but neither of us said a word, for as you all know, some questions are best left unanswered.