

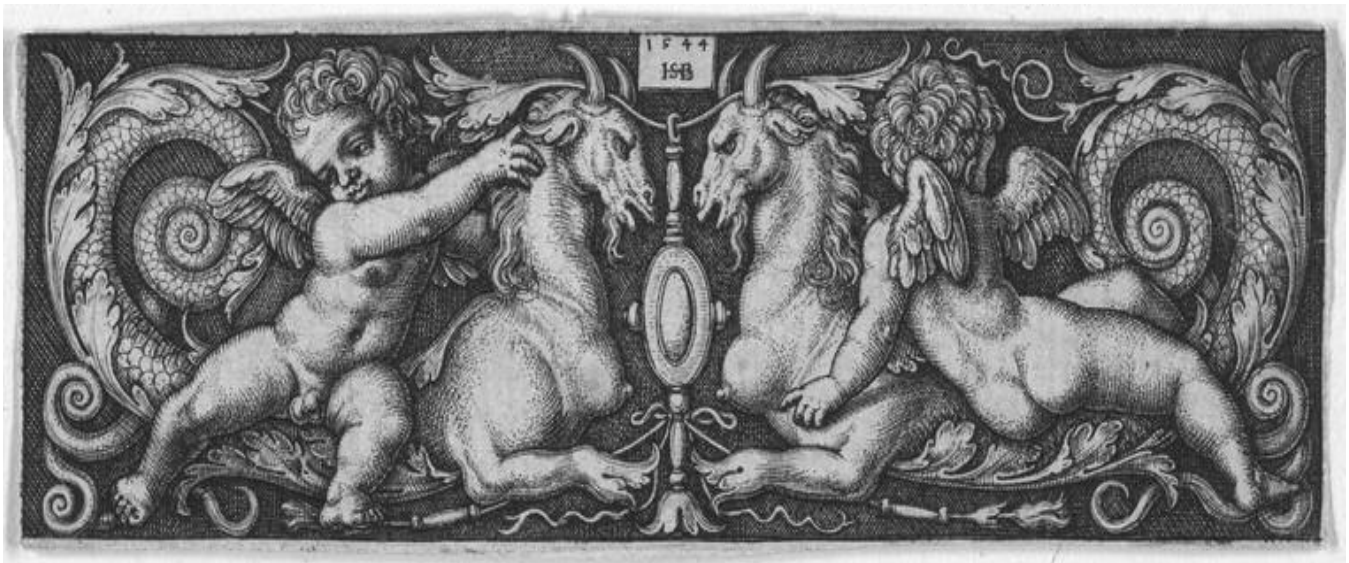
# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 3 Number 6

Page 1 – THE TOOTH by Catherine J. Link. Ms Link writes, “Currently living in north central Texas, I am an art teacher working with adults who have had no painting experience. I enter local shows and sell my work. For years I have enjoyed writing and sharing stories with friends and family. Last year, on a dare, I entered a contest and won second place. My story was *Dead of Winter*, published by an on-line journal, *Toasted Cheese*, in 2017. My husband and son are also writers, and as a family, we have a writers group that includes people from several states, and even one member in Manila. We recently joined the Texas Writer's League, and belong to the Bosque Valley Writers' Group, here in Texas. My ultimate goal is to get my stories out to the public, for their enjoyment, and my own.”

Page 7 – THE THIRD OPTION by Melodie Corrigan. Ms Corrigan has appeared on these pages before, as well as other magazines. Find her on [www.melodiecorrigan.com](http://www.melodiecorrigan.com).

Page 11 – DON'T LEAVE TOWN WITHOUT TRYING THE VIRGIN'S BLOOD by Steve Conn. Mr. Conn lives and writes in Charleston SC. He was most recently published in *Coffin Bell* magazine.



# “THE TOOTH”

by CATHERINE J. LINK

“It’s not the real thing.”

“But it is, Daddy,” Libby said. “See the ship? And there are two lions on the other side. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“There’s one lion. Look closely, sweetie. The other is a dog. It’s an English coat of arms. The scrimshaw is real. That’s what this type of engraving is called. If it was an authentic whale’s tooth, it would cost thousands.”

“How much does this cost?”

“It’s two hundred dollars. It’s not real.”

Her father walked away, scrutinizing other items, but Libby stood fast, holding the scrimshawed tooth, wishing with all her heart that she could buy it. She held it in her hands and it made her feel excited, but at the same time somewhat overwhelmed. She had discovered another world.

She felt a tingle, as though the tooth had an electric current passing through it. She watched the ship’s roll, up and down, riding the waves. Sails fluttered in the wind, and she heard a distant bell tolling.

“Put that back, Libby.” Father’s voice broke the spell.

She put it back on the display shelf,

but she was unable to take her eyes off it until the door closed behind them.

“Why are your hands wet?” he asked as they left the shop.

When they got home, Libby could not stop talking about the scrimshawed tooth.

“You should have seen it, Mommy. It’s beautiful. Can I have it?”

Mother moved about the kitchen, making dinner. “How much do you have left in your saving account?”

“Twenty-three dollars and seventy-five cents.”

“Save your allowance and do a few odd jobs for the neighbors. Then you can do whatever you like with the money.”

“I was saving up for a pair of in-line skates.”

“Which do you want more?”

“I want it all,” Libby said, flashing an engaging smile.

“And you can have it all, but not at the same time. You have to prioritize.”

“What?”

“Decide which is more important.”

The next day, Libby convinced her mother to come with her to the antique shop and see the tooth.

“That is lovely,” Mother agreed, impressed that her twelve-year old daughter would find such an object compelling. “I can see why you like it.”

Mother stared at the tooth, imagining the ship in motion. She heard waves crashing on a stormy sea, and the rumble of distant thunder.

“My goodness, this thing is hypnotizing,” she said. “I wouldn’t mind having it myself.”

“Are you going to buy it?”

“This is your treasure. You buy it. Ask the shop owner to put it on layaway for you.”

“Layaway?”

“You put money down and pay the rest out slowly.”

“We don’t do layaway. I’m sorry,” John, the owner of the shop said. “People love antiques, but when they do layaway, they tend to forget why they wanted the thing in the first place and stop paying.”

“I won’t forget. I promise,” Libby said.

“If I do it for you, then I’ll have to do it for other people, and it never works out

well in the end.”

“It can be our secret.”

“This means a lot to her,” Mother said. “Can you make an exception?”

“I’ll show you that I haven’t forgotten,” Libby said. “Every Saturday at exactly noon, I’ll be here.”

“Well, since it means so much to you.” John said. “But don’t let me down.”

“I won’t.”

“You know this isn’t real?” he asked.

“Oh, but it is real. Look at the scrimshaw. The ship and the coat of arms,” Libby said.

“Believe me, it’s a replica,” John said. “If I had the real thing, I’d never sell it.”

Libby was true to her word. Every Saturday she arrived promptly at noon with a payment. As a reward, John would allow her to hold the tooth for a few minutes. He watched her face with keen interest as a variety of expressions came over it. There was always the initial excitement—a child’s delight, then she would become enthralled and stare. But there were other times when she looked frightened. John would become unnerved watching her face, then he would take the tooth away.

There were days when Libby’s mother would come with her, and she would hold it. Often, she too fell under some sort of spell. She would stare and frown, as though

she were struggling to understand something just beyond her ken. When the spell was broken, she would return to normal.

Once, after Libby left the shop, John stared at it for a while, wondering what all the fuss was about, but he saw nothing beyond a chunk of resin. The price sticker with a code number on it identified the piece as part of an estate he had purchased years ago. The tooth, and a few other artifacts from the same estate, had been gathering dust for over a decade.

Thinking about it, he remembered other people who had shown interest in the object, but with less intensity. One old man died with it in his hands, but the shop owner had thought nothing of it at the time. The unfortunate man looked to be in his eighties, confined to a wheel chair, and when he gently passed from this realm to the next, the tooth fell out of his grasp and to the floor with a heavy thud. It was agreed by authorities, and the old man's family, that it had simply been his time to go.

The shop owner became uncomfortable so near the tooth. He took it into the backroom and placed it on a shelf, feeling a sense of relief to close the shop and go home early.

Later that night, one of many denizens of the basement chewed its way through a gap between floorboards and meandered around the room, searching for nesting material. The pregnant gray mouse found things to shred and transported them from

the storage room, down through the hole in the floorboards, her tiny nails clicking as she scurried back and forth.

Felt padding, excelsior, newspaper—she chewed chunks from cardboard boxes, tablecloths, hats, coats; then working her way up the shelves, she came to other various treasures.

Sniffing around the tooth, she too found it fascinating. She backed away from it at first, as though sizing it up. She sniffed it, then, daring to come closer, she examined the open end. Her sense of smell told her what only Libby seemed to know. It was the real thing. A natural tooth from some creature born in the depths of the earth. Not a whale, however. Nothing like a whale. Not even the scrimshander, who carved the ship and the coat of arms, realized what he had. When he found it in a market place off the coast of Indonesia, he had been fascinated by it, and paid too high a price.

It was abnormally hard and took a long time to carve. Holding it in his hands over so long a period, they turned a sickly yellow and one of several fingernails became infected. The hair on his head fell out in handfuls, his gums bled, and his teeth loosened. He took dreadfully ill, and one month from the day he finished the carving, he died of what was believed to be scurvy.

After his burial at sea, two members of the crew—one a gunner and the other an able-bodied seaman—came to blows over

the tooth. The fight turned deadly when one man pulled a knife and the other lay leaking blood from his gut. The captain of the ship ordered the injured man to the surgeon and the man with the knife clapped in irons, then he took possession of the tooth, keeping it on a bookshelf in his quarters.

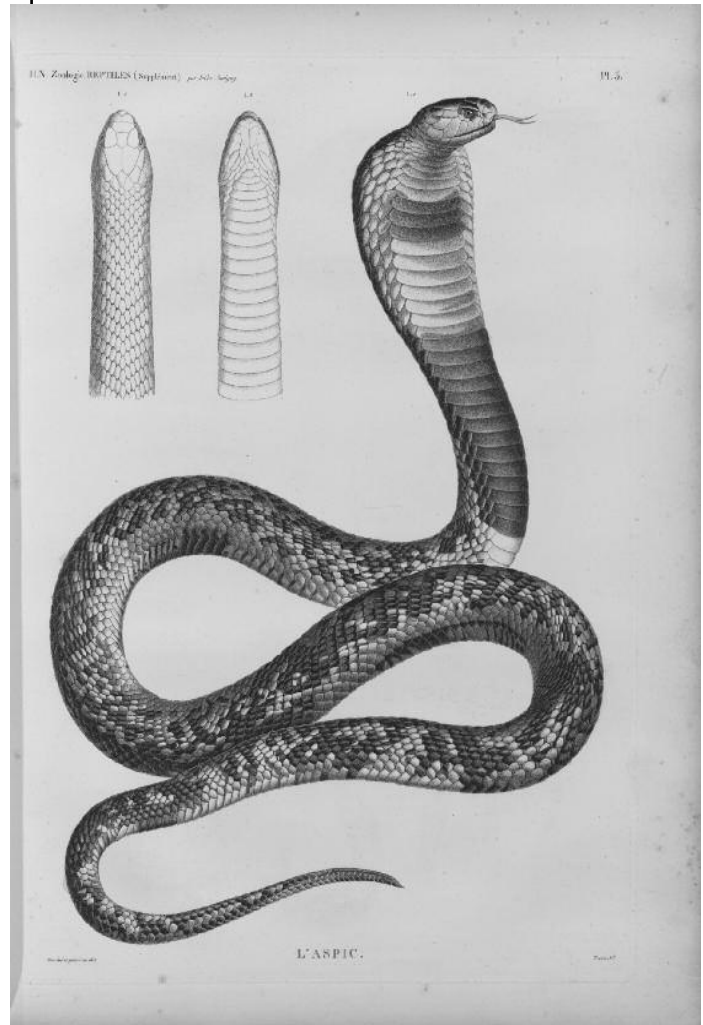
Over time, he too became ill. He disappeared from the ship one night, with no sign of foul play. He was just gone. A memorial was held, consigning his soul to God and the sea. It was assumed he had fallen overboard during the night. The tooth fell into obscurity for years, after becoming lodged in a crevice in the shoddy construction of the captain's bookshelf.

It went undiscovered for decades, until a carpenter's mate, while making repairs, rescued the tooth from the crevice and tucked his found treasure in the pocket of his breeches.

He got a good price for the tooth at market in Chile, after which the tooth circumnavigated the globe many times, from ship to ship, and port to port, until it was purchased by an old woman in Lynn, Massachusetts, who'd had a brother lost at sea. Upon her death, the tooth and other nautical memorabilia, came to the antique shop in Boston.

Due to oddities in the color and heft of the tooth, it was mistaken for a replica. An understandable mistake, for there was no other tooth on dry land to compare it with.

But the mouse knew, smelling marrow, petrified but still enticing enough to lure her into the hole in the bottom of the tooth. She nibbled cautiously, but soon she was gnawing, without success. Her teeth could not penetrate it, and after an extend-



ed effort she fell into a stupor. Instinct warned of danger and, barely able to move, she crawled out of the tooth and fell dead just inches away.

Libby arrived at the shop, well before noon, with money in her hand. She had, at last, earned enough to pay in full. The

store owner wrapped the tooth in tissue paper and put it in a bag for her. Thrilled, she ran the whole way home.

She put the tooth on a display stand that her father constructed from driftwood. It looked magnificent. She took pictures and uploaded them on Facebook, then settled down to play games on her tablet, impatient for Mother's return from the store. But she could not concentrate. Continually, she found herself drawn to the tooth.

Libby took the tooth from the driftwood stand and held it, stroking it as though it were alive, enjoying the creamy smoothness of the tooth beneath her fingertips. Hypnotized by the movement of the ship on the sea, watching it dip and rise between waves, she could hear orders being shouted to the crew by a man with a booming voice.

Suddenly, Libby was dizzy, fighting nausea, feeling as though she had just gotten off a roller coaster ride. She stumbled to bed, taking her treasure with her. Laying still, waiting for the dizziness to pass, she continued to stare at the tooth, and only the tooth, watching tiny figures scurrying about the deck. Sailors climbed masts with ease, as though they had lived the entirety of their lives among the rigging. Flags whipped in a gale, and that booming voice kept everyone in motion.

Seawater dampened her hands, soaked her clothing, her hair, and deluged the bedding beneath her, and all the while she

remained unaware that she was floating in the sea until the softness of her pillow vanished and she was thrown violently, feeling the impact of hard wood against her head.

Libby looked down, expecting to see bedding, but seeing instead deck planking dappled by her blood. She was confounded, then horrified, when a man came rushing toward her, grabbing her by the shirt. She let out a scream and fought to escape his grasp.

"Calm down. You are alright, boyo. You're just out of your head a bit," the first mate said, pulling the youngster to his feet.

Her moment of terror faded gradually into oblivion, as Libby, who had once been a twelve-year-old girl from Boston, vanished from the world. The young deckhand touched the swelling on his forehead.

"Where am I?"

"You'll be alright, son. I've been knocked from the rigging into the sea a time or two. It hasn't killed me yet. Deeds. Take young Hamish to the surgeon for a look over. Cracked his head, he did."

"Yes, sir." Deeds said, taking the boy's arm and pulling him along.

"Thank you, sir," Hamish called over his shoulder, not yet out of his stupor.

Suddenly, the boy remembered something and frantically began searching his pockets, then looking around the deck. "It's gone."

"What's amiss, lad?" Deeds asked.

“I had it in my hand, I think,” the boy said. “A whale’s tooth. Someone...I wish I could remember...someone gave it to me.”

“That means the luck was all played out, my boy. The sea spit you out and took the tooth as payment. A fair trade, I’d say.”

Hamish was taken below deck to the surgeon, who examined him by candlelight, then bandaged his head.

“How do you feel?”

“Too odd, sir. Like I can’t remember things—who you are, or even who I am. Seconds ago, I was hearing a voice in my head. She was calling me. My mum, I think. There she goes again. Can you hear it, sir?”

“You’ll be alright,” the surgeon said. “No work for you today and eat lightly.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Hamish sipped a cup of broth, the last spark of life drained from Libby’s body, which had been found in bed, sodden with sweat. Mother wailed over the child, railing against herself and God. Her pitiful cries were heard in the present, as well as the past, penetrating the barrier between dimensions, and haunting a boy named Hamish, who had been fished from the sea.

He had briefly held the tooth in his hand, while being pulled under by the tide and dragged beneath the waves. Struggling to swim to the surface, he saved his own life by releasing the tooth, for it was not sinking like an unaware cannonball, it was

diving with great purpose. It was going home.

It had been relentlessly summoned, over time and space, by magical powers spoken of in legends, stories told and retold countless times in the world of men. The tooth took its rightful place within the skeleton of the beast, after a fantastic journey of hundreds of thousands of miles and uncountable centuries, through multiple dimensions of time and space, the way only a dragon tooth can do.

Made whole once again, the beast could rejuvenate slowly over time. Sleeping, dreaming, waiting for the day when a sorcerer’s voice would call it forth, and it might rise once more to the sky. ❖

# “THE THIRD OPTION”

by MELODIE CORRIGALL

She and Rita hadn't been in touch for at least six months. Always one thing or another: new brakes for the car, babysitting the grandchild, blood pressure requiring attention and, most annoying, the condo scaffolding under blue netting driving her out of the building. Similar trivial events had kept her away from her usual social activities.

And as to checking e-mail, as her friends complained, she was lax. Her excuse was that she was submerged on lists that bombarded her with 20 e-mails a day—most of which were junk—and she couldn't figure how to get off the merry-go-round. No sooner had she deleted one intruder than another popped up.

Then in the middle of the night, during a restless bone-aching wide-awake moment she began thinking about Rita and how long it had been since they had been in touch. No one else in her life was as much fun or as lively as her old friend: the one person who never gave detailed information about her health tribulations when they met. (Years before they had agreed not to focus their get-togethers on complaints about their children's bad behaviors or their aches and pains.) Time with Rita—lunch or a concert—was always delightful. They were both, as one of her

former colleagues had said, “So far out of the box, they needed repackaging.”

Except for Rita she hadn't kept in touch with her previous work colleagues since retiring two years earlier. Her other workmates, still in the saddle, stirred up unhappy memories of downsizing, backbiting and cutbacks. No one who still worked at the Beaker Company had time for a smile or the imagination for a wild conversation. Their faces were smeared with shock if she threw out challenging questions. “Is there life in outer space?” “Ever thought to try a séance?” “When will robots take over?”

After sending her witty “Are you dead? Or am I? E-mail to Rita, Jennifer trudged back to bed. The next morning when she checked her computer Rita, who also must have had a sleepless night, had sent back a response. “YES.” Capital letters with one of those little smiley faces Jennifer always forgot how to do.

She immediately replied, “Good, we'll meet next week for coffee. How's we say Thursday at the Professor and the Pigeon after my keep fit class. I got news about a new beau. A looker.”

Later that morning at her aerobics class Jennifer told a woman who attended the same church as Rita about the witty e-mail.



The woman, whose name Jennifer couldn't dredge up, recoiled, and responded with a shocked look.

"Rita is dead," she hissed.

Jennifer knew the woman was not one for humor, so her comment was off-putting. As soon as the break came she approached her.

"What do you mean, she's dead?"

"Dead, like no long living. She died months ago."

"No way. I got an e-mail from her yesterday."

"Maybe something automatic."

"It can't be."

"Well it wasn't from her. I was at her funeral."

"She couldn't be dead. Someone would have told me."

"Everyone assumed you knew. Where were you in June?"

"In Ontario, at my parents, dad's 90th."

"That's when it was."

"I can't believe it. What did she die of?"

"A stroke."

Jennifer wondered whether the woman had Alzheimer's or was mixing Rita up with someone else. As soon as she got home, she checked her e-mail. There was Rita's message, dated the day before. That night, deep breathing to relax, Jennifer scrolled over her old e-mails and there it was a notice. Posted in June was an e-mail from someone at the church, telling of Rita's death and the time of the funeral service.

She sunk back on her chair and stared at the screen. How had she missed the news? She opened a bottle of wine—saved for an occasion—well what was this if not an occasion—turned off the lights and sat by the window watching the cars go over the Granville Street Bridge.

I should check my e-mails more often, she thought. But would it have mattered? She couldn't have gotten back for the funeral and Rita wouldn't have cared.

And what about the message? There must be a rationale for the reply. Maybe she had sent it to Rita a year ago? It was the sort of thing she might have said in the past. Sometimes e-mails got jumbled.

Determined to clean up her messages Jennifer plunked down in front of the computer and began moving all the junk mail to trash. Then up popped a message, in the thread to Rita: So, what about this new beau? Hope you've found one of the sharper pencils in the box not another of your 'needs work.'

She chuckled, that was one of Rita's favorite put-downs, 'Not the sharpest pencil in the box.' But that didn't prove it was Rita, other people used the expression, it wasn't a secret code.

Jennifer checked through her contact list. Who was doing this and how were they doing it? It had to be someone who knew them both, and who had both her e-mail address and Rita's. She didn't know what happened to old e-mail addresses.

Up came another message. "What are you up to? Try a séance."

They had always promised to do that,

after a shared bottle or two of wine. “First one out, send back a message,” they had said.

But who else knew that? It wasn’t the sort of information she shared with the cynics in her life and in fact, she hadn’t really meant it, nor, she was certain, had Rita. And even had she meant it, in this day and age who conducted séances? Still what was there to lose?

Two weeks later, Jennifer was sitting at Amelia, the Seer’s, creaky dining room table with two other women of a certain age and the young pink haired Amelia, “taking over the gift from her mother” as she put it.

Jennifer glanced around the room concerned that the session was on camera and

her folly would be part of an on-line national chuckle by tomorrow? The other women fidgeted as the lights were lowered; the séance leader gave instructions on how to proceed and then deferred to her.

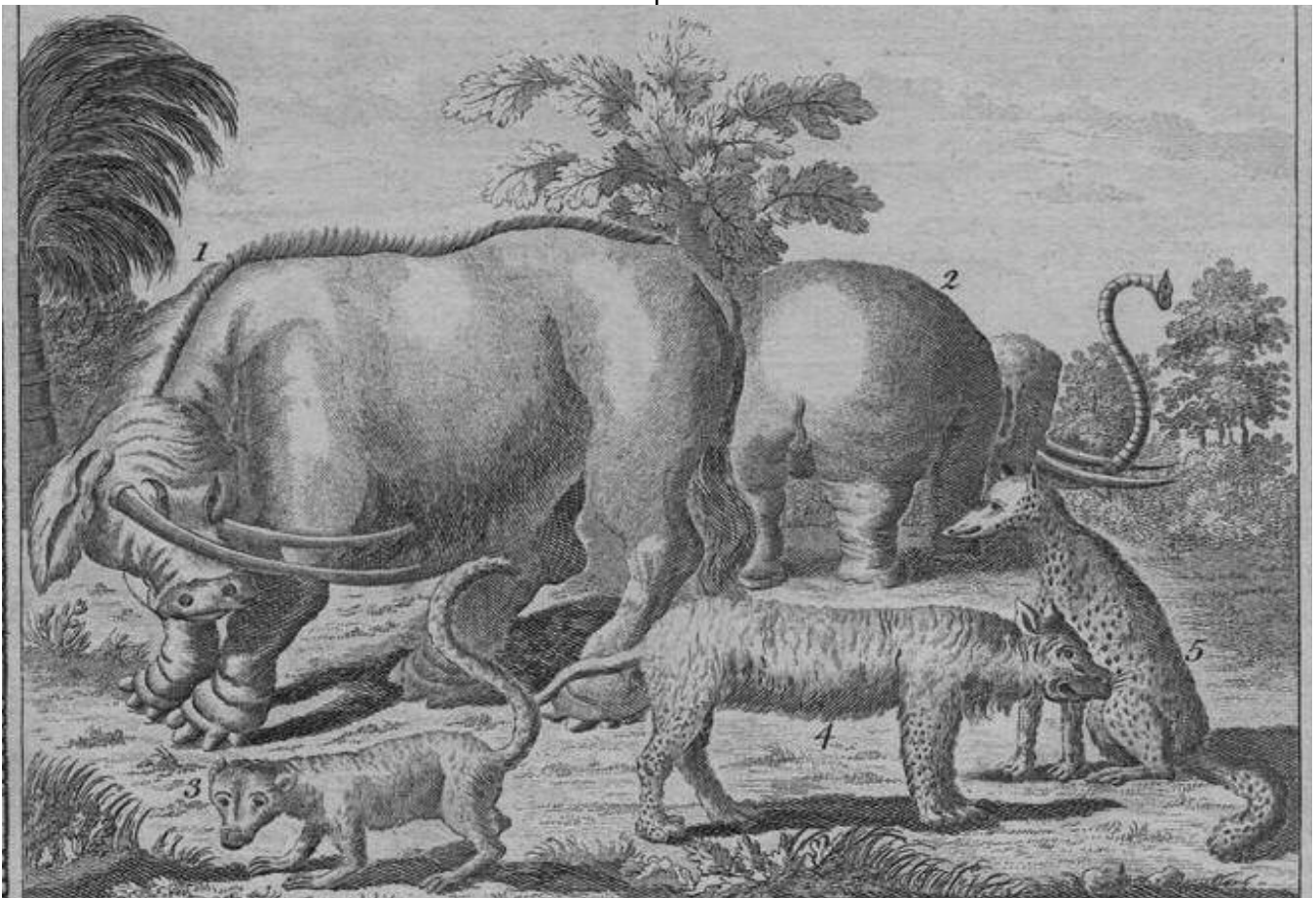
“Yes, you go first, dear,” said one of the older women.

The room was silent except for a fan from the bathroom across the hall and the comforting sound of street traffic.

“Don’t move,” Amelia cautioned the women, all now still as statues. Jennifer had told the woman Rita’s name and when she had died so was not surprised when Amelia said,

“Rita, we have your sister here.”

“Friends, just friends,” Jennifer whispered.



“Rita, we have your friend Jennifer here. She wants to talk to you.”

A chilly breeze fluttered the curtains and then a raspy voice, amazing like Rita’s but as if speaking from down a long tunnel, “What about last Thursday, I waited. You were a no show.”

Who was doing this and how were they doing it? Jennifer thought. They were like cockroaches that had gotten inside her computer and now were getting inside her head.

Her mind was so focused on her predicament she hardly heard the rest of the session. Next thing she knew it was over and the woman sitting on her right hand was pulling on her coat and complaining about her cousin who had refused to talk to her. “And this session didn’t come cheap.”

Jennifer hurried home, cursing the late-night traffic. Probably the woman at the class had made a mistake. She’d gotten Rita mixed up with someone else. The class notice hadn’t given a last name. Next day, she went to church, and asked the minister if her friend was buried there. “Oh, there are no longer burials at the cemetery, she was cremated and is now in a drawer. I can show you where.”

Not willing to believe what she had seen, Jennifer sent off another e-mail to Rita apologizing for not going to meet her. It was crazy, she was crazy, but she had to know.

The next day, umbrella threatened by a harsh wind, her shoes rain-soaked, Jennifer hurried to the café. She sat in a window

seat and ordered a glass of wine, “I’m waiting for a friend. I hope she can get away,” she told the waitress with a shiver.

As the time ticked by, she kept checking her watch, then her phone for a message and finally wiping the fog off the window and peering through the rainy view. It’s Rita, she cried out loud, leaping to her feet and spilling her wine into her lap. But it wasn’t. When the woman shifted her umbrella, Jennifer saw she didn’t look anything like Rita.

She smiled at the two other customers cozy in the corner and apologized to the waitress who came to wipe off the table. “Could happen to anyone,” the woman said kindly. “Must be a good friend. Long time since you saw her?”

“Yes, long time,” Jennifer said, sinking back against the bench. Her mind flip-flopped between wondering what the explanation could be and fury at who was so mean spirited to play this trick.

Whatever happens she thought, this cannot end well. To the surprise of the waitress Jennifer—who was as regular as clockwork in her daily espresso—ordered a second glass of wine. She was glued to her seat, afraid to leave but frightened to stay. Either Rita is dead, she thought, and this is a trick, or I am dead. But rather than relying on these two options, perhaps she should she be thinking—as the popular parlance put it—outside the box. Maybe she should be searching for a third option. ❖

# “DON'T LEAVE TOWN WITHOUT TRYING THE VIRGIN'S BLOOD”

by STEVE CONN

Reynard scanned the crowd's masks and robes, but still could not find Sara anywhere in Trilocca's village square. Such an insufferable girl. He stepped out into the packed stones of the street and put his hands on his waist as a light breeze cooled his face and neck.

A masked man passing on the left bumped into Reynard's elbow. No apologies, typical of a Triloccan. Reynard straightened the cuffs on his shirt and then looked down the street toward his hired room, then back at the crowded square. He could either search the town's narrow alleyways for Sara or sit down and wait for her to slink back to his side when the festival's opening ritual began. Sara would not dare stay out by herself after sunset. Not his little girl.

A family exited one of the rear pews nearest Reynard, leaving a considerable space behind. The pews had been carried out of the central church earlier and arranged in front of a raised wooden stage, with rows reaching all the way back to the tavern, livery stable, church, and shops bordering the square. Reynard walked over and sat at the center-aisle edge of the last pew in his row, but he left enough space for Sara to fit, once she appeared. Which

better be soon.

Reynard brushed at the stray dirt and spilled beer where Sara would be sitting. He inhaled the thick scent of cooking meat and cheap wine. He let his frustration subside. Karin would have loved all this. He closed his eyes until Karin's face faded into darkness. Still no easy task, especially since Sara was starting to look so much like her.

People began lighting torches at each pew. A woman across the aisle from Reynard grabbed a man's crotch, a man two rows up from her cupped a woman's breast. Gallons of wine and beer poured into mouths, down the fronts of shirts, or splashed onto the increasingly muddied stones set in the ground. Reynard cleared his throat. He should be drinking, back in the tavern, or in the privacy of the hired room. Sara should be the one with these people, feasting and having fun. Sara, and her mother, if the world was not so cruel.

A man near the stage was making his way up the aisle toward Reynard. He stopped and interrogated anyone who looked like a tourist, and he seemed especially concerned with the few people who were not masked. No doubt he filled a security role. Something official, for hire. His mask looked dark and forbidding, with sharp angles around the cheeks and three

long horns that curled up and over the back of the man's bald head. They gave the impression of a woman's black hair, just washed in a stream and separating into three points.

The man sauntered up to a woman only two rows away from Reynard, raised a giant stone mug to her health and laughed. He bent at the waist and spoke to her. The woman crossed herself when he walked away. He turned toward Reynard, who reached down to check the laces of his boots. Why had he refused to buy a mask while he was in the tavern? Perhaps the man would simply pass by. Too late — he made eye contact.

"Evening," the man said. He raised his mug. "May your time here be merry, and the demon Mahra's thirst be slaked."

Reynard offered him one curt nod.

"Have you a drink? Please, enjoy the Virgin's Blood." He pushed the foul-smelling swill in his mug toward Reynard. "We only make it during the festival."

"Fermented tomato juice and wine is hardly my favorite mixture. But thank you, all the same." He kicked himself for checking his own rudeness. Now the man might never go away.

The man's mask stopped just below his nose, revealing crooked, sharp teeth when he smiled. "I am known here as DeLocke. May I join you?"

"I have someone meeting me." Reynard indicated the space in the pew that he was saving for Sara.

DeLocke pointed out that there was plenty of room on Reynard's opposite side.

Reynard had no polite way to deny DeLocke a seat, and further rudeness might provoke the man's ire.

Reynard stood and exited the pew so DeLocke could slide in. He had to look up to meet DeLocke's eyes, even after they both sat down. Reynard introduced himself and said he was from Alton. DeLocke, refreshingly, seemed unimpressed.

"Lovely stage we built, isn't it?" DeLocke said. "We used to behead murderers and castrate rapists on one just like it, not many years ago."

Reynard gave him another single nod. Hopefully DeLocke would take the hint and keep quiet.

"In fact," DeLocke went on, "when people truly believed in the Mahra-demon, we'd sacrifice all sorts of people to him, and all the other ghouls out here."

"I suppose people still fall for that one, these days?" Reynard caught himself before he went further. He held his breath.

"You'd be surprised," DeLocke said. He smiled again, and Reynard relaxed his stomach.

Reynard kept his eyes from meeting DeLocke's. "I know I have no right to an opinion, but I simply find it difficult to believe anyone in this day and age was ever bled to death in a town square to appease some mythical demon, that is all." DeLocke remained silent, so Reynard added, "I'm not a fool, no matter where I've come from, you understand."

DeLocke opened his mouth to reply, but the crowd broke into applause as an enormous, lightning-bearded man took the

stage.

The man's speech started out pleasant enough, but once the descriptions of the Mahra-demon and its giant black pincers piled on, Reynard struggled to keep his eyes open. Shadows lengthened around them as night fell. Sweat beaded on Reynard's forehead, thanks to the nearest aisle torch, although he saw no sweat dribbling down from behind DeLocke's mask. Where was Sara?

On stage, the speaker mentioned the selection of virgins for sacrifice.

"Come on, get to it," DeLocke shouted, but amiably.

A combination of masked little girls and unmasked young women were suddenly dancing behind the speaker in white, loosely belted robes. All were naked underneath. The crowd erupted into hoots and whistles. A couple stood up in front of Reynard to let some woman exit the aisle. She looked sick, almost a pale green.

Reynard stole another close look at DeLocke. The eyeholes in DeLocke's mask revealed that his baldness descended below his forehead — no eyebrows, no eyelashes. Had he been burned as a child?

Reynard turned away, searching the crowd again. Sara was about to miss the biggest event of the festival. Reynard felt his right leg bouncing. He put his hand down to still it.

The couple in front of Reynard sat back down as the speaker announced the elimination of two of the virgins on stage, leaving eight to sort through until they found the final one. Reynard exhaled a

deep breath from his mouth.

"Anything the matter?" DeLocke asked.

"Sorry," he said, "nothing of import."

DeLocke stared at him, silent.

"As I said before, I'm not here alone. My daughter, Sara, should have joined us by now."

DeLocke swallowed his last bit of Virgin's Blood and set down his mug. "Well, we have to find her. Shall we go, then?"

Reynard hesitated. "Please, you mustn't concern yourself. Once the next hourly bells start—"

"All sorts of types come for this festival," DeLocke said, rising to his feet. "I'd trust no man's child alone here after dark." Reynard's shoulder disappeared under DeLocke's hand. "Besides, do you feel confident you wouldn't get lost, trying to find her by yourself?"

Reynard stood. DeLocke had a point.

"Free women have much to fear these days," DeLocke said. "Especially in a small town full of festival crowd and mixed wine. Come then, after me."

Reynard took a breath, but DeLocke was already walking. Full dark, over three hundred people out; Sara could be anywhere.

Reynard froze, transfixed by the boy's thrusting bare ass. Two round white cheeks, the rest of him a black mess of shapes in the dark.

DeLocke push past on the left, slamming Reynard into a wall in the process. They had been searching the quiet streets

near Reynard's room when a harsh, rhythmic grunting drew them into a recessed alley between two small shops. DeLocke only hesitated a moment before he rushed forward and grabbed a skinny, black-haired kid by the neck and threw him off Sara into the dirt. The kid tried to rise up and fight back, but DeLocke pushed him down and swung a booted foot into his chest.

Sara shrieked as Reynard moved in to help her. She clawed at him at first, but then grabbed onto his arms and held him as he tried to assure her everything would be all right. She shivered and apologized — as if she were at fault! Reynard tightened his hold around her. Karin's cold, dark glare met him whenever he shut his eyes.

When Reynard opened his eyes again, Sara's attacker was on the ground between DeLocke and the stone-bricked wall of the alley. The boy held both hands up, begging DeLocke not to hurt him. DeLocke reached down and ripped the boy's mask from his face, then shattered it against the wall. Reynard left his daughter for the moment and walked over to them.

Before the kid could speak, Reynard kicked the boy's still-exposed crotch. Karin would have approved, given the circumstances. She would have stamped her boot into his crotch and stomach until he stopped moving. DeLocke stood up and pointed Reynard toward his daughter before he could inflict any further damage.

Reynard returned to Sara, who immediately grabbed him around the neck and began crying. Her shivering made his heart flutter. He gently unhooked her arms and

looked at her face, hair, and clothes. His beautiful little girl.

"She all right?" DeLocke asked, behind him.

"I think so," Reynard said. "I see no blood, no bruises." Her clothes were not even torn. Could she have willingly — no. He would make no accusations. Reynard put his hands on either side of Sara's face and soothed her until she looked into his eyes. Up this close, he only saw Karin's eyes.

The hourly bells rang. If Reynard had waited until now before leaving the square... he shook his head. Thank the gods in all their heavens for DeLocke.

"Can you stand, my dear?" Reynard asked. "Are you hurt, does anything feel broken?"

"I think I'm all right." Her voice dissolved into sobs.

Reynard helped her stand. He smoothed out her dress and brushed his hands through her hair to straighten it. When she seemed able to maintain her balance, Reynard let her go and looked up at DeLocke. "Do you know of a healer nearby?"

"I can take her to a safe place," DeLocke said. "You'd like a moment alone with this one, no doubt."

The boy at their feet was holding himself and laboring to breathe. Farmer's clothes. Half-covered in filth. Bleeding from his nose and mouth. He looked barely older than fourteen.

"Thank you," Reynard said, "but I'd prefer not to leave my daughter's side."

“Suit yourself. Take her down that street, first left at the corner. Knock on the large red door and ask for Father Lorning. Make sure to tell him I sent you.”

“Does he know medicine?”

DeLocke shook his head. “Lorning’s my priest, but he can care for your girl.” He paused a moment, eyeing the farm boy. “Once she’s sorted out, leave her side long enough to bring me back a length of rope, some cloth, two lanterns and a tinderbox. Make sure you give Lorning my name. I cannot stress that enough.”

“I shall, I shall, but shouldn’t we all go to him, together?”

“No need,” DeLocke said, and he smiled down at the boy. “This one and I are going for a walk in the woods. Alton may be a lovely place to visit, but in Trilocca we have our own ways of handling the likes of him.”

Reynard swallowed. He turned and led Sara out of the alley into the street.

Father Lorning wrapped Sara up in a thick white robe. A priest had wrapped a robe just like it around Karin and then laid her out for her pyre, six months earlier. Reynard took a deep breath and closed his eyes until he exhaled. Priests.

Lorning showed no surprise when Reynard asked for the tinderbox, lanterns and rope. Reynard offered to at least pay for the candles but Lorning refused. DeLocke’s name had been enough.

“Where will you take him?” Reynard asked DeLocke, upon finding them back in the same alley.

“Not far.” DeLocke had the kid standing with his head against the wall, his eyes turned away. The boy was half-bent, still recovering from Reynard’s kick to his groin. DeLocke pushed the kid’s face into the wall whenever he tried to speak.

“You need not come along,” DeLocke said – it sounded like a warning.

“I know. I’ll see you to the edge of town, at least.”

DeLocke tied the kid’s hands behind him and gagged his mouth with the cloth. Reynard stepped aside as DeLocke pulled the kid by the shoulders and pushed him forward.

Reynard followed them out into the street, tasked with carrying the lanterns. The abundance of torches back in the center of town continued to dimly light their way as they approached the line of trees at Trilocca’s eastern edge. Once they were a few steps into the woods, DeLocke stopped them and took a moment to fire up the candles.

“Far enough,” DeLocke said to Reynard. “Go see to your daughter. I can tend to him.”

Reynard kept silent. DeLocke sat their prisoner down and began working the tinderbox. Reynard’s stomach churned as Father Lorning’s craggy, pious face loomed in his memory and DeLocke’s talk of castration in the village square echoed behind it. One really had to toe the line with these religious types.

The farm boy had been completely silent, apart from occasionally sucking snot up his nose. Sara could not possibly have



consented to lay with this boy. Of course not. Reynard would not even question her about it. Karin's cold eyes cut into him from the darkness between the trees.

DeLocke finished lighting the candles and set them in the lanterns. "Have you decided, then?"

Reynard stepped over and took a lantern. DeLocke smiled, stood back up and yanked the kid to his feet.

"I misjudged you, and for that I want to apologize," Reynard said to DeLocke. He tried to see the face under the mask, but even with the lanterns, the woods were too dark.

"Come along, then. We've not much farther to walk."

But the three of them walked in silence for quite a while. Reynard had to trim his candle twice with his fingernail to prevent the wick from going out. Eventually he saw a clearing of stones ahead, and DeLocke slowed.

Reynard stopped at the edge of the circular clearing. Several large stones were arranged in their own circle at the center. He saw several other smaller stones like them on the ground.

DeLocke walked the farm boy to the center of the stone circle and forced him to his knees. He grabbed the boy's hair and pulled his head back, exposing his throat. "You have a knife, then?" he asked Reynard.

"Just my dinner knife, at the room." So much for castration. Reynard's oversized sack was sitting, useless, next to his bed. Lot of good his tableware would do

out here, anyway. The tip of the blade would need a devilishly hard thrust to puncture the kid's throat. And then all the blood. The way the boy would shake. Bile crept up Reynard's throat.

DeLocke shoved the boy face down. The kid rolled over on his back. His breath came in short bursts through the gag. Was his mother still alive? His father? Did he have sisters or girl cousins that he looked at when he thought they weren't looking? Reynard shook away the thoughts.

DeLocke bent down and pulled a large rock up out of the dirt. He handed it to Reynard, then knelt down and held the kid by his shoulders, with enough room for Reynard to smash his face in. The kid began screaming, but stopped as he nearly choked on the gag and DeLocke lifted him up enough to slam his head against the ground. His wet, wide eyes were fixed on the rock in Reynard's hands.

The rock felt heavier now, held over the kid's face. Did this boy kiss his mother in the mornings, after breakfast? Reynard needed to urinate. Sara, back in town with Father Loring, had to be frantic, wondering where he was. How could he have left her there? Sara needed her father, not a strange priest in a foreign town. Karin would never have forgiven him for leaving her alone like that.

"No," Reynard said. "We must not do this." He set the rock down, carefully. He smelled the farm boy's piss and heard the deep, difficult breaths coming through the gag. Had he ever been in love? Had he ever lost the one person he loved?

“Trilocca must have a sheriff. You people must have laws.”

DeLocke remained silent for a moment, but then let the kid go and stood up. “Well, well. Looks like I misjudged you, too.”

Reynard leaned down to take the kid’s hand, but DeLocke stepped between them. “Go back. Leave this business to me.”

“This is not your burden, and I certainly cannot stand by while—” Reynard said, but DeLocke stopped him from going any further simply by removing his mask. No scars, no evidence of a childhood burning that had rendered him hairless. Reynard saw merely a man, with stark disappointment in his eyes. More so than threat, but the threat was still there.

DeLocke leaned in close to Reynard and said: “Believe me, friend. I know exactly what he deserves.”

Reynard tried to look away, but DeLocke put a hand on his left shoulder. “Trust me. Go back and find your daughter.”

DeLocke’s breath stank of tomato juice and wine, but he spoke and moved like a sober man. His eyes were like polished stone, his grip firm and heavy.

Reynard picked up his lantern and caught the candle before it died. He turned his back on DeLocke and the farm boy. He would have to speak to Father Lorning about this, make a full confession, even if it meant DeLocke was punished as a result. But this boy, this boy who maybe wanted to see a city like Alton someday, who maybe cried his eyes out the first time

he saw a chicken slaughtered, this boy would not be a stain on Reynard’s conscience.

Karin may have been ashamed, but she was gone.

Reynard pulled his trousers back up. He had only made a few twists and turns on the ghost of the path toward town, and after he finished and fastened his belt, he reached down and picked up the lantern. This time, the flame went out before he could trim the wax.

Reynard dropped the lantern and cursed the glass for breaking so easily. He could barely see beyond the closest trees. He heard the roar of the festival in the distance but had only a vague idea of which direction to go in the dark. One’s ears often told lies in the forest. No choice but to light a fire by hand and form a torch.

Just as the fire was catching, Reynard heard movement in the trees behind him. He stood up to call out, but froze when he saw a black shape far too small to be DeLocke heading toward him. Reynard tramped down the kindling and retreated back into heavier brush.

Within a breath, the farm boy was pushing branches aside only a few steps away. He was moving quickly, but not in a panic. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, as well, even in the dark.

He passed Reynard without seeing him. Reynard flattened a hand against the closest trunk to keep from falling down. The farm boy disappeared into the dark. He disappeared, and Reynard had done

nothing. How could this have happened? What could he have done to a huge monster like DeLocke?

Reynard looked down both sides of the path the boy had torn. He could either go after him and get answers, or go back to the clearing and help DeLocke, who must be near death to have let the kid go. Reynard knew what he should do – what Karin would want him to do. Reynard could easily reach the farm boy before he made it into town. He could still set things right, the way he should have when the rock was still in his hands.

But, DeLocke might need help.

The boy could wait.

DeLocke's lantern was still lit; Reynard could see him doubled over on his hands and knees in the center of the clearing. Before Reynard could break the tree line and hurry in to DeLocke's aid, he heard his own name whispered from the bushes on his left.

Reynard turned, half-expecting to feel a knife slide into his side, but instead saw Father Lorning stepping toward him. He held a lantern out in front of him and was dressed in flowing dark robes.

"He sent you back," Lorning said, still whispering. "You were supposed to go back to find her." He sounded equally surprised and upset.

"What's going on here?" Reynard whispered. "Where is Sara?"

Lorning seemed unable to speak.

Reynard turned to step into the clearing and help DeLocke, but then heard glass

breaking as something large and heavy smashed into the back of his head.

The town bells boomed in the distance and slick warmth trickled down the back of Reynard's head. He opened his eyes, dimly aware of Father Lorning sitting him up against a tree. Lorning pulled his arms up and behind him around the tree's trunk until he had crossed Reynard's wrists. He was binding them. Reynard's arms felt heavy, numb and useless.

"What are you doing?" Reynard whispered – only this time he had intended to shout.

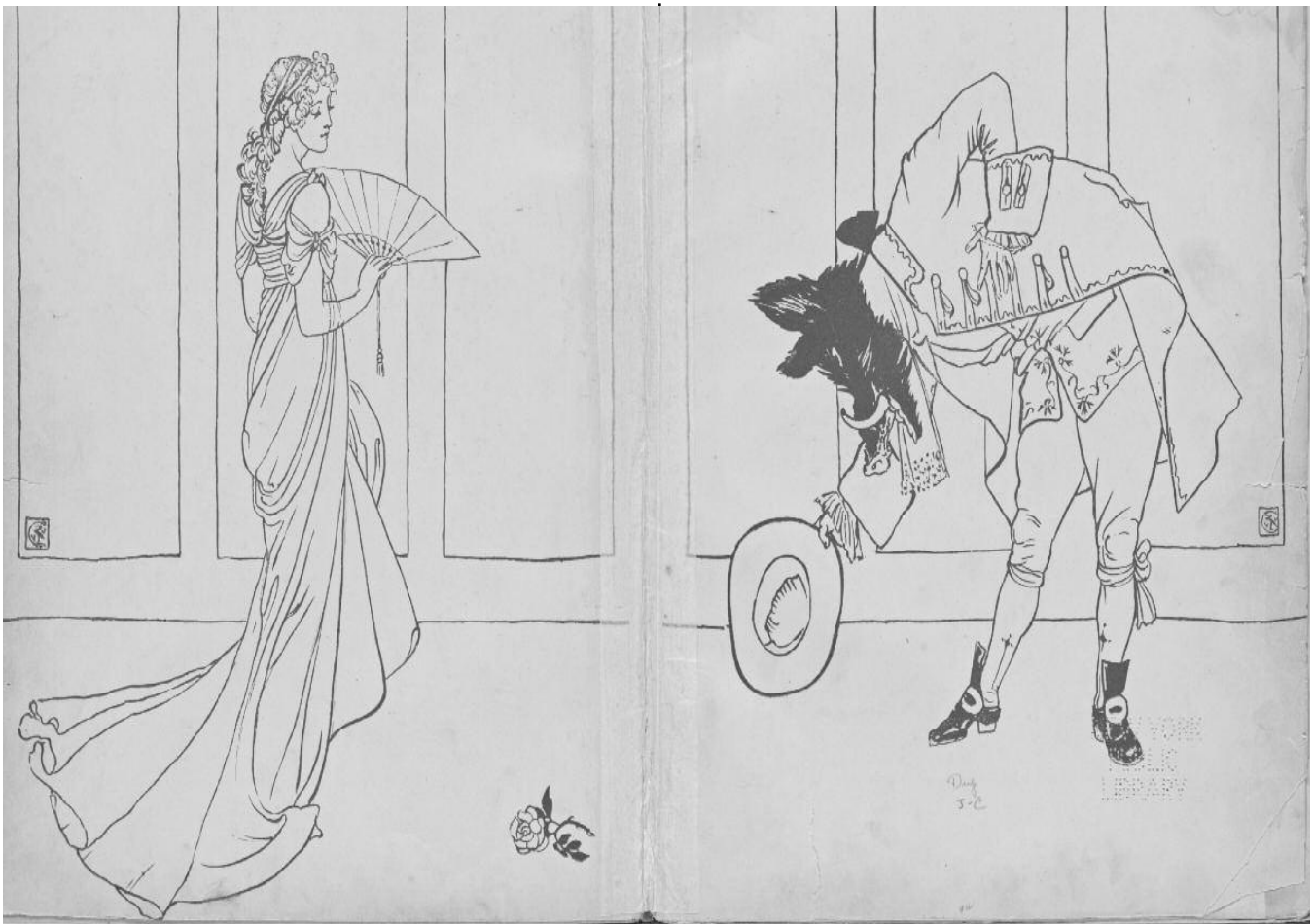
Lorning remained silent. He finished tying the ropes and Reynard heard him crunching through the forest behind him, off to the left.

Reynard strained to pull apart his wrists, crushing his bound arms against the tree trunk. There was no give, and no slack when he relaxed.

DeLocke was still on his hands and knees in the clearing. He took shallow breaths and swayed from side to side with his head hanging down. Reynard called out to him, and DeLocke answered without looking up.

"I told you to go back," DeLocke said. "I thought chasing our young friend might keep you busy the rest of the night. This will be a very unpleasant alternative, I'm afraid."

Reynard scraped his wrists against the back of the tree. Perhaps the ropes were frayed enough for the bark to wear them out.



“Bring her forward,” DeLocke said.

At first, the woman who Lorning and another masked man in robes brought out was just a dim shape – a small figure in robes with a grim, wooden mask under her hood. She was made to kneel in the center of stones with DeLocke, and then Lorning kneeled down and whispered in her ear.

Reynard rubbed the rope faster against the tree bark, gaining no slack between his wrists. It was no use.

Lorning pointed at Reynard, and the masked man turned the woman’s head toward him. Despite her mask, Reynard recognized her eyes immediately. Sara. Reynard battered his arms against the tree and shouted her name. He ordered Lorning to release her.

Sara’s voice came, muffled and incoherent. Lorning and the other priest removed her gag, pulled her up and then walked her to Reynard. Even through the mask, her green eyes looked huge and wild.

“I’m so sorry, Daddy – that boy – this is all my fault.” Her voice hitched. “What’s going to happen?” she asked Lorning. “Don’t hurt my father, please!”

Reynard renewed his efforts to tear the rope on the tree bark. She tried to break free, as well, but Lorning and the other priest kept her in place, each holding an arm and shoulder as they forced the gag back in her mouth.

Behind and to the left of her, DeLocke made a low, thick sound, and Reynard stopped struggling. DeLocke had turned

on his knees, his back straight but his head still down. He had bent his elbows and pressed his fists together in front of his chest. The sound coming from DeLocke reminded Reynard both of a cat purring and a wolf snarling. But then DeLocke stopped.

Reynard cried out as two black, bulging objects tore free of DeLocke's forearms. They looked like thin, curved blades, protruding from DeLocke's elbows. They left a thin trail of mucus back to the long open cavities running down his arms. The cavities closed up to the point a thin fold of skin remained on each arm.

DeLocke slowly moved his fists apart and fanned out his fingers, then pushed his elbows slightly forward until his pincers scraped against each other.

Lorning and the other priest turned Sara around at the sound of the pincers. She screamed through the gag when she saw DeLocke but remained unable to wrench her arms free. She, unlike Reynard, could see not only the pincers, but whatever horror his face had become.

The priests walked her forward one step as Reynard shouted at them, repeatedly, to stop.

Then Reynard had to stop, to breathe. He closed his eyes. All the people back in Trilocca's town square, no doubt the farm boy among them, were dancing and drinking in the pews and aisles in the square, as a giant fake demon with great black pincers cavorted on the stage. The farm boy would be drinking and smiling. The farm boy would be bragging about his conquest as

the mock-demon on stage ate its virgin. Virgin!

"Wait, DeLocke! She's not a virgin," Reynard shouted, his voice breaking. "We just saw her — you know it to be true."

"The virginity does not matter, my child," Lorning called in response. "He only requires a maiden; he selected her. You should be a very proud father."

Reynard cursed the foul priest as they dragged Sara another step toward DeLocke. Whatever his mouth had become made a rasping, wet noise. She tried slamming her head into the priests or kicking at their legs, but the two men were far too strong for her. Her whole body shook. She moaned and cried.

"Take me, DeLocke," Reynard said. "Please, let her go!"

Lorning dragged Sara another step forward before he answered for his master. "You're a noble man. Like you, we all would gladly give him our lives, my child. But you cannot feed him, nor I, nor any other man alive."

Reynard begged Sara to fight. This could not be. Not after losing Karin. Not Sara. He shook his head against the tree trunk; bark tore off into his hair. He pulled at the ropes and practically twisted his left shoulder out of joint.

Reynard's chest was collapsing. He could no longer breathe. The world blurred. The lantern near DeLocke had gone out, and the woods were so dark that she and DeLocke and the priests looked like little more than thick, black shapes. The DeLocke-shape was shifting and mov-

ing and bulging, its pincers beckoning Sara close.

Reynard slammed his head back into the tree. The pain was tremendous, but after the initial dizziness and near-slide back into darkness, his mind cleared.

Sara was alone in the clearing. Her mask was still in place, but the gag had fallen free. Lorning and the other priest had disappeared, but instead of taking her chance to escape, she remained frozen on her knees in front of DeLocke. He was holding her wrists to his chest with his hands, his black pincers scraping down her shoulders in even strokes. They did not draw blood. Not yet.

Reynard screamed at her to fight, to run. She made small, pained sounds with each breath. Her head jerked back and forth, the mask tight on her face.

DeLocke raised her arms and drew her toward him, until his pincers formed a circle behind her. Light crept into the clearing, as Reynard made out candles in the trees behind them. Sixteen or seventeen men and women had spread out along the border of the circle. They were chanting, each holding a lantern. Lorning was among them.

Reynard shouted Sara's name — she had stopped resisting DeLocke, her head still, her mask facing him directly now that DeLocke had turned toward the crowd. Reynard pounded his head against the tree and tried to pull his arms apart. He rubbed the ropes against the bark until he felt some of the flesh of his hands give.

DeLocke let go of Sara. Reynard

opened his mouth to croak “run” with what was left of his voice, but then both pincers sunk into Sara's sides with a thick sound that sucked Reynard's breath right out of his lungs.

Sara, who was once nothing more than a sweet, headstrong little girl in Reynard's arms, wriggled between DeLocke's two long, thin pincers. Sara had hugged Reynard so hard once something in his back had popped. She used to kiss both of his cheeks twice whenever he would leave in the morning.

A flicker of light from one of the lanterns drew Reynard's eyes to a stream of blood running down one pincer all the way to DeLocke's elbow. Sara had once stroked the side of Reynard's face and told him it was okay if he cried about mama. She had made him hold her mother's old nightdress to his face and hugged him against her until all he could hear was her beating heart.

DeLocke lifted Sara up to his head. He drew her to the mouth that Reynard could not see. Sara had once made seven straw dolls to celebrate her father's birthday, though she had never explained why she had chosen that specific number. One of the dolls represented Karin, the others were pairings of father and daughter in different clothes to represent different situations and seasons. She had done the same for her mother the next year. Reynard could not believe how clever she had been, and how much she had remembered about the activities they did together. The detail she had put into the dolls' clothes.

Reynard shut his eyes. He finally found air enough to scream.

Sara was screaming, too. Reynard could hear her over his own strained, guttural sounds. When his voice gave out, he had to sit and listen to it all. Nothing could make him open his eyes again. Then Sara's screams gave out, and then only the low, monotonous chanting of Lorning's congregation fell on Reynard's ears.

Then he smelled blood, and then he heard the chewing. Endless, endless chewing.

Reynard awoke to the morning sounds of birds in the trees and the hum of insects around him. Flies. He heard so many flies. The ground felt cold and wet — he was half-blind in the dawn.

Reynard's hands were caked with dried blood from his wrists. He calmly worked at the ropes until they gave way, gritting his teeth to the pain. Only a few moments. Such a short amount of time, a few twists of his sore wrists, and he could wrap his arms around himself in the cold.

Darkness threatened to close in again, but he stayed awake. Reynard held himself and rocked against the tree.

Gradually, the sun made the remains in the clearing easier to see: Wet, darkened

ground. A pile of torn robes. Blood. Little ribbons of candle wax in weird trails. The unbearable stench of it all. Reynard waved and swatted at the flies at first, but gave up quickly. They landed on him and then swooped back over to the robes.

As the sun spilled more flat yellow light into the clearing, Reynard's eye caught two discarded masks. He crawled on his hands and knees over the wet grass to them, carefully avoiding the tattered, bloody robes. The masks had been stuck into the ground so that they were standing up, their hollow eyes pointed directly at him. They were watching him. He laughed once. Only once.

Reynard pulled the smaller mask up from the dirt. He went over all the angles and curves with his fingers. He felt her dried blood.

The two holes for the eyes were uneven, and very crudely carved. Reynard brought the mask up to his face and touched noses with it. He touched his tongue to the teeth and tasted the blood. Her blood. He turned the mask around and almost put it on. Almost.

Reynard held the mask, silent, and stared through its empty eyes at the ground. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**