

Imogene Baker and the Adventure of the Debt Collector

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When I knocked on the door of Imogene Baker on April the seventh I by no means expected to find her in such bright spirits as I did. Indeed, a giddy smile lit her face and took me quite aback as she welcomed me into the flat.

It was not so long after the passing of her friend Miss Charlotte Lewin, and everyone in town knew that she had been out of sorts since then, holing up in her little unit and not coming out for days on end, not taking cases; there was a rumour around the village that she wasn't even eating, although the grocer assured us that he had left a sack of staple goods on her stoop shortly after this started and that she had been leaving him money in return for his delivery services. She wasn't always the most popular woman in Far Water but she certainly livened up the place, and everyone felt her absence.

So when I went to her that afternoon to tell her of the body which had been found mutilated in Far Water Gorge, it was meant as an act of charity. I have never needed Miss Baker's help in doing my own job, much as she might — and often has — said otherwise. But it was clear that she needed to be gotten out of the house.

I could not even state my purpose before she hurried me to an armchair with a flutter of hands and prancing steps and sat herself on a settee, pulling her feet up onto the cushion with her and leaving smudges of dirt on the seat from the soles of her boots. Normally this behaviour would have been unremarkable for her, as she was a flighty and excitable woman for the whole time I knew her, but without the steady and languid presence of Miss Lewin beside her as an anchor I found myself rather unnerved, as if Baker was a rogue wave which threatened to pounce and drown me at any moment.

"So!" she said as if oblivious to my unease, although I knew she was never oblivious to anything, "You are here about a murder, aren't you? It's been ages. I feel we've never been so long without a killing. We're well overdue."

"Yes," said I. "What I mean is, I am here about a murder. I should like to think the county's homicide rate isn't so high that we can call it overdue."

"I should like to think many things," said Miss Baker brightly, "but that doesn't make them true."

"Quite," I said in reticence. "But to the matter at hand. A hiker discovered a body in Far Water Gorge this morning." I inclined my head so that had I worn spectacles I would have been looking at her over top of them. "Travis Koenig," I intoned.

I must admit I had expected her to be more taken aback by the reveal, for Koenig was one of Far Water's wealthier residents and employed a good deal of our working class at his factory, but as she spoke I realised the reason for her lack of surprise. "Am I to take it he was the victim rather than the hiker? The chap never struck me as athletically inclined."

"Yes, the victim. The hiker was a Mr. Velnier. One of Koenig's employees, by chance."

"Or perhaps," said Baker, leaning her chin on her hand, "not by chance?"

"What, you think Velnier may be the killer?"

She sprang to her feet with a thump of her boots on the rug. "Perhaps!" she said again. "Only time will tell!" With that she darted to the vanity which stood out of place in the parlour and began to deftly assemble the disguise she wore on investigatory outings. I still sat dumbly looking at her, and on noticing this she gave me an admonishing lour. "Do you plan to lounge in my sitting room all day, Inspector, or will you be helping to solve a murder?"

"Yes, right." I stood and made my way to the door, frowning. Before opening the door I paused. "It's just—" I began, "I mean to say, I'm glad to see you in good humour, Miss Baker, but I confess that you have confounded me." I softened my voice. "It has only been five months since the passing of Miss Lewin. I had expected to find you in mourning."

"If you expected to find me in the morning, you should have come earlier. It is well past noon." She tried to speak seriously, but a self-satisfied grin broke through at the corners of her mouth and the crinkle of her eyes. When I kept looking at her soberly though, her demeanour calmed and she straightened her spine and the lapels of her jacket and began to look just slightly like the bereaved woman she was. "If you must know, Inspector, I've come to a decision on the matter. I spent a good while living like a dog in this room, subsisting on scraps and howling. But some time ago as I was eating out of some jar or other, Charlotte's voice came to me as clearly as if she'd been standing in front of me. I could practically see the scolding line of her mouth and her folded arms. She said to me, 'Gene, if you think behaving like a corpse will let you become one then you've become stupid in my absence. You've got two options: either kill yourself properly, or start living. But if you choose the former, I'll be awfully cross with you. So stop being a mutt and start being a bloody detective, and that way I can look you in the eye when I see you again.'" Baker paused, glancing down at herself before looking back up at me. "So I have," she concluded.

"I see," I said. "Well, I am impressed. You've pulled yourself together remarkably well."

"Thank you, Inspector," she said, picking up her satchel, and marched out the door.

I ought now to take a moment to explain myself. I have presented this tale as I know it: the final case I worked with the assistance of Miss Imogene Baker. This may, however, confound certain audiences. You, reader, have likely never heard of Miss Baker, unless you are a resident of Far Water. You may, however, know of a Mr. Gene Bakerson, the private detective. There is a reason for this. It is to my great shame that I aided for many years in concealing the true identity of Miss Baker behind this false persona. It was one she wove from whole cloth in order to carry out her investigations undisturbed, and I and Miss Lewin were her sole confidants in the matter. I tell this now with the knowledge that revealing my part in this deception will likely end my career as a police inspector. But there is no longer good reason for me to keep her secret.

The drive to the gorge was not far — it served as the northern border of Far Water, and Baker's flat was on the north side — but she elected to question me in the carriage on the way.

"I take it there must be something unusual about this death or you would not have come to me, prideful as you are. So what is it?"

Thinking I ought not let her know it was a gesture of charity, for she was as prideful as I, I told her, "I think it would be best for you to see it for yourself." The fact was, I did not think the case would give us much trouble. There were peculiarities, certainly, but we already had a suspect in custody and I guessed it would not take long for him to confess.

She gave me a look of intense scepticism and calculation, but said nothing and turned to rest her elbow on the window frame and gaze out at the passing streets. I took the opportunity to study her further. While she was better composed than she might have been, there were still certain signs of bereavement. Her hair, although it was rarely in a state one would call tidy, was in greater disarray than usual. Besides the jacket, which I suspected had hung on its hook those entire five months, her dress was rumpled and seemed to have been taken directly from the hamper. I was reminded that Baker had disclosed to me in the course of investigating a case some years ago that she had come up on the streets and earned her living as a pickpurse in her early years before scraping her way out of the gutter and into polite society.

Charlotte Lewin had been a great help to Miss Baker when she was alive. A woman of poise and stature, she had accompanied Imogene on her cases both as an assistant and adviser in the ways of the upper class and in her capacity as a reporter for the county's newspaper. She was, of course, obliged to write under an alias — Charles Landon, she went by — and I had expressed my disapproval of the deception numerous times, as I had at Imogene's. She was set on her work, however, and even I must concede that her articles were some of the best in the paper due to her detailed crime reporting.

As I was lost in these thoughts, Baker turned back and caught me looking at her. "You are still a married man, are you not, Inspector Raine?" she asked with a wicked grin, and I rushed to apologise although I well knew she was joking.

The body had been found at the end of the gorge where the split in the land halted and the River Lovell tumbled in, continuing its run through the centre of the ravine. Mr. Koenig had been lying in the stream looking up at the heavens, the water running over most of his face and body. His throat had been slit, but by the time he was discovered the river had washed away his spilt blood. He had been taken away not long ago by the coroner, but the area remained cordoned off, despite the unlikelihood that the public would come tromping through the river.

I relayed all this to Miss Baker as we made our way down the slope, though I had to raise my voice to a near shout to be heard over the waterfall. The water at the bottom of the gorge was not very wide or deep, not even covering the ground completely, and so we stood at the edge of it as Baker adjusted her trousers to crouch without getting the hems wet, a task at which she was only partly successful. There were faint impressions in the silt where Koenig had lain and it did not take long of Baker frowning at them for her to look up at me and ask, "Inspector. What happened to his left leg?"

Indeed, where his leg ought to have pressed into the gravel there was no such impression, a fact which I had noted myself only after seeing the body removed. "It had been cut off," I told her. "Sawn off, in fact."

Her eyebrows jumped incredulously. "With an actual saw? Or did they use a hunting knife and really go at it?" She mimicked the gesture one might use to cut off a leg and I grimaced.

"A saw, yes. We have yet to find it, but it's evident from the leg wound. Not only that, but that's what they used to cut his throat as well."

Baker rested her head in her hand. "Well. That's a new one, I believe." Her gaze flitted to where the victim's feet — or rather, foot — had been. "You have noticed the footprints, yes?"

"Of course. Obvious sign of an altercation."

"Obvious," she repeated, then stood and turned to me with crossed arms. "So, Inspector. What do you make of it?"

"Me?" I said, taken aback. She rarely listened to my opinion, and never asked for it.

"Yes, Raine, you. Or aren't you the officer here?" She raised her chin, challenging.

"Well," I started, and I stuttered in my surprise, "we have Velnier, who found the body, down at the station for questioning. My bet's on him."

"And why's that?"

"He worked for the victim, for one. Plenty reason a man might kill his boss."

"And?" she probed.

"And as it happens, he's a carpenter. He could access a saw even more easily than most men."

"And?" she insisted.

"And being a working man, he has the build to beat Koenig in a scuffle."

"I see. That's all?"

"As of yet. But as I said, he's still in questioning. We may well uncover a motive."

"Right," she said with a firm nod. "All fine reasoning."

"Thank you, Miss." Although I by no means required her approval of my police work, I admit that I puffed up a bit at the praise.

"You're welcome. Now let him go."

"I beg your pardon?"

Baker tucked a loose strand of long hair back into her hat and turned to start back up the slope. "Beg all you like, Inspector, but it will do you no good. You have placed your bets on the easy way out, but that's no way to solve a crime." She directed the comments over her shoulder, calling back to me as she worked to find her footing on the loose dirt.

I went after her, rather annoyed at this treatment. "Pray tell, then, how do you know Velnier to be innocent?"

She chuckled in a manner both condescending and, as it struck me later, dark. "Why do you suppose I have been asking for your thoughts on the matter?" She reached the top and turned back to look down as I was still scrabbling up the slope, continuing to speak before I could reply. "I have been thinking, Inspector. Charlotte's killer walks free due to my own incompetence as well as yours."

"Baker, that is hardly—"

"You deny this? Neither of us has identified her murderer. To what do you attribute this if not inefficacy?"

I now stood at her level at the top of the hill, allowing me several inches of height on her as I was accustomed to. "Not every case can be solved," I said. I tried to speak softly, the way one ought to talk to a grieving woman, but irritation slipped into my tone despite my efforts. Baker always made it rather difficult to address her as one ought a lady, for she was as bold and outspoken as a man. "The sharpest minds in the world can not solve a crime if they are not presented with sufficient evidence."

"Perhaps," she conceded. "But are we sharper than the knife which slit Charlotte's throat? I think not. I think our blades have honing yet to go."

It was slowly becoming clear to me that my assessment of how well she was coping with her grief may have been too quick. "And how do you plan to that?" I inquired carefully.

She brushed past me and began to walk down the side of the wooded road which we stood beside. She had sent the carriage away when we disembarked, claiming that the day was so nice we ought to walk back. "A lady's mind is her own business. But yours, Inspector?" A feeling of indigestion, sudden and ominous, made itself known in my stomach. "Yours, I can do something about." She spun deftly on her heel to face me, still walking so that she now had no view of where she was going. Despite this, a devious smile overtook her thin lips. "I intend to teach you my methods," she informed me.

I stood for a full minute I believe, watching her go on her way until she reached a bend in the road and was forced to turn back around and look where she was going or else walk into the street. I deliberately said nothing until that moment, for I did not trust myself to speak civilly with her smug gaze on me. The moment I was unobserved, my neutral expression fell into irritability and I marched after her, gaining quickly with my longer stride. "You might consider that as a police inspector I am trained in the most modern investigative techniques," I called ahead to her and added in a mutter, "As opposed to untrained amateurs."

"The inspectors of our little Wexley county are taught the latest, are they?" Her arrogance was audible. "That has not stopped me from solving a slew of your cases

for you. How many are we up to? Fifty-three now?"

The infuriating fact of it was that she was right on all counts. I steamed beside her silently for a good length of road, sorely tempted to speed up to my normal pace and leave her in the dust. Only chivalry kept me walking at her side.

As we were passing into town I finally spoke again, mollified by reminding myself that she was, despite appearances, a woman in mourning. "You never did tell me why I ought to release Arthur Velnier."

"Ah! Yes, him," exclaimed Baker. "The reason is simple. I know Arthur. We were coves together."

"A pickpocket?" I asked. "I should think that puts him under greater suspicion."

"No, Inspector, it does not. You see, poor Art faints at the sight of blood. To think he cut a man's throat and sawed off his leg is preposterous."

I offered to take Miss Baker to the morgue — do not think me indelicate, for she often took great interest in examining corpses — but she told me there was no need, that my description had been more than adequate. Were she anyone else, I would have suspected that she wished to avoid the gore of this particular body.

Instead she requested that we see the victim's widow, a Mrs. Jennifer Koenig, and so we set off for the Koenig estate on the west side of town. To call it a mansion would be an overstatement. However, it was certainly among the largest houses in Far Water. Russet bricks comprised its facade, reminiscent of a gingerbread house, but arched gables undercut the effect with a threatening sharpness.

To both of our surprise, a man opened the door. He was a rodent-like fellow, with shifty eyes and a wiry frame made for slinking, but he was dressed as a gentleman befitting of the wealthy house.

"Can I help you?" he said, voice far deeper than I'd expected from the impression he gave.

I identified myself as an officer of the law and he let us in with some begrudgement. The interior was as fine and modern as the exterior but sparse, a far cry from the cluttered but homey flat of Imogene Baker. We were led into the parlour where a dishevelled Mrs. Koenig sat bundled in an arm chair. She was a woman of grace befitting her stature, which was to say that it was clear she wanted very much to be seen as a rich man's wife but was resigned to being the spouse only of the wealthiest man in Far Water, which held no candle to the wealth of men in the capitol. Greying blonde hair was neatly tucked into a bun at her nape, and in the time since my officer had informed her of her husband's death she had changed into

mourning dress, a black veil covering her face which she did not have the poise to carry off.

"You must be Inspector Raine," she greeted me with a watery smile, and I could see beneath the veil that she gave Baker a curious look. "And this is...?"

Before I could speak, Baker held out her hand far too jovially. "Gene Bakerson. I'm assisting the Inspector here."

Mrs. Koenig shook her hand, clearly confused. "Assisting? Is the investigation not going well, then?"

"No, not at all, Mrs. Koenig," I interjected before Baker could cause more concern. "Mr. Bakerson is a sort of inspector in training," I said, the phrase 'sort of' doing a great deal of heavy lifting. Wanting to change the subject, I cast a glance at the wiry man who was now hovering behind the widow's chair. "And you are, sir?"

"Kip Stafford," he said, and extended a hand to me and Baker. His grip, like his voice, was far stronger than I'd thought. "Travis's right hand man in the company."

"Mr. Stafford here is kindly keeping me company," said Mrs. Koenig. "We had no children, you see, and the house got so terribly quiet after your detectives left."

"And the rest of your family?" I enquired.

"I've had word sent to my sister in London. Mr. Stafford has agreed to stay here at the house with me until she and her husband arrive in a few days."

"Quite the gentleman," said Baker. While I had sat in my offered seat, she remained standing, meandering about the parlour and picking up the occasional trinket for study. At present she was inspecting a small tin of shoe polish.

"It's the least I can do for the wife of a dear friend," said Stafford, seeming to make a point of not looking at Jennifer Koenig. I shot a glance at Imogene and she returned it with a hidden smirk, confirming my suspicions.

We spoke with the house staff as well, who had been gathered outside the kitchen to be interviewed one by one. Baker seemed to take no interest in these proceedings, instead fiddling with utensils behind me. It was only when the chef was called in that she looked up from her fidgeting.

"This knife," she said, addressing the cook, "is new, is it not?"

The cook frowned at the sudden change of topic. "The boning knife?"

"Yes," said Baker.

"Newer than the rest. The old one had a botched screw, couldn't keep its handle on. I had it replaced months ago, didn't I?"

"Yes, thank you," said Baker, and dismissed the woman. I, who had not finished questioning her, had to call her back, and in my irritation at Baker's insubordination forgot the exchange by the time we left.

When we had bid the widow and staff good day and had shut the door behind us, I turned to Baker. "An affair?"

"Certainly," she said. "But they've done such a bad job of hiding it that I almost think they could not possibly be the killers."

"No?" I asked as we exited the front gate. Imogene took the lead, directing us towards the edge of town to, I presumed, Koenig's factory.

"Why go to all the trouble of cutting a man's leg off if you're just going to turn around and make your motive obvious? Speaking of which," she said, "I have yet to hear your theory on that matter."

"The matter of the leg? It still puzzles me. Have you a notion?"

She waved her hand in dismissal. "I have many notions, Inspector. I wish to hear yours."

I let out a weary breath. "Perhaps we are up against a cannibal," I posed, which earned me a dubious look from the woman.

"That is certainly one possibility."

"But not a likely one, I know. Let me see." I took out a cigarette from my pocket and lit it, buying myself a moment to think. "Perhaps," I said at length, "there is something to be concealed on the leg."

This seemed to interest Baker, for she looked at me with something like pride. "Now there's a thought. What might it conceal?"

"Any number of things," I mused. "A tattoo, or other distinguishing mark, I wager."

"A fine thought." Her pride seemed to wane somewhat.

"You do not believe it?"

"It does not matter what I believe," she said, and I suddenly noticed her eyes grow dark and mournful. I wondered if she was thinking then of Charlotte. "I remind you again that you are the inspector here."

We arrived at the Koenig factory as the sun was getting low in the sky, hanging above Far Water Gorge as if threatening to fall in. Work had been halted on account of the owner's death, but a bobby waited by the door to let us in and we were told the door had remained locked since closing time the previous day.

I dutifully inspected the production floor while Baker flitted off to find Koenig's office. When I eventually went to meet her there, she was sat comfortably in the victim's chair, her feet up on the desk and apparently dozing. I moved about the small room, careful not to disturb her. Under ordinary circumstances she would have received admonition for such behaviour, but she appeared so desperately exhausted and forlorn, small in the enveloping chair, that I allowed her that moment of rest.

In the meantime, I looked through the papers strewn about the desk; Koenig, it seemed, had not been an orderly man. I did not have a mind for most of the documents present — there is a reason I became a policeman rather than a businessman — but I did flip through the ledger which sat open on the desk by Imogene's feet. Nothing seemed of much interest.

It was when I rifled through the drawers that something caught my eye. In the bottom drawer, under a pile of monogrammed paper, lay a second ledger, identical to the one I had just read through. I sat the two side by side on the desk and began to compare.

About ten minutes later, I exclaimed, "My God, Imogene, wake up!"

She jolted awake, almost knocking one of the ledgers off the desk, and looked about with wild alarm for a moment before regaining her senses. "Ah!" she said with a toothy grin. "You have figured it out, then?"

"I believe so!" said I. "I fear your instincts about Stafford were off the mark. He may be having an affair with Jennifer Koenig, but I believe that is secondary to his true motive for murder. It seems that Travis Koenig was embezzling funds. You see?" I pointed out the inconsistent figures.

"Oh." Baker did not seem nearly as interested as I had expected. In fact, her face had fallen as I spoke and she now bore a look of utter disappointment. "And how do you think he killed Koenig?"

I continued despite her desolation. "We know the killer must have overpowered Koenig. Stafford's stronger than he looks, and a fair bit taller than Koenig. It would not be a stretch to think he could have done it."

Baker's mouth had fallen into a hard line. "And why use a saw to cut his throat?"

"Misdirection, maybe. To make us think it was one of the workers."

She leaned forward and gave me a hard and scathing stare. "And what of the leg?"

I opened my mouth with confidence, then lost it at once and closed it again. She kept on with her loathsome stare. "I don't know," I finally admitted. "But I'll find out."

"I'm sure you will," she said flatly, and swung her legs down off the desk. "But in the meantime, we've a date to keep." She started for the door.

I followed after, the ledgers in hand. "Have we?"

"Yes," she said, and did not elaborate further. At the door to the factory I handed the books off to the bobby as evidence and ran to catch up with Baker. But despite my many questions, she did not speak again until she had led me to the gates of the town graveyard.

The sun, as well as my patience, had all but set as we passed into the cemetery.

"Imogene," I called, raising my voice more than I would normally have done when using her true name in public. "Tell me what is going on."

She did not turn around, instead navigating through the rows of headstones towards an all too familiar plot. "Inspector," she said in tired, grim tones, "must I tell you everything?"

"Yes, you must. Why are we visiting Charlotte's grave?"

"Can a woman not visit the grave of her friend?"

"Can a man not have his questions answered?"

She sighed and removed her hat, gesturing for me to do the same. Recalling etiquette, I did so. "This is not easy for me, Inspector. I hope you know that," she said.

"And that is another thing," I pressed. "You have not called me by my name all day. What have I done to offend you?"

"You did nothing, Arnold." I could only barely hear her low tones over the wind as it passed through the trees. "You did nothing at all."

"I don't understand."

"I know."

We rounded a corner in the path and came in sight of Charlotte's grave. I stopped short. Where I had seen Miss Lewin buried months ago, a freshly exhumed coffin sat on the grass, its grave empty. Agape, I ran to catch up with Miss Baker.

She was standing beside the coffin, eyes closed and hat over her heart. She dropped her satchel on the ground next to her with a heavy thump and opened her eyes to look at me. They were rimmed with red but hard, set in whatever task she had taken upon herself.

"For five months Charlotte's killer was a free man. You were the lead inspector on the case. It was your job to bring him to justice."

My mouth was dry as the grave we stood before. "There was nothing to be done, Imogene. The evidence was lacking."

"No." She fixed the full force of her glare on me as if it might turn me to stone. "I solved it. Bereaved, I solved it. And you, Arnold, you did nothing. You had no leads. No clues. Nothing. I do not want to think you are that stupid, to have investigated to your best ability and come up with nothing. But the only other option is that you simply did not care enough to try." She took a deep breath of the chilly night air. "I solved it, Arnold, and it wasn't even hard."

"I-" I was at a loss. I had truly believed I had done my best with the case. But in the face of her accusation I began to doubt. "Who killed her?" I asked instead.

She did not answer. Instead she knelt and opened the satchel at her feet. I could not see what was inside until she stood again and the coffin no longer blocked my view, but when I saw what she had taken from it I took an involuntary step back, a hand shooting to cover my mouth.

It was a leg.

A shin and foot, sawed below the knee, its flesh battered by whatever shoddy saw blade Imogene had used for the job and with a bullet wound squarely in its centre. "Travis Koenig," she said, and tossed me the leg.

I cringed back and let it fall at my feet. "I don't understand," I managed, stumbling over the words.

"A shot in the leg to stop him running. After that he was easy to overpower, with him in so much pain. He was not a young man, and I am more able than I look."

"But why-"

"Why take his leg? Had you seen the bullet wound you would know that it was no difficult feat to overcome him. As it is, you were looking for a man of decent strength." A slight smug look came over her. "Were you any other inspector, I could

have been a suspect. But you know me as Imogene, and so Gene Bakerson did not fall under suspicion."

"I would not have suspected you even then," I said earnestly. "I consider you a friend."

She looked almost touched, but the cold came back to her eyes quickly. "And I you. As did Charlotte. It changed nothing."

I shook my head. It was all too much. I hardly felt capable of processing it all. "I still don't understand. Why would Koenig kill Charlotte?"

"His embezzlement. Charlotte found out about it. Don't ask me how. She always did have her ways of digging these things up." A twitch of a smile played on her lips. "You will recall the knife which his cook replaced those months ago, the one with the broken screw?"

"The murder weapon," I muttered, not loud enough for her to hear. She must have seen my lips move, for she pressed on.

"His shoe polish was on her windowsill, for God's sake." Her voice was raising now, and I prayed that a grave-keeper was about, for my feet felt welded in place. "And still you were mystified. I have long considered you a friend, and I am sorry, but I am afraid you deserve this."

"What are you going to do?" My tone had become undignified, pleading.

She did not answer. Instead she opened the lid of the coffin where Charlotte Lewin was laid to rest.

In the five months since her death a wax had formed on her skin, saving her features from the worst of the decay. Still, she was pallid and gaunt, her features which had been round in life now drawn close to her bones. Imogene looked at her as she always had, a softness in her eyes.

From her bag she pulled two more objects: a book, old and leather-bound and nearly falling apart, and a glass bottle. Even at the distance from which I viewed the events I could recognise its contents as blood.

The moon rising above her, she began to read from the book. It was a language I had never heard and could not recall moments after the words passed her lips, but the world seemed to listen closely and attend each syllable. The trees ceased their rustling, the wind grew still, and I swear on my life that the moon turned a colour I had never seen before and have not since.

Finishing the text, she gently took Charlotte's head in her hand and tipped it forward, raising the bottle to her lifeless lips and pouring its contents down her

throat. She whispered something to the corpse, and dipped her own head to the edge of the coffin, still and waiting. I prayed for Lewin's body to remain vacant and unmoving.

My prayers were not answered that night. But five seconds passed before the wax seal across Charlotte's skin cracked as her muscles returned to use and her eyes opened once more.

"Gene?" came a disused voice, low and dry, and Imogene's head raised as a look of bare relief spread over her.

"Yes, love, it's me. I'm here. You're alright now."

A fractured smile came to Charlotte's face. "I missed you."

"My dear," said Imogene, "you will never have to miss me again." She moved to help Lewin up from her deathbed, struggling but supporting most of her weight as the corpse clambered stiffly out. "We don't have much time now. We must be quick.," I heard her say, and this snapped me out of the horrified fascination with which I had been watching the scene.

"Imogene," I called to her, and Charlotte looked up and saw me. She smiled, raised a hand in a vague greeting, and I saw her lips mouth my name. Imogene did not share her goodwill.

"I am sorry," she told me again, "but there is a price to be paid for this, and the two of us have lost enough already. The debt collector will have to settle for you."

She and Charlotte were already swiftly making their way towards the cemetery gate and I turned to follow them when a tremor came from below me. I looked back at Charlotte's grave and found that the coffin's hinges were rattling, the whole thing shaking so violently that it threatened to fall back into the hole from whence it came.

I stepped back, about to follow the women once more, but found that the ground beneath me was splitting like broken ceramic, the shard upon which I stood turning and slipping, throwing me off balance and back towards the grave. As I fought to keep my footing I saw the dirt walls of the grave begin to crumble and collapse in on themselves and a moment later a great appendage emerged from the earth, unlike any I have before seen. Its end resembled a hand, yet from each knuckle sprung innumerable new limbs and joints, a mess of grabbing fingers. The ground bowed beneath its weight as it groped for a hold, attempting to pry whatever horrible body was attached to that limb to the surface.

I confess I let out a scream, perhaps calling back to the escaping women for help or to the Lord above for mercy. This was a mistake. As if it could hear me, the limbs stretched in my direction, grasping at the air and seeming to grow by the second

until a set of disjointed knuckles found their way round my ankle as I scrabbled against the shifting ground.

I believe even now that it was by God's own providence that I saw the leg of Travis Koenig still at my feet then. I lunged for it and hurled it with all my might at the beast in the desperate hope that it might take that meagre piece of flesh rather than mine. The hold on my ankle released as like a hungry mongrel it followed the leg through the air and away from me. I scrambled to my feet, launching myself as far and as quickly away from the limbs as I could manage. I never saw what happened to Travis Koenig's leg, but I heard the cracking of bone and ripping of flesh behind me.

I made it to the cemetery gates and kept running, not thinking of any direction but away from Charlotte Lewin's grave. At some point I must have lost consciousness, for the next thing I recall is waking in a hospital bed the next town over.

I know not what happened to Imogene Baker or the corpse of Charlotte Lewin, for I have never seen them since. I know that by giving my account as I have put it down here I am certain to lose my job and perhaps even my freedom, for I know that this account sounds to any reasonable person mad. But after the events of that night

I have no fear of such things. My only fear is that Imogene's debt collector has added my name to its list.