

The Blood of Innocents

Edward wiped away the sweat beading on his brow with one large hand and glanced over to the ~~great large~~ clock hanging on the far wall. The work day was almost over; ~~Then~~ he could soon head home to embrace his wife, Amelia, and ~~their~~ daughter, Mabel.

Wife. It still felt strange to even think the word. *How had time passed so quickly?*

The ceremony had been performed in the local tavern amid the drunks and pickpockets; ~~t~~The officiator had been Old Tom, a half-blind once-priest of the twin goddesses Alya and Myria, ~~and~~ ~~The wedding had been~~ was short, grimy, and ~~dubiously official~~ ~~technically unofficial~~, for ~~they hadn't the coin for anything else~~. Surroundings and circumstance ceased to matter though, as Old Tom wound the bright red ribbon around both of their wrists ~~just the same~~. A few words were spoken, a prayer ~~was~~ offered up to the Gods, and ~~then~~ Amelia and Edward were wed. That was Edward's happiest day, ~~he knew~~, second only to the day his daughter was born, and he knew without words that his wife, Amelia, felt the same.

A man of 31 years, Edward was a blacksmith for *Bishop & Ferguson*, a company that produced steam coaches for those in the Gold District. The carriages of *Bishop & Ferguson* were a curious work of gadgetry; ~~They were~~ arranged much in the same way as horse-drawn carriages. A driver sat on the box seat, ~~with a driver~~ pushing and pulling an array of levers and dials to control the steam engine. The carriage itself contained ~~with~~ one large compartment where four people could sit, comfortably facing ~~comfortably sit facing~~ one another ~~while~~ and looking out through the curtained windows to gawk at those less fortunate than they. ~~And when it came time to exit, they could leave through the doors on either side of the carriage. Atop the front of the carriage, on the~~

~~outside would sit a driver, though instead of reins he would push and pull at an array of levers and dials to control the steam coach.~~

Edward's job at the smithy was to run the **assembly line, operating the** machines that aided in the construction of each piece of those great steam powered carriages. It was hard work, and **it was** dangerous. Once, a gout of superheated steam had spewed from a place where **two great** pipe segments joined, **scalding air**. ~~The heated gas had narrowly missed~~ Edward. ~~;~~ **But** even so, it had seared through the fabric of his shirt and left an ugly, mottled scar on his right arm that had taken months to heal fully. ~~;~~ **He knew it and** would likely never fade entirely. Still, the job paid better than most, and Edward sometimes even caught himself enjoying his work.

He was not an educated man, but the workings of these great machines of steel and coalfire fascinated him. Were he ~~a~~ **wealthier man**, perhaps he would have even owned one of the gleaming horseless carriages that he worked **so tirelessly** to produce. **Then again,** ~~But,~~ Edward was a pragmatist; ~~;~~ **He knew better than to believe that** he would ~~ever~~ **never** rise above the slums of the Copper District. The only thing he could hope for was to earn enough coin in his lifetime to help his daughter **survive.**

Edward's thoughts were interrupted by the tolling of the bell signaling the end of the workday, ~~and.~~ ~~He~~ began the long process of **waiting patiently for** ~~allowing~~ the machine to cool and settle. He pulled hard on the lever that closed the vents, cutting off the machine's oxygen. **Doing so,** ~~quenching~~ the furnace fires until the great steam engines ceased their relentless chugging, ~~and~~ both gear and piston ~~shuddering~~ to a halt. Around him, his fellow working men were all doing the same as the foreman bellowed out over their heads for them to "hurry up."

Edward Bartholomew Hartley was not a small man. He was built like an ox, tall and broad with shoulders like giant slabs of meat. His hair was short and black, his skin bronzed from working in front of the hot furnaces of *Bishop & Ferguson*. His face —; if he was being honest —; was not a pretty one. Like the rest of him, ~~it his face~~ was blunt and broad, like a bulldog's. He was not ~~beautiful~~~~pretty~~, not like Amelia, yet somehow she still chose to marry him. It was something he marvelled at every day.

~~Walking home from the factory, As he walked home~~ he thought ~~to himself that~~ perhaps he should get her a gift. *Maybe a flower. He thought. She likes those. And we've got the coin.*

Now, it is known that ~~a~~~~All~~ animals are imbued with a sense;; an instinct for danger. And if some philosophers are to be believed, mankind is no different. ~~For H~~humans, ~~despite~~~~for all~~ their ~~immense capacity for~~ higher thought and cognitive prowess, still ~~must~~ answer to instinct. Humans —; regardless of rationale or reason —; still experience that unexplained sense of dread when in the presence of a predator. So it was that Edward knew instantly as he approached his apartment that something was very wrong.

The building ~~where Edward and his family resided~~ was nothing more than one row of small, ill-constructed rooms in a sea of ~~identical~~~~similar~~ rows. Such was the nature of the Copper District slums:: ~~p~~Poor families such as Edward's lived — ~~all of them~~ — in singular rooms with few exceptions. At night, the streets of the Copper District were generally full with clandestine activity, groups of boys roving from tavern to tavern, dogs snuffing for scraps, women perched on street corners plying their trade when day work could not pay the bills. ~~However, beyond~~ ~~o~~~~Outside of~~ Edward's apartment chain ~~though~~, all was eerily silent. No dogs howled, no drunks sang incompetently. ~~Despite the hard day's work,~~ Edward had felt happy to be returning to his wife and

daughter, despite the hard day's work. But now that joy curdled in his stomach as he took in the eerie silence of the district. A sense of wrongness — of danger — turned the cool night air to ice in his lungs, and despite his mind telling him it was nothing — only his imagination — Edward broke into a run for the homestead. His aches and pains forgotten, Edward's boots thundered on the cobbled ground as he raced for the door of his apartment.

Amelia, Mabel — they were in danger. He could feel it in his heart.

The door was locked — that he knew — but he had no time to concern himself with that thought: as he reached for the door, he simply aimed one massive shoulder and bashed it down to the ground. for the door and battered it aside. He After it had fallen to the dusty floor, he stood in the doorway, frozen, stopped in the doorway, his massive chest heaving as his eyes adjusted to the pitch blackness of the small room.

Slowly, shapes began to emerge from the darkness. First, the single, wide bed in the corner that Edward and Amelia slept on, with their daughter, Mabel nestled between. Then the shape of the fireplace; Amelia was usually up cooking a stew at this time of night, but there was no smell of boiling stew, nor soft glow of coals in the hearth. Finally, in the middle of the floor, a dark, prone shape came into view. Edward rushed forward and sank to his knees. It was his wife.

His *wife*.

Amelia. Even in the darkness, he could tell And she wasn't breathing. He gently took her small hand in his, pain swelling in his chest. It was cold as ice and felt limp in his desperate grip. Even in the dim moonlight he could tell her fair face was impossibly pale.

Dead. The word entered his mind unbidden, and no matter how fervently he denied it, it rang true. Amelia Hartley, Edward's wife, was dead.

But how? She had been perfectly healthy this morning, and there was no blood.

How could this have happened?

There. On her neck. ~~Two neat puncture wounds. A smear of blood with no wound, save two neat punctures.~~ ~~It~~ Edward knew in an instant that it could only be the work of a vampire, a dread creature of the night. He had known they were a threat, but still... ~~How~~ How could he have let this happen?

A small cry rang out ~~sound~~ from the corner of the room, and ~~made~~ his head shoot up, his eyes straining to pierce the blanketing dark. Again, the sound, almost like a sob.

Mabel. Mabel wasn't on the floor with her mother. ~~The thought hit him suddenly.~~

Perhaps —

Edward rushed to the far corner, away from the doorway, where Amelia had insisted Mabel practice hiding beneath the floorboards in case of danger. Edward had thought it foolish, but now, as he wrenched the floorboards back and beheld his daughter's tear streaked face, he could only thank the gods for Amelia's foresight. With a low sound of equal parts despair and relief, Edward gathered Mabel up in his arms and squeezed her tightly. Her small hands clutched at his shirt as she sobbed against his chest. ~~She was~~ ~~were~~ ~~nearly~~ ~~unintelligible~~ ~~Amidst~~ ~~her~~ ~~childish~~ ~~naïveté,~~ ~~her~~ ~~words~~ ~~were~~ ~~nearly~~ ~~unintelligible~~ ~~as~~ ~~she~~ ~~lamented~~ ~~the~~ ~~events~~ ~~that~~ ~~had~~ ~~transpired~~ ~~in~~ ~~that~~ ~~small~~ ~~room.~~ ~~in~~ ~~her~~ ~~childlike~~ ~~misery~~ ~~as~~ ~~she~~ ~~told~~ ~~him~~ ~~what~~ ~~happened.~~

“A b-bad man came- and- and then M-mommy made me go under the floor!” Mabel blubbered. “I-it was so scary Father! Is- is Mommy okay?”

Edward wished he had an answer ~~that was both comforting and true.~~ Instead, he only held her tighter and quietly added his tears to hers.

* * *

Four years later, Edward dumped coals out of the metal bin and into the hearth. Times had been hard since Amelia died. *In the years following her passing, Edward had taken great time off from* of his work to stay home and take care of young Mabel.; ~~but,~~ *Even so, she had had to become far much* more self-sufficient than he would have liked for a girl of only *twelve*.

Stuffing tinder under a few of the coals, Edward struck a piece of flint until ~~the~~ sparks *flew arrived* onto the piece of tinder and smoldered. Mabel would be finishing up her shift at the mill soon, and he wanted their apartment to be warm and dinner to be ready when he picked her up. Edward always walked Mabel to and from her work every day, *and although:* ~~h~~ He knew it was not common for parents to do *this*, ~~but~~ he did not want to take any chances with Mabel.

He had a proper fire going and a pot of porridge cooking over the coals when three hard raps sounded on the door.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Perhaps Mabel was back from work; and had forgotten her key. ~~Yet~~ *But* those knocks had been made by a *hand far* heavier ~~hand~~ than hers.

It was night, so Edward rose and collected a sharp stake from the pile he had whittled down years ago. When he opened the door, *slowly and carefully,* two strangers stood before him in fine clothing; a man and a woman. The man was tall and lanky, with a pair of spectacles perched *atop* on the bridge of his nose. He had brown hair and eyes that darted this way and that with a sort of nervous, squirrely energy. The woman was slight of build, but had a hard look about her, as if she dared anyone to comment on her stature. *In her hands she clutched* ~~She clutched in her hands~~ a bundle of papers — pamphlets of some kind. The three of them stared at *each other* ~~each other~~ for a

time as he took in their fine dress and strange demeanor, and they looked up at his brutish face and hulking frame in silence. Edward was so large, in fact, that eEven the man had to look up, for Edward outranked them both in height.

“What d’you want?” EdwardHe grunted. *It isn’t quite dark out... he thought to himself. Perhaps they aren’t — He dispelled the half-finished thought.. ...Could maybe take them both...*

His thoughts were interrupted as the man politely cleared his throat. ~~before speaking.~~

“Ahem. Ah, hello good, um... ; sir.” He seemed intimidated by Edward, hesitant and cowardly beyond the doorway. “Um,” he continued. “...are you perchance aware of the vampire menace?”

Edward’s eyes narrowed, but the man plowed forward despite his obvious nerves. “...Aha, yes,” he said, voice quavering. “Very dangerous. You see, my associate and I are a part of an organization dedicated to spreading the truth about these fiends. We are —”

“I’m not interested.” Edward said abruptly.

“Um, p-pardon?” The man spluttered. The woman with the pamphlets only just glared.

Edward’s voice was cold. “I said I’m not interested.”

He Edward began to shut the door, but the man extended a wiry leg, stopping the cedar door with one well polished boot. “Now — now hold on just one moment sir!” He said. “This is a matter of utmost importance! Please, if you’ll just take one of our pamphlets.” He fumbled with the bundle in the woman’s hands before pulling out a slightly rumpled pamphlet and shoving it towards Edward. “Th-this information could save your life!”

Edward took the pamphlet, if only to get them to leave.

“Thanks,” he grumbled. “...but I still ain’t interested.” He began to close the door again, harder this time.

The woman’s voice was shrill as she exclaimed through the slamming door:

“Take it or not! It is of no interest to me!” ~~The woman exclaimed as the door was shut in their faces.~~ “It is only your life on the line!”

The door slammed shut, encasing the room in silence. Edward idly glanced down at the pamphlet he now held in his hand. At the top of the ~~paper~~pamphlet it read:

A message from The Vampire Hunters Guild

Have you or a loved one come into contact with the undead? Here is how you may protect yourself if you find yourself at the mercy of one of these undead fiends!

- 1. The most effective deterrent to the undead is a vial of holy water. It will burn the unholy flesh of these vile creatures. Contact your local priest!**
- 2. Barring ~~that,~~ a symbol of faith, such as ~~like~~ the emblems of Alya and Myria will repel them if it is wielded with faith in your heart!**
- 3. If you find yourself without a symbol of faith or holy water, run. Run as fast as you can. ~~Simply run.~~**
- 4. Finally, if running is not an option, you may use a sharpened wooden stake. Driving this weapon into the heart of a vampire may disable them for a time. The next step after this is beheading. A heavy axe works best.**

A the bottom of the letter, a final warning was transcribed:

The importance of the following cannot be understated: ~~We must stress however, that~~ the best strategy for surviving a vampire attack is avoidance. Actively hunting vampires is best left up to the professionals: ~~Us~~.

Upon reading the words, Edward found himself transported back to that horrible night four years ago, and ~~, when he had found his dearest wife limp and cold on the floor, utterly drained of blood. For all his size, he the burly man~~ shuddered at the thought.

Still, ~~He~~ was glad someone was finally doing something about those creatures. ~~, and a~~ At one point, he ~~might~~ have ~~even~~ joined ~~them in~~ their crusade against the ~~beasts; creatures of the night, and~~ the list rekindled that desire to open the door and follow the two hunters ~~out into the night.~~ ~~¶~~

~~but~~ Yet he knew that he could not possibly dedicate himself to their goals. He had his darling daughter to take care of after all. If he were to go out and get himself killed or enthralled by some vampire or other, ~~then~~ Mabel would be left all alone. She had lost her mother ~~already;~~ Edward would not allow her to lose her father as well.

For their whole journey home together, Mabel told her father of ~~the happenings of the her day. for the whole journey way home.~~ She told him of her friend Josephine, who always stood up to their mean old foreman even when he yelled.

~~“And~~ she’s never scared,” she said. ~~“Not~~ even when Mr. Wilson bangs his cane on the ground!”

As always, she was full of questions as well. ~~She asked him many questions too.~~ “Why does he have a cane anyway?” She said. “He walks just fine!”

Edward listened and answered her questions as best he could, content to spend this meager time with his daughter. ~~In truth, he He~~ didn’t know why Mr. Wilson had a cane. Probably to make himself feel more important than he actually was.

~~EdwardHe~~ listened until they were home, ~~listened as and Mabel talked was talking in~~ between ~~mouthfulsmouthfulls~~ of bland porridge. And when she asked about his day, ~~and~~ he told her. He told her about the furnaces and the soot; ~~and~~ how one of the tiny cogs that made up the great machines had cracked and had to be replaced. He ~~even~~ presented her with the broken brass gear, to her obvious delight. She listened with rapt attention, even though she had heard most of it before; ~~it~~ It was an old, comfortable ritual that they had practiced for years.

Mabel listened until it was time for bed. ~~Then, and~~ Edward tucked her in with their one hole--ridden blanket before plopping into bed himself.

There he lay for a time, dreaming silently.

That is until — very suddenly — he was ~~Edward~~ jerked awake to the sound of Mabel screaming.

~~’s screams.~~ Turning to look beside him, Edward beheld the sight of Mabel, ~~Beside him~~ Mabel kicking and flailing in her bed as ; ~~and there was a~~ a figure standing over her. A pale creature with the appearance of a man wreathed in shadow, his arms gripping ~~at~~ Mabel’s shoulders. Edward knew at once, and with great fear, that it ~~He~~ was trying to take her.

Edward launched himself out of bed, lashing out ~~at the stranger’s head~~ with one brawny fist ~~at the stranger’s head~~. His knuckles connected with the creature’s ~~man’s~~ jaw, ~~and it felt no different~~

to him than striking a wall. ~~and it was like punching a wall.~~ The creaturestranger's head jerked back with the impact, but his grip on Mabel did not falter. She screamed, ~~and clawinged~~ at the creature's ~~man's~~ arms, but it was to no avail. The creature, — no, the vampire —, released Mabel with one arm. And, with the speed of a serpent, it shot out its other hand, aiming for Edward. ~~and stretched out the other with the speed of a snake towards Edward. His~~ Its pale fingers, tipped in black, clawlike nails, fastened like a vice around Edward's neck, and the creature lifted him up as if he weighedwere nothing. Then, the creature spoke, its voice sickeningly sweet.

“Oh my,” it said. “It seems I have found a fighter. Be glad that I find your *spirit* entertaining, or you would be dead already.”

Edward gripped onto the creaturestranger's arm as its fingers slowly tightened around his neck. The beingthing was strong —, impossibly so —, but a life of wrangling machines and shoveling coal had made Edward strong as well. He found the joint of the creature's elbow, holding it as he would one of the cogs of. ~~Just like one of his machines. Then he brought down an immense force upon it, as if he were pushing a large lever. Use a big enough lever...~~

With a sickening crunch, Edward snappedbroke the vampire's arm at the elbow, and: tThe creature screamed out with an inhuman shriek, ~~by flinging Edward and flung him~~ across the room. ~~as if he were a ragdoll.~~ He landed in a heap, coughing and struggling to take in even a single breath.

But ~~W~~when he looked up, the creature was gone, and Mabel with it.

Resolve settled into him, heavy and unyielding: he would go to the ends of the earth to bring his daughter back. And he would begin that very moment.

~~NOT The End...~~