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2,923 words
(short story)
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The Dull Lord Hornsby
By John D. Harvey

Alexandra Smythe felt a stab of guilt while driving through the brilliantly green English countryside in her new Jaguar. She had graduated from Salisbury College and entered the world of journalism to escape the stifling upper-echelons of British society which had trapped her in a manorial womb since birth.

Yet when given the choice between infant kidnappings in Hyde Park and an interview with Lord Ashton Hornsby about his annual flower fair, she had leapt to safety, or to dull Lord Hornsby's estate house, as the case may be.

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At Hornsby Manor, Alexandra was greeted by a short, compact man with bluish, pitch-black skin. His perfectly pressed tuxedo was striking against his undiluted African features.

He opened her door and offered a hand saying, "Madam," in a lyrical English accent. Alexandra put her hand in his and noticed the amazing softness of his skin. His eyes were dark and deep-set with the whites having an aging ivory shade. His expression stayed neutral, as any good butler's demeanor should.

"I will transport your luggage to your room, Madam," he said. "Mr. Lange will show you to my Lord." He gestured to a portly gentleman waiting at the entrance to the house.

"I do have a cottage rented in the village," she explained.

"I'm sure my Lord will help you decide on your arrangements." With that, the butler bowed deeply, climbed into her car, and drove away.

"Ms. Smythe I take it," said Lange. He marched toward her with his hand outstretched and a smile spanning his face. "I'm Charles Lange: the 'public relations steward' for Lord Hornsby. It's a lengthy way of saying that I get the blame if anything's a cock-up."

"Wonderful to meet you, Mr. Lange." Alexandra shook his hand. "It's rude of me to question your hospitality, but is Lord Hornsby letting all the journalists have a room?"

"No, Ms. Smythe, just the ones who attended Salsbury. Lord Hornsby's deceased wife was alumni, so he has an affinity for the school. I chatted with your editor; that's how we know."

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Alexandra and Lange found Lord Hornsby strolling about his garden. When he noticed Lange and Alexandra his delicate face lit up.

"Ms. Smythe, bloody good to have you here!" He held her hand in both of his. "Lange, I've always said that Salsbury produces the prettiest young women, as evidenced by my late Abigail and Ms. Smythe here."

"Prettiest flower in the garden," agreed Lange.

Alexandra blushed. "I think you gentlemen are trying to sway my journalistic objectivity. Not that I mind one bit."

Lord Hornsby laughed. For someone her editor called 'dull', Alexandra found him dashing. He swam in a Tory gentleman's stuffy airs, but with a pleasant, unintimidating demeanor.

"You are tired, Ms. Smythe," said Hornsby. "Lange, escort her to her room so that she can rest." He looked back to Alexandra. "We'll chat more at dinner then, shall we? And don't even start with the blasted 'Lord Hornsby' nonsense. Call me Ash."

"Of course, Ash. Thank you very much," she said beaming. "And please call me Alexandra, or even Alex, if you want."

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They arrived at her room just as the head maid left. Alexandra noted that she was African as well, with the same build and facial features as the butler. "Good evening, Ms. Smythe," the maid said and curtsied. "I've drawn a hot bath and unpacked your clothes. If you need me for anything,

please pull the cord by your bed." She curtsied again and departed.

"Mr. Lange, I must ask about the servants."

Lange grinned knowingly. "One of Hornsby's peculiarities. The previous Lord Hornsby was a governor in the west of Africa when it was a British colony. Most British governors were disdainful of the savages they controlled, but old Lord Hornsby developed an affinity for them. Especially the Ginbuttu tribe, who lived in the Ubangi River basin north of the Congo. Old Lord Hornsby was enthralled by the old legends that thousands of years ago their tribe had an empire that rivaled the Egyptians or the Incas.

"The family still has the governor's house in the Ubangi and our Lord Hornsby visits often to maintain the good relationship with the tribe. Reginald and Olive were adopted in their adolescence from the Ginbuttu. The estate cook and two of his assistants are also from the Congo region."

"How fascinating," remarked Alexandra. "Our Lord Hornsby must be older than he looks if his father was a colonial governor," she noted.

Lange chuckled. "Hornsby attributes his youthful looks to his diet and being bloody rich."

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"Seeing as it's just the three of us including Lange," said Lord Hornsby with Alexandra on his arm, "I thought that we would have an informal dinner in the sitting room. Is a thick, hot stew to your liking?"

"Stew sounds lovely," said Alexandra. "Very rural."

After the dishes were cleared, Lord Hornsby guided the conversation towards how truly magnificent gardens were disappearing in England. Alexandra took notes diligently for her newspaper article.

Lange turned in early, but Alexandra and Lord Hornsby talked for hours with Alexandra sitting next to him. She asked about Africa and Lord Hornsby became contagiously animated. He described the Ginbuttu Royal Palace with its elephant tusk gates and the King's hundreds of wives. He also talked at length about the ceremonies and the ritual scarring of the flesh.

"Off the record," said Hornsby, with the tone of a gossip, "Reginald, Olive, and my cooks all have scar patterns covering their chests and backs from when they went through rites of passage as adolescents. It's a fascinating ritual."

The exotic, animal sensuality that Hornsby conveyed of the Congo people aroused in Alexandra lewd musings of being in a Ginbuttu King's harem. Eventually though, even she grew heavy lidded. "I'm sorry Ash, but I just can't keep my eyes open," she apologized.

"Oh, I do tend to ramble on about Africa. It's such a fetish, I'm afraid to say," said Hornsby.

"Don't be afraid to say anything," Alexandra assured. "I find it all so interesting and I love listening to you talk. I find you very...intriguing," she said.

His fingers swept over hers and he said, "I find myself utterly distracted by you." Hornsby smiled and an crimson glow washed over his face. "Good Lord, I've forgotten how to talk properly to a lady."

They sat for a long, silent moment, and then Alexandra bit her lip and said, "Ash, would you like to accompany me to my room now?"

"Well," said Hornsby with surprise, "yes, that would be lovely."

#

A month later, Alexandra's face bore a grim mask as she drove back to Lord Hornsby's estate. The feature article she wrote about Ash's flower show went over well, and the night previous to it had been a smashing success.

There had been no illusions for either of them. A girlfriend over thirty years his junior would tarnish Lord Hornsby's spotless reputation, and Alexandra had only wanted spontaneous sex with a aristocratic older man. Nothing to make a habit of, but a fine memory of nubile wickedness to keep her smiling in her old age.

That all changed when she skipped her period, took a take-home test, and swore like a sailor when the results came up positive.

As much as it pained her, she wanted an abortion. Though, her conscience wouldn't let her terminate the pregnancy without telling Ash.

As she pulled into the manor lane, she saw Reginald at the front door. He immediately led her to Lord Hornsby in his library.

As soon as Reginald left, Alexandra explained the predicament. Hornsby gently placed a hand on her knee. "I would like to end the pregnancy," she admitted, "but I couldn't just ignore you." The enormity of an abortion caught up with her and she broke down into wracking sobs.

Lord Hornsby held her and said, "Well, I'm not as stuffy as I look. If that's what you want to do, then I'll support you."

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Ash proposed that Alexandra stay for the night, and she was happy to accept. The last few days had been hard and she needed to be pampered. Lange was elsewhere attending to Lord Hornsby's affairs, so it was just the two of them.

That night they ate a fine selection of sliced meats with a vintage cabernet. Though Hornsby struggled to be natural, the conversation lay flat.

At the end of the meal, Hornsby brightened. "I know what we can do that's fun. Seeing as you are interested in my Africa stories, I should take you down to the storage areas where I keep my old relics. How would you like that?"

Ash was trying so hard to rescue the night that she couldn't refuse. "That would be nice," she said.

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Reginald led them to the lower levels of the estate mansion, which had been built over the ruins of Hornsby Castle. Below ground level the masonry of irregular, time-worn chunks of granite took on a distinctly medieval and moist appearance. The passages were desperately narrow and the lighting consisted of bare bulbs that cast stark, grim shadows. Every ten feet or so, they would pass a wide door composed of thick beams fortified by steel bands and an iron crossbar.

"They're tombs," explained Lord Hornsby. "Mostly Hornsbys from long ago, and a few other related families. We use the empty tombs for storage."

"Seems a bit morbid," said Alexandra, rubbing her arms as a cold dankness seeped into her skin.

He smiled thinly. "We'll only be down here for a bit. I guess it is a bit morbid, as you say."

The hall terminated with a large door, similar to the others but broader. Reginald lifted the sturdy bolt. As the door opened, a quavering, animal cacophony assaulted Alexandra's ears. It was utterly unidentifiable. "What is that horrible sound?," she asked.

"That's the air changers and humidity controls. Makes a racket," he said calmly. To Alexandra it sounded nothing like machinery. To her it sounded more like...

Hornsby's hand seized her shoulder and propelled her into the chamber. What she saw threatened her sanity. Small, stacked cages lined the walls. Within each cage lay a fleshy,

hairless creature writhing in a leather harness. The cages' dimensions were such that the occupants could do nothing but lay there. Each prisoner screamed in a garbled torrent of anguish, and where their eyes should have been Alexandra saw only sunken sockets with the eyelids crudely sewn shut.

Hands gripped her roughly and dragged her into the room. "ASH, THEY'RE PEOPLE!," Alexandra screamed. She struggled without success in their grasp.

"Children, Alex. Children," said Ash absently. "Not one is over thirteen."

She was pinned to a long table. Reginald forced her neck into a frame that Hornsby padlocked in place. Leather straps held her feet and hands to the rack. "WHY?" she sobbed.

"Beyond that age they become tough and aren't good for anything but stew," he replied frankly. They shut off the lights and left.

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A month passed, and Alexandra became intimate with the workings in Lord Hornsby's secret tomb. Reginald lobotomized any new child through the nose with a long hook, and then removed their eyes and tongues for pickling: "hors d' oeuvres" as Hornsby referred to them. When a female reached a ripe age, she became a 'breeder,' and the cycle renewed itself. Occasionally, kidnapped children were bought on the black market to bring "new blood" into the stock. Overall, the dull Lord Hornsby maintained about seventy mutilated children in the tomb.

"The Ginbuttu did not believe that any species of animal was above any other," he lectured while watching Reginald feed fatty, almost raw meat to his stock. "They saw all creatures to be of equal importance, and therefore no one animal deserved to be eaten any more or less than the next, and that included humans. Before the British arrived, the Ginbuttu regularly took smaller, weaker tribes into their human herds." He smiled then, in remembrance. "My father came to believe in their philosophy, and was the most successful Colonial Governor in Africa."

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Alexandra suffered on the rack most of the day. Her restraints were kept tight to prevent a suicide attempt, and for an hour each day she walked the thin corridor outside the tomb while Reginald watched. She was fed regularly. Olive, a certified midwife, monitored her health.

Ash had worried for years about an heir continuing his family line and the family traditions. It was hard for him to have a long-term relationship without risking the discovery of his peculiar pallate.

Adoption was out of the question, as the child wouldn't have any true Hornsby blood in him. Truthfully, Lord Hornsby wasn't entirely sure how to explain a new, motherless heir, but was confident that a plan would arise.

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Two more months passed, although Alexandra would have guessed longer if not for her slightly swollen belly. Lord

Hornsby's servants watched Alexandra, but at night and between feedings she lay alone with Hornsby's herd.

The rack was an ancient wooden relic. Although the straps binding her wrists were new, the bolts holding the straps to the table, and the wood surrounding them, had corroded over the ages. Every night she twisted the restraints and felt the bolts loosening bit by bit.

Days later, she heard a dull snap and her right hand jerked away from the rack with a long, rusty iron bolt dangling from her wrist. This had been the easy part. She inserted the sharp bolt back into its hole and waited for the late night feeding.

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As Olive entered the tomb with a wheelbarrow full of meat, Alexandra cried out in agony. The maid approached with a fearful scowl.

"What is wrong," she snapped, "Is it the baby?"

"No!," wailed Alexandra, "I have a cramp in my neck." She struggled and contorted in mock pain. "Please rub it, Olive. It hurts so much!"

Olive glared, but such thrashing about could harm the baby. She unlocked the neck stock and bent over to rub her neck.

Alexandra plunged the rusty iron bolt into Olive's neck. The maid recoiled and the bolt came free with a torrent of blood. She stared at Alexandra with the wide, glassy eyes of a dead fish. Blood poured out of her mouth and dribbled down

her prim black and white uniform. Almost robotically, she turned toward the door, took three steps, and collapsed with a muted thud on the stone floor.

Using Olive's key, which still hung from the neck stock, Alexandra unlocked the rest of her bindings. She dragged Olive's body away from the doorway while caged children wailed as they always did at the smell of blood.

Alexandra hauled every child out of its cage, while being careful of her fingers. Their diet of undercooked meat kept their jaws unusually strong and they could take a thumb easily.

From the doorway, she watched the formless, fatty creatures crawl on their bellies toward Olives body...the scent of blood. She switched the lights off and plunged the room into an inky darkness.

Alexandra walked to the stairs at the end of the corridor and screamed as if she were in abject agony, and then hid behind the open door to the children's chamber. She gripped a large meat cleaver from the butcher block with both hands.

After a few moments she heard rapid footsteps descending down into the hall. "Bloody hell, Reginald! Hurry!," Lord Hornsby yelled. The footsteps came closer; she lifted the cleaver and waited for her moment to strike.

Their lack of caution was more profound than she expected. They rushed headlong into the darkened chamber without a pause. Of course, how afraid is the shepherd of his sheep?, she thought and threw herself against the door. As

massive as it looked, the door was balanced perfectly and it slammed shut. Alexandra dropped the crossbar into the steel braces.

"Alexandra!," Hornsby's screamed. "Open this door at once. I demand it!" More screaming came from behind the door, not angry but agonized. It was Reginald. Apparently, Olive's body hadn't satisfied seventy hungry mouths.

"Oh God Alexandra, please!," wailed Hornsby. "Get off! Get off! Open the door, open the dooropenthedooropenthedoor!" Lord Hornsby's pleas soon degenerated into shrieks. After that, she she heard only the muffled sounds feeding and fighting over scraps.

Alexandra entered the freezer to fetch a heavy, long-handled meat hook. As a little girl, she remembered her cats mauling a large robin. Her father had used a shovel put the hopelessly crippled animal out of its misery. With a resigned sigh, she entered children's chamber.

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Headline from *The London Times*, the next day:

HORNSBY MANOR BURNS TO THE GROUND

NO SURVIVORS

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From *The London Times*, one year later:

Alexandra Smythe, daughter of Sir Thuron Shelby Smythe, returned to her home in the Cotswolds last night in a taxi cab with a four month old son. Smythe had disappeared over a year

ago and has been the subject of an extensive hunt by the police and Sir Smythe.

According to a statement released by Alexandra Smythe, she ran away from England after falling in love with an unidentified Swiss artist who abandoned her upon learning of her pregnancy. She claims that she remained in Switzerland afterwards because of personal shame, but "time has healed all of the wounds that could be healed, and I couldn't bear to stay away any longer. My boy needs a family."

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