

Slow Famine

by Sean McMullen

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I do not enjoy stalking the undead. That may come as a strange admission from someone who has done so for nine hundred years, but it is true. The thought weighed heavily on my mind as the Alpha sailed slowly up to the Melbourne Town wharves through the midwinter drizzle of 1842. According to Roberts, the Alpha's master, the place had been forest a mere seven years earlier, but now over 10,000 souls lived there.

I hired a pony gig at the wharf and bundled my luggage onto it.

"Do you know Melbourne Town well?" I asked the driver. "I have just arrived from Launceston."

"Been here from the beginnin'," he drawled in a Midlands accent. "Came over with Fawkner's people on the schooner Enterprise in '35."

"Then take me to a good hotel and be quick about it, if you please."

"Why be hurried, sir?" he asked as he flicked the reins and set us rattling along the street. "Nobody's a-hurried in Melbourne Town."

Sir. I generally go about as a man to have greater freedom, but even after so many centuries the assumption can surprise me.

"I have a debtor to catch," I explained. "If I'm not quick he will hear of me and abscond again."

"An elderly gent like you, a-huntin' debtors?"

"Age is no hobble," I replied, displaying the Colt five-shot beneath my coat.

"Ah ha, fine machine. Melbourne's the world debtor capital, did ye know? Many a fine gentleman's bought Melbourne land on notes o' credit, but now land prices be down and they all be debtors."

He gestured down Elizabeth Street as we passed. It was wide and well appointed, but the surface was a quagmire of mud and ditches where dogs and goats scavenged.

"No money for the public good, sir. Why only last month another child drowned in one o' those ditches. 'Tis a wild place, Melbourne Town, with but few honest constables for 10,000 souls. Aye, and so many rogues among 'em."

A wild and lawless boomtown, that suited me well for I was a killer and outside the law. Melbourne was a melting pot of the dynamic and hopeless: the pioneers who wanted to carve a future out of the bushland, newly released convicts, dispossessed Aborigines stupefied with rum, government functionaries building a curriculum vitae to take elsewhere, speculators growing rich on credit, and speculators going bankrupt for the lack thereof.

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The Albion Hotel was just like an English coaching inn, and attracted a good and prosperous clientele. I was given an upstairs bedroom lit by a dormer window, and I was relieved by the clean comfort of the place after the turmoil and squalor of the streets. In the early afternoon I began my search, but it got off to a bad start. I wandered the streets until I came upon the Red Lion Inn, a humble little place at the west end of town. I ordered lunch, and as it was served I asked the publican where houses of pleasure were to be found. His wife, a most fearsome woman, overheard and let fly with such a tirade against loose morals that I abandoned my lunch and fled. At the Lamb Inn I had better luck, but it was tempered with

a warning.

"Ha ha, you'd be the cove who caught Mrs. McGuire's tongue a half-hour back," drawled a loafer that I approached. "So, you'd wantin' to find our nymphs of the pave, old cock?"

"Might be," I replied, flipping a shilling into the air. "I like nice girls, who stay overnight and tell no tales later."

"Try Mother Newberry's, in Flinders Lane near Market Reserve. There's two big berries painted on the door, like."

He combined a wink and a leer, and I tossed the coin to him and departed. Surprise was still my ally, yet I was appalled at how fast word of the incident with Mrs. McGuire had spread. Mother Newberry's establishment was a stone and timber cottage of three rooms, and I paid in advance to question her. Rather than asking about Lord Southern, I invented a fictitious wife for my fictitious son and pretended to be searching the world for her.

"Nah, I seen no nymph as yer describe, Mr. Maynard," responded Mother Newberry, a surprisingly young ex-convict from Sydney. "Girls' looks change real quick in the game, though, so who knows? Yer say she'd be likely ter work gentlemen?"

"Caroline was well brought up," I said anxiously. "She would not lie with mere sailors and navvies."

"Dunno 'bout that, sar. Times is 'ard."

"Please, stop!" I cried, putting my hands over my ears. "Just help me find her."

"Cor, all right then, easy! Ye're sure she's out 'ere, then?"

"She was a servant. My son and-- well, they eloped and married against my wishes. I am a man of means, so I-- I arranged for her to be sent her away. I told my son that she had run off with a sailor but he learned the truth. Melancholy has been consuming him for five years, and now he is close to death. I repented, and began searching the world for his lost darling. I tracked her to here: a ship's officer that I met in Liverpool said that he talked with a tipsy harlot in Port Phillip in 1841. She said her real name was Caroline, and that she was really married to a very important gentleman..."

I allowed my voice to trail away.

"Yeah, yeah, I sees the problem," Mother Newbury sighed, sounding convinced.

"He met her at Woolpack Inn." I had heard a sailor on the Alpha mention the place.

"That's in Williamstown. Commander Gorden cleared out the houses o' pleasure in Williamstown about this time last year, damn 'is eyes, so most nymphs came 'ere ter Melbourne. Look, if Caroline's the type ter work gentlemen, I got a list of nymphs for 'appointment', as I calls it. They're good girls in honest employ as scrubbers and such, not the type ter lie with sailors and troopers but, well, money's money, and there's gentlemen about who likes an occasional night with a clean nymph who won't tattle. They sends a man with a gig, and I arranges a nymph. For ten pounds I'd let yer see me list and write down such names as yer fancied."

I gave her the money and copied the list. For the rest of the day I negotiated the foul puddles, mud, tree stumps, savage dogs and insolent loafers of Melbourne Town as I visited each of the 'appointment' women in turn. To these I said that I was searching for a long-lost brother, an exiled nobleman. I had thought that Lord Southern would stand out like a beacon in such a frontier setting, but Melbourne Town turned out to be flush with exiled aristocracy. Just as Sydney and other Australian towns had been penal stations where the criminals of Britain were dumped, so now was Melbourne Town a place where the odd, dissolute, demented or spendthrift embarrassments of the English upper class were sent. It was not a widely known fact, but it made sense. The settlement was remote and dangerous, but with good prospects for the industrious. A compulsive young gambler from a good family could be sent there, ostensibly to make his fortune-- but he would also be safely out of sight and liable to be dead within a year or two.

By evening I had a lead. The undead never allow portraits to be made of them, but I had seen Lord Southern at a ball five years earlier. Later I had done a sketch of his face from memory, and it was a fair likeness. At least two dozen men had Mother Newberry's 'appointments' stay overnight from time to time, but three of the women thought that they recognised the face of my sketch. All three named Mr. James Slater of Brighton, south of the city. I bought a horse, then called at the Lamb Inn for dinner and a

game of billiards. I feigned being suspiciously at ease with the locals, laughing, drinking ale and asking after a fictional debtor who might live at Brighton.

* * *

The next day, an hour before dawn but in bright moonlight, I roused the punt operator and crossed the Yarra River with my horse. The track south was all ruts, mud, deep sand and tree stumps, and the surrounding country was thickly grown with gum trees and scrub. I saw nobody else as I rode, and by the time the sun was up I was perhaps a mile from the house where James Salter resided. Like war, hunting the undead is months, even years of tedium culminating in a moment of intense terror. That moment was near, and my heart was already pounding.

I noticed a pony gig approaching, driven by a well-kempt but nondescript man with a woman beside him. She was muffled against the cold winter air, and I did not recognise her as we passed-- but she knew me.

"Pete, that's him, that's the cove who was askin' about Mr. Slater!"

The driver was caught as much by surprise as I was. We continued on until perhaps fifty feet apart before he thought to draw a carbine from under the seat and take aim as I sat half-turned in the saddle.

"Pete, no!" the woman screamed, seizing his arm as he fired. I was hit just below the ribs. My horse reared and I was flung into long grass beside the track. I lay still.

"Damn yor eyes!" the man roared.

"Please Pete, I didn't mean it, honest I didn't." Her voice was shrill with terror. "I thought you'd lost your senses."

"Shut up and don't move!" His accent was Cockney, his voice hoarse and breathless.

I drew my Colt Patent Revolver with my right hand, slowly, smoothly, then thumbed the striker back until the trigger clicked free of the stock. There were five shots in the chamber, but the first would count most. Pain burned like hot coals in my intestines, and I could feel my hands shaking as I listened to footsteps approaching. He was coming straight over, he might not have reloaded his carbine.

I wrenched myself up through a boiling spasm of pain and fired-- but missed! He flung a knife aside and drew a Derringer from his coat as I fanned the Colt's hammer back and fired two, three, four, five times. Half-deafened by the blasts, I watch the man fall, his right eye obliterated by my single hit. As I got to my knees the woman just sat there with her arms held tightly against her breasts and her fists beneath her chin.

"I seen it all, guv'ner," she suddenly blurted in a quavering voice. "I'll tell Judge Willis that Pete Hooper took a shot at you an'-- "

"That's enough! Help me get him to the gig."

With blood seeping between the fingers of my left hand I helped her heave the body across the poles of the gig behind the pony. My own horse, which seemed suspiciously at ease after such an exchange of gunfire, was grazing nearby and the woman easily caught him and tied the reins to the gig. I had her scuff sand over the blood on the road before we left. It was only as she climbed up beside me that I realised she was one of Mother Newberry's 'arrangement' nymphs. Letitia was a laundress. She was in her forties, but she had a plump, pleasant figure and pretty face after what had obviously been a hard life. I turned off into a nearby break in the bush and the pony managed to force its way through a hundred yards of scrub until we reached a clearing. We dragged the body off the poles then Letitia stood back, her hands clasped and her shoulders hunched as I drew my argenter dagger.

"Oh Lord, no guv, I'm not ready-- "

"Quiet, this is not for you," I snapped, doubled over with pain and with my vision starting to blur. "Unbutton his shirt, all the way down."

* * *

While she was turned away I thumbed out a little spike in the argenter's handle, and the point sank into

the flesh of my palm as I gripped the handle tightly. I knelt beside the body, opposite Letitia

"What do you mean to do?" she gasped as I raised the dagger. "He's dead, there's a bullet through his head, he's up there explainin' his sins to the Almighty-- "

I stabbed down with all my strength. Letitia shrieked as the corpse gave a hissing yowl. The surviving eye bulged and dead hands tore at my fist as I pressed the argentor down. A warm tingle spread through my fist and up my arm, then Hooper's body became truly still.

"He were alive!" babbled Letitia. "Lord in Heaven, but he were alive with a hole shot through his eye."

"Not alive, undead," I said as the tingling continued. "Do you have a needle and cotton in your bag?"

She nodded. The body's flesh seemed to sag as the tingling stopped, and I withdrew the blade and wiped it on the wet grass. Letitia was speechless as I removed my coat, and then she fainted at the sight of the shirt beneath all soaked in blood. While she lay senseless I rummaged in her bag. I found cheap perfume, a knife, and a folder of sheepgut sheaths before I came upon her sewing kit and began patching the hole in my coat. Presently she groaned and sat up.

"It really happened," I said before she could speak.

"Who-- *what* was he?"

"Do you know the word vampyre?"

"Vam-- vampyre? Can't say as I have, but it has a bad sound."

I explained about vampyres, about how they were transformed humans, neither dead nor alive who were sustained by the blood of living people. Should a mortal taste a vampyre's blood, then upon dying he-- or she-- also becomes a vampyre in turn.

"They are paralysed by day but invincible by night and as strong as ten men. Only argentor daggers deter them, daggers made of nickel and iron that has fallen from the sky and been inlaid with silver. Only something from beyond this world can kill something not of this world."

"I don't rightly follow all that."

"Look... the man you know as Mr. Salter is Lord Southern, a vampyre that I that have stalked for many years. The late Mr. Hooper guarded him by day and served him by night. In return he was given a drop or two of the vampyre's blood so that upon dying, he too would become a vampyre. Live mortals who are destined to become undead are called neophytes."

"You're jokin'!" she squealed. "You mean Pete *wanted* to be, uh, like that?"

"It has its attractions. Vampyres draw the vitality from the living, as well as their blood. It restores their youth, sustains them through centuries of existence, and even heals wounds. They are also said to get sensual pleasure from the act of biting."

"Get aht!" she said, giving me a playful push. "Dead folk doin' it, I never heard such a thing. Give that coat here, I've patched many a hole like that in Melbourne Town."

Her fingers were deft and nimble, and the rent slowly dissolved back into the cloth.

"Pete and his guv'ner kept asking me about raptors," she said as she worked.

"That is the vampyres' term for my kind. In Latin it means thief or plunderer."

"So you rob the vampyres, then?"

"I-- ah, yes, of their immortality." And more besides, much more.

"I was wonderin'... I mean, like his lordship used my services, if you get my meaning. Am I a neo-thing, I mean will I become-- "

"Describe your liaisons," I said curtly.

"Once a month Pete would take me out to the Brighton house in the gig. Mr.-- his lordship was respectable, like always well dressed and groomed, you know? Sort of regal, I mean I'm not surprised he's a nobleman. We drank a bit-- "

"Did you ever see him drink?"

"No, come to think of it. I'd go to his bedchamber and undress in the dark, then he'd come in and mount up. He rode hard, like, and I always wore out and dozed off. Pete would take me back in the morning, they were kind and all."

I sat back, leaning against a wheel of the gig as I reloaded my Colt.

"Your drink was drugged. It was Hooper who entered in the darkness and coupled with you. Once

you were comatose Lord Southern would enter, sink his fangs into your neck and drink your blood."

"You're barmy! Nothin' like that ever happened."

"You wear high collars to conceal lovebites."

"Why that I do. I may work as a nymph a-times, but I'm not some bold slut."

"The fang-marks are small and rendered painless by the vampyre's saliva, so you'd not notice them.

Will you unbutton your collar for me?"

She nodded reluctantly, then put my coat down and bared her neck. There, amid Hooper's oval lovebites, were two puncture marks.

"Will I end up like Pete?" she asked fearfully as she buttoned her collar.

"Have you even licked blood from a scratch on Lord Southern's skin?"

"Never."

"Then you are not a neophyte."

She considered this, still frowning.

"You said his lordship has the strength of ten men, yet has to sleep by day."

"Yes."

"But Pete were a-movin' and the was sun up," she said with a wave at the sky.

I shook my head. "Neophytes only become vampyres after being killed. Pete would have risen at the moment of sunset, except..." I held up the argentor and pointed it at his body. "With very old vampyres it is more dramatic. They crumble to dust."

* * *

She picked up my coat and began working at the bullet hole again. Her sewing was excellent, and when she was done the rent was not noticeable unless one knew to look for it. I stood up and buttoned the coat, and was relieved that none of the blood on the shirt beneath could be seen.

"You'd better let me tend that hole in you," said Letitia as she got to her feet.

That would never do. My breasts were not large, but they most definitely did not belong on a man. Besides, my wound had already been healed by vitality conducted out of Hooper's heart along the argentor's blade but she did not need to know that.

"I'm not hurt badly, but it's sweet of you to be concerned," I replied with a smile.

"You're a nice one," she giggled as she gave me another push. "Tough as bullock driver, yet handsome for an elderly gent."

"Strength and age are not excuses for bad grooming."

She slipped an arm about my waist. "It's nice out here."

"You mean to couple with me," I stated baldly. She blinked and stared hard at my face.

"What's the matter? Is it because I'm a whore-- "

She stopped, breathing rapidly as if to hold back sobs. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"This is neither the time or the place for dalliance, Letitia. I am a raptor soldier, and this is my battlefield. I must be on my guard constantly, for I do not have the supernatural powers of the enemies that I hunt. If I am killed I shall not rise from the grave at the next sunset."

That much was true, at least.

"Who are you then?"

I shrugged. "A raptor. One of a brotherhood of mortals dedicated to ridding the world of undead predators."

That was more of a lie. We raptors draw vitality from vampyres as we kill them, vitality that cures disease, heals wounds and reverses ageing. I am mortal, yet I once served at the table of William the Conqueror. Letitia folded her arms, half turned, then regarded me through her eyelashes.

"When Lord Southern has your dagger in his heart, perhaps then we can do some legplay?" she asked simperingly. "I really do fancy you."

"Most likely," I lied again.

She frowned, as if she could sniff out a lie like a hunting dog after game. As I untied my horse and mounted up she stood rubbing her chin, deep in thought.

"Stay here while I ride on to Lord Southern's house," I told her. "When I return we shall go-- "

"Guv, I got lots of customers what has me stay overnight, but there's a few as doesn't show a reflection in my little powderin' mirror. I thought it might be 'cause I were tipsy and all but-- "

"What!" I exclaimed, leaping down at once. I had not mentioned that property of vampyres to her.

"Are you sure, who are they?" I demanded. "Names, names, names!"

I found myself seizing the lapels of her coat. I forced myself to let go and began patterned breathing exercises to calm myself. She smiled knowingly.

"Each of 'em leaves me weak and giddy when I get up to go home in the mornin'."

The thought of what she was implying was making my head spin.

"Name a price," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

"No price, guv, just make me into the Caroline from that tale you told Mother Newberry."

Damn! Gossip obviously spread through Melbourne Town with the speed of winged Mercury.

"Look here, I have no son, you must have guessed that. I'll give you two thousand pounds, you could persuade any number of ruined Melbourne gentlemen to wed you for that."

"Ah ha ha, not likely," she replied. "Guv, last Thursday I saw a show at the Royal Vic. It was called Catching an Heiress, I do have a taste for culture. I'd been mendin' the costumes, so I was allowed to watch from the wings. The like of me is not welcome to sit with respectable ladies. Mind, their menfolk share themselves with me for a fee-- "

"Get to the point!"

"Money's not enough. The heiress in that show was only wanted for her money. Even with your two thousand pounds I'd still be a damned whore who made good and married a ruined gentleman. Were I to leave Melbourne Town as your 'son's' wife I'd be a respectable lady who fell on bad times then got saved by her father-in-law. I want to rub Melbourne Town faces in horse apples when I leave here, guv, do you follow? Back in England, well now, two thousand pounds is all the money I need to live comfortable-like till me dying day."

This was awkward, but not impossible. I thought carefully for some moments before I committed myself.

"Give me proof and I'll lodge papers to declare that you are my long-lost daughter-in-law. I'll tell everyone I'm here to clear your name, then I'll book you on the first ship out of here and you can leave in triumph. Is that to your satisfaction?"

"I... should think so. Well then, luvey, let's go to town. There's a diary under my mattress, and in there I've recorded services provided to certain gentlemen since I arrived here. I had a mind to publish it one day and turn a lot of faces red, but what you'll give me for it is far better. You will soon work out who are your vampyres and neophytes."

"And addresses, are they in the diary?"

She put her hands on her hips and laughed.

"Ah ha ha ha, I'm not silly. When I got papers calling me Mrs. Maynard, *then* we talk addresses."

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It was late morning when we reached town. The diary was all that Letitia had promised, there were at least six vampyres residing in the Port Phillip area! True to my promise I lodged papers declaring Letitia to be my son's wife, then made a big show of booking her a passage on the Timbo, which was to sail the next day. As we set about shopping for her voyage we spread word that I was staying behind to settle certain matters of honour while Letitia sailed by herself for London via Sydney. True to her fondest hopes, we caused a sensation. Soon there was talk of very little else among the frontier aristocracy of Melbourne. All the while I pondered on my good luck. So many undead, and all in one place. I had spent 25 years searching since my last undead victim, and there had been a real risk that I would have died of old age without finding another vampyre. Now this. Why were they all here? True, it was a remote and

unlikely place, but that was somehow not enough to explain it.

All that night I sat awake with the argentor in my hand, going over maps, addresses and diary entries. Letitia would not let me out of her sight, and stayed awake altering her new dresses and coats to better suit her figure. There was distant drunken singing and even the occasional gunshot from the streets outside, but I had been in wilder, rougher places than this and was not worried. What set my hair on end was the slight scratching and scrabbling outside the dormer window on the roof. Something was outside, something that the argentor's aura kept at bay. Letitia sewed on, oblivious. An hour before dawn it stopped, for it had to return all the way to Brighton.

* * *

At sunrise I hired a gig and took Letitia and her trunks to the wharf. There was a crowd of several dozen gathered, some of them Letitia's friends, others merely curious to see the real-life happy ending acted out before their eyes. We shed tears, called each other daughter and father, and said endearing and forgiving things for the onlookers to hear. Twelve guests of Her Majesty and their guards who were also going to Sydney cheered Letitia as she went aboard the Timbo, then everyone on the wharf cheered as the schooner cast off.

Even before the vessel was out of sight I was riding for the punt to cross the river. As my gelding cantered along the track to Brighton my mind was still a-whirl with what I had found. Six undead! Six vampyres, all in one town. They were always solitary in Europe, so as not to attract the attention of us raptors. Too many victims of anaemia in one place and one of us would be sure to investigate. I had only come to Melbourne Town after learning that Lord Southern had invested in the place. Of course many people invest overseas without ever leaving England, but I had no other clue and I was desperate-- I certainly had no inkling of this whole community of six undead. There were no tales of dozens of victims with fang-marks on their necks, it was as if Mother Newberry had--

I reined my gelding in so hard that he reared. That was it! Mother Newberry was in league with them. She was probably a neophyte, her price for running a refuge where vampyres could feed with discretion. When she died she would become immortal, then feed on mortals' blood in the safety of a haven of her own creation. I was near the place where I had left Hooper's body, so I turned off the track and rode until I came to the clearing. The pony was grazing quietly, still harnessed to the gig, but wild dogs had gnawed Hooper's face. Within minutes I had exchanged clothing with the corpse, then I drove the gig back onto the track, leaving my own horse to roam free.

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As I neared Lord Southern's house in the Brighton bushland I drew back the hammer of my Colt and left it loose under my coat. Something glinted at a window in the weak winter sunlight. Keep your nerve, don't show alarm, I told myself. There was no gunshot, but as I drew up before the stone house the door was flung open and Mother Newberry appeared, a Hall breechblock loader in one hand. I casually threw the gig's brake.

"Where the hell have you been, Pete Hooper?" she demanded. "A raptor's in town, he held Lord Southern off with an argentor all last night and-- *you!!*"

We fired almost together, but my aim was in less haste than hers. Fearful of who may have been drawn by the shots, I pushed her body aside and closed the door. Beneath a Persian rug was a trapdoor to a wine cellar the size of a small room, and I descended carrying a lamp and axe. After nine hundred years of practice I had become an expert with locks and secret doorways, and I soon discovered that one of the wine racks hinged outwards and sideways. My lamp illuminated an alcove lined with gold and red velvet, with a marble casket at the centre. The lid was heavier than I could lift, but I had been expecting that. I smashed the marble lid into manageable pieces with the axe, and was rewarded by the sight of Lord Southern himself. Now in a frenzy I drew the argentor, thumbed out the spur and stabbed down. For perhaps half an hour I absorbed his vitality, feeling the aches and pains of aging being burned

out of my body until Lord Southern was no more than dust within fine clothing.

I sealed the alcove and climbed out of the cellar to where Mother Newberry lay dead by the door. The skin of my hands was now smoother, and my pocket mirror showed a face of mere early middle age. Mother Newberry would be undead now, so I rolled her over, unbuttoned her blouse and stabbed. Nothing. No blaze of undead vitality, nothing. I might as well have stabbed another mortal or... another raptor!

There was no way to tell from her body alone. Raptors are mortal without their undead prey, but there was one item that we are never far from. I felt beneath her skirts, and strapped to her thigh was a lead sheath containing an argentor. The heraldic crest on the pommel was French. Angélique! She had supposedly died in the French Revolution, yet some had said that she was merely in hiding. Neither vampyres nor raptors wait fifty years between incarnations, however, so I had assumed her to be truly dead. At some stage she had obviously moved to the other side of the world, pretended to be a neophyte, and begun cultivating a flock of gullible undead. A raptor cultivating undead! It was unthinkable, the very idea revolted me. Raptors existed to keep the scourge of vampyrism in check, not to foster it for their own advantage. That was the basis of our entire theology and morality... yet perhaps what Angélique/Mother Newberry had done was understandable. We raptors had been very successful during the Eighteenth Century, so much so that there were very few vampyres left to sustain us. Our numbers were dwindling as we grew old and died. How many other raptors besides Angélique had decided that immortality was our right, rather than a reward for controlling the undead, that the famine of our own creation need not be killing us?

I looted a cache of banknotes from the house, then-- still dressed as Pete Hooper-- I hid Angélique's body in the gig's tray and drove back to the clearing. Hooper's body was dressed as me, and thanks to the wild dogs his face was bloody pulp. When the bodies were found, a double murder would be suspected: myself and Mother Newberry shot by Hooper, no doubt over Letitia's honour.

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All through that Sunday of August 28th, 1842 I toured a list of houses in bushland settings, shooting down neophyte guards and stabbing their torpid masters, gorging on vitality. By the late afternoon I had the face and body of a girl of no more than seventeen. I drove the gig into Melbourne Town with my cap low and collar high, my face rubbed with dirt. It was time for rebirth.

At the Albion Hotel I entered as Hooper, dashed upstairs and let myself into my room. Some of Letitia's discarded clothing was still there, and I hurriedly scrubbed my face and dressed in her skirts, then stuffed my disguise into the bag of gold and banknotes collected during my day of carnage. I slipped out by the stables, then came back in through the front door. Mr. Dobson, the licensee, was speaking with two constables about Hooper being on the premises and acting suspiciously.

"Pardon me, but do you have any rooms vacant?" I declared. Girlish timidity was not easy to feign after going about as a man for as long as I have.

Dobson hurried over to me and directed me into his office as the constables climbed the stairs.

"Please, do not be alarmed," he said urgently. "A ruffian has burst in here uninvited, but the constables will soon have him packing. Have you just arrived in Melbourne Town?"

"Yes, on the Black Swan. I was looking at land around Western Port Bay."

He nodded and opened his register. "Now then, you wanted a room for your self and, ah..."

"Just myself."

Dobson gasped and looked up. "You're travelling without a chaperone?" he exclaimed in disbelief.

"Why yes. I'm not as young as I look and besides, I-- I'm American. I was brought up on the Western Plains. Sir, I shot two outlaws and five wolves before I was fifteen. When my parents died of cholera I decided to make a clean break and start a new life on the other side of the world."

If you are going to lie, be magnificent. Dobson assigned me a room and gave me a key just as the constables returned. Hooper was gone, they reported, but Mr. Maynard's room was open and the key was in the door. If Hooper had used Maynard's key, how did he come by it and what had been

Maynard's fate? I said that where I came from we would just hunt down a varmint like Hooper and shoot him, then I retired to my new room before anyone realised that I had but a single bag for my luggage.

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Thus did I end my second day in Melbourne Town, yet I was not to leave there for another twenty three years. In that time I first became the successful licensee of my own hotel, then made a fortune during the gold rush of the 1850s. I established a charity for the town's harlots, helping the living find other work and managing the business of the dead-- including Angélique as Mother Newberry. Thus did I watch and wait, killing all raptors who arrived and asked after her. By this year of 1865 I have the argentor daggers of five raptors in a lead lined casket in my bedchamber safe. One raptor even arrived with two vampyres in crates lined with argentor metal... and the folk of Melbourne Town marvelled at how I suddenly seemed ten years younger.

For all this, I am not happy. The guards have betrayed the guarded. Some raptors had betrayed humanity to preserve their own kind of immortality, yet if raptors should die out while a few vampyres linger, then who would stop their spread in the years that followed? Was Angélique right to do what she did? Should I do the same, am I making lame excuses to cling to immortality? Every year I ask those questions at her graveside, and her own death is always her reply. As each new grey hair appears amid my auburn curls, that reply becomes more convincing. While I was Maynard I grew old for the first time in 900 years, and I did not like it at all.

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