

The Stake

by Alan Edward

His hands trembling so he could hardly hold the taper, the old innkeeper lit seven candles and placed them in the points of the tall Gothic windows, then murmured a Hail Mary and crossed himself.

“Return, Mr. Parker,” he said earnestly, “Return – before it is too late.”

“I’m awfully sorry, I can’t do that,” said the young man, “At least, not until Thursday. It’s a five-day ticket, you see; there’s the reduction.”

The old man crossed himself again, lit another three candles, hung a crucifix and a rosemary wreath over the door, and stuck a sprig of garlic behind each ear.

“Listen – what’s that?” asked the young man.

“The coach – the coach!” cried the innkeeper. He started tugging at the young man’s arm; “Pray, Mr. Parker, be seated in the circle with your head pointing to the east and your feet to the south and recite five Paternosters while tracing the square within the circle with the third toe of your left foot. This will protect you.”

“No, but I say, though.” The young man pulled back a shutter and peered out. “I mean, how jolly convenient. Is there a request stop outside, by any chance, or do I just stand by the side of the road and wave?”

“But it is doom, doom and disaster to all who travel in it!” sobbed the innkeeper.

“My dear fellow, you speak to one who has traveled daily on the eight-fifteen from Epping. Don’t worry about me.”

But the old man was kneeling in the circle with his eyes closed, his arms crossed, and an illuminated version of the Apostles’ Creed balanced on his head, so Parker drew the heavy bolts, opened the door, and stepped out into the inn forecourt.

Now he could hear the hooves clearly and could see the coach-lamps swaying in the darkness, growing nearer, their light flickering along the tall tree-trunks on either side of the road. Then, at a shout, the horses were drawn up and the coachman, an indistinct figure above the circle of

lamplight, cried out, "Who would travel in this coach?"

"It is I, Jonathan Parker."

"We have been expecting you, Mr. Parker. Please enter."

"Thanks." Parker got in. "All the way, please."

A shriek of maniacal laughter, the chime of harness, a rattle of hooves and the coach swept off into the night, leaving behind the lights of the village and the inn; the voice of the old man, raised in fervent prayer, faded rapidly. Onward, upward, the road narrowing until two great pillars were passed, then the road grew steeper and more twisted until at last the horses' hooves clattered on to cobbles, slowed, and stopped. Parker, peering through the glass, could see the form of a vast building, lamps lit on either side of a deeply recessed doorway. He picked up his bags and dismounted; instantly the coachman cracked the reins and the coach sped off around the angle of the building and out of sight. Parker shrugged, went up the steps and pulled the bell. Soon a faint light shone through the keyhole, and he heard what might have been the rattle of a bolt from some distance away, but again there followed silence; he put down his bags, filled his pipe, and lit it. At last the door creaked and swung inwards.

"My lord?"

Parker stood quite still; his pipe slid from his mouth and shattered on the step.

"Allow me, please... Alas, my lord, it is broke."

"Broken," said Parker, "The pipe is broken. But thanks very much, anyway. It's just that – well, one expects an aged harridan of fearful aspect, or a one-eyed dwarf, perhaps. It's the shock, you see."

"I'm sorry, my lord."

"Oh pray don't apologize. You a page or something?"

"I am *not* 'something'", came the dignified reply. "I am Mikhail, page to the Count, at your service, my lord. Please come in."

"Thanks very much." Parker picked up his luggage.

"It's decent of the Count to let me stay; shall I see him now?"

"The Count sends his regrets, my lord," said the boy, pausing in the wide hall; he cast a glimpse toward the windows from where moonlight flooded the staircase and the landings. "Tonight my Master the Count is abroad."

"Oh dear. Well, can't be helped, I suppose. So many people on holiday around this time of the year, eh?"

"Ah, though you are sad that you do not see the Count yet you make the joke. This is the stiff upper English lip, yes?"

“Perhaps,” said Parker, “*You* speak remarkable good English, if I may say so.”

“An Englishman stayed here once. He taught me... many things,” said the boy, lowering his eyes.

“Where is he now?”

“He is no longer with us, alas. Shall I show you upstairs?”

“Yes, please. You are young, are you not, to be the Count's page? And to be almost alone in this whopping great place?”

“I *am* alone,” said the boy, “But I am aged thirteen years and one moon. You must now ask no more questions. Follow.”

The boy turned again at the top of the staircase. “You would prefer dinner first, my lord? I will show you to your room afterwards.”

It may have been fatigue, or the red wine Parker had tasted too liberally at the inn, but as dinner progressed everything in the heavily-curtained room grew strangely unreal, detaching and distancing from ordinary time and locality, something perhaps diffused around the storybook child in the velvet suit moving to and fro about among the rich oak furnishings, his slim fingers noiselessly handling the silver, the moon at the tall windows touching the ends of his long fair hair and reflecting from the highly polished buckles of his shoes.

“Wine, my lord?”

The boy turned to the sideboard, presenting a pair of neat, tightly-clad hips; then he turned with the decanter, his limpid eyes met Parker's and he smiled. “Shall I pour, my lord?”

Parker swallowed and nodded, then he hastily gulped down most of the glass and the boy refilled it. But the boy did not speak again; at further questions from Parker he merely smiled and shook his head.

“Follow,” he said when Parker had finished. They went up another flight of stairs and then Parker was shown into a dim, tapestried room, its windows slightly open, the long curtains lifting a little in the breeze from the dark outside. The boy lit a candle, placed it by the side of the great four-poster bed and withdrew to the door.

“I hope you sleep well, my lord. Will there be anything else?”

Parker moved across to the door as well and partly blocked the boy's exit. He cleared his throat and colored a little. “I – I say...”

“Yes, Mr. Parker? I remind you of your fag at Eton, is that it?”

“By George!” stammered Parker, his eyes wide, “How did you guess?”

“The other Englishman always began that way,” said the boy, moving swiftly round Parker and through the doorway. He slid off into the dark

and his voice came again from a distance. “Tonight I may call on you, Mr. Parker, or I may not – who can say? Leave the window open, Mr. Parker, leave the window open.”

Echoing, the words faded; Parker shrugged and closed the door. “Cloak and dagger stuff,” he grumbled, going across to the window. He shut it, then after a moment's thought pushed it open again. “But he's wrong about one thing,” he mused aloud, “He's *not* like my fag at Eton; he's prettier. I wouldn't have believed it possible.” He undressed and blew out the candle. “You won't sleep tonight, Parker,” he said, “Not a blessed wink.”

But the wine had been good and Parker must have slept for some hours, because when he woke the moon stood high over the castle and the light had contracted to a narrow bar under the sill.

“Mr. Parker?”

Startled, he half sat up. On the end of the bed was perched Mikhail, clad in a long nightgown; he swung his legs round, knelt upright, and smiled broadly. “I have been here for some time, my lord. You sleep deeply.”

His eyes sparkled; his complexion glowed even more radiantly with youthful health and vitality than on the previous night. His cheeks were slightly flushed; he laughed again. “Am I not welcome, my lord?”

Parker struggled very slowly to a sitting position; he felt oddly weak and it took him a few moments. The boy leaned forward a little and brushed Parker's cheek with his fingers. “Wakey-wakey!” says the English Mr. Sergeant Major, yes?” he said, his strangely mischievous manner contrasting peculiarly with his dignified bearing of the evening before.

“I seem to have had a – little too much wine, perhaps,” said Parker, his voice a little slurred, “Or to have... I say, that's odd.”

He put a finger to the side of his neck; he withdrew it, looked at it, turned to the boy with slowly widening eyes, then was at once awake and had leapt out of bed, away from the boy, and stood with his back to the far wall, glaring at him.

“Why, you little beast!” he said. He took a handkerchief and dabbed tenderly at his neck. “I mean, this is *too* much, it really is! Of the Count one might expect it, but of *you*... For heaven's sake, how many of you are there?”

The boy shook his head, smiled, then slid off the bed and came towards him.

“Keep away from me!” said Parker, edging along the wall.

“No, my lord, I am young and require no more tonight, I swear it. I have had what I want, and now it is your turn, my lord.”

He reached out and took Parker's hand; Parker had stopped where he was, prevented from retreating any further by the angle of the wall. Then he said indignantly, “*My* turn? *I* am not one of you, make no mistake about that.”

“You misunderstand.” The boy, running on the tips of his toes, his arms spread, returned to the window and then, turning to face Parker, he swiftly grasped the hem of his nightshirt and pulled it high above his waist, his gaze still fixed on the man opposite him. Then, with a quick movement, he pulled it over his head and threw it on the carpet. Eyes again mischievously alight, he jumped up and down on his toes, laughing, palms gently slapping his bare hips. “Look, Mr. Parker, look! Do I look like your Eton boy now? Do I, do I? Did *he* come to your room naked too? Did he? Did he?”

Parker stumbled forward and reached towards the boy, but he ran round the man and jumped on to the bed, leaping up and down on the springy surface. “Answer, answer!”

“No, I shan't. Come down!” Parker made another rush, but the boy flitted effortlessly on to the bedside table, then on to a chair. “Try again, Mr. Parker. Follow, follow!”

“No – I give up.” Parker suddenly sat down.

“Then I win. Stand up, hold your arms out, and catch me,” said the boy imperiously.

Parker did as requested; the boy leaped again and Parker caught his light weight easily, holding him for a moment before lowering him on to the broad counterpane. The boy's arms had twined themselves round Parker's neck; he slowly pulled the man's head downwards, though this time not towards his lips, and this time Parker was unresisting.

Now the moon had slid further out of the trees but the wind was rising again and the shadows of leaves and branches flitted hither and thither across the room, across the bed, half blending with the dark locks of the man, quivering and leaping with the slim nude form of the boy, fragments of light at intervals catching a pair of spinning legs, feet pedaling the air, then the swift jack-knife flexion of the boy's knees and hips that came with his soft shuddering cry, and then the legs and body dropping until at last both figures were still, the shapes of the leaves moving across them as lazily as before, the light on the carpet once more diffuse and unbroken.

Parker gradually rose to a sitting position; the boy opened his eyes

and grinned at him. “Honor is satisfied, Mr. Parker? The *quid pro quo*, as they say on the playing fields of Eton?”

“I doubt it; perhaps your friend was an Harrowvian,” said Parker darkly. “I say, how long have you been in this game?”

The boy looked up towards the ceiling and considered. “Not so long,” he said, “Just over two hundred years, I should say. And it's not a game.”

“What is it, then?” Parker asked, “And excuse me if I sit some little distance away.”

“Certainly, Mr. Parker. We of the Undead are most accommodating. Indeed my Master the Count was once esteemed as a great and good man; he was a Bishop of the Church and Superior of a great monastery. It was to this monastery, my lord, that I had come as a pupil and it was there where I would soon take the vows; but it came about that the Count – it would not be for me to say why – became much attached to me, and I to him. By night we made love, but all was soon discovered and the Count was disgraced and put to death, but he had already become one of the Undead, and it was not long before he visited me again and made me, too, one of their number. Thus even in our living death we are not separated; by day we lie side by side in the cool vaults of the castle, traveling only by night on our separate ways.”

“Ugh!” Parker rubbed his neck again. “You really are a pair of rotters. But what gets me is that one of – one of your lot should look like *you* do. Dammit, a young devil shouldn't go around looking as if he'd just escaped from the other place; it oughtn't to be allowed.”

The boy giggled. “That's what they said at the monastery; they said that to have me around was a temptation to the monks. You know, they used to fight to hear my confession, because after hearing it they could give me my penance, meaning that they were allowed to undress me and whip my bottom. I used to wonder why no-one liked me; I *was* innocent in those days. Ah, the penalties of being pretty!”

“You're not only a beastly little vampire, you're vain,” said Parker.

“No, I'm not. Anyway, after they killed the Count they were going to lock me in a tower away from the monks' eyes, or even kill me – but I didn't mind, because I knew that my Master would soon come. But it will be light in an hour, and I can't go back like this. Throw me my shroud across, will you?”

The priest rose at last, drew the shutters and turned up the lamp. “You tell a strange tale, my son,” he said, “Yet much is, I think, untold.”

Parker remained silent.

“Truth to tell, I had half expected that you might visit my humble presbytery today,” the old man went on. “Strangers stay at the castle but rarely; those that do often find themselves in need of... spiritual counsel. Shall you stay longer?”

“I don't know,” said Parker. “I really can't decide.”

“Pray, tell me more about this creature of the... of the Undead, my son,” said the priest in a low voice. He crossed himself. “What manner of being is it, how did it appear to you?”

Parker looked down and shook his head. “I'd really rather not,” he said, “If you don't mind.”

“I understand, my son. How, then, may I be of help to you?”

Parker spoke hesitantly. “You see, padre, I find it very difficult to believe that any being can be completely evil, completely – well, depraved, especially when the appearance of that being – well, conveys absolutely the opposite impression. If you see what I mean.”

“You talk in riddles, my son,” said the priest, smiling, “Yet perhaps I do see a little. Perhaps this is one of the oldest tales of all, that of the beautiful maiden who has been desired and loved by a vampire and who is now herself of the Undead. Would I be correct, my son, in assuming that this... visitant is indeed young, is beautiful perhaps?”

Parker swallowed. “Absolutely, padre.”

The old man poured some brandy into a balloon glass; he peered into the depth of the pale golden fluid as if seeking to know the wisdom of the ages, then he drank it.

“And, my son – correct me if I am mistaken – perhaps you would now know if this creature is for ever lost and beyond all hope, or may yet be redeemed?”

Parker nodded eagerly. “Yes, that's just it.”

“The vampire legend, my son, is embedded in an ages- old cosmology that none can now fully comprehend; glimpses, scraps and symbols only remain – the moon for the goddess of night, the mirror void of a soul, the garlic, the rosemary. You, too, will have some brandy?”

“Thanks.”

“Now it is said that the tale of the vampire is closely entwined with that of the succubus, the demonic female who comes to a man at night and who is – forgive me, my son – penetrated by him. And it is further said that if the vampire is to be redeemed by the legendary pointed stake, it is not the heart that the stake must penetrate, and that the stake is not that which has been fashioned from wood. Soda, my son?”

“Thanks. Decent of you.”

“Think about it, my son.”

Time passed. The old man trimmed the lamp and toyed a little sadly, yet merrily, with his scapulars. Then Parker turned bright red and choked on his brandy.

“Ah, you do understand me, perhaps?”

“Yes, by George, I believe I do!” Parker rose in a state of some excitement, then sat down again. “Yes, but...”

“Yes, my son?”

“Nothing. I'll give it some thought, that's all.”

The priest rose and accompanied Parker to the door; he put a hand on the young man's shoulder. “Always remember, my son – in life there is death, yet in death there is life. God is distant, yet he is very near. Through the teardrops of our repentance the world appears small, far away, and faintly plum-colored. This is everything, yet it is nothing. Would you like to borrow a book on the subject?”

“But, padre, just supposing that...?”

“Yes, my son?”

“I think I *would* like to borrow the book.”

“There, my son. Remember, you were indeed fortunate. If the creature is young you may survive one visit, but as for the second... Well, God go with you.”

The last cloud moved from in front of the moon and cold light streamed in at the open window; the curtains that had been blowing into the room in the night breeze swung gradually backwards, then hung still; the whispering of the leaves died, the calls of the shy creatures of the woodland faded, and then all of the great forest was silent. Soon ivy rustled and, an instant later, a lithe white figure dropped on to the carpet.

“Got you, by George!” Parker had risen from concealment, had pounced, and now pinned the wriggling form to the carpet. “Ha!” he cried in triumph, “You did not suspect that I would keep myself awake by sitting upright on the stone ledge drinking black coffee and reading *Panathology One*, did you?”

“Ah, the cunning of you English!” said the boy in a muffled voice, “Very well, my lord, let me up; I shall not try to get away.”

“I'll see that you don't, you young devil,” Parker said with grim satisfaction. The boy sat up slowly and rubbed his nose; he looked doubtfully at Parker, who still held his arms tightly.

“This – this tackle you learn on the playing-fields of Eton too, yes?”

“Yes – and more. So I think you'll agree that tonight it's *my* turn first,

eh?”

The boy nodded. He looked tired and a little pallid. “Very well, Mr. Parker.”

Parker helped the boy to his feet.

“This, what you call the rugby tackle, you will teach me, yes?”

“Some day.” Parker took hold of the boy's long garment; the boy raised his arms and it was pulled off and dropped on the floor.

“The same again, my lord?”

Parker shook his head; he fiddled uneasily with a small jar he had picked up, then he leaned forward and whispered in the boy's ear. The boy turned his soft eyes up to meet Parker's and nodded. Parker took both the boy's hands and led him across to the bed, where he paused and lit the candle. Its rays fell on the boy's pale body; Parker looked down and smiled faintly. “Ah, I can see that my request pleases you,” he said.

The boy nodded again. “Maybe, my lord, you will do something for little Mikhail too?” he said shyly.

“Well, let's see what can be managed; a chap always likes to do the decent thing,” said Parker. “Come over here.”

Soon the boy lay prone on the wide bed, the single candle still flickering alongside. *Through the stake cometh redemption. Miserere, miserere.* Yet it entered the young body almost without effort, sliding as between the exquisite softness of a maiden's breasts, then nestling further inwards, lightly gripped in the warm dark. The body moved only slightly, squirming as though more readily to accept its penance, then rising a little to accommodate the hand slid below, then moving a little more, lifting, dropping, until at last the moon was rising again, growing steadily brighter until the room was awash in waves of blinding white pulsing ever higher until it exploded into a million fragments and the smaller hips underneath were also thrown vigorously upwards by their own inner detonation as pillow-muffled treble sounds escaped into the room again and again. Then the slivers of broken light went spinning away into the dark, one after another, and it then was silent and the moon was once again hidden.

After a long time the boy asked, “It was good, my lord?”

“It was super.”

“And for me too it was... super,” said the boy quietly. Parker had rolled over onto his back; the boy knelt upright on the bed and looked down at him; he smiled. “Now, I think it really is my turn, Mr. Parker.”

“Eh?” For a moment or two Parker had some trouble in focusing; he saw the boy's eyes fixed on him, growing bigger, his outlines

shimmering, becoming indistinct; he blinked and the boy's form grew a little clearer, but his limbs felt heavy, he had grown oddly powerless. Through a light visual haze he saw the boy's lips part, then saw the razor-sharp tips of his long incisors protrude, unmistakable at last. He tried to struggle, but even under the boy's light weight it was impossible for him to move.

“But – the priest...the book...” he said weakly, “He – he told me, he *promised...*”

The boy smiled again. “My Master the Count is a fine actor,” he said, “But such a liar! Yes, Mr. Parker, it was good while it lasted. But we have a saying in the country that, if you're going to have a party, *someone* has to provide the drinks.”