

## Bone, Moon, Blood and Vine

By: Mike Phillips

Slowly it came. A single tendril unfurled, reached into the night air, and took hold of an old fencepost. It found its way around the thickness of the rotting wood, encircling, testing, grasping stronger and stronger. Another tendril followed the first and fixed itself upon the post. It too tightened its grip.

More and more came, delicate strands wrapping so thickly on the post and planks of the old fence that it seemed an entire summer's growth had come in a single night. Then it was time to move on.

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“Edith?” a gruff voice called. “Edith, where are you?”

“Here in the pantry,” a woman replied, her words punctuated by the sound of boxes being moved upon shelves.

Eustace Malloy made his way into the kitchen, neglecting to shut the door behind him, and went to the sink where he washed his thick hands. “Can you come here and help me?”

“Certainly. What's wrong? What happened to you?” Edith's voice was now behind Eustace. She set a few things down on the counter and came to see what this new upset was all about. Her husband was vigorously scrubbing his arms all the way to where

the shirt began, a thick stream of dirty water running into the drain, making a mess of the clean sink.

“That grapevine again,” Eustace replied cryptically, shutting off the faucet and drying his hands on the white towel with the embroidered roses. Without further explanation he lifted off his shirt and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

“Thorns,” he said as he displayed his naked back and shoulders.

Finding no gushing wound, Edith closed the kitchen door and came back to take a closer look. “Thorns? In the grapevine? Thorns?”

She inspected the back of her husband’s arms, his neck and shoulders. He was covered with thorns. It looked to her as if the man had been rolling in them, like the dog did when it found a dead animal on the side of the road.

“Yep, big ones, ain’t they?”

“Yes they are. I think I’ll have to use a pin, they’re in too deep for the tweezers.” After settling her husband into a chair at the kitchen table, Edith retrieved a safety pin from a drawer and began removing the thorns.

“But it can’t be the grapevine,” Edith muttered while she worked, “you must have a blackberry bush growing in there and just don’t know it.”

“You mean used to have a blackberry bush growing in there,” Eustace said with satisfaction. “And I mean to tell you that grapevine grew thorns just as sure as the garden grows rocks over the winter.”

“No, oh no! You didn’t pull it out, not tonight of all nights?”

“Yes I did and it put a smile on my face to do it. Five years I’ve been watering and fertilizing and pruning and no grapes. All the others I bought at the same place and planted at the same time and they give us more than we deserve in return.”

“But you shouldn’t have done it tonight,” Edith gasped.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Because Mars is in the heavens with a druid moon.”

“Druid moon? What’s a druid moon?”

“It’s a moon like we have tonight.”

Eustace laughed a humiliating laugh. “And where did you pick up such a valuable piece of wisdom?”

“From the almanac,” Edith said, setting her hands upon the massive shoulders of her husband, contemplating the pin fixed between her thumb and forefinger.

“Which almanac?”

“The one that holds all the old farm wisdom.”

“What’s the name then? I’d like to buy one.”

“Oh, I don’t remember, I read it when I was a girl. Besides, every farmer worth a bushel of beans knows better than to pull out crops under Mars and the druid moon. Bad things will happen because of it. You mark my words, bad things.”

“I’ll be careful,” Eustace replied in a child’s voice.

“Ouch!” he shouted the next moment.

“Sorry, that one was in pretty deep,” Edith said innocently, indulging herself with a smile, given her husband’s back was turned.

Rubbing the sore spot, Eustace said, “Well, either way I’m done with it now. I’ve pulled it out of the ground and set it on the pile to rot with the rest of the rubbish.”

“Well, I always said you’d planted those grapes too close to the old Village Cemetery. It’s bad luck you know. Who can tell what kind of unnatural things come out of there on Halloween night?”

“Well, be glad it’s not Halloween then. Goodness, woman, where do you get such ideas? If anything, good dirt like that should make the vines grow all the better.” Eustace let out a deep breath to dramatize his frustration. “Besides, it’s not in the cemetery.”

Edith was about to drive the pin but decided not to press her luck. “It’s close, too close. Remember the story about that crazy old man the town’s people lynched a hundred years back, the one in that old newspaper at the county museum? They said he was always up to something of the supernatural. Some even said he was a sorcerer.”

“Nope, I never heard that.”

“Well, none of the people back then would have buried someone as wicked as that on holy ground, blasphemy. Come to think about it, I never knew anyone said where he ended up. Maybe he’s the one turned your grapes to thorns.”

“Stories like that to scare children are about as interesting in today’s world as watching the hay grow.”

Passing on the insult, Edith announced, “Well, that’s the most of them. All that’s left is to take a hot bath to draw the itch.”

“Thanks, you coming to bed?” Eustace asked, standing.

“No, dinner upset my stomach,” Edith replied, clutching her middle, “too spicy.”

“I thought it was delicious. Maybe you ought to see a doctor about that. It doesn’t seem to be getting any better.”

“I will.”

Eustace took his wife into his burly arms. “Promise?”

Edith let out a breath and smiled. “Yes, I promise.”

They kissed good night. Eustace brought a blanket and pillow from the hall closet to his wife on the sofa and went upstairs. He drew a hot bath and soaked until he was red and wrinkled. Then he put on his nightshirt and went to bed, listening to the frogs sing, falling into a deep sleep.

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Under wizard moon and warrior planet it chased the smell of blood, hunting the man who had torn its roots from the earth and thrown it into the trash heap. Grasping, pulling, its tendrils worked across the lawn.

The house was found, the cracks in the stone, the overlap of the siding, the first window, but not the man. It climbed, higher and higher, reaching toward the stars and the night. A window closed, it sought another, until it smelled the blood and found the man inside. It had tasted flesh and now it wanted more.

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As Eustace slept, the vine made its way into the bedroom. And there, in the last glint of the celestial light as it fell upon the floor, a single white bone, an ancient curse, was clutched.

A night breeze through pines was greater than the sound of its passing as it crawled to the foot of the bed, certain of its prey. The vine rose, finding hands and arms and feet and legs.

Confined and pained, the man awoke, fearing death and not knowing why. Desperately he thrashed against what felt like bands of steel that locked him to the bed. Something wound around his throat, choking, blocking desperate gasps for air. Eustace opened his mouth to scream, but not a sound broke the still night.

The vine tasted blood and thrilled in panic and tightened its grip. Crazy with heated life, it filled the mouth of its victim, digging, grasping, feeding, and then finally breaking through.

### **The End**

Bio: Mike Phillips is the author of **Reign of the Nightmare Prince** available in bookstores, online booksellers, Kindle and Nook. He has published several short stories both in print and online, including ParABnormal Digest, Sinister Tales, Dark Horizons and many others. He is best known for his Crow Witch and Patrick Donegal series.