

## The Alabaster Nightmare

by James Shawe

The grand face of the Heartlock Manor peered out from behind the sagging willows as Richard and his family drove closer. The alabaster walls were welcoming, mounted by gargoyles with stony arms raised to Heaven. “We’ll just stop by briefly,” he reassured them, “the Heartlocks weren’t at mass on Sunday.” The car came to a rumbling stop, the gravel shifting under its weight. “Come, Allen,” he said to his brother, “Mister Heartlock can use your juvenile wit to raise his spirits.”

“I’ll stay with Anthony,” said Richard’s wife, Elizabeth, wiping their son’s nose with a napkin from her coat pocket, “I don’t want him in and out of the cold.”

Richard turned in his seat and grabbed his wife’s hand, “Alright, we’ll be back soon.” His son began patting his small blue, puffy jacket. “You like blue, huh?” The boy nodded and sniveled. Richard mussed his son’s hair, then got out of the car.

The two brothers made their way up the manor stairs to find the front doors open. “Strange,” Allen said, “William isn’t here to greet us and the door’s wide open. They should hire a new butler.” The brothers knocked on the open doors and stepped in slowly. “William!” Allen shouted, “Samantha?” The manor answered in silence, the cold wind from outside whipping their exposed ears and neck.

“It’s damn cold. We can let ourselves in.” Richard said, closing the doors behind them, letting them clank loudly. “Well, Mister Heartlock is partial to his study. Let’s check there.”

“A studious man and his study, inseparable, indeed.” Allen said, giggling at his own attempt at humor. The brothers continued to the left stairwell, leading up to the bedrooms and the study. As they were climbing the stairs, they noticed visible claw marks on the polished, dark wood.

“Do you think a bobcat did these? I’ve heard of sightings recently, but…” Richard bent down and felt the claw marks that dug deep into the wooden floor. “Maybe that’s why the door was open, one of them got in.”

“Then we should be careful. Vicious beasts, they can do real damage, you know.”

“I know, Allen. I don’t like this. Maybe we should head back.” Richard proposed, looking over his shoulder. He could see more claw marks now. Covering the stairs, the floor, and a few on the ceiling. *The ceiling?* Richard thought. *How did it get up there?*

“Come, Richard. Let’s just check the study and leave. If they’re huddled up in safety, they’re probably there.” Allen commanded with strange determination. “I want to see what happened.”

“Your curiosity will be the death of us, some day,” Richard sighed, trying to bring humor to the situation the way Allen does so easily. The brothers continued their journey to the study.

*One more left, and we’re there.* Richard thought, trying to reassure himself as if saying it aloud would make their destination disappear into nothingness. They turned left to see the door of the study ripped off its hinges, flung several feet from the doorway. The door was covered in claw marks. Caked in blood. “Oh God,” Richard began as Allen rushed to the doorway, “Are they in there, Allen?”

“No, just more blood. Damn bobcats, I tell you, beasts sent from Hell.” Richard made his weary way into the room. Scattered papers everywhere. An overturned inkwell slowly dripping its

black blood onto the floor, mingling with the dry pool of crimson below it. There were claw marks from the hall to the desk where a great red circle was turning darker, and darker. Richard rubbed his eyes, as if it could make the horrible images go away. He wanted to cry, or scream. He wasn't sure.

"There's numbers written in blood here," Allen said, "Oh, I bet it's for the safe." Allen began scrambling to the wall safe, left naked to the world. Richard now saw the numbers "two, zero, three, zero, four" were hastily drawn.

"No, Allen. Respect the dead. We need to call someone and get this sorted." Richard pleaded, hopeless.

"You can't disrespect the dead, they're dead. I'm curious to see what Old Heartlock had in here." Before Richard could stop him, the metal door squeaked open. The brothers looked into the safe in awe. A bloody cassette tape filled Richard with stomach turning horror, and Allen with visible excitement. The ancestral heirlooms of gold and gem paled in comparison to the gloom of the cassette tape. "Oh, yes. This will tell us what happened." Allen said as he moved to the desk, the cassette player readily available. Allen inserted it, rewound it, and waited expectantly for Richard.

"Sure, Allen. But we need to leave, with or without it." Richard said fearfully, his nerves becoming stricken by the possibility that the bobcats were still here. *What if they're outside... No, no, they're safe in the car.*

The cassette player began, the voice of Thaddeus Heartlock was clear. "A boy, we only wanted a boy... after the last miscarriage... we... Oh, God. I hear it, running up and down the halls, back and forth... soft patting feet... God save me. They were in on it, they all knew... William,

Samantha.... That man, Hamilton Prize, he gave me the vial. He told me it would make her keep the next child. She birthed a beast, a beast from Hell. Oh God, what have I done? It, it had the face... the face of my wife, my poor Mary, oh... Oh, no... no, no, it's scratching at the door."

The recording ended. "We need to leave, right now." Richard said, his heart throbbing, urging him to escape. They began to leave the study. Before they reached the doorway, they heard the sound of soft patting feet and clacking claws coming down the hall. The patting and clacking coming closer, closer. The sound stopped outside the doorway, as the faces of Thaddeus and Mary Heartlock slowly craned around the corner on pale, elongated necks. Their faces twisted in eternal horror. Soulless, white eyes. The brothers held each other as lanky, grasping hands and grotesque alabaster bodies came hungrily towards them.