

The Beast

by Jim Schicatanano

Thomas McPhinnis slowly awakened and discovered himself lying face-down on the ground. His thoughts were incoherent and he was unable to remember what had happened. Dirt covered his face and his entire body ached. Barely able to move, he struggled to roll onto his side. It was night, and as he staggered off the ground in darkness, he strained to recall the incident that had rendered him unconscious. The back of his head throbbed in pain. Still dizzy, he began to rub it and discovered that it was moist. He realized that he was bleeding.

The blood that covered his hand sparked his memory. There had been strangers on the road, first in front of him, then behind him. He remembered engaging in a brief scuffle but quickly succumbed to their numbers. He had been beaten and knocked unconscious. A brisk search of his trousers revealed him to be penniless. Apparently, he had also been robbed.

A brilliant, full moon suddenly emerged from behind the clouds and he managed to slowly stagger to the dirt road. The moon was still fairly low in the sky and he estimated the time to be reasonably early, probably before eleven. The village of Nixton was another mile or two down the hilly, winding road, and the woods of Scotland surrounded him. The road extended along the side of a hill with thick forests blanketing the hill above him on the left, and the wooded valley residing below him on the right. Still lightheaded, he began the walk home.

Thomas had never been gifted with good night vision, but as long as the moon remained visible he would manage to stay on the road. Quickly glancing up into the cloudy sky he realized that he would not be blessed with its reassuring rays much longer.

Unexpectedly, he heard something move in the forests below him. Totally coherent now, the first thought that entered his mind was one of terror: the beast. Every legend that he had ever heard about the monster entered his thoughts. He had been just a boy when his grandfather had first informed him of the beast's existence. That was over 35 years ago, back in 1853, and although he was a grown man now, he could feel those childhood fears reemerging. Nervously, he continued to walk.

He began to whistle to occupy his time, but quickly ceased, fearing that it might draw the attention of the beast. His eyes strained to

examine the road ahead of him and he turned completely around every twenty or thirty steps to investigate the road behind him. Desperately wanting to return to his warm, safe home sooner, he quickened his pace.

He glanced up into the night sky again and was dismayed by what he saw. The moon was disappearing behind the cloud cover; the valley was quickly shrouded in blackness.

The forest seemed to come alive. Crickets were chirping. Other creatures of the night were stirring. Something suddenly flew by him overhead. He instinctively ducked but then realized that it was probably just a bat. His hands trembled, his palms were sweating. A cool, night breeze began to chill his sweated body. Staggering through the darkness, he managed to stay on the road.

He felt the back of his throbbing head. It was soaked. Some of the moisture was definitely blood, the rest was probably a cold sweat. He suddenly recalled a legend of the beast. Thomas had heard it could smell blood miles away. Like a shark or a vulture, it could sense a weak prey – it could smell death. There was some truth in every legend, he thought to himself, and despite his usual disinclination to believe such a tale, he could not remove such thoughts from his mind; he was, after all, bleeding.

He heard movement again. Something seemed to be stirring in the bushes just below him and he came to a sudden stop. He strained to see anything unusual, then he abruptly spun around, viewing the ground around him. His eyes could penetrate no more than ten to fifteen feet through the eerie darkness. Leaves rustled in the gentle autumn breeze. Crickets continued their nightly chirping. The movement in the forest ceased, and Thomas apprehensively continued to walk down the dark and foreboding road.

Despite the pain and lightheadedness he endured, he was determined to maintain a constant pace towards Nixon. The walk to town would normally take fifteen to twenty minutes in ordinary conditions; the darkness of the night would double that time. In the meantime, much to his dismay, he continued to recall past episodes of Nixon's encounters with the beast.

It had been seven years since the O'Malley boys' incident. The young brothers had been playing in the forest one afternoon and little Patrick O'Malley was screaming hysterically when he returned to the village that evening alone. He claimed his brother, Michael, had fallen into a covered pit that was dug by the beast. The men of Nixon entered the forests that night with their lanterns in one hand and their rifles in the other. Over the next five days, different shifts

searched the forests for little Michael O'Malley. Young Patrick was unable to remember the exact location of the pit and they never were able to find it. Some said the beast filled its pits once it trapped a prey. Others said Patrick fabricated the entire story. A few surmised that Michael was lost and, unfortunately, killed in a nearby cave or marsh. Everyone held different opinions, but there was one fact that was indisputable: young Michael O'Malley was never seen again. In addition, the very night the villagers abandoned their search, a shrilling moan was heard throughout the valley – supposedly the infamous, thunderous moan of the beast.

Thomas ceased walking again and warily eyed the area around him. Ominous darkness still engulfed the valley. His inability to see even the ground just ahead, terrified him. Even if he managed to spot the beast, it might be too late. Shuddering, he realized that he could be walking directly towards it. His head continued to bleed and he remained lightheaded. He had only a little further to go, perhaps just ten more minutes in the blackness. He prayed the moon would soon re-emerge, then continued on his journey.

The rough outline of the road prevented him from straying off its side. Despite his restricted vision, he was determined to concentrate on the road ahead of him and remain in the middle – the place he believed to be the safest. His legs continued to tremble. His heart pounded. A knot formed in his stomach. He was sweating from anxiety. But despite his physical exhaustion he knew that he was nearing his destination, and that was encouraging. Still resolved to reach safety, he increased his pace.

The moan of the beast. That shrilling noise – whatever it was – baffled and frightened even the most stubborn skeptics of the legend. What was its purpose? Was the beast celebrating the slaughter of another victim? That's what most people believed; that's what his grandfather had believed. The scientists who accepted the beast's existence believed the cry to be a mating call. Since the beast had been heard over much of Scotland, it was conceivable that it was searching for a mate. Was it the last of some vanishing species? Was it a wandering mutant with no one to befriend? Or was the beast more than that? Some believed that he was a highly intelligent, grossly deformed man who had been rejected by society decades earlier.

There was no questioning the beast's intelligence. It required a clever mind to dig and camouflage the pit that was used to trap little Michael O'Malley. And what about that incident two years ago? Something had opened the latch on old man Griver's sheep pen, walked away carrying two sheep, and closed the gate behind it. To this day, Thomas vividly recalled the footprints found in the mud the following

morning. They didn't appear to resemble anything remotely human. Furthermore, the latch had always been difficult to open and required some dexterity – you had to press down on the catch while turning the handle to open it. No mere animal could accomplish such a task, yet the beast had done so without using force, for nothing had been damaged. Clearly, the beast possessed intelligence and resourcefulness. It might not be a man, but it was definitely more than a mere animal.

His recollections were terrifying him and the forest seemed to come alive with movement. He was in a cold sweat. Every beat of his heart seemed to reverberate throughout his body. His legs were almost too weak to continue. Clouds continued to blanket the moon, enveloping the valley in an ominous blackness. A ghostly, fine mist was rising from the valley below, further impairing his already restricted vision. He trembled in terror and knew that he must remove all thoughts of the beast from his mind. He must concentrate on the journey ahead of him. He had to continue; Nixon was not much further.

He heard movement once again. Something was stirring in the woods just below him. Thomas came to an abrupt halt – too terrified to move. He held his breath in anticipation. He strained to see what was moving. There was no doubt that this time something was definitely moving – and it seemed to be coming towards him! He listened in horror as it drew nearer. And then he realized what he heard: footsteps! – not more than twenty feet away. He was paralyzed from terror! It was 15 feet away... He couldn't breathe! 10 feet...

Suddenly, as if God Himself intervened, precious rays of salvation unexpectedly illuminated the ominous valley: the moon had reemerged. Instinctively, he darted down the road towards Nixon, running for his life. He would not look behind him. The moonlight was all he needed to guide him. Nixon was just a little further, a few minutes at most. His head was spinning. Objects seemed to be flying by him. It was a nightmare that he prayed would end. He had lost his coherency. He was dazed, bleeding, and agonizing in pain. But he continued to run – faster than he thought possible. Was it chasing him? Or was it his own footsteps that he heard? The road seemed to be shifting below his feet. He looked up at the moon as he ran. "No!" he shouted in dismay. The moon was about to disappear behind the clouds. He had to get to Nixon while there was still light. The village was just around the turn in the road ahead.

The clouds were too fast though, and... There... in front of him! Something was standing there! He came to a complete stop as blackness again permeated the valley. Before the moon's rays disappeared, however, he observed a silhouette standing on the misty road ahead of

him. He estimated it to be fifty feet away. Now he saw nothing but darkness.

He gasped for breath. He was exhausted and dizzy, and the valley seemed to be spinning around him. His heart was pounding as blood surged through his weary body. He was bent over in pain. Sharp cramps seemed to be piercing his side. He felt as if he was going to be sick. Unable to stand, he collapsed on one knee, struggling to remain conscious.

The figure had appeared only for a fleeting moment but, if his eyes did not deceive him, it appeared to be human. Could it be a man? Could it be a member of a search party looking for Thomas? He wasn't sure, but he knew that he could not continue much longer, he was losing too much blood and was growing increasingly weaker. Why wouldn't this nightmare end? If only he could see the road ahead of him. Still on his knee, he realized that he could no longer stand. His journey was coming to an end. There was nothing more to lose. He was going to attempt to contact whatever stood on the road ahead of him. If it was the beast, then he was as good as dead anyway. But if it was a member of a search party then he must make contact to be saved. He could remain silent no longer.

He listened, but heard only silence. Still panting for his breath, he managed to utter three words.

"Who are you?"

He waited for a reply. Nixon was so near, yet the biggest obstacle in the world might be standing between him and his village. He held his breath.

"Who are you?" was the reply. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was a man, just a man! He began to laugh and tears filled his eyes. He would live to see Nixon again! He scoffed at those preposterous legends and felt ridiculous for having scared himself half to death. Deep down he never did believe in the existence of some ridiculous beast that roamed the hills of Scotland. Those silly legends were surely the products of idle minds.

His legs ached and he was heavily perspired from fear. He rubbed the back of his head and knew that it was still bleeding. He thanked God that Nixon had a capable doctor. He thanked God that someone had organized a search party for him. The authorities would still have to investigate the assault and the robbery, but that seemed almost incidental now.

Still in total blackness, he became aware of the woods around him. The

forest now seemed particularly peaceful and beautiful. The cool autumn breeze that flowed through the wooded valley was refreshing and appeasing. Even the fine, white mist seemed almost wondrously beautiful. How could he ever have feared something so innocent? But enough of a beautiful thing, he wanted to go home.

"Wait up!" he yelled as he struggled to rise off the ground. He now had a companion for the remainder of his short journey. Rejuvenated, he staggered down the road towards Nixon. The man was just ahead.

Still, Thomas thought, there have been some unusual and inexplicable occurrences the last several years. The O'Malley boys and Mr. Griver weren't the only village residents who claimed to have had an encounter with the beast. Thomas knew every legend that was ever told about the creature but there was one more he just remembered and he abruptly came to a halt. The old man's reply, 'Who are you?', was the same words as Thomas's question. And didn't someone once claim that the beast was capable of mimicking words?

A shrill moan echoed throughout the valley, and the villagers of Nixon knew the clever beast had claimed yet another victim.