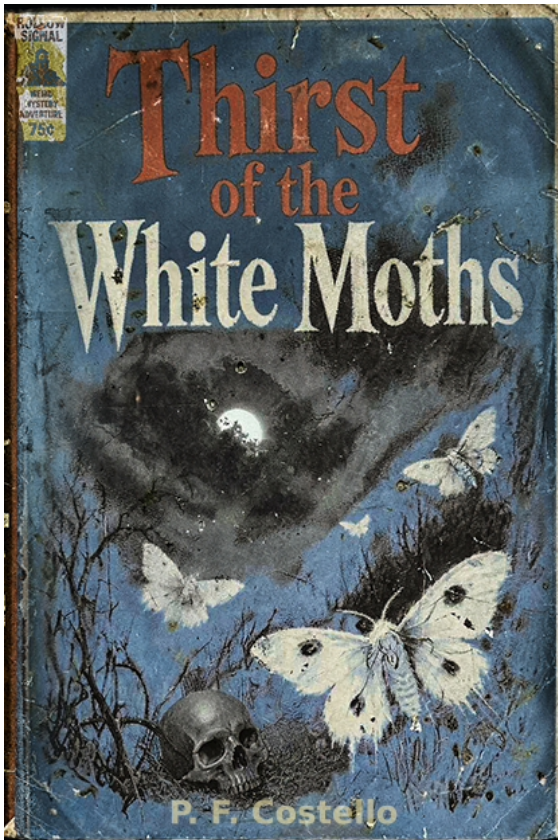




Thirst of the White Moths

by P. F. Costello

The manuscript arrived wrapped in oiled canvas, bearing the stamp of a solicitor's office in Columbus, Ohio. Within lay forty-three pages of foolscap, each sheet bearing the peculiar odor of mildew mingled with a metallic scent that called to mind old copper coins left too long in damp earth.

The pages bore the careful script of one Jonathan Pierce, though as the narrative progressed, the handwriting grew increasingly erratic. Most curious were the margins, which contained dozens of small winged creatures rendered with obsessive precision.

Pierce died in the autumn of 1897 of what the attending physician termed "idiopathic hemorrhagic syndrome." The death certificate noted severe anemia of unknown origin and blood chemistry of most unusual character.

Witnesses reported that on the night of his passing, pale moths clustered at every lamp in the house where he lay dying, pressing against the glass in such numbers that the flames could barely penetrate their mass.

What follows is Pierce's own account, preserved exactly as written.

Part 1: The Fall And The Village

I do not expect to be believed. Indeed, were such a narrative as this to fall into my hands from another's pen, I should perhaps smile at the author's credulity and wonder what strange fancies illness might produce in an otherwise rational mind. Yet I find myself compelled to set down these events with what precision remains to me, for my time grows short, and there are matters that ought to be recorded.

My name is Jonathan Pierce, and until recently I operated a modest transport enterprise along the rivers of Central America. My equipment consisted of a shallow-draft launch of local construction and a small team of pack mules, which together enabled me to convey passengers and cargo to settlements beyond the reach of larger vessels. The work suited me well enough, for I had served before the mast in my younger years and possessed a fair understanding of boats and difficult water.

In September of that year I accepted what seemed a routine commission, the conveyance of two passengers to a mission outpost some days' journey up the Rio Sombra. The first of these was Miss Elizabeth Brown of Ohio, a schoolteacher who had contracted to serve at a mission school in the interior.

She was a woman of perhaps thirty years, possessed of that practical demeanor one associates with those who have devoted themselves to the instruction of children. Her personal effects consisted of a canvas valise and a leather satchel containing a much-worn Bible.

My second passenger introduced himself as Count Vannevar Barischua. He was a gentleman of European extraction, lean to the point of emaciation, with skin that seemed never to have known the touch of tropical sun. Most remarkable were the scars that marked both his wrists, thin lines that resembled the rungs of some cruel ladder.

When I inquired as to the nature of his business in such remote territory, the Count smiled with an expression I found difficult to interpret.

"I am researching certain family investments in this region," he said. His English bore traces of an accent I could not place. "My ancestor enjoyed quite the adventure in these hills some decades past. Something concerning what our family records term 'the Horrible Things of Saint Varas.' Legend, of course, but one must honor the dead."

Miss Brown, who had been listening with evident interest, frowned at this intelligence.

"That sounds unpleasant, Count Barischua. Sane men shouldn't go looking for horrible things."

The Count's smile broadened in a manner I found unsettling.

"Indeed they should not, Miss Brown. Most emphatically not."

We departed Guatemala City at dawn, our cargo consisting of the usual supplies required by such remote establishments: preserved foods, medicines, and lamp oil. The launch bore us steadily upstream against a current grown swift from recent rains.

Miss Brown occupied herself with her Bible while the Count gazed at the jungle walls that rose on either side like the nave of some vast cathedral.

For the better part of two days our progress remained satisfactory. The engine maintained its steady rhythm, and the river showed no sign of the treachery that lay ahead. We passed occasional settlements where children watched us from the banks, but these grew fewer as we penetrated deeper into the wilderness.

On the morning of the third day, we encountered what I can only describe as a wall of storm.

The change came with a suddenness. One moment we traveled beneath a clear sky, and the next we were engulfed in darkness so complete that I could not discern the bow from my place at the tiller. Wind struck the water with such violence that waves broke over our gunwales. Rain fell in sheets that seemed solid as iron.

I fought to keep the launch pointed upstream, but the current had become a living thing that sought to dash us against the banks. Lightning revealed glimpses of fallen trees that hung over the water like grasping fingers.

The engine began to labor against debris that choked the propeller. Steam rose from the boiler in ominous clouds. Through the storm's fury, I caught sight of something that filled me with dread. A massive tree trunk lying just beneath the surface, its branches spread like the ribs of some drowned leviathan.

"Hold fast!" I shouted, but my warning came too late.

We struck the snag at considerable speed. The impact threw me from my seat and sent Miss Brown tumbling against the cargo. The Count maintained his position through some miracle of balance, his hands gripping the rail with white knuckles.

The launch's bottom tore open with a sound like rending cloth. Dark water poured through the breach with eager haste. Our supplies floated free of their lashings, crates and barrels spinning in the current while the boat sank away beneath us.

"We must reach the bank!" I called, but my words were lost in the storm's roar.

The launch tilted at a sickening angle. Miss Brown clutched her Bible to her chest as water swirled around her knees. The Count stood perfectly still, watching our disaster unfold with what appeared to be academic interest.

I seized the emergency paddle and fought to steer our dying craft toward shore. The current carried us sideways, spinning like a child's toy. Through the rain I glimpsed a stretch of muddy bank that offered our only hope of survival.

We struck the shallows with bone-jarring force. The launch rolled over completely, spilling us into water. I surfaced gasping, my lungs burning from the effort. Miss Brown floated nearby, her sodden skirts tangled around her legs. The Count emerged from the murk with his pale hair plastered to his skull.

We dragged ourselves onto the bank and lay gasping in the mud, which stank of brine and rotting fish. The storm moved off as suddenly as it had come, leaving us soaked and shivering beneath a sky gone suddenly clear.

Our launch had settled in the shallows, its broken hull jutting from the water like the bones of some prehistoric beast.

"The supplies?" Miss Brown asked through chattering teeth.

"Lost," I replied, surveying the debris that dotted the river's surface. "Everything save what we carry."

Count Barischua wrung water from his coat and examined a long scratch on his forearm with detached interest.

"How far to the nearest settlement?" he inquired.

I consulted my pocket compass, though I suspected our position lay far from any charted course.

"Difficult to say with certainty. We must follow the river and hope to encounter friendly natives."

We salvaged what we could from the wreckage, a waterproof pouch containing matches, a coil of rope, and Miss Brown's Bible. Then we set off downstream along a game trail that wound through vegetation so thick it seemed to press against us with malevolent intent.

The jungle rose on all sides in walls of green that filtered the sunlight to a sickly pallor. Strange birds called from the canopy above, their cries echoing like the voices of the damned.

More than once I heard the crash of some large creature moving parallel to our path, though we never glimpsed our unseen companion.

Miss Brown walked behind me with admirable fortitude, pausing only occasionally to rest against the trunk of some forest giant. The Count brought up the rear, humming some melody I did not recognize. His demeanor suggested that being stranded in trackless jungle was precisely what he had hoped might occur.

We had traveled perhaps five miles when the boy found us.

He could not have been more than twelve years old, dark-skinned and barefoot, wearing trousers cut from old flour sacking. He stepped from behind a cecropia tree and regarded us with eyes both solemn and wary.

"Están perdidos?" he asked, which I took as his way of inquiring whether we had lost our way.

"Sí," I replied in my limited Spanish. "Necesitamos ayuda."

The boy nodded and gestured that we should follow. He led us from the obvious path onto a track so faint I would never have detected it myself. This wound between massive buttress roots and under hanging vines that dripped with moisture from the recent storm.

"How much farther?" Miss Brown inquired, her voice betraying exhaustion.

The boy held up three fingers, though whether this indicated miles or hours remained unclear.

The settlement lay in a clearing beneath limestone cliffs that rose sheer into the canopy. Perhaps thirty dwellings constructed of split bamboo and thatched with palm fronds stood arranged around a central plaza. Smoke drifted from cooking fires. Children ceased their games to stare at our bedraggled procession.

An elderly man emerged from the largest structure and spoke rapidly with our young guide. He then turned to address us in English of careful pronunciation.

"I am Jefe Raul," he said. "You are welcome among us, but there are laws here that must be observed. When darkness comes, you remain within your shelter. You do not open windows or doors after the sun sets. You do not venture outside until dawn returns, no matter what you may hear."

Miss Brown appeared puzzled by these stern instructions.

"Is there some particular danger in this place?"

Jefe Raul glanced at the sky where the first stars had begun to appear.

"There are things that hunt in darkness. Old things. Strangers draw them as carrion draws flies."

He conducted us to an empty hut near the village center. The single room contained three sleeping mats woven from palm fiber, a clay water vessel, and bundles of some pungent herb suspended from the ceiling beams.

"What is that odor?" Miss Brown asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Protection," Jefe Raul said simply. He indicated the hanging bundles with a gesture of reverence. "The smoke drives them away. Do not let your fire die."

Count Barischua examined one of the herb bundles with the attention of a botanist, crushing a leaf between his long fingers.

"Most interesting. From what exactly are we being protected?"

His face settled into a weary look as he studied him.

"The Thirsting One. She rides with the white moths when the moon grows dark."

After our host departed, we started a fire in the stone circle at the room's center. Miss Brown attempted conversation, but exhaustion weighed heavily upon us all. The events of the last few hours had left me feeling as if I had grown several years older; my muscles sore and my right shoulder drawn tight and aching.

Sleep came despite the strange surroundings. Yet near midnight I was awakened by a sound that defied ready description.

It resembled autumn leaves scraping against window glass, a dry, papery rustling that seemed to rise from just beyond our bamboo walls. I lay motionless upon my mat, every sense alert to potential danger.

The sound appeared to originate from the window opening near my head.

I turned with utmost care and beheld a sight that shall remain etched upon my memory until my final breath.

A horrible moth of extraordinary proportions clung to the exterior of our window frame. Its wings, each the span of a man's hand, displayed a pallid coloration marked with dark blotches that resembled old bruises.

As I watched in growing horror, a thin black appendage uncoiled from beneath the creature's head and began probing between the bamboo slats with obvious purpose.

This proboscis extended to the length of a knitting needle and glistened wetly at its tip.

I reached for a piece of firewood and prodded the creature through the lattice. The moment my makeshift weapon contacted its body, the proboscis struck with serpentine swiftness, penetrating deep into the wood grain. Dark fluid immediately began seeping into the timber like ink into blotting paper.

Footsteps pounded across the village plaza. Voices shouted in rapid Spanish. Our door burst open and three villagers rushed inside, bearing machetes and torches of burning palm.

They saw the moth and fell upon it with frenzied determination, hacking through the window frame until nothing remained but pale fragments scattered in the dirt. Then they scraped away every piece of wood that the proboscis had touched and threw the shavings into our fire.

The wood burned with a sharp, acrid stench that brought tears to my eyes.

Part 2: The Thirsting One

When dawn broke, the villagers who had destroyed the moth remained in our hut, speaking in hushed tones with Jefe Raul. Their faces were drawn and pinched. One of them, an elderly woman with silver hair braided down her back, stepped forward when she saw me stirring.

"I am Dono Matela," she said in careful English. "I tend the sick here. You must understand what you have seen."

She settled beside our dying fire and prodded the ashes with a charred stick.

"The white moths drink blood," she continued. "They pierce the skin with their feeding tubes and drain what they need. Those they visit grow weak and feverish. Within days, they begin coughing blood. Soon after, they die."

Miss Brown, who had awakened during this exchange, pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders.

"Surely you don't mean to suggest that a moth could kill a grown person?"

"I have seen it happen many times," Dono Matela replied. "Come. I will show you."

She led us from the hut toward the edge of the village, where a plot of turned earth lay beneath a cluster of cecropia trees. Perhaps two dozen mounds rose from the dark soil, each marked with a crude wooden cross. The dirt still sat loose and high over the graves, not yet packed flat by rain, and the pale wood of the crosses showed little sign of weather.

"All of these died since the last new moon," Jefe Raul said quietly. "The moths have grown bold. They come in greater numbers each night."

"What draws them here?" I asked.

"La sedienta grows hungry. The Thirsting One calls them from their roosts in the deep jungle. They come seeking blood of certain quality."

Count Barischua, who had remained silent throughout this conversation, stepped closer with obvious interest.

"And what makes blood particularly attractive to these creatures?"

"Foreigners," Dono Matela said simply. "Blood from distant lands. Blood that carries memories of other places."

The Count's pale eyes brightened.

"Most fascinating. I wonder if there might be some connection to my family's presence in this region. My ancestor spent considerable time exploring these hills in search of certain artifacts."

"What manner of artifacts?" Jefe Raul asked, his voice carrying a note of suspicion.

"Religious items, primarily. Sacred stones and the like. He was something of a collector."

Dono Matela's expression darkened at these words, though she said nothing more.

We returned to the hut as the morning grew warm. The villagers resumed their daily activities, but I noticed they moved with the quick, nervous gestures. Children stayed close to their mothers. Men carried machetes even when engaged in simple tasks like repairing thatch.

That afternoon, while Miss Brown rested and the Count examined his personal effects, I helped Jefe Raul repair a section of bamboo lattice that had been damaged during the night. The work proved simple enough, but I found myself constantly glancing at the shadows.

"How long have the creatures been troubling your village?" I asked as we lashed the bamboo poles with vine.

"They've always been here," he replied. "But something changed three months ago. They grew bolder. Hungrier. The old protections no longer work as they should."

"What changed?"

Jefe Raul paused in his work and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"A stranger came through the village. A man with very pale skin like your companion. He asked many questions about the old cave in the hills. We warned him not to go there, but he would not listen. After he left, the moths began their nightly visits."

A chill ran down my spine despite the tropical heat.

"What became of this stranger?"

"He never returned to the village. But sometimes, on very dark nights, the hunters see a figure walking in the jungle. Always moving toward the cave."

That evening, Dono Matela brought us a meal of rice and beans seasoned with herbs that tasted bitter on the tongue. She also provided fresh bundles of the protective plants, which she hung from every beam and corner of our shelter.

"You must keep these burning all night," she instructed. "The smoke confuses the moths. They cannot find their way through it."

Miss Brown wrinkled her nose at the acrid fumes.

"Is there no other protection we might employ?"

"Prayer, perhaps. Though I am not certain your God listens in this place."

As darkness settled over the village, we prepared for what I hoped would be a peaceful night. Miss Brown read from her Bible by firelight while the Count examined a leather journal filled with his own cramped handwriting. I occupied myself with checking our meager supplies and planning our eventual departure.

The first moths appeared just after midnight.

I heard them before I saw them. It began as a faint dry whispering, like pages turned slowly in an empty room, and it swelled by degrees until it seemed to come from every wall at once. Something brushed the thatch above our heads. Something else tapped at the bamboo near the door, softly and patiently, as a guest might knock who knows he'll be admitted in time.

Through the gaps in the walls I caught glimpses of pale shapes drifting past in the dark. They didn't flutter in the aimless way of ordinary moths. They moved slowly, deliberately, circling the hut as though they were taking its measure.

One settled against the window lattice. Its wings opened and closed with a sluggish rhythm, and in the firelight I could see the bruise-colored blotches on them darken and

fade with each beat. Its fat white body pressed into the space between two slats. I watched the bamboo creak and give a fraction of an inch.

Miss Brown looked up from her Bible. Her face had gone the color of candle wax.

"How many do you think there are?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but her scream came first.

One of the creatures had worked its way through some crack and dropped onto her face.

The thing covered her left eye entirely. Its wings spread across her cheek and temple like a pale hand cupping her skull, and its many legs worked into her hair and the skin of her brow, finding purchase. I could see its abdomen swelling and contracting against the bridge of her nose.

She clawed at it with desperate fingers. Her nails scraped the wings and tore loose a cloud of white powder that settled on her lips and lashes, but the body itself would not move. It clung to her with a terrible, single-minded patience.

Then I saw the worst of it. Beneath the edge of its body, the black thread of its proboscis had slipped under her closed eyelid. The lid bulged where the thing had pushed inside, and I could see it shifting there, probing, feeling its way into the soft tissue behind her eye.

A thin line of blood crept from the corner of her eye and ran down her cheek. A second followed it, mixed with some clear fluid that glistened in the firelight. The moth's body gave a slow, satisfied shudder, and its pale abdomen began, very gradually, to darken and fill.

I lunged forward and seized the moth's wing, pulling with all my strength. It resisted fiercely. Miss Brown screamed again as I yanked the creature free.

The moth came away with a wet, tearing sound, bringing with it a thread of blood and clear fluid. Miss Brown collapsed to her knees, pressing both hands to her wounded eye. The moth writhed in my grip, its black feeding tube still extended and dripping.

Dono Matela burst through our door, and snatched the moth from my hands. She threw it into our fire, where it twisted and blackened with a sound like frying meat.

"Hold still," she commanded Miss Brown, producing a small clay pot from her satchel. She smeared a thick paste of crushed herbs over the wounded eye, muttering words in a language I did not recognize.

Count Barischua had not stirred from his place by the wall. He stood with his hands folded behind his back, watching the whole dreadful business with the calm attention of a gentleman at the opera.

"Remarkable," he murmured. "The feeding apparatus is far more refined than one would expect of so humble a creature."

I turned on him, my hands still wet with filth and blood.

"I should have thought a gentleman of your breeding would lift a hand to help me save her, sir," I said, and I made little effort to hide my disgust.

The Count inclined his head with perfect courtesy.

"And I thought a man of your evident capability would manage the matter without me," he replied. "It appears my confidence was well placed."

Miss Brown's eye remained bloodshot and swollen for the remainder of our stay in the village.

Part 3: Herb Smoke And Blood Dreams

Over the following nights, the attacks grew worse. Dozens of pale moths clung to our roof like living shingles, their wings creating a constant rasping sound that continued until dawn. I felt tiny stings on my arms whenever I ventured too close to the walls, though I never saw the creatures responsible.

The Count's behavior grew increasingly strange. His already pale skin became almost translucent, revealing a network of blue veins beneath the surface. When lamplight fell across his face, his eyes seemed to glow with their own faint radiance.

On our fourth night in the village, he voiced a theory that chilled my blood.

"Perhaps we're approaching this matter incorrectly," he said, watching a cluster of moths press against our window. "What if these creatures don't seek to harm us, but rather to... include us? My family's old records speak of a spiritual communion achieved through the sharing of blood."

Dono Matela, who had come to check Miss Brown's healing eye, turned sharply at these words.

"Do not speak such foolishness," she said. "La sedienta offers no communion. Only emptiness and hunger."

The Count smiled, revealing teeth that seemed somehow longer than before.

"But what if my blood is different? What if it carries something these moths recognize and desire? Perhaps the herb smoke you burn so diligently is preventing a reunion that should rightfully take place."

White powder dusted his lips as he spoke, though I could not determine its source.

Dono Matela's face hardened at the Count's words. She seized him by the wrist and examined the pale skin with obvious alarm.

"You will sleep apart from the others tonight," she commanded. "And you will breathe nothing but herb smoke until this madness passes."

She departed and returned with an armload of the bitter plants, more than I had yet seen gathered in one place. These she arranged in thick bundles around our sleeping area, creating a barrier of smoking vegetation that reduced visibility to mere inches.

"This will burn your throats and sting your eyes," she warned Miss Brown and myself. "But it may save your lives. The smoke confuses more than moths. It clouds the thoughts of those who would welcome la sedienta."

The fumes proved even more noxious than she had promised. Within minutes, tears streamed down my face and my throat felt raw as scraped leather. Miss Brown coughed continuously, pressing a damp cloth to her nose in a futile attempt to filter the acrid smoke.

Count Barischua lay upon his mat with apparent serenity, breathing deeply of the choking atmosphere as if it were the finest mountain breeze.

"Such protection seems rather excessive," he murmured. "Surely we might achieve the same result with less aggressive methods."

"Sleep," Dono Matela ordered from the doorway. "And do not leave your mats until dawn, no matter what dreams may come."

Sleep arrived despite the noxious smoke, though it brought with it visions of surpassing strangeness. I found myself standing at the entrance to a vast cavern whose walls disappeared into shadow beyond the reach of any light. The ceiling writhed with a living carpet of pale wings that moved in slow, hypnotic patterns.

At the cavern's heart lay a stone altar carved from black rock. Upon this slab rested the figure of a man dressed in the remnants of fine European clothing. Moths crawled across his motionless form, entering and emerging from his mouth in an endless procession. His eyes stared blindly upward, though something within them suggested a terrible awareness.

Above the altar, suspended from a stalactite, hung a medallion of tarnished silver. Even in the dream's uncertain light, I could discern the Barischua coat of arms etched into its surface.

The figure on the altar turned its head toward me with a motion that defied the moths filling its throat. When it smiled, white powder spilled from between its lips.

I woke gasping and found Count Barischua sitting beside my mat, his face barely visible through the herb smoke. His skin had grown so pale it seemed to glow with its own faint luminescence.

"Remarkable dreams tonight," he said softly. "Such vivid imagery."

Miss Brown stirred on her mat, whimpering like a child in the grip of fever. Her face was streaked with tears, though she remained deeply asleep. I reached out to wake her, but the Count caught my wrist.

"Best to let her finish," he advised. "Some dreams must be experienced completely before they release their hold."

His fingers felt cold as winter stone against my skin.

She woke sobbing just before dawn, clutching her Bible to her chest.

"Horrible dream," she whispered. "People screaming and crazed. So many talking and rushing in on me."

Count Barischua leaned forward with obvious interest.

"What manner of voices?"

"Many voices speaking as one. They knew my name. They knew my thoughts. They promised such beautiful things if I would only open my heart to them."

She shuddered and pulled her shawl tighter about her shoulders.

"I fear my faith is being tested in ways I never anticipated."

Dawn brought the sound of running feet and shouting voices from the village square. I rose stiffly from my mat and peered through the smoke-stained window. A small crowd had gathered near the central plaza, their excited voices carrying clearly in the morning stillness.

At the center of their attention stood a child of perhaps eight years, swaying on unsteady legs. Even from a distance, I could see that something was terribly wrong with the boy. His shirt hung open, revealing a chest marked with dozens of small, circular wounds. Blood had dried in dark patches across his brown skin.

"Dear God," Miss Brown breathed, joining me at the window. "He's just a child!"

Before I could reply, the child collapsed to the packed earth. The villagers rushed forward, but I could see from their gestures that no help would suffice. The boy's eyes stared sightlessly at the brightening sky.

Jefe Raul appeared at our door moments later, his face grave.

"We must move the body quickly," he said. "Before the scent draws them back."

I followed him to the plaza, where Dono Matela knelt beside the small corpse. The wounds on his chest and throat were perfectly round, each the diameter of a reed pen. No tearing or bruising marked the skin around these punctures, as if they had been made by instruments of surgical precision.

"So many marks," Jefe Raul said.

Dono Matela counted under her breath, her weathered fingers hovering over each mark.

"Forty-seven," she replied. "They drained him slowly throughout the night."

I helped lift the boy's body, and my hands came away sticky with blood that seemed reluctant to dry. The metallic scent clung to my palms despite repeated washing, as if the child's essence had somehow adhered to my skin.

We carried him to the cemetery and dug a hasty grave while the morning grew hot around us. No ceremony marked his burial. Jefe Raul spoke a few words in the local dialect, then we covered the small form with earth that looked darker than it should have.

"He wandered from his hut during the night," Dono Matela explained as we walked back to the village. "His grandmother found his sleeping mat empty this morning. The moths must have called to him."

"Called to him?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"They sing," she said simply. "Those who hear their song find it difficult to resist. Children are particularly susceptible."

That evening I came upon Count Barischua seated near the fire with his sleeves turned back to the elbow. He was studying his forearms with a peculiar tenderness, turning them slowly in the light and running one long fingertip over the skin, the way a man might admire a new ring.

Tiny marks had appeared there. Each was no larger than a pinprick, perfectly round, and ringed with a faint blush of pink. There were a great many of them, arranged in loose clusters along the blue course of his veins.

He heard my step and looked up without the smallest sign of embarrassment. Then he smiled and drew his sleeves down over his wrists, buttoning each cuff with deliberate care.

"Mosquitoes," he said. "The jungle is generous with its little bloodletters."

"Strange," I said. "I've not seen a single mosquito since we arrived. The smoke keeps them off, I'm told. And I never saw a mosquito leave a wound like those."

The Count's smile did not falter, though something cooled behind his eyes.

"If you mean to imply that our pale visitors have favored me with their attentions, I'll remind you that I sit before you full and whole. Hardly the condition of a man being drained by night." He tilted his head. "What reason could I possibly have to deceive you?"

"I've been asking myself the same question," I said. "I haven't found an answer yet. But I'm quite certain you know more of this business than you've chosen to share."

For a moment he only looked at me. His eyes caught the firelight and held it longer than eyes ought to.

Then the Count laughed. It was a thin, high, breathless sound that seemed to come from somewhere behind his teeth rather than from his chest, and it went on a little too long.

"My dear fellow," he said softly, "I'm every bit as eager as you to see the mystery solved. More eager, I should think." He leaned toward me, and I caught a faint dry scent from him, the smell of an attic shut up for years. "After all, it's my family's mystery. Not yours."

As darkness fell, Dono Matela again filled our hut with choking herb smoke. The Count bore this treatment with decreasing patience, muttering about primitive superstitions and misguided fears. More than once I caught him gazing longingly at the door, as if calculating the distance to fresh air.

Near midnight, I woke to find his sleeping mat empty.

The dying embers of our fire cast uncertain shadows across the bamboo walls. Through the gaps, I could see a tall figure standing at the edge of the village plaza. Pale moths circled around this shape in a slow spiral, their wings catching the faint starlight.

Part 4: The Cave Of Wings

I watched through the window as the figure gestured to its pale attendants. Then the shape melted back into the jungle shadows, taking its swarm with it. By morning, Count Barischua had returned to his mat, though his clothes were damp with dew and his boots caked with mud.

When I confronted him about his nocturnal wandering, he merely smiled and claimed to have stepped outside for fresh air. The herb smoke, he insisted, had grown unbearable. I said nothing more, but I resolved to keep him in sight thereafter.

Three more children died that week.

Each morning brought another small body to the cemetery, each bearing the same precise circular wounds. The villagers spoke in hushed voices of dreams that called them from their beds, of voices that promised wonderful things in the darkness beyond their doors.

Jefe Raul came to me, his weathered face drawn with exhaustion.

"We cannot continue this way," he said. "The thing in the cave grows bolder. Soon it will take more people. Adults as well as the children."

"Where is the cave?"

He gestured toward the limestone cliffs that loomed over the village.

"It's always been the source of our troubles. The place where your Count's ancestor committed his sacrilege thirty years ago."

I studied the rocky heights with growing unease. Even in daylight, the stone faces seemed to harbor deep shadows that resisted the sun's penetration.

"What did he do there?"

"He broke open a shrine that had been sealed for centuries. The local tribes had forgotten why it was closed, only that it must never be opened. But Europeans see old warnings as mere superstition." Jefe Raul spat into the dust at his feet. "Within days, the white moths began appearing. Since then, they have claimed lives whenever the moon grows dark. But recently, they have grown bold enough to hunt during the full moon as well."

Miss Brown, who had been tending her wounded eye with fresh herbs, joined our conversation.

"Surely the proper course would be to seal the cave again?"

"We tried," Jefe Raul said grimly. "But la sedienta will not permit it. She sends her servants to drive us back whenever we approach the entrance."

"Then we must try a different approach," I suggested. "Perhaps a smaller party, moving at night when the moths are active elsewhere."

The chief considered this proposal with obvious reluctance.

"It would mean certain death for most who attempt it."

"And doing nothing means certain death for your entire village," I said.

After much deliberation, he agreed to guide a small expedition to the accursed cave. Miss Brown insisted on accompanying us despite her injured eye. Count Barischua, when informed of our plan, expressed the keenest interest in participating.

"How fascinating," he said, his pale eyes brightening. "To think that I might visit the very site of my ancestor's archaeological triumph."

We departed before dawn, following a narrow trail that wound up the cliff face in steep switchbacks. Our party consisted of Jefe Raul, three village warriors armed with machetes, Miss Brown, the Count, and myself. Dono Matela had provided each of us with bundles of the protective herb, though she held little hope for our success.

"The cave has defenses beyond what you have yet encountered," she warned.

The path grew treacherous as we climbed higher. Trees gave way to jagged rock formations that seemed to have been carved by some titanic blade. Strange streaks of rust-colored mineral ran through the stone like dried blood that had never been washed away by rain.

Miss Brown struggled with the ascent, her breathing labored on the rough climb. Count Barischua, conversely, seemed to gain strength as we climbed. His pale skin had acquired an almost luminous quality, and his movements carried a fluid grace that reminded me unpleasantly of certain jungle predators.

"The family records mention this very path," he remarked cheerfully. "My ancestor described the mineral stains in his journal. He theorized they were iron deposits, though I suspect the truth is rather more interesting."

The cave entrance yawned before us like an open wound in the cliff face. Water seepage had stained the limestone around the opening in patterns that resembled tears or perhaps old battle scars. A foul odor drifted from the depths.

"The shrine lies inside," Jefe Raul said quietly. "The passage narrows as it descends, then opens into a natural chamber where the old priests conducted their rituals."

We lit torches and entered the cave in single file. Our footsteps echoed strangely in the confined space, creating multiple overlapping sounds that seemed to come from all directions. The walls bore evidence of human habitation stretching back centuries.

Carved crosses covered every available surface, though many had been defaced or carved over with symbols I did not recognize. Names in Latin and Spanish crowded between the religious markings, some etched with obvious care, others scratched hastily as if by men in great fear.

"Marcus Villareal, Anno Domini 1847," Miss Brown read from one inscription. "Deus miserere nobis."

Below this, someone had carved a crude eye surrounded by radiating lines. Dark stains filled the carved channels, giving the symbol an unsettling three-dimensional quality.

Count Barischua paused at a section of wall bearing his family name. The carving was older than the others, executed with the precise strokes of a professional stonecutter.

"Vannevar Barischua fecit," he read aloud. "My ancestor was here indeed."

Beneath his name, in a rougher and more hurried hand, someone had scratched a warning in Spanish. Miss Brown translated it in a low voice: "He who opens the door must also close it."

Our torches illuminated fragments of pale material scattered across the cave floor. When I knelt to examine these more closely, I realized they were the dried husks of moth cocoons, thousands upon thousands of them. They crunched underfoot like autumn leaves, releasing clouds of dust that made us all cough.

"Dear God," Miss Brown whispered, pressing her handkerchief to her nose. "How many generations of the creatures have bred in this place?"

The passage opened into a vast natural chamber whose ceiling disappeared beyond the reach of our torchlight. Every surface writhed with movement. Pale moths covered the walls and ceiling in such numbers that they resembled some strange form of living wallpaper. Their wings moved in slow, synchronized patterns that created an hypnotic visual rhythm.

At the chamber's center stood a rough stone altar, its surface crusted with layer upon layer of what appeared to be dried flesh. The accumulation was so thick that the original shape of the altar could barely be discerned beneath the organic deposits.

Hanging from a stalactite directly above this abomination was a tarnished medallion that caught the torchlight with familiar gleams. Even at a distance, I could see the Barischua coat of arms etched into its surface.

Count Barischua stepped forward with obvious fascination.

"Magnificent," he breathed. "To think that all these years, the family treasure has been waiting here for my return."

The moths began to stir as he approached the altar. It started on the ceiling directly above him, a slow ripple of pale wings opening and closing, and it spread outward across the walls until the whole chamber seemed to shiver. The sound was soft at first, the patter of distant rain on a roof. Then it grew, and grew, until I could feel it in my chest.

They lifted from their roosts by the hundreds, then by the thousands. Dust sifted down from their wings and drifted through our torchlight in a fine white snow, settling on our hair and shoulders and on the backs of our hands. I tasted it on my lips, dry and faintly bitter.

Within moments the creatures had risen into a vast, slow spiral that filled the chamber from floor to vaulted ceiling. They made no attempt to flee the light. They circled patiently around the altar and the man who stood before it, and every pale body in that turning mass seemed to angle itself toward us, the way a congregation turns to look at latecomers in the pews.

At the center of this living tornado, a human figure took shape. Torn remnants of fine European clothing hung from its emaciated frame. Its face bore the unmistakable features of the Barischua lineage, though the skin had acquired the same translucent quality I had observed in the Count.

The thing that had once been a man opened its mouth in a smile that revealed rows of needle-sharp teeth. When it spoke, its voice carried the sound of beating wings.

Part 5: Sealing The Thirst

"Welcome, boy."

The creature's lips moved, but the voice did not come from them alone. It rose from every corner of the chamber at once, a man's cultured tones threaded through with a dry, rustling chorus, as though ten thousand tiny mouths were shaping each word a half-beat behind him.

"How long I have waited," it said. "So many years in the dark, tasting nothing but the memory of our blood. And now you've come home to me."

Count Barischua stepped toward the swirling mass. His face was transfigured. I have seen men look upon a bride at the altar with less devotion than he showed that thing.

"At last," he breathed. "Grandfather told me of you when I was a boy. I used to lie awake and listen for your wings."

The creature smiled more widely. Something moved behind its teeth. A single pale moth crawled out from between its lips, walked slowly across its cheek, and disappeared into its hair.

"You heard them," it said. "Of course you did. They've always known where to find you."

Then its head turned, with a slow, jerking motion, until its bright eyes rested on Miss Brown and me.

The swarm began to drift toward us. It didn't rush. It came on with a horrible unhurried patience, the whole turning column bending in our direction as one body.

Single moths broke away from the mass and settled on any skin they could find. One landed on the back of my hand. I felt its legs first, a delicate prickling, and then the cold probing touch of its proboscis searching for the vein. A sharp sting followed. Then another at my wrist, and another at my neck, until a dozen points of pain burned along my arms and I could feel, faintly and unmistakably, the steady pull of them drinking.

"We have to get out of here!" I shouted to Jefe Raul, but my words were lost in the sound of ten thousand beating wings.

Miss Brown screamed as moths settled on her face and neck. She clawed at them frantically, but for each one she dislodged, two more took its place. Blood began to seep through her clothing where the creatures had found purchase.

I seized one of our herb bundles and thrust it into the nearest torch flame. The dried plants caught immediately, producing clouds of acrid smoke that caused the nearby moths to recoil in obvious distress. Those creatures that had fastened themselves to Miss Brown released their hold and fluttered away into the greater swarm.

"The herbs!" I called to the warriors. "Light them all!"

We kindled every bundle we carried, creating a barrier of choking smoke between ourselves and the advancing mass of moths. The creatures' organized assault dissolved into confused retreat as the fumes spread throughout the chamber.

Through the smoke, I caught a final glimpse of Count Barischua standing before the altar. Moths covered his entire body now, their wings beating in perfect synchronization with his breathing. His pale eyes met mine for an instant, and I saw in them a terrible contentment.

I yelled out, raising my burning bundle like a torch as I turned and pushed toward the cave entrance. "Keep the smoke between us and them!"

We fought our way back through the narrow passage, the warriors slashing at any moth that dared approach our protective cloud. Behind us, the sound of wings grew to a deafening crescendo as the entire swarm gave chase.

Miss Brown stumbled and would have fallen, but I caught her arm and half-carried her toward the distant circle of daylight that marked the cave mouth. Her breathing came in

ragged gasps, and I could feel blood seeping through the cloth of her sleeve where the creatures had fed.

We burst from the cave into the golden sunlight of late afternoon. Dono Matela waited at the entrance with a group of villagers, their arms loaded with stones, clay, and lengths of timber.

"Quickly!" she shouted.

Working with desperate haste, we began dragging fallen logs and chunks of limestone across the cave opening. The villagers slapped handfuls of wet clay into every gap, sealing the entrance with the efficiency of long practice.

From within the cave came a sound like distant thunder as the mass of moths hurled itself against our makeshift barrier. The stone trembled under the impact, but our seal held firm.

Then I heard a voice that chilled my blood.

Count Barischua's cultured tones echoed from within the sealed chamber, though the words he spoke belonged to no language I recognized. The syllables seemed to writhe and twist in the air, forming patterns that hurt the mind to contemplate.

His voice rose to a shriek of rage and despair that no human throat should have been capable of producing. The sound went on far longer than any set of lungs could sustain, rising and falling like the cry of some enormous predatory bird.

A thin line of fresh blood seeped between the stones of our barrier, trickling down the rock face before drying into a permanent stain.

The hammering from within grew weaker, then ceased altogether. Silence settled over the mountainside like a burial shroud.

"Is it finished?" Miss Brown asked, her voice barely audible.

"For now," Dono Matela replied grimly. "But such things are patient. It may sleep for years or decades before stirring again."

We made our way back to the village as darkness fell. The few moths that remained scattered at our approach, their numbers too small to pose any significant threat. For the first time since our arrival, the night passed without incident.

Over the following days, Miss Brown's wounds healed cleanly, though her injured eye never regained its original clarity. We spoke little of what we had witnessed in the cave, as if silence might somehow diminish its reality.

Dono Matela insisted on performing what she called a cutting rite before our departure. Using a blade of volcanic glass, she made small incisions on our forearms and pressed burning herbs into the wounds.

"La sedienta has tasted your blood," she explained as we endured this painful procedure. "Sometimes she remembers flavors that please her. This may confuse her memory, should she ever wake from her slumber."

The scars from these ritual cuts remained visible for the rest of our lives.

xxx

The manuscript ends here, though several blank pages follow bearing only scattered moth sketches in the margins. From other sources, I have learned that Jonathan Pierce and Elizabeth Brown were married in Guatemala City some months after their ordeal. They returned to the United States and established themselves in a quiet Ohio town, where Pierce found employment as a surveyor and his wife resumed her teaching career.

For nearly twenty years, they lived unremarkable lives. Pierce's health remained robust until the autumn of 1897, when he began experiencing the symptoms that would eventually claim his life. Physicians noted unusual blood chemistry and a progressive anemia that responded to no treatment.

On the night of Pierce's death, every lamp in the house drew clusters of pale moths that pressed against the glass until dawn. A neighbor who sat up with Mrs. Pierce reported that their wings made a soft, steady sound against the windows the whole night through.

In the morning, the physician who examined the body noted that it appeared oddly desiccated, though no wound could be found to account for the apparent loss of fluids. Mrs. Pierce, when questioned, would offer no explanation for her husband's condition beyond observing that he had grown increasingly restless during the final weeks of his illness, often standing at their bedroom window throughout the long hours of darkness.

Whether the sealed cave in the Guatemalan hills still contains the horror that Pierce and his companions encountered there, I cannot say. Recent travelers to that region report no unusual activity, though few venture into the remote areas where such things might be observed.

Perhaps it is enough to know that some doors, once opened, can never be completely closed again.

END