

Reptilian

by Rebecca Metcalfe

London, 1876

They found the statues at the bottom of the Regent's Canal. It wasn't until later, however, that someone noticed the resemblance between the stone figures that had been pulled from the water and the photograph of the three Henshaw children who had disappeared from the reptile house of London Zoo a week previously. I, of course, kept my distance while these initial investigations were going on and made sure my hiding places were undetectable. Hardly anyone believed in things like me anymore so no one considered the truth. Which made me think I was safe. This was until that pig-headed Sir Percival turned up.

It's difficult for me to put all this into some sort of linear timeline. My beginnings were not of flesh and womb, more of soil and water. I was birthed by the polluted leftovers of your slimy, industrial revolution. Men, thinking they can do what they want, and befouling mother nature and her sisters. I know I had siblings; there were three of us who slithered our way out of that stinking pit, although where they went I have no idea.

My first memories are of dragging myself across the ground of this wretched city trying to find refuge: hard in a place so hostile. How I despised that city. The wart on the end of Queen Victoria's nose, I always thought. Not a nice place for anyone to turn up in. Even its own inhabitants, the people who built the damn place, struggled to find sanctuary there. So you can imagine what terror I felt as I crawled my way into life. It was dark and I could not see. I only sensed my way, licking the dirt and sniffing the shit in order to learn my way around. I was ultimately drawn to where I felt there were creatures that resembled me more than the humans did. They'd been imprisoned by you humans and their true beauty had been lost by thrusting them in front of leering eyes. But they still retained some of their core instincts and I felt safer among them than I did out in the open. So I made my home amongst my sleeker, cleaner cousins. I was born from industrial waste, which they were not. As such, I was bonier than they were and hadn't been conditioned by incarceration; I could dislocate myself in a way evolution had denied them and slide through gaps they'd been trained not to notice. The pond and piles of logs at the back of their cage hid me well from the opium-addled bastards who turned the keys. Still, it wasn't easy.

My fellow inmates were not hostile towards me, though we kept our distance from each other. They did their thing and I did mine. Although their thing didn't extend to sharing the food they were given, but in their defence the meagre portions weren't enough to feed them anyway. So I had to find other means of satisfying myself.

It was survival, really; that's the only reason anyone does anything. We're all just trying to live in this world. Maybe sometimes we forget that others are too. I wasn't this philosophical back then, though. I was just hungry.

I'd like to be able to say the children were an accident. I'd like to be able to say it was self-defence, that I was provoked. I mean, they had climbed through the bars and were disturbing the logs above my head. But I was starving, and they smelt sweet. I drained them of everything and I left them as shells. Once I'd finished they didn't look fully human any more. They'd stiffened and become tinged with an unearthly grey. To this day I don't understand the process that occurred

when I feasted on fat, but I suppose it was some side-effect of the rancid water I was born out of. Later on, people described it as like having been turned to stone. It wasn't that exactly; they retained some resemblance to organic matter, although as I'm unable to properly explain it, it's a decent enough comparison.

I knew I had to get rid of the remains of the three brats fast and I panicked; it was nearly sunrise. The canal was only a few hundred yards away. I probably should have thought of a better plan, but in my haste I simply dragged them away and pushed them into the water where they sank in silence. I should have realised that with all the barges that went up and down the canal that it wouldn't take long for someone to realise they were there. And it didn't. Within days of my disposing of them the whole city was in a flurry of fury and fear. Those children had been loved, it seemed. I've never understood love.

There was this young aristocrat in those days, Sir Percival Wallace his name was, and he used to swan around Kensington spending more money in an evening than most of London earned in a year. Well he became interested in the death of the children and started investigating. And by investigating, I mean he started making assumptions and threatening people, claiming he was trying to protect more innocent children. He never cared about the Henshaw children, nor any of London's children come to that, or at least not ones with less money than him. He just wanted glory. He'd lead bands of people to try and hunt down the killer but they weren't successful, at least not at first. Sir Percival's angry mob never actually arrived at the zoo. They ransacked the studios of sleazy sculptors, the artists and bohemians who lived elsewhere in the city, but they never thought to search the zoo. I was expecting them to, considering that's where the children had last been seen, but no police search or flock of journalists descended on my home. I'll never understand humans, especially not ones like Sir Percival. I lay low for a while regardless. You can never be too careful when an entire society despises you. Not that any human knew of my existence. My co-inhabitants of that cell may have suspected it was me who killed the children, but that didn't bother me. They could never let my dirty secrets slip through their forked tongues, not even if they wanted to. So I remained undetected.

This was until I spewed out the entrails of the children and found myself hungry once more. That same evening, when the zoo was about to close, a young and stupid couple stuck their fingers through the bars, shouting and jeering and behaving more like animals than most of the actual inhabitants of the zoo. I was hungry, and those two so irritated me with their pathetic cawing that I couldn't stop myself. Although, annoying as they were, I enjoyed their deaths far less than I enjoyed that of the children's. As far as I was concerned, they were just dinner. I had to survive same as everybody else. Once again, as my teeth had torn off the last of their flesh, what remained of their muscle and bone began to harden and turn grey. I don't know if there was something chemical in my saliva, or what it was, but it was mesmerizing watching all the shapes and features become dry, cold stone. In hindsight, the way their faces retained the look of fear that they'd died with should really have unnerved me. But as I say, I needed to eat.

I tried to think of somewhere else to hide the couple's remains that wasn't the canal, but the rising sun forced me to make the same mistake I'd made with the children. I had nowhere else to hide them, only this time it would prove to have far more serious consequences for me.

The discovery of the young French couple once again dragged the deaths into the consciousness of the nation, and the nation was livid. Sir Percival crawled out of his Belgravia

Gentleman's Club once more and took it upon himself to lead the investigation into the five deaths. Arrogant prick. Saw himself as the saviour of the city. And this time he used his brain a little bit more than he had done previously. It was him who first pointed out that both the children and the French couple had last been seen in the zoo. Fair play to him, he was the first person to notice how obvious it was, although this was what started the chain of events that led immediately to my death, so I won't congratulate him too much.

Sir Percival was adamant that the answers to the questions surrounding the deaths lay somewhere in the zoo. He and his privileged and inbred cronies swaggered up to the main gates one morning, a group of reluctant coppers cowering behind them. The keepers shrank back and simply let them in. Traitors. The reptile house is near the back of the zoo, so it was a while until they reached us. But that was only after they'd finished terrorising most of the other poor souls that were imprisoned behind those bars. I didn't realise Sir Percival had arrived until his shadow fell across the sawdust of the snake-cage floor. If I'd have known in advance I'd have tried to get away sooner. As soon as I saw him I made straight for the gap in the bars, but they saw me and it was too late. I just wasn't fast enough. I was outnumbered and they were faster and more prepared than me. I'd been asleep, I was sluggish, desperate. I shouldn't have been so careless. I can see that now, now I'm here in this miserable afterlife, and I can see where I went wrong. But I can also see I never had a chance of surviving for very long. I was doomed the moment I crawled out of that mud. Where could I have gone if I'd left the snake cage? So it didn't take much for Sir Percival to have me surrounded like the vermin I was.

'What in the name of God is that?' said one of his cronies. I reared up and hissed at them.

'That's not one of ours,' replied the head of the reptile house. 'I've no idea what that is.'

'Gentleman,' declared Sir Percival, 'I believe we may have our culprit.' They had no evidence of this, of course, but people like Sir Percival don't need things such as evidence or common sense. They were right, though, and they had me trapped.

'You think this thing was what killed those children and that couple?' said another.

'What else could have done it?'

'What even is that?'

'Some hideous bitch spawned by Satan,' answered Sir Percival.

The word bitch really stung. It's always got me how people like Sir Percival stuck labels on me. The press were notoriously bad for it; all the articles written about me claimed I was something I wasn't. The so-called femme fatale was the usual one and the temptress was another. The fallen woman. A horrific slut who threatened men-kind. Look at what they did with Eve. What they did not understand was that I fitted into no category. There was nothing between my legs; I didn't even have any legs. I was simply a thing that had been spat out by the mud. And I was raging. I'd spent my short life in the dirt, trying to survive. I'd never asked to be born, it wasn't my fault that I was like that. But having been forced into existence I wanted merely to survive. That's all I'd been thinking when I'd taken those people for my meals. Someone's survival nearly always results in someone else's death. I can see now that I had the appearance of a cruel and bloodthirsty monster, but I acted by instinct, not malice.

And it was instinct that drove me to make my final move, towards the nearest of the cronies, with my mouth wide open. My teeth sank into his face, ripping a large hole in it, and he collapsed to the floor. That was the last thing I saw before the flurry of bullets from Sir Percival's pistol tore so many holes in my neck that my head almost became separate.

After my death, they paraded my mangled body through the streets and strung it up for all to see. Journalists wrote damning stories about me, and about all the gruesome murders I'd committed. Most of the unsolved deaths in London at that time were later attributed to me, but I didn't commit any of them. They painted me as a caricature of myself and gave me the features of a music-hall villain. Whereas Sir Percival, of course, well he was praised as a Saint. Have you ever noticed it's always the exaggerated version of events that people remember? Sir Percival went down in history as a hero. I went down as a monster. Neither was true, but what's that old saying about history being written by the winners? Well, I lost.

