

The Silver Collar

GARRY KILWORTH

“The Silver Collar” is a departure for Garry, who usually writes contemporary or futuristic science fiction. It is the most traditional of the stories in this volume, a gothic fantasy in which the vampire main character is never on stage. It shows the folly of those who believe love can conquer all.

The remote Scottish island came into view just as the sun was setting. Outside the natural harbor, the sea was kicking a little in its traces and tossing its white manes in the dying light. My small outboard motor struggled against the ebbing tide, sometimes whining as it raced in the air as a particularly low trough left it without water to push against the blades of its propeller. By the time I reached the jetty, the moon was up and casting its chill light upon the shore and purple-heather hills beyond. There was a smothered atmosphere to this lonely place of rock and thin soil, as if the coarse grass and hardy plants had descended as a complete layer to wrap the ruggedness in a faded cover, hiding the nakedness from mean, inquisitive eyes.

As the agents had promised, he was waiting on the quay, his tall, emaciated figure stark against the gentle upward slope of the hinterland, a splinter of granite from the rock on which he made his home.

“I’ve brought the provisions,” I called, as he took the line and secured it.

“Good. Will you come up to the croft? There’s a peat fire going—it’s warm, and I have some scotch. Nothing like a dram before an open fire, with the smell of burning peat filling the room.”

“I could just make it out with the tide,” I said. “Perhaps I should go now.” It was not that I was reluctant to accept the invitation from this eremite, this strange recluse—on the contrary, he interested me—but I had to be sure to get back to the mainland that night, since I was to crew a fishing vessel the next day.

“You have time for a dram,” his voice drifted away on the cold wind that had sprung up within minutes, like a breath from the mouth of the icy north. I had to admit to myself that a whisky, by the fire, would set me on my toes for the return trip, and his tone had a faintly insistent quality about it which made the offer difficult to refuse.

“Just a minute then—and thanks. You lead the way.”

I followed his lean, lithe figure up through the heather, which scratched at my ankles through my season socks. The path was obviously not well used and I imagined he spent his time in and around his croft, for even in the moonlight I could discern no other tracks incising the soft shape of the hill.

We reached his dwelling and he opened the wooden door, allowing me to enter first. Then, seating me in front of the fire, he poured me a generous whisky before sitting down himself. I listened to the wind, locked outside the timber and turf croft, and waited for him to speak.

He said, "John, isn't it? They told me on the radio."

"Yes—and you're Samual."

"Sam. You must call me Sam."

I told him I would and there was a period of silence while we regarded each other. Peat is not a consistent fuel, and tends to spurt and spit colorful plumes of flame as the gases escape, having been held prisoner from the seasons for God knows how long. Nevertheless, I was able to study my host in the brief periods of illumination that the fire afforded. He could have been any age, but I knew he was my senior by a great many years. The same thoughts must have been passing through his own head, for he remarked, "John, how old are you? I would guess at twenty."

"Nearer thirty, Sam. I was twenty-six last birthday." He nodded, saying that those who live a solitary life, away from others, have great difficulty in assessing the ages of people they do meet. Recent events slipped from his memory quite quickly, while the past seemed so close.

He leaned forward, into the hissing fire, as if drawing a breath from the ancient atmospheres it released into the room. Behind him, the earthen walls of the croft, held together by rough timbers and unhewn stones, seemed to move closer to his shoulder, as if ready to support his words with confirmation. I sensed a story coming. I recognized the pose from being in the company of sailors on long voyages and hoped he would finish before I had to leave.

"You're a good-looking boy," he said. "So was I, once upon a time." He paused to stir the flames and a blue-green cough from the peat illuminated his face. The skin was taut over the high cheekbones and there was a wanness to it, no doubt brought about by the inclement weather of the isles—the lack of sunshine and the constant misty rain that comes in as white veils from the north. Yes, he had been handsome—still was. I was surprised by his youthful features and suspected that he was not as old as he implied.

"A long time ago," he began, "when we had horse-drawn vehicles and things were different, in more ways than one..."

A sharp whistling note—the wind squeezing through two tightly packed logs in the croft—distracted me. Horse-drawn vehicles? What was this? A second-hand tale, surely? Yet he continued in the first person.

"... gas lighting in the streets. A different set of values. A different set of beliefs. We were more pagan then. Still had our roots buried in dark thoughts. Machines have changed all that. Those sort of pagan, mystical ideas can't share a world with machines. Unnatural beings can only exist close to the natural world and nature's been displaced.

Yes, a different world—different things to fear. I was afraid as a young man—the reasons may seem trivial to you, now, in your time. I was afraid of, well, getting into something I couldn't get out of. Woman trouble, for instance—especially one not of my class. You understand?

I got involved once. Must have been about your age, or maybe a bit younger since I'd only just finished my apprenticeship and was a journeyman at the time. Silversmith. You knew that? No, of course you didn't. A silversmith, and a good one too. My master trusted me with one of his three shops, which puffed my pride a bit, I don't mind telling you. Anyway, it happened that I was working late one evening, when I heard the basement doorbell jangle.

I had just finished lighting the gas lamps in the workshop at the back, so I hurried to the counter where a customer was waiting. She had left the door open and the sounds from the street were distracting, the basement of course being on a level with the cobbled road. Coaches were rumbling by and the noise of street urchins and flower sellers was fighting for attention with the foghorns from the river. As politely as I could, I went behind the customer and closed the door. Then I turned to her and said, “Yes madam? Can I be of service?”

She was wearing one of those large satin cloaks that only ladies of quality could afford and she threw back the hood to reveal one of the most beautiful faces I have ever seen in my life. There was a purity to her complexion that went deeper than her flawless skin, much deeper. And her eyes—how can I describe her eyes?—they were like black mirrors and you felt you could see the reflection of your own soul in them. Her hair was dark—coiled on her head—and it contrasted sharply with that complexion, pale as a winter moon, and soft, soft as the velvet I used for polishing the silver.

“Yes,” she replied. “You may be of service. You are the silversmith, are you not?”

“The journeyman, madam. I’m in charge of this shop.”

She seemed a little agitated, her fingers playing nervously with her reticule.

“I... ‘ she faltered, then continued. ”I have a rather unusual request. Are you able to keep a secret, silversmith?”

“My work is confidential, if the customer wishes it so. Is it some special design you require? Something to surprise a loved one with? I have some very fine filigree work here.” I removed a tray from beneath the counter. “There’s something for both the lady and the gentleman. A cigar case, perhaps? This one has a crest wrought into the case in fine silver wire—an eagle, as you can see. It has been fashioned especially for a particular customer, but I can do something similar if you require... ‘

I stopped talking because she was shaking her head and seemed to be getting impatient with me.

“Nothing like that. Something very personal. I want you to make me a collar—a silver collar. Is that possible?”

“All things are possible.” I smiled. “Given the time of course. A tore of some kind?”

“No, you misunderstand me.” A small frown marred the ivory forehead and she glanced anxiously towards the shop door. “Perhaps I made a mistake... ?

Worried, in case I lost her custom, I assured her that whatever was her request I should do my utmost to fulfill it. At the same time I told her that I could be trusted to keep the nature of the work to myself.

“No one shall know about this but the craftsman and the customer— you and I.”

She smiled at me then: a bewitching, spellbinding smile, and my heart melted within me. I would have done anything for her at that moment—I would have robbed my master—and I think she knew it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have realized I could trust you. You have a kind face. A gentle face. One should learn to trust in faces.

“I want you—I want you to make me a collar which will cover my whole neck, especially the throat. I have a picture here, of some savages in Africa. The women have metal bands around their necks which envelop them from shoulder to chin. I want you to encase me in a similar fashion, except with one single piece of silver, do you understand? And I want it to fit tightly, so that not even your...” She took my hand in her own small gloved fingers. “So that not even your little finger will be able to find its way beneath.”

I was, of course, extremely perturbed at such a request. I tried to explain to her that she would have to take the collar off quite frequently, or the skin beneath would become diseased. Her neck would certainly become very ugly.

“In any case, it will chafe and become quite sore. There will be constant irritation...”

She dropped my hand and said, no, I still misunderstood. The collar was to be worn permanently. She had no desire to remove it, once I had fashioned it around her neck. There was to be no locking device or anything of that sort. She wanted me to seal the metal.

“But?” I began, but she interrupted me in a firm voice.

“Silversmith, I have stated my request, my requirements. Will you carry out my wishes, or do I find another craftsman? I should be loath to do so, for I feel we have reached a level of understanding which might be difficult elsewhere. I’m going to be frank with you. This device, well—its purpose is protective. My husband-to-be is not—not like other men, but I love him just the same. I don’t wish to embarrass you with talk that’s not proper between strangers, and personal to my situation, but the collar is necessary to ensure my marriage is happy—a limited happiness. Limited to a lifetime. I’m sure you *must* understand now. If you want me to leave your shop, I shall do so, but I am appealing to you because you are young and must know the pain of love—unfulfilled love. You are a handsome man and I don’t doubt you have a young lady whom you adore. If she were suffering under some terrible affliction, a disease which you might contract from her, I’m sure it would make no difference to your feelings. You would strive to find a way in which you could live together, yet remain uncontaminated yourself. Am I right?”

I managed to breathe the word ‘Yes,’ but at the time I was filled with visions of horror. Visions of this beautiful young woman being wooed by some foul creature of the night—a supernatural beast that had no right to be treading on the same earth, let alone touching that sacred skin, kissing—my mind reeled—kissing those soft, moist lips with his monstrous mouth. How could she? Even the thought of it made me shudder in revulsion.

“Ah,” she smiled, knowingly. “You want to save me from him. You think he is ugly and that I’ve been hypnotized, somehow, into believing otherwise? You’re quite wrong. He’s handsome in a way that you’d surely understand—and sensitive, kind, gentle—those things a woman finds important. He’s also very cultured. His blood...”

I winced and took a step backward, but she was lost in some kind of reverie as she listed his attributes and I’m sure was unaware of my presence for some time.

“... his blood is unimpeachable, reaching back through a royal lineage to the most notable of European families. I love him, yet I do not want to become one of his kind, for that would destroy my love...”

“And—he loves you of course,” I said, daringly.

For a moment those bright eyes clouded over, but she replied, “In his way. It’s not important that we

both feel the same *kind of love*. We want to be together, to share our lives. I prefer him to any man I have ever met and I *will not* be deterred by an obstacle that's neither his fault, nor mine. A barrier that's been placed in our way by the injustice of nature. He can't help the way he is—and I want to go to him. That's all there is to it."

For a long time neither of us said anything. My throat felt too dry and constricted for words, and deep inside me I could feel something struggling, like a small creature fighting the folds of a net. The situation was beyond my comprehension: that is, I did not wish to allow it to enter my full understanding or I would have run screaming from the shop and made myself look foolish to my neighbors.

"Will you do it, silversmith?"

"But," I said, "a collar covers only the throat... I left the rest unsaid, but I was concerned that she was not protecting herself fully: the other parts of her anatomy—the wrists, the thighs.

She became very angry. "He isn't an *animal*. He's a gentleman. I'm merely guarding against—against moments of high passion. It's not just a matter of survival with him. The act is sensual and spiritual, as well as—as well as—what you're suggesting," there was a note of loathing in her tone, "is tantamount to rape."

She was so incensed that I did not dare say that her lover must have satisfied his needs *somewhere*, and therefore had compromised the manners and morals of a gentleman many times.

"Will you help me?" The eyes were pleading now. I tried to look out of the small, half-moon window, at the yellow-lighted streets, at the feet moving by on the pavement above, in an attempt to distract myself, but they were magnetic, those eyes, and they drew me back in less than a moment. I felt helpless—a trapped bird—in their unremitting gaze of anguish, and of course, I submitted.

I agreed. I just heard myself saying, "Yes," and led her into the back of the shop where I began the work. It was not a difficult task to actually fashion the collar, though the sealing of it was somewhat painful to her and had to be carried out in stages, which took us well into the night hours. I must have, subconsciously perhaps, continued to glance through the workshop door at the window, for she said once, very quietly, "He will not come here."

Such a beautiful throat she had too. Very long, and elegant. It seemed a sacrilege to encase such beauty in metal, though I made the collar as attractive as I made any silver ornament which might adorn a pretty woman. On the outside of the metal I engraved centripetal designs and at her request, some representational forms: Christ on the cross, immediately over her jugular vein, but also Zeus and Europa, and Zeus and Leda, with the Greek god in his bestial forms of the bull and the swan. I think she had been seduced by the thought that she was marrying some kind of deity.

When I had finished, she paid me and left. I watched her walk out, into the early morning mists, with a heavy guilt in my heart. What could I have done? I was just a common craftsman and had no right interfering in the lives of others. Perhaps I should have tried harder to dissuade her, but I doubt she would have listened to my impertinence for more than a few moments. Besides, I had, during those few short hours, fallen in love with her—utterly—and when she realized she had made a mistake, she would have to come back to me again, to have the collar removed.

I wanted desperately to see her again, though I knew that any chance of romance was impossible, hopeless. She was not of my class—or rather, I was not of hers, and her beauty was more than I could ever aspire to, though I knew myself to be a good-looking young man. Some had called *me* beautiful—it

was that kind of handsomeness that I had been blessed with, rather than the rugged sort.

But despite my physical advantages, I had nothing which would attract a lady of quality from her own kind. The most I could ever hope for—the very most—was perhaps to serve her in some way.

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Three weeks later she was back, looking somewhat distraught.

“I want it to come off,” she said. “It must be removed.”

My fingers trembled as I worked at cutting her free—a much simpler task than the previous one.

“You’ve left him,” I said. “Won’t he follow?”

“No, you’re quite wrong.” There was a haunted look to her eyes which chilled me to the bone. “It’s not that. I was too mistrustful. I love him too much to withhold from him the very thing he desires. I must give myself to him—wholly and completely. I need him, you see. And he needs me—yet like this I cannot give him the kind of love he has to have. I’ve been selfish. Very selfish. I must go to him... ‘

“Are you mad?” I cried, forgetting my position. “You’ll become like him—you’ll become—‘

“Howdare you! How dare you preach to me ? Just do your work, silversmith. Remove the collar!”

I was weak of course, as most of us are when confronted by a superior being. I cut the collar loose and put it aside. She rubbed her neck and complained loudly that flakes of skin were coming away in her hands.

“It’s ugly,” she said. “Scrawny. He’ll never want me like this.”

“No—thank God!” I cried, gathering my courage.

At that moment she looked me full in the eyes and a strange expression came over her face.

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you? That’s why you’re so concerned, silversmith. Oh dear, I am so dreadfully sorry. I thought you were just being meddlesome. It was genuine concern for my welfare and I didn’t recognize it at first. Dear man,” she touched my cheek. “Don’t look so sad. It cannot be, you know. You should find some nice girl and try to forget, because you’ll never see me again after tonight. And don’t worry about me. I know what I’m doing.”

With that, she gathered up her skirts and was gone again, down toward the river. The sun was just coming up, since she had arrived not long before the dawn, and I thought: At least she will have a few hours more of natural life.

After that I tried to follow her advice and put her out of my mind. I did my work, something I had always enjoyed, and rarely left the shop. I felt that if I could get over a few months without a change in my normal pattern of existence, I should be safe. There were nightmares of course, to be gone through after sunsets, but those I was able to cope with. I have always managed to keep my dreams at a respectable distance and not let them interfere with my normal activities.

Then, one day, as I was working on a pendant—a butterfly requested by a banker for his wife—a small

boy brought me a message. Though it was unsigned, I knew it was from her and my hands trembled as I read the words.

They simply said, "Come. I need you."

Underneath this request was scrawled an address, which I knew to be located down by one of the wharves, south of the river.

She needed me—and I knew exactly what for. I touched my throat. I wanted her too, but for different reasons. I did not have the courage that she had—the kind of sacrificial courage that's produced by an overwhelming love. But I was not without strength. If there was a chance, just a chance, that I could meet with her and come away unscathed, then I was prepared to accept the risk.

But I didn't see how that was possible. Her kind, as she had become, possessed a physical strength which would make any escape fraught with difficulty.

I had no illusions about her being in love with me—or even fond of me.

She wanted to use me for her own purposes, which were as far away from love as earth is from the stars. I remembered seeing deep gouges in the silver collar, the time she had come to have it removed. They were like the claw marks of some beast, incised into the trunk of a tree. No wonder she had asked to have it sealed. Whoever, *whatever*, had made those marks would have had the strength to tear away any hinges or lock. The frenzy to get at what lay beneath the silver must have been appalling to witness—*experience*—yet she had gone back to him, without the collar's protection.

I wanted her. I dreamed about having her, warm and close to me. That she had become something other than the beautiful woman who had entered my shop was no deterrent. I knew she would be just as lovely in her new form and I desired her above all things. For nights I lay awake, running different schemes over in my mind, trying to find a path which would allow us to make love together, just once, and yet let me walk away safely afterward. Even as I schemed, I saw her beauty laid before me, willingly, and my body and soul ached for her presence.

One chance. I had this one chance of loving a woman a dozen places above my station: a woman whose refined ways and manner of speech had captivated me from the moment I met her. A woman whose dignity, elegance, and gracefulness were without parallel. Whose form surpassed that of the finest silverwork figurine I had ever known.

I had to find a way.

Finally, I came up with a plan which seemed to suit my purposes, and taking my courage in both hands I wrote her a note which said, "I'm waiting for you. *You* must come *to me* ." I found an urchin to carry it for me and told him to put it through the letter box of the address she had given me.

That afternoon I visited the church and a purveyor of medical instruments.

That evening I spent wandering the streets, alternately praising myself for dreaming up such a clever plan and cursing myself for my foolhardiness in carrying it through. As I strolled through the backstreets, stepping around the gin-soaked drunks and tipping my hat to the factory girls as they hurried home from a sixteen-hour day in some garment manufacturer's sweatshop, or a hosiery, I realized that for once I had allowed my emotions to overrule my intellect. I'm not saying I was an intelligent young man—not above the average—but I was wise enough to know that there was great danger in what I proposed to do, yet

the force of my feelings was more powerful than fear. I could not deny them their expression. The heart has no reason, but its drive is stronger than sense dictates.

The barges on the river ploughed slowly against the current as I leaned on the wrought-iron balustrade overlooking the water. I could see the gas lamps reflected on the dark surface and thought about the shadow world that lived alongside our own, where nothing was rigid, set, but could be warped and twisted, like those lights in the water when the ripples from the barges passed through them. Would it take me and twist me into something, not ugly, but insubstantial? Into something that has the appearance of the real thing, but which is evanescent in the daylight and can only make its appearance at night, when vacuous shapes and phantasms take on a semblance of life and mock it with their unreal forms?

When the smell of the mud below me began to waft upward, as the tide retreated and the river diminished, I made my way homeward. There was a sharpness to the air which cut into my confidence and I was glad to be leaving it behind for the warmth and security of my rooms. Security? I laughed at myself, having voluntarily exposed my vulnerability.

She came.

There was a scratching at the casement windowpane in the early hours of the morning and I opened it and let her in. She had not changed. If anything, she was more beautiful than ever, with a paler color to her cheeks and a fuller red to her lips.

No words were exchanged between us. I lay on the bed naked and she joined me after removing her garments. She stroked my hair and the nape of my neck as I sank into her soft young body. I cannot describe the ecstasy. It was—*unearthly*. She allowed me—encouraged me—and the happiness of those moments was worth all the risks of entering Hell for a taste of Heaven.

Of course, the moment came when she lowered her head to the base of my throat. I felt the black coils of her hair against my cheek: smelled their sweet fragrance. I could sense the pulse in my neck, throbbing with blood. Her body was warm against mine—deliciously warm. I wanted her to stay there forever. There was just a hint of pain in my throat—a needleprick, no more, and then a feeling of drifting, floating on warm water, as if I had suddenly been transported to tropic seas and lay in the shallows of some sunbleached island's beaches. I felt no fear—only, *bliss* .

Then, suddenly, she snorted, springing to her feet like no athlete I have ever seen. Her eyes were blazing and she spat and hissed into my face.

“What have you done?” she shrieked.

Then the fear came, rushing to my heart. I cowered at the bedhead, pulling my legs up to my chest in an effort to get as far away from her as possible.

Again she cried, “What have you done?”

“Holy water,” I said. “I’ve injected holy water into my veins.”

She let out another wail which made my ears sing. Her hands reached for me and I saw those long nails, like talons, ready to slash at an artery, but the fear was gone from me. I just wanted her back in bed with me. I no longer cared for the consequences.

“Please?” I said, reaching for her. “Help me? I want you to help me.”

She withdrew from me then and sprang to the window. It was getting close to dawn: The first rays of the sun were sliding over the horizon.

“You fool,” she said, and then she was gone, out into the murk. I jumped up and looked for her through the window, but all I could see was the mist on the river, curling its way around the rotten stumps of an old jetty.

“Once I had recovered my common sense and was out of her influence, I remember thinking to myself that I would have to make a collar—a silver collar...”

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The fire spat in the grate and I jerked upright. I had no idea how long Sam had been talking but the peat was almost all ashes.

“The tide,” I said, alarmed. “I must leave.”

“I haven’t finished,” he complained, but I was already on my feet. I opened the door and began to walk quickly down the narrow path we had made through the heather, to where my boat lay, but even as I approached it, I could see that it was lying on its side in the slick, glinting mud.

Angry, I looked back at the croft on the hillside. He must have known. He must have known. I was about to march back and take Sam to task, when I suddenly saw the croft in a new perspective. It was like most dwellings of its kind—timber framed, with sods of earth filling the cracks, and stones holding down the turf on the roof. But it was a peculiar shape—more of a mound than the normal four walls and a roof—and was without windows.

My mind suddenly ran wild with frightening images of wood, earth, and rocks. The wooden coffin goes inside the earth and the headstone weights it down. A mound—a burial mound. *He hadn’t been able to stay away from her. The same trap that had caught her ...*

I turned back to the boat and tried dragging it across the moonlit mud, toward the distant water, but it was too heavy. I could only inch it along, and rapidly became tired. The muscles in my arms and legs screamed at me. All the time I labored, one side of my mind kept telling me not to be so foolish, while the other was equally insistent regarding the need to get away. I could hear myself repeating the words. *“He couldn’t stay away from her. He couldn’t stay away.”*

I had covered about six yards when I heard a voice at my shoulder—a soft, dry voice, full of concern.

“Here, John, let me help you...”

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Sam did help me that day, more than I wished him to. I don’t hate him for that, especially now that so many years have passed. Since then I have obtained this job, of night ferryman on the loch, helping young ladies like the one I have in the skiff with me now—a runaway, off to join her lover.

“Don’t worry,” I try to reassure her, after telling her my story, “we sailors are fond of our tales. Come and join me by the tiller. I’ll show you how to manage the boat. Do I frighten you? I don’t

mean to. I only want to help you...”

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Writers are so often asked where they get their ideas from and nine times out of ten I can't reply because I don't know myself. However, in this case I know exactly where it came from—my daughter's dream. A couple of nights before her wedding, Chantelle had a nightmare. She told me at breakfast the following morning that she dreamed she had discovered that Mark (her fiance) was a vampire and that she had to wear a silver collar on their wedding night. So the main ingredient of the story was handed to me on a platter, the credit going to prenuptial nerves.

This is my first story involving the vampire myth. I'm not so much interested in the idea of the creatures themselves as I am in why we need them. Why do we invent blood-sucking monsters to feed our fascination? The idea that blood is a sacred substance, with properties of determining nobility or peasantry, racial superiority or inferiority, criminality or decency, goes back a long way and is still with us in various forms. Blue blood, *bad* blood, red-blooded youths. A whole mythological web has been woven out of this ordinary red, viscous fluid, that is important to us, but no more so than our kidneys. Anybody fancy writing a kidney-eating monster story? Ah, you laugh?

I think we need vampires, not because they drain our lifeblood, but because they change us into someone else and give us the gift of immortality. To live forever—*nowthere*'s the rub.

Garry Kilworth