

FORBIDDEN BRIDES

OF THE
FACELESS
SLAVES

IN THE
SECRET
HOUSE

OF THE
NIGHT
OF
DREAD
DESIRE


NEIL
GAIMAN

SHANE
OAKLEY




SOMEWHERE IN THE NIGHT,
SOMEONE WAS WRITING.





Her feet scrunched the gravel as she ran, wildly, up the tree-lined drive. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her lungs felt as if they were bursting, heaving breath after breath of the cold night air.



Her eyes fixed on the house ahead, the single light in the topmost room drawing her toward it like a moth to a candle flame.

Above her, and away in the deep forest behind the house, night things whooped and skarked.



From the road behind her, she heard something scream briefly – a small animal that had been the victim of some beast of prey, she hoped, but could not be certain.



She ran as if the legions of hell were close on her heels, and spared not even a glance behind her until she reached the porch of the old mansion.

In the moon's pale light the white pillars seemed skeletal, like the bones of a great beast.



**KNOCK!
KNOCK!
KNOCK!**



PLEASE!
IF THERE'S SOMEONE HERE-- ANYONE-- PLEASE LET ME IN. I BESEECH YOU. I IMPORE YOU!



HELLO?



**WHO CALLS?
WHO KNOCKS? WHO CALLS, ON THIS NIGHT OF ALL NIGHTS?**



'TIS I, **AMELIA EARNSHAW**, RECENTLY ORPHANED AND NOW ON MY WAY TO TAKE UP A POSITION AS A GOVERNESS TO THE TWO SMALL CHILDREN--A BOY AND A GIRL--

--OF LORD **FALCONMERE**, WHOSE **CRUEL GLANCES** I FOUND, DURING OUR INTERVIEW IN HIS LONDON RESIDENCE, BOTH REPELLENT AND FASCINATING...

...BUT WHOSE **AQUILINE FACE** HAUNTS MY DREAMS.



AND WHAT DO YOU DO HERE, THEN, AT THIS HOUSE, ON THIS **NIGHT OF ALL NIGHTS**?

FALCONMERE CASTLE LIES A GOOD TWENTY LEAGUES FROM HERE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOORS.



THE COACHMAN--AN ILL-NATURED FELLOW, AND A MUTE, OR SO HE PRETENDED TO BE, FOR HE FORMED NO WORDS, BUT MADE HIS WISHES KNOWN ONLY BY **GRUNTS AND GOBBLINGS**--REINED IN HIS TEAM A MILE OR SO BACK DOWN THE ROAD, OR SO I JUDGE, AND THEN HE SHOWED ME BY GESTURES THAT HE WOULD GO NO FURTHER, AND THAT I WAS TO ALIGHT.

WHEN I DID REFUSE TO DO SO, HE **PUSHED** ME ROUGHLY FROM THE CARRIAGE TO THE COLD EARTH, THEN, **WHIPPING** THE POOR HORSES INTO A FRENZY, HE CLATTERED OFF THE WAY HE HAD COME, TAKING MY SEVERAL BAGS AND MY TRUNK WITH HIM.

I CALLED AFTER HIM, BUT HE DID NOT RETURN, AND IT SEEMED TO ME THAT A DEEPER **DARKNESS** STIRRED IN THE FOREST GLOOM BEHIND ME. I SAW THE LIGHT IN YOUR WINDOW AND I... I...

SOB!





