

Flesh was written for the fifth of Tara Moss's Literary Salons. It is based on *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a wonderful novel which was so far ahead of its time that it's still gripping today. (Its time, by the way, was 1896.)

This story was also inspired by Katurian's *The Tale of the Town on the River* (publication date unknown).

I'd like to dedicate *Flesh* to H.G. Wells – raving prophet, grandfather of a genre – and to Katurian K. Katurian, one of the greatest writers who never lived.

- Jack



Flesh

by Jack Heath

'Where were we?' Moreau asks.

I find myself unable to recollect exactly which stage of the process we were up to. This vivisection has been complex, to say the least; the laboratory is littered with so many bloodied instruments that I can scarcely recall which was last in the doctor's hands. But soon he says, 'Ah! The brain!' and picks up a gleaming bone-saw.

The beast on the operating table snuffles quietly. It is asleep, for the moment, and unaware of what is happening to it. One could be forgiven for thinking it human, it is so close to finished – the fangs have been filed away, the bones broken and reset into primate shapes, the fur shaved off and the skin cauterised so it won't return.

'Montgomery, the lantern. Bring it closer. Quickly, man!' I do so, and he begins to scrape the blade to and fro across the creature's milky skull.

Moreau is rarely so content as when he is working. I have oft wondered if his head is so full of regrets and nightmares that difficult tasks provide his only respite. But perhaps he simply misses England, and is happiest when working towards his triumphant return, with a perfect man sculpted from beast-flesh by his side.

A curious sound reaches my ears. A booming, a thumping, a pounding, as of distant drums. We sometimes hear the beast-men yelling as they move through the jungle – I wonder, can they have taken to music? But the wretched creatures can barely manage a knife and fork. My numerous attempts to civilise them have all been fruitless.

'Doctor, can you hear that?'

'What's that, you say?'

'Stop sawing, listen.'

He pauses, with reluctance, and then says, 'I hear nothing.' He continues his work.

Perhaps it is nothing. Perhaps I am going mad. I have been on this island for so long now that I rarely muse on life before it, and when I do, the details are foggy. Truly, the only events of which I am certain are the ones transcribed in my old diaries.

I very much look forward to going home. While I believe in the doctor's work, these long nights holding the lantern have bent my

spine until I can barely stand erect during the day.

The drums are louder now, so much so that I cannot believe that Moreau doesn't hear them, but nor can I believe that they are imagined. Suddenly I realise they are not drums at all, but the sound of a heartbeat. I once borrowed Moreau's stethoscope to examine one of the beast-people, and when I pressed the bell against its sternum, I heard similar sounds to those I'm hearing now.

But surely this beast's heart cannot be so swollen that its rhythm is audible to the naked ear? I lean closer, trying to determine the source of the noise.

'Damn it man,' Moreau barks, 'keep that lantern still!'

I return to my former stance and apologise, but I doubt he hears me. His brows are twisted in concentration as he traces a scalpel as fine as a quill across the yellow-grey flesh inside the creature's head, all the while muttering to himself.

'The brain,' he says. 'The brain is of utmost importance. Are there not men who look like animals, yet are welcomed by society because of their supreme intelligence? But a man who thinks like a beast is still a beast. And teaching them to be human does no good unless the teachings are permanent, unless the memory centres are strong enough to retain the information. I must stop them from reverting to animal form. I have succeeded everywhere but in the mind. More

flesh! I must graft more flesh to the hippocampus, here, and to the striatum, here . . . '

Limbs twitch as Moreau's knife gouges deeper. He is siphoning tissue from the creature's reflex lobes. The beast's claws are almost skeletal, most of the skin and muscle having been long since flayed from them; and yet they clench and unclench upon the table as if puppeteered.

The heartbeat is accelerating. Perhaps the anaesthetic is wearing off. But how can I hear it?

'It must believe itself to be a man,' Moreau says. 'And the conditioning must not fade this time. Flesh, more flesh!'

I've not heard Moreau speak of psychological conditioning before; he has always delegated the tuition of the beast-people to me.

'This time?' I ask.

He gives me no reply.

The creature on the table moans softly. The brain holds but a few pain sensors, ("nociceptors," the doctor calls them) so it must be pain from the other surgeries that penetrates the etherous haze.

With my free hand, I reach for my ear, thinking to plug it with my finger and shut out half of this strange din – but something stops me. There is an unfamiliar lump on my ear, behind the helix, just above the anti-helical fold. At first I assume a mosquito has made a meal of

me – those infernal things are always buzzing about my ears when I try to rest at night – but the lump is too hard for that, almost as if some additional cartilage has sprouted beneath the skin.

All of a sudden, I realise it's not that the heart beats louder. My hearing has improved.

Ice filling my chest, I ask, 'Moreau – what have you done to me?'
Again, he says nothing.

It cannot be. I think of my failing memory. The way my back only feels natural in a hunch. The handwriting in my old diaries has always seemed queer to me – is it mine? Or Moreau's?

It must believe itself to be a man, he had said.

Louder, I demand, 'What have you done to me?'

He says, 'Sadly, nothing permanent.'

The lantern falls from my hand. The glass shatters, and flaming paraffin spills across the floor. Moreau whirls around, brandishing the scalpel. Drips of brain matter fall upon the tiles.

'Useless swine! See what you've done?'

'Swine, am I?' I shout. 'Or dog, or chimp, or horse? What was I before you bound me to this table? What am I now becoming?'

'There'd be little use telling you,' he says. 'You'd not remember only days from now. Indeed, you'll soon forget this whole discussion.'

I have no home, I realise. I have never been to England. My life

before this island was nothing more than a dream, and someone else's at that.

The beast opens its eyes, the pupils shrinking to slits. Thick hind legs kick at the fetters that imprison them, and an agonised roar fills the laboratory.

Moreau runs to the other end of the table, grabbing the creature's skinless ankles, holding them down. 'Don't just stand there,' he yells. 'Help me! Get the tranquilliser!'

Ignoring his cries, ignoring the howling of the creature, ignoring the flames which dance about my feet, I turn to the door. I can hear the beast-men hooting and grunting in the distance.

'Montgomery!' Moreau exclaims. 'Where the devil are you going?'

'To be with my people,' I say, before I disappear into the night.