

## The Howling Beast – Noel Vindry (trans John Pugmire)

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It's March in Paris and M. Allou the magistrate is at the start of his holiday. One thing he hadn't bargained on was buying lunch for Pierre Herry, a man on the run from the police for two murders committed in such seemingly impossible circumstances that even Herry doubts his own innocence.

Four years ago Herry had been staying with the Comte Robert de Saint-Luce. The two had met while big game hunting in India when Herry had saved Saint-Luce from being killed by a tiger. Also staying with Saint-Luce is the morose Serbian, Carlovitch, an engineer, and his wife Sonia, a *femme fatale* type, although we have to take this on trust as her character is slightly underdeveloped. Pierre is immediately attracted to her and Saint-Luce wants to make her his mistress. One night Pierre is subjected to a violent attack in his bedroom, he fights off his assailant and, hearing Saint-Luce cry for help, finds his friend wounded. As Carlovitch has gone missing it's assumed that he perpetrated the attacks in a fit of insane jealousy and has run away, leaving his wife behind. The police are not called in because this is an affair best settled between gentlemen, as Robert puts it. But is that the whole story? What of the mysterious howling that Pierre heard in the depths of the night?

We come now to the present day. Pierre is once again staying with Robert who is now living with Sonia; living in fear. In Robert's library is a sacred statue that he stole from a Hindu sect in India some years before. Now he's been receiving notes demanding its return or face death. One note reads "*When the beast howls for the third time, you will die.*" The beast has already howled once. There's a problem though: despite Robert's home being inaccessible to outsiders the statuette has vanished, he has nothing to bargain with. It's time to settle down for a siege.

The parallels with **The Moonstone** and other Victorian sensation novels are obvious here, and the book mixes this with an impossible crime to good effect. There is also an atmosphere of a dark fairy tale. Saint-Luce's home is an isolated castle with a moat, set among a gloomy forest which is surrounded by a high wall, and in turn surrounded by barren moorland. The plot shares a few elements with Vindry's earlier novel **The House That Kill** but here they are handled more skilfully; structurally and as a puzzle this is a great advance. The murders come late in the story which builds up an ever increasing sense of dread. Allou only kicks into action near the end, having spent most of the time listening to Pierre's tale, but when he does he takes decisive steps to apply logic and common sense to unravel the mystery. All in all this is a most entertaining book and one well worth your time.