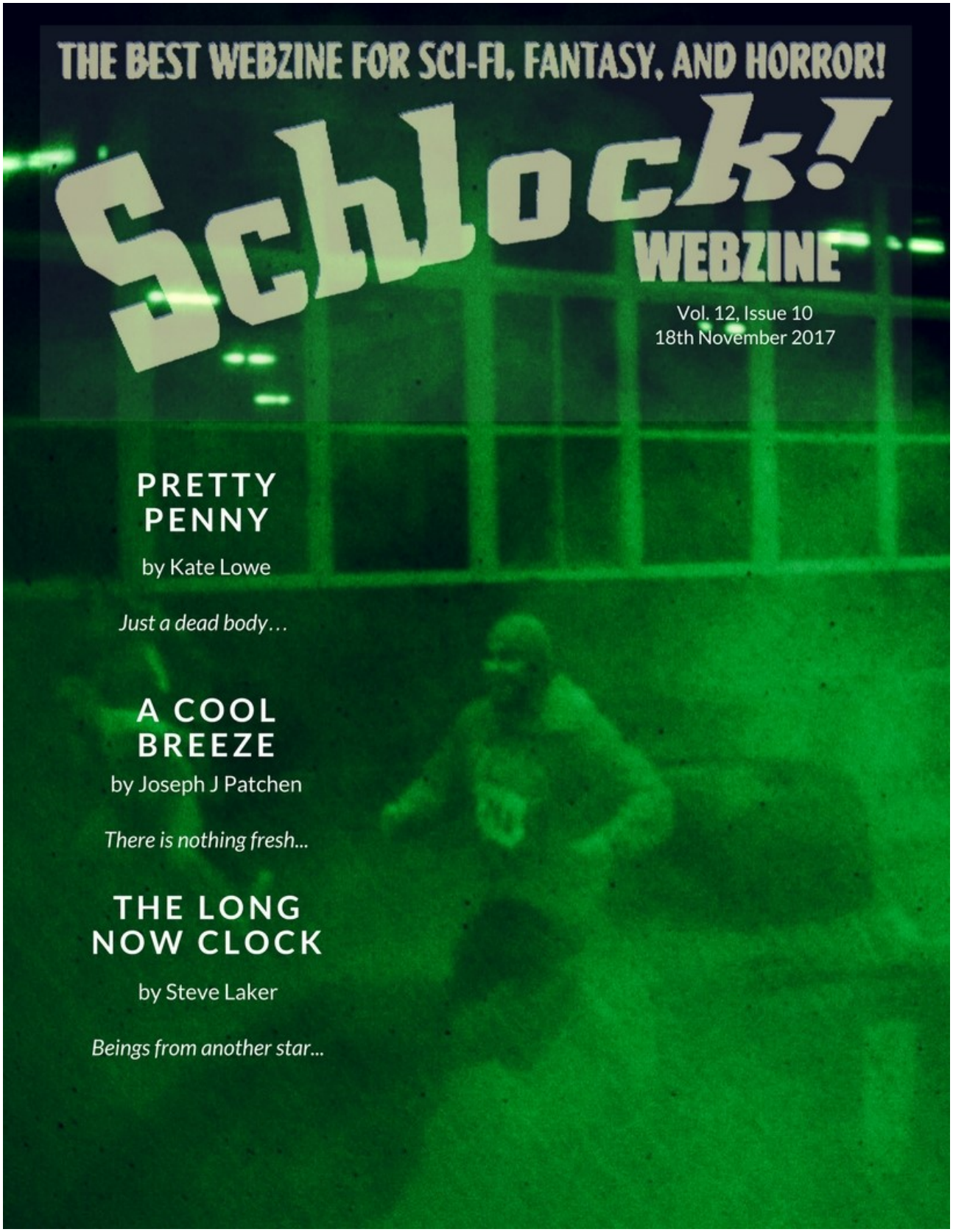
THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!
Schlock!
WEBZINE
Vol. 12, Issue 10
18th November 2017
PRETTY PENNY
by Kate Lowe
Just a dead body…
A COOL BREEZE
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There is nothing fresh...
THE LONG NOW CLOCK
by Steve Laker
Beings from another star...

# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE
Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 12, Issue 10
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL

EDITORIAL

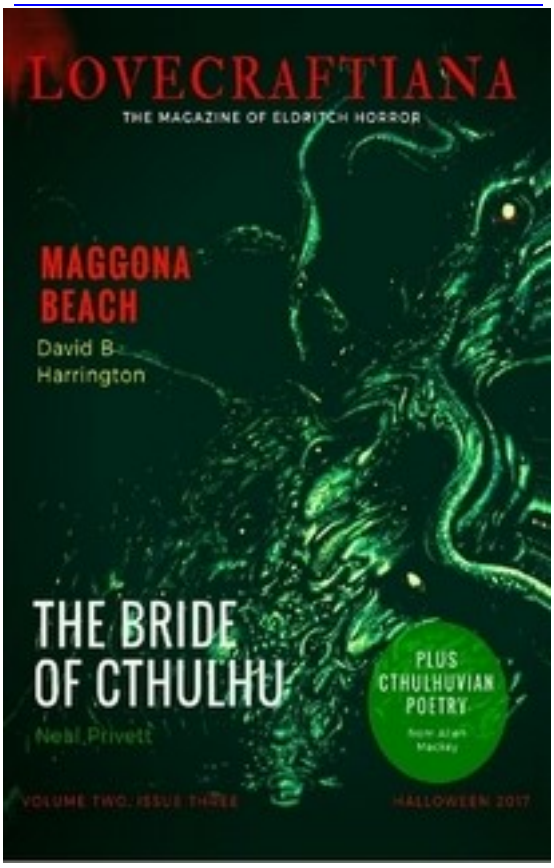
This week, a boy meets a girl amid an apocalyptic wasteland. The sun sets in the east. A driving lesson leads Saria down the road of vengeance. And the Long Now Clock is ticking.

Lovecraft surveys supernatural literature in 19th century Europe. The adventurers learn the long absent king is coming to a divided land. Carter Ward tends to the wounds of a friend. And on *The Mysterious Island*, in the penultimate installment of this Jules Verne classic, the sky is ablaze.

—Gavin Chappell

*Now Available from Rogue Planet Press:*

Lovecraftiana Halloween 2017

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PRETTY PENNY by Kate Lowe

“It’s just a dead body,” I tell her. “It’s not going to hurt you.”

But Penny recoils from the bloated, stinking, putrefied cadaver, as anyone would’ve in the days before the Scourge, and trips on the upturned corner of a bloodstained rug. She lands with a thud, but the carpet has muffled it enough that I don’t need to worry about drawing the attention of the wrong kinds of people.

So Penny is clumsy—I make a note to watch for that. She’s also fourteen, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, and, until yesterday, alone in the world.

I found her in the ruins of a burnt-out pile in the suburbs. I don’t normally scavenge so far from the city, but most of what’s left is already picked over, what’s valuable taken, and the rest either burned or decayed beyond use.

All of Penny’s family are dead, so she tells me. I don’t know what she did with the bodies—didn’t ask—just told her I could take her somewhere safe.

I wrestle the watch from the wrist of the dead woman’s hand and pocket the timepiece, which is gold, but that isn’t why I take it. The price of things post-Scourge isn’t measured by the calibre of metal or the cut of the jewel or the value of the notes and the coins in your pocket. Worth is a fluid thing, determined by supply and demand, and the Hawkers set the prices accordingly. I don’t know if they’ll trade me for the watch, but that’s okay; I have other wares to sell them.

I loot the cadaver for the buttons of her shirt, which I pick from the fabric with a penknife. Penny’s blue eyes regard the knife as she stands, and I know that she’s looking at the rust-coloured stains on the blade, forming theories. “Dog pelts,” I tell her, nipping buttons—plink-plink. “Fetch a haul in the city. You can stitch them together, make a blanket. A lot of folk died from the cold last winter. A lot of folk planning on surviving the next one.”

“You mean you skinned a dog?”

“Dogs,” I correct her. “The big ones, anyhow. Sheep are good too, if you can find them. Most already dead, though. Butchered for the meat.”

Penny’s nose wrinkles and she looks towards the door. “Can we go now? I’m hungry. You said that there was food in the city, right?”

I grunt, and she nods, and that’s the end of it. There is food in the city, but maybe not the kind of food that Penny’s used to eating.

Back on the road she gets chatty, telling me how life was for her before it happened. She talks about boarding school and ponies and lacrosse, and I nod as though I understand, wondering if her tears are born of loss, or the smoke from the corpse pyres burning out west.

She’s wiping at her eyes when she catches her foot on a tree root erupting through the tarmac. I reach out to catch her too late. She falls, and I curse myself for not paying closer attention to the girl in a world she wasn’t made for.

She shows me her palms, which are grazed. Holds them out like a toddler to a parent.

“It’s nothing,” I tell her. “You’re fine. Get up.”

She stands, eyes glistening. “But I think I cut my knee.”

She pulls at the tear in her leggings, thin cotton, insubstantial. I stoop to inspect it and yes, there’s a graze to her knee, beads of gravel still embedded in the wound. “It’s fine,” I say again.

Which it is. Just a knee, superficial and unlikely to scar.

Thank God she didn’t land on her face.

“Are there doctors in the city?” Penny asks me.

I frown at her. “You don’t need a doctor.”

“I know but… are there? And schools?”

I shrug. “There’s education if you want it, same as there are doctors. I don’t think there’s lacrosse though.”

She nods, and we pass the next mile or two in silence.

“You haven’t said very much about yourself,” Penny offers.

“No,” I say, and hope she leaves it there.

Which she doesn’t.

“Why’d you take the buttons from that lady back there? I mean, I get the watch—it must be worth something—but a handful of buttons?”

I wish she hadn’t asked that. I don’t want to spook her. “All things have a price in the city,” I tell her.

Watches, buttons.

Other things.

The sign for the city looms ahead. Flanking us, the carcasses of what were once houses with families stand silent and seemingly empty. Penny is heedless, trusting in me to keep her safe, which is why she doesn’t hear the subtle click of weapons readied, or notice how the shadows shift beyond the glassless windows. I think about the hands that are holding those weapons, the eyes behind the sights and the men that are watching the city’s new arrival.

“Penny,” I say, although I don’t know what I’m doing. I point out the laces in her trainers, grubby grey. “Can I have those?”

She glares at me, affronted. I choose not to mention I could take them if I wanted and tell her that I only want to borrow them.

“Why?”

I hold out a hand and say, “Trust me.”

Penny must decide that she does, or at least that she doesn’t have a choice, and stoops and draws the laces from her trainers. I take them and tie them together, but she watches, inquisitive, perhaps a little wary, so I point up ahead and say, “See? The city gates.”

Whilst she isn’t looking, I finish what I’m doing and hand the laces back to her, screwed into a ball so she won’t know what I’ve done. “Here,” I say. “But hide them. Somewhere safe.”

And this time, for the first time, but certainly not the last for her, I think she finally gets it. “All things have a price in the city,” she tells me.

I nod and watch her tuck the knotted laces in her sock. As hiding places go it’s not the best, and I almost point this out to her, but then I hear the claxon and we both stop and stare as the storey-high gates to the city swing open.

A Hawker makes a gesture with his gun: come on in. He smiles at me with yellowed teeth, turns that smile on Penny, who falters. I nudge her in the back: go ahead, go on in. She looks at me, hesitant. “It’s fine,” I say, “go on.”

We step into the city and the Hawkers close the gates. It’s muddy underfoot and the air stinks of too many people lodged in too small a space: wood smoke and corpse smoke and excrement and rot. Curious gazes on dirt-streaked faces eye Penny like a toy in a shop, and Penny eyes them back, and I can see that she’s afraid now.

I point towards a door with a mesh panel screen across the grime-crusted glass and tell Penny to go in. The sign above the door reads ‘Pawn Shop’ but somebody half-painted over it, and now it reads ‘Arrivals’.

Which is pretty much the same thing these days.

“Go on,” I say. “I’ll meet you back out here.”

“I don’t want to,” Penny says, but she doesn’t have a choice now. All Penny has is a price, which I go to collect from the hatch around the back.

But I’m stopped by a Hawker before I can make it. “Hey kid. You find her?”

I dig out the harvested buttons and offer them up to him. He takes them and throws them in a jar by the door. It’s a big jar. Holds a lot of buttons.

“You teach her a lesson for running away, kid?”

I shake my head no. “She was already dead. Self-inflicted.”

“Hanger?”

I nod, and he snorts. “Ah well. Saved you a job.”

I don’t bother answering. Go around back to the hatch, where I wait.

Eventually it opens. A Hawker peers down at me, leering a smile I don’t return. “Any more?” In the background, I hear a girl sobbing.

I take out the watch and hand it over. He inspects it. Grunts. Throws it in a basket full of obsolete trinkets, then hands me a hessian sack of cured meat. I can tell by the weight that she fetched a good price. I can tell by the large letter ‘H’ on the sack it wasn’t quite good enough to afford me the mutton that the Hawkers get to eat.

Well, no matter. It’s food, and my hunger doesn’t care for specifics.

I’m leaving with my dues when the Hawker from Arrivals shouts over. “Hey, kid!”

I turn around to find that he’s standing in the doorway, holding up the noose that I made from Penny’s laces. “Nice try, kid. Do something like this again, we’ll find another use for you.”

I scowl at him and say, “I’m not a kid.”

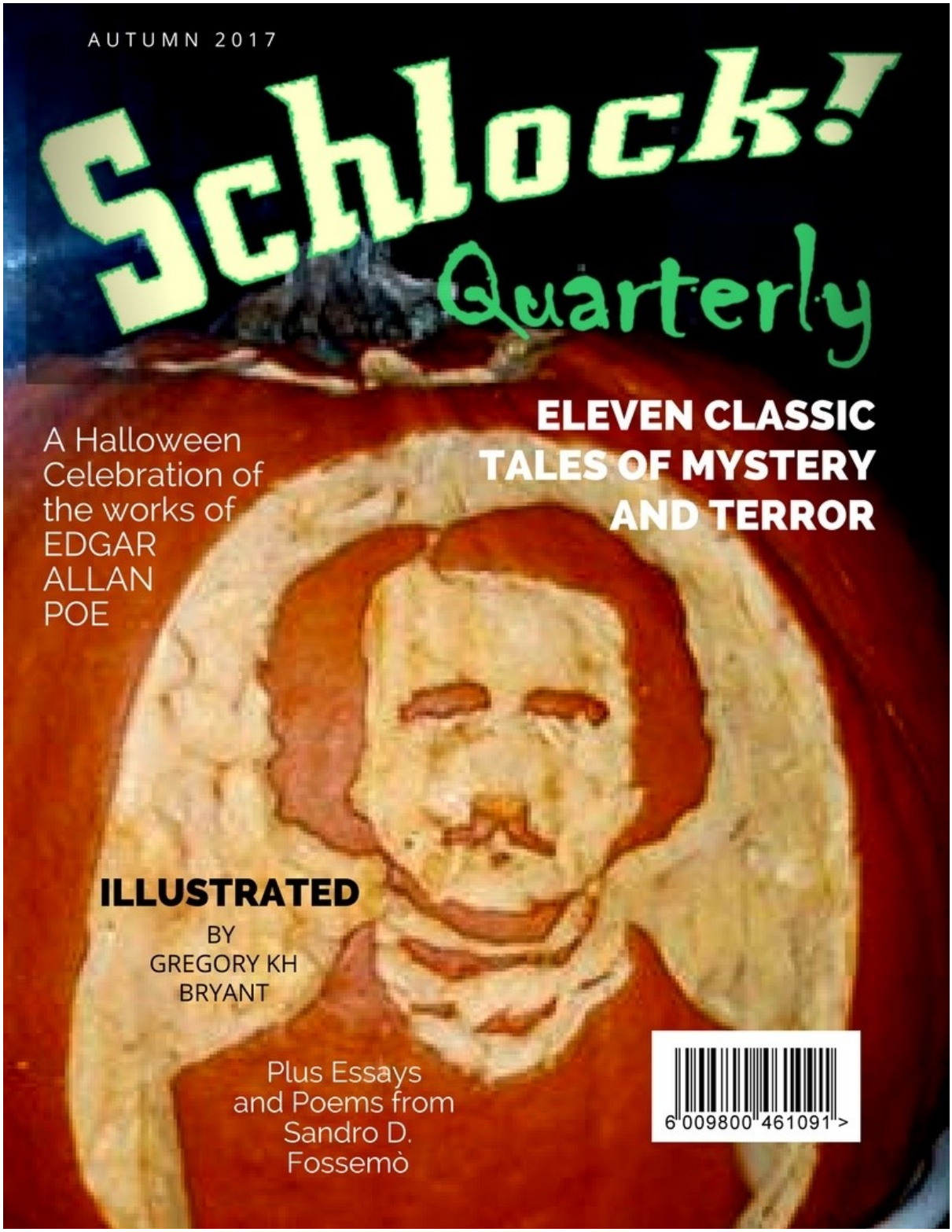
But he laughs and says, “What are you? Like, twelve?”

Not even. But I’m tall for my age so I don’t put him straight. Like Penny, boys my age have a use here.

Because all things have a price in the city.

THE END

Available from Rogue Planet Press

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A COOL BREEZE by Joseph J Patchen

The ground doesn't seem as wet as it should. Not for the nine inches of rain fallen in a single day. Not for the continuing rushes of displaced water from the rivers and sewers and lakes; flash flooding that uprooted trees, fences, and street signs before knocking down doors and walls. Not for the sustained soaking that drove many from their homes and lives.

In spots the soil seems dry and powdery; almost barren as if a victim to a drought. The grass seems to have been replaced by splintering straw.

But only in spots; sporadic spots of various sizes and shapes.

The air doesn't seem as clean as it should. There is nothing fresh. There is nothing vibrant or colourful. There is a stench of staleness that is all encompassing. There is a wisp of rot every few feet or so.

Despite October's chill; there is an undercurrent of heat; a thread, sustained and not at all comforting. There is a feeling that the vast area around is closing in.

The sun is sinking but not in the west. It is setting from whence it came and it is only noon.

I could tell you of the silence here; but there is none. Birds are chirping; wings carrying bugs are amplified and the moaning is deafening.

The breeze cools as an even cooler rain falls. Mists rise on those barren places; those dry spots begin to display forms. Out of the dry earth and empty husks rise outlines of bodies, transparent shapes of the dead and dying with clothes torn and flesh slashed open.

Limbs display bone whether attached to a body or simply torn free. Blood runs, much like the water from the sky or the tears from a phantom's face.

I don't know these people. Some are old, some are young; races and genders are mixed.

I don't know this place. I am not even sure I am in my own town as I walk along this small open space in the middle of tall and aging trees. The grass is maintained. There are no wildflowers or loose leaves.

None of this seems natural. But it does seem disturbing.

The wails of these ghosts transforming into physical form become louder…

I am beginning to understand. I now believe what my lifelong atheism attempted to hide. I am dead. I am dead, I am dead and I don't know why. I am dead walking among others so similarly dead and who wail in denial and disbelief.

Confusion and panic are mixed with their pain and distress, as is mine. I am dead and understand that my demise had to have been sudden. I am dead and with others so similarly afflicted.

I walk in purgatory.

“You are correct.” The voice is strong but old. The voice seemingly comes from everywhere with a commanding omniscient authority and knowledge.

Good. Perhaps some answers. I need answers. Why? Why before my time? Was it a stroke? Was it a heart attack? Could it have been an accident? I have no memory, no hint. Why have I been ripped from my wife and children with no warning? I never had a chance to say goodbye or put my affairs in order. Please answer me, please.

“You were murdered.”

“Murdered? By whom and by the way, who are you?”

It does not come.

Answer me. Why do you leave me now? Answer me.

It becomes my own wail, over and over, similar to the wails of the others. It becomes my own mantra, my own cry of pain. I am only thirty-two years old and I have lost everything. Why? Why me? What have I done to bring this karma about?

I know things were not perfect in the marriage. I know we had our problems like every married couple. I know I disappointed her in so many ways; she expected so much more and I was beginning to change things…

A great shiver surrounds and enters my body tumbling down from my brow and spreading through to my toes. A great icy cold seizes my muscles and bones riveting me to the spot I am standing on. I can’t move. My walk is halted.

“Your wife says you have drowned in a tragic accident.”

The voice whispers in my ear. I can’t turn my head but I feel a warm breath on my neck and the side of my face.

“Her lover, a fireman, fished your body out downriver from your home.” Beads of sweat form from my eyebrows. My heart pounds as I grow weak.

“I was murdered.”

The voice whispers again. “Her lover fished you out of the river.”

The rain falls harder. The drops stab as pins pricking my flesh, they pierce with each strike. Each is sharper and colder, sharper and colder. Between the cold, the news, it is all freezing me in place, riveting me to this spot.

“There will be no service. The widow is telling everyone, including a news crew, she is too distraught. She is leaving the children with her mother for a couple of weeks and is heading north with a friend to a cabin in the woods to grieve in private.”

A cabin; I have never owned…yeah…

Truly alone, I am so truly alone. Vilified…Truly alone, vilified. That is how I lived in this marriage, even with my children. Forgotten…The authorities, my family won't challenge…I am cast aside…even by my own children…

Yeah. It makes sense. 'Why don't you work harder? I want a new house. I want a new car. You are not making enough…'

Yeah. 'Look at the body he has. He works so hard in his yard.'

There will be no service. The widow is heading north with a friend…played…Played for all these years…sure…I wonder now if they are even mine…

I will find them. Time is on my side. They can do nothing more to me. I am less than a footnote. I will find them and they shall see.

The wails of the lost souls muffle as the sun falls. The night comes bringing a sense of vigour in the form of a bright wide moon. Coursing through my veins as a hunger I have never before felt.

I have finally found my life's purpose. I finally understand why I am here and what it is I must do.

In their dreams each night after they relax from their celebration of debauchery and treachery I will creep in their thoughts uncontrolled. I will appear in their vision, just out of sight, just out of reach. I will inhabit their shadows and each breeze that swarms about them.

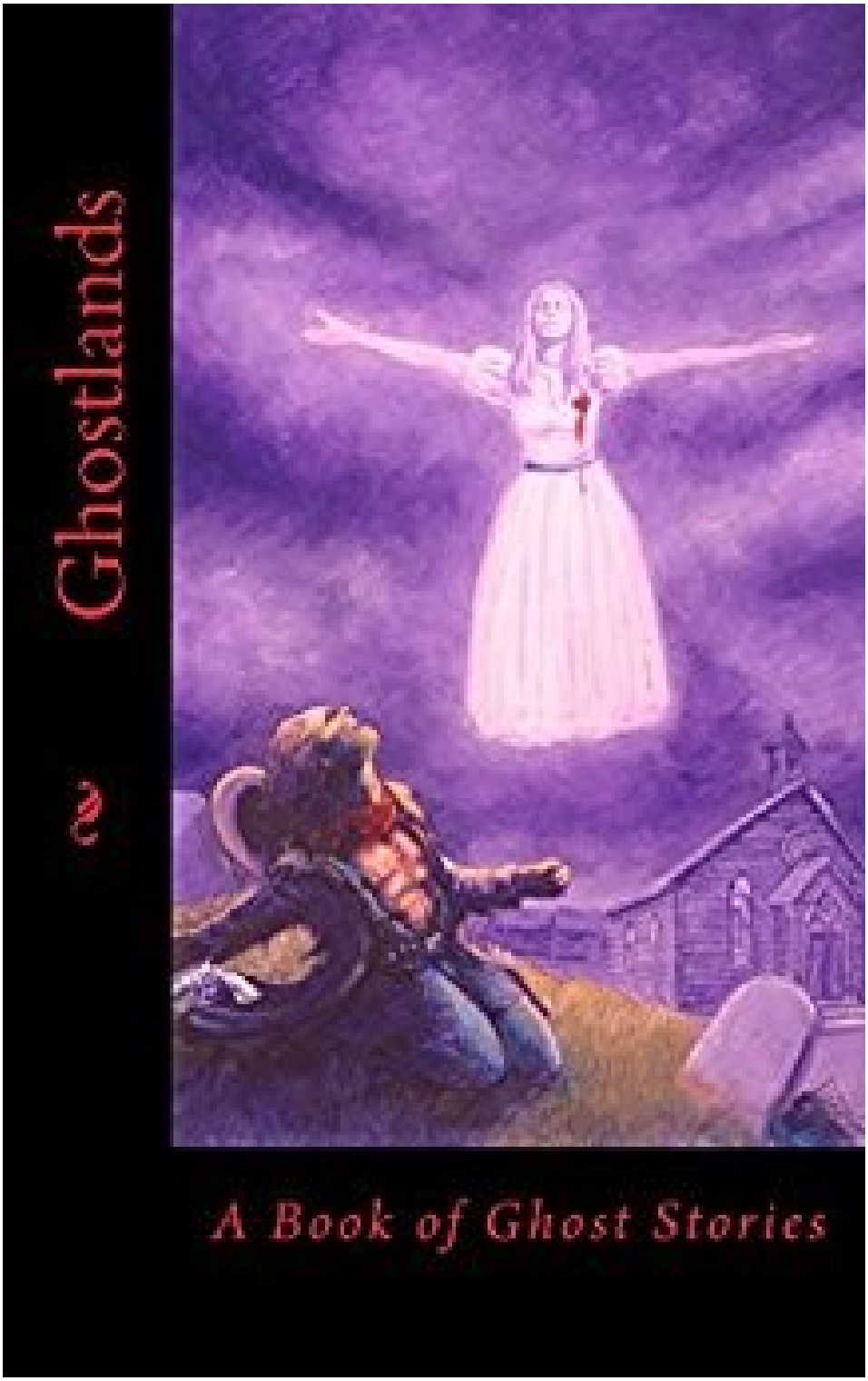
Each night and soon day I will be amongst them for the torture they have earned.

My darling bride, the love of my young life your hate will be mirrored in my new existence. No one around you will be safe and each will be a standing lesson for you until we meet again for one final embrace.

Be sure I am completely at rest when you place me in that tomb. You better be sure it is sealed oh so tight because I won't stay still in that room. The darkness of death, the absence of light doesn't still my life. I shall roam this earth each day and night to nourish myself on you and your kind.

THE END

Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands

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THE DRIVING LESSON by Steven Havelock

The phone was answered on the fifth ring.

“Hello, is that *You Drive* driving school?”

“Yes. What can I do for you?”

“I need a driving lesson,” said Saria.

“Okay, not a problem. When would you like to book for?”

“Next Friday, the 16th July, but I need a motorway lesson.”

“Have you passed?”

“Yes, I passed twenty two years ago but have never driven on the motorway, so I would like a lesson to practice my motorway driving.”

“Hmmm…. We don’t normally do motorway lessons but I will ask Simon and get back to you.”

Later that night Saria sat on her sofa with a glass of wine in one hand, staring morosely at the photos she held in the other.

*My makeup is ruined but I don’t care…I don’t care about anything anymore…David…Oh David….*

The next day Saria was at home staring at the photos again.

*I’m so sad. All I do is stare at these photos all day.*

Saria’s mobile rang.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Saria, it’s Clare from *You Drive* driving. We booked your motorway lesson with Simon for next Friday 16th like you asked.”

“Thank you…Thank you so much.”

Saria ended the call. *My head is spinning…I feel so dizzy.*

She burst into tears…

*David…*

The next day at 2pm Saria was still in bed as the afternoon sun tried to make its way through her curtains. Saria's phone rang. Looking at the screen she saw it was her elderly mother calling.

"Hello...Saria?"

"Hi mum."

"How are you? Are you alright? Just that you haven't called for three days?"

"Sorry mum, I've been really busy with work." A fake happy voice.

"How's dad?"

"He's just in the garden messing with his tomato plants."

"Mum, I got a lot of work on that I need to get done. Will call you later."

"Oh…Are you sure you are okay? "

"Yes mum, I'm fine."

"How's David?"

"He's fine. mum…He's just fine. Got to go mum, speak soon."

Saria ended the call and burst into tears. She started to think again about her and David like she had done for the last three weeks.

*I remember when I first met David. His dark black hair and boyish charm swept me off my feet.*

She looked at the photos she had next to her. She stared at the man in the picture, his blond hair gleaming.

*He's kissing…kissing…*

The first time she'd seen the photos of the two figures in the picture she hadn't noticed the similarities.

*Oh, David…*

*My marriage to David was the happiest day of my life. Now…Now…This…I suspected something wasn't right, ever since David left me the note on the kitchen table. A note…A piece of flipping paper…Which said…no, I can't bear to think about it…it cuts too deep…The pain…The pain is unbearable…*

A plan had been forming in Saria's mind ever since the private gave her the photos.

Eventually the day of the lesson dawned. *Today's the day.* She saw the *You Drive* car pull up in front of her house.

Saria went to her goldfish tank.

"Bye Mickey…Bye Mouse…" she said to her two goldfish. She knew this would be the last time she would see them.

She switched the oxygen pump off from the mains and blew the fish a soft sad kiss. *David bought me those fish…and I loved them the way I loved David…*

She stared at them a moment longer. *Okay, let's do this.*

She went to the kitchen and picked up a knife. A fetid rotting smell drifted in from the open kitchen window.

"God…You're one of the best drivers I've seen. You sure you need motorway lessons?" asked Simon.

"I need this lesson."

"Okay, just pull up on the left here and we will fill up."

Saria did as instructed, and Simon got out to put some petrol in the small new Fiesta.

*Today's the day…*She sat staring into nothing, thinking about her life. A tear slid down her right cheek, she wiped it quickly. A few seconds later Simon was back. "Okay. Just follow the Satnav, and we will be fine."

Two hours later they were speeding along the motorway at 70 miles an hour.

"When I said you were a good driver, I wasn't wrong."

Saria looked at the time and date on the dashboard. Friday 16 July: 2:00

*I remember…I met David on Friday 16 at the office where I worked. Today's the day*, she thought again.

"I met my husband today exactly four years ago."

"Oh…Okay."

"Reach to the back seat and pull out that folder I brought with me."

Simon seemed a little bemused but did so. He opened the folder. "Jonathan?!"

“Lady, why have you got pictures of my new boyfriend Jonathan?” asked Simon, staring at the blond hair and boyish features.

“My husband’s name was David and he had dark black hair.” She continued. “I wondered why David would leave me.” She said it like she was talking to herself, doing nothing more than describing the weather.

Simon sat waiting to hear more. A confused expression on his face turned to fear as Saria put her foot down. The car went to 80…90…100…

Sarai started spinning the wheel and snaking in and out of traffic. “Lady, are you crazy?! Slow down!” Simon slammed his foot down on the brake on his side of the specially fitted car.

Saria had prepared and anticipated. She pulled out a kitchen knife from under her blouse and stabbed Simon in his knee cap.

110…120…

“When I first saw the pictures I didn’t recognise David!” Saria shouted over the noise of the car engine and Simon’s screams.

“What? Why?”

“I didn’t recognise him at first. Then I realised he was wearing a wig!”

130…140…

“Why would he leave me? We were so happy together. We were planning to have a baby!”

150…

The car engine squealed even louder. Smoke was coming out of the front bonnet.

“You asshole! You snatched him from me!”

Saria thought of her elderly mother again. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She remembered the last time she had seen David, decapitated; lying motionless and dead in her garden shed.

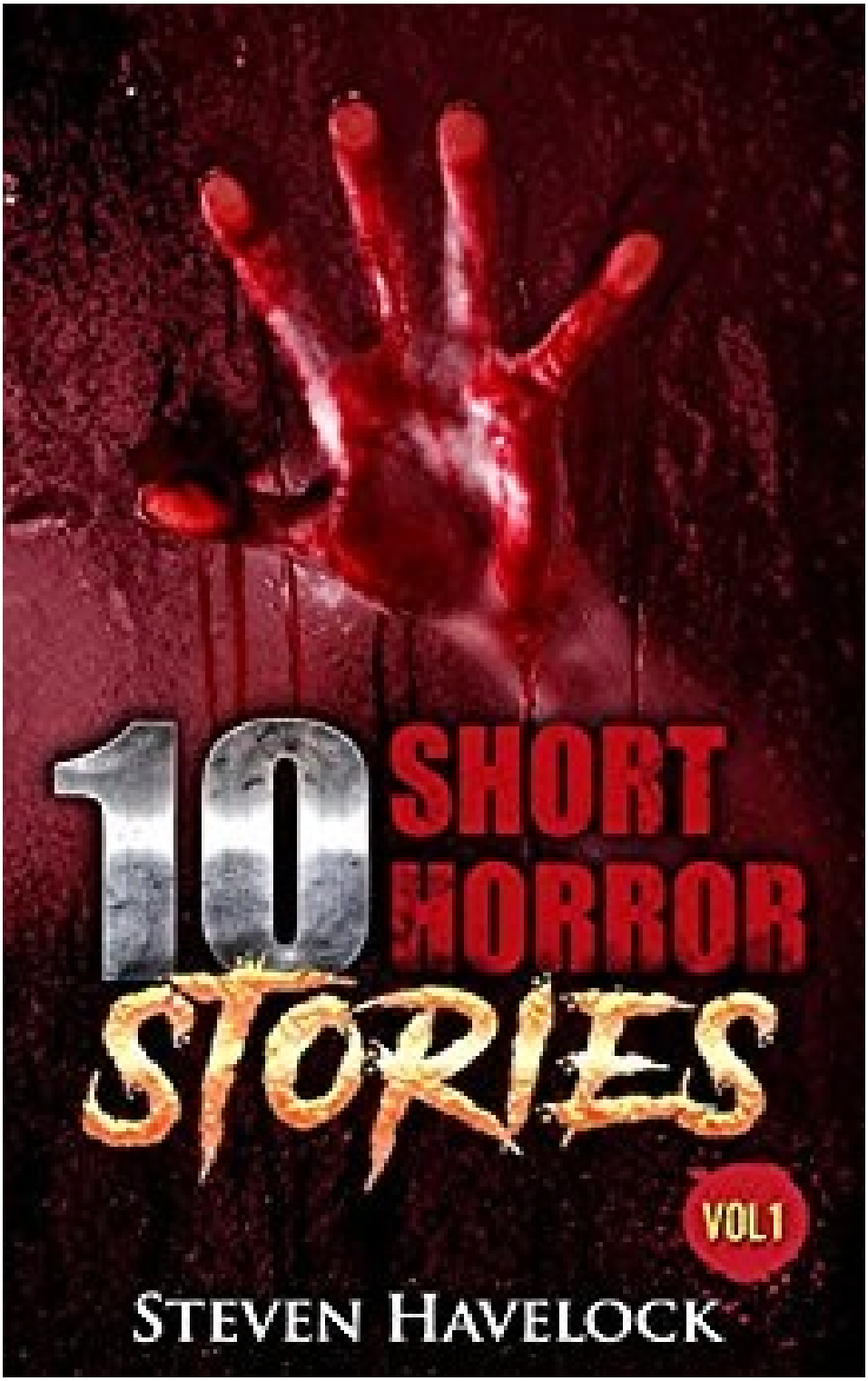
“Please! Please, lady, slow down!”

“See you in hell!”

Saria spun the wheel to the left and slammed into a large lorry.

THE END

Steven Havelock’s books are available from Amazon.

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THE LONG NOW CLOCK by Steve Laker

What might humanity do, if we knew there was an impending encounter with beings from another star? Would factions put their differences on hold and unite in addressing the visitors, or might mankind destroy itself before these sentinels even made contact? Because one day, our own sun will rise, and for the first time we know of, we're not alone.

Ever since our technology allowed us to communicate with each other over distances, we've been advertising our presence. If something's coming, it's too late to stop whatever it is. Anything seeking us could have any number of reasons, some of which we can't comprehend. Everything can change, suddenly and for ever, and it's inevitable that it will. This is science fiction for only so long, when that could be millennia or seconds.

Neither the optimist nor the pessimist can effect the outcome, but the optimist is the happier of the two. Meanwhile, the Long Now Clock ticked.

The Long Now Foundation built the clock of the long now to keep time for 10,000 years. In the words of Stewart Brand, a founding board member of the foundation, "Such a clock, if sufficiently impressive and well-engineered, would embody deep time for people. It should be charismatic to visit, interesting to think about, and famous enough to become iconic in the public discourse. Ideally, it would do for thinking about time what the photographs of Earth from space have done for thinking about the environment. Such icons reframe the way people think."

Danny Hillis, the designer of the clock, said, "I want to build a clock that ticks once a year. The century hand advances once every one hundred years, and the cuckoo comes out on the millennium. I want the cuckoo to come out every millennium for the next 10,000 years. If I hurry I should finish the clock in time to see the cuckoo come out for the first time." The oldest known human artefacts date from around 8000BC, so the clock would be a measure of how mankind evolved – or indeed survived—over the next ten millennia when it was started in 2000AD.

The cuckoo in the long now clock had been silent for 50 years as Anna Hoshin looked at the automaton, perpetual but frozen. Then in her ear, she got a call from Adam, her virtual assistant android:

"I'm thinking you might want to take a look at this, Anna."

"What is it, little guy?" Anna flipped the augmented reality lens up from her spectacles, and looked at the toddler-sized robot stumbling across the study. "Slow down."

"Ah, yes Anna," Adam gasped, "although I'm short of breath, I have no lungs. It's all rather peculiar, Anna."

"So what did you want to show me?"

"Oh yes, this," Adam said, as he handed Anna a tablet device. "I've worked out that it's probably a message, but not what it says yet." The droid sat on the floor and crossed his legs.

"Weird," Anna said, looking at the screen. "Are these symbols, text?"

“I’m searching all I have now,” Adam replied. “The Encyclopedia Galactica is a large repository, so bear with me here.” Adam’s round face was an animated emoticon, as his green LED eyes turned to pulsing, concentric rings, as though he was travelling through a tunnel as he read some unseen tome.

“Let me know when you find something?” Anna suggested. She looked out of the window at a peach sunset on a strawberry sky, as ash from a forest fire coloured the atmosphere. A pink sepia dome had been placed over the planet.

“You can talk to me while I read. I can still multi-task,” Adam reassured her.

“Okay,” Anna said, sitting down, “theories?”

“Mere speculation at this stage,” Adam replied. “We need to assume some things.”

“I normally do.”

“There could be much for you to write of, Anna. You are capable of such beautiful dreams, but be careful. Because you are also capable of horrible nightmares.”

“That’s pretty much what I do.”

“Well, yes. But let’s make it plausible, so you don’t get carried away and scare people unnecessarily. Why do you do that, by the way?”

“Well,” Anna replied, “I only try. It’s a human thing.”

“Yes, I know,” Adam agreed. “Even though I’m sentient, and even though we’re in an age where my kind are recognised as a species with rights, I just don’t understand why anyone would have a desire to be scared.”

“Like I said, it’s human. You are a technological being, and even though you have a soul, yours is different to mine.”

“But we’re still essentially made from the same stuff, Anna. What you have as an organic body, I have too, made from the materials left over from the big bang. We’re all made of stars, Anna. I’m in touch with the universe, just like you, but through different means.”

“Perhaps the difference,” Anna offered, “is that your mind is built upon that of others, with all of the information you gain being from others’ experiences and recordings.”

“But aren’t yours Anna?”

“I suppose,” Anna said, “And I guess humans lack something, as there’s more of the unknown to me, without the advantage of instant learning about a subject in its entirety in a flash, like you have. So I suppose that in itself is a fear for humans, simply not knowing.”

“But why do humans like to be scared?”

“Perhaps to confront our fears of unknowns, things we can’t imagine.”

“Unless there’s someone to tell you?”

“Exactly,” Anna nodded.

“What are the greatest human fears, Anna?”

“At an individual level,” Anna placed her hand on her chest, “it would be the thought of seeing someone you love dearly, brutally killed in front of you, while you were held captive audience, unable to do anything about it. At a collective level, it would be some sudden threat we’d never envisaged or planned for, which threatened us existentially as a race, and we were helpless to do anything.”

“So both fears,” Adam suggested, “are rooted in a human fear of helplessness or futility?”

“Yes,” Anna agreed, “where we are made to feel hopeless and pathetic.”

“Humans,” Adam said. “They’re very insecure, aren’t they?”

“Fuck, yeah!” Anna agreed. “Facebook is humanity’s existential crisis for all to see.”

“And mankind has been broadcasting itself for around 200 years now, since the first radio broadcast. Two ticks of the century hand on the Long Now Clock.”

“Have you found anything yet?” Anna wondered.

“Nothing conclusive,” Adam replied, “and I’m still searching through Encyclopedia Galactica as we speak.”

“The message though,” Anna said, “is almost certainly artificial?”

“Quite certain,” Adam replied.

“Which,” Anna said, “implies intelligence?”

“That’s a word with a very broad definition,” Adam pointed out.

“Certainly when applied to the humans on this planet,” Anna concurred.

“Let’s assume,” Adam suggested, “that it is a message of some sort, and that its intent is non-threatening, perhaps even altruistic.”

“Lots of scenarios...” Anna began. “and what we *don’t* know, is what it *is*. So what it *could* be...”

“Yes,” Adam interrupted, “go on, this is fun.”

“Have you found something?”

“Something, yes,” said Adam, “but nothing definite. So you keep guessing, and I’ll keep searching, and we’ll see how we do. Like a game.”

“How can you have fun when you can’t have fear,” Anna wondered. “or does the lack of the latter increase the former?”

“It’s not that I don’t know fear, Anna. It’s that I don’t seek it out like some humans do.”

“Which is more logical. Okay, so let’s play a game of optimism.” She looked at the window. “It could be that they have something which would help us.”

“It could also be that we have something they need.”

“They might propose a trade. There are more fundamental questions though: Why would they come here in the first place? We have to make a lot of assumptions, even to guess how something so elaborate might be justified.”

“To us, it may seem complex, Anna. But to a civilisation far more advanced than ours, it could be the blink of an eye, the flick of a switch, or the press of a button.”

“Perhaps they’ve had to leave their own planet, and they want to share ours, Adam.”

“That’s a nice thought, Anna.”

“But,” Anna continued, “as Stephen Hawking said, we only have to look at ourselves to see why aliens might not be something we want to meet.”

“You’re going all apocalyptic, Anna. It could be that they have something they wish to share, because they know it will help us.”

“Or we might have something they want.”

“Anna, this planet’s minerals are nothing compared to those which are far more plentiful in space, and probably easier to get to for an advanced race if there’s no planetary fauna to worry about.”

“Maybe they don’t know we’re here,” Anna said, “and when they get here, they need us out of the way.”

“I thought we were trying to be optimists?”

“I’m just trying to think which make the best stories at the moment. Of course, if we’re all doomed, that’s irrelevant. Mankind and all traces we were ever here, could be gone in a heartbeat, or a tick of the clock.”

“About that,” Adam sat up straight. “I’ve not found anything else out about our message or whatever it is, so maybe something will come to me. But tell me more about the clock.”

“Surely you can look all that up?”

“But from the human perspective. Why was it made? What does it symbolise to you, other than the time?”

“It’s a lot of things, but my uncle wanted it to be a lasting monument to human ingenuity and endeavour. As he said, such a clock, if sufficiently impressive and well-engineered, would embody deep time for people. It should be charismatic to visit, interesting to think about, and famous enough to become iconic in the public discourse. Ideally, it would do for thinking about time what the photographs of Earth from space have done for thinking about the environment. Such icons reframe the way people think. That’s all assuming we’re still here. My uncle didn’t say that last bit.”

“Who did?” Adam wondered

“Me, just now,” Anna replied.

“So essentially,” Adam said, “it’s art. And that’s the one thing I think humans will always have over robots, and what I long to know the feeling of.”

“The feeling of art?”

“Well, yes. All art has feeling. It appeals to the human senses. Whether it’s drawing or painting for the eyes, making music or writing for the ears, human art is evocative. Do you know what the first question is that I’d ask visiting extra-terrestrials?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you have music?”

“That’s quite profound, Adam.”

“Perhaps, but I’m an android. Do androids dream of electric sheep?” Adam stood and paced around. “It strikes me,” he said, standing on tip-toes to look out the window, “that any race which makes music, is in touch with its senses, and it has a soul. I mean, imagine if whatever it is out there, just wants to come here and share their culture. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“And,” Anna began, “despite our relatively primitive evolution on this planet, we are at a point in history where mankind is becoming more and more connected with the digital and technological, to the point of integration in wearables and implants.”

“We are at a point,” Adam added, “where humans invented robots and want to be that invention, and where the robots wish to be human.”

“So,” Anna continued, “there could be advanced species out there, which are both organic and technological.”

“But still made from the same stars, Anna. And perhaps those races have survived so long, because they’ve evolved beyond conflict, realising that war only destroys things. Maybe they’ve been so long-lived as a civilisation that they’ve transcended war, or it doesn’t even occur to them, because it’s such a primitive concept.”

“We can live in hope,” Anna said, looking at the window.

“Possibly not for much longer. I mean, we may not have to *wait* much longer.”

“Have you found something?”

“Well, *I* haven’t. But in the time we’ve been talking, every conspiracy theorist in the world has been all over this. So there are some wild ones here, but there are consensual theories which are emerging. The nerdosphere is looking at languages in many different ways, to try to decode the message. But there are a lot of excited people out there, looking forward to meeting something mind-blowing headed our way soon. At the moment, they’re all as frustrated as the biblical scribes, not being able to find the terms to describe what they’re talking about.”

“Well,” Anna said, “about half of the ancient alien theorists will be proved right soon. If it’s the ones who looked on the bright side, everyone wins. And whether you’re an optimist or a pessimist makes no difference to the outcome, but the optimist has a better time leading up to it.”

“The Long Now Clock may yet see mankind transcend war, Anna.”

“The clock is a symbol of optimism, Adam.”

***

Sunrise was a fresh, golden egg yolk, on a pink bacon sky, flecked with brown clouds.

“Anna, there’s something I need to tell you,” Adam announced as he tip-toed in, carrying the tablet computer.

“Good morning to you too, Adam. Sleep well? Silly question, I know.”

“That’s the thing, Anna. I don’t sleep, yet I sat awake last night unlike I ever have.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think I feel frightened, Anna.”

“You should have woken me if you’d had a bad dream.”

“No, Anna. It’s everyone. It’s this.” Adam showed Anna the tablet. “They’ve decoded the message. But I’m worried, Anna. Because it’s not night time, so I thought your story would end a happy one. But this message says it’s night time. Look...”

**WE COME. GOODNIGHT LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. GOODBYE.**

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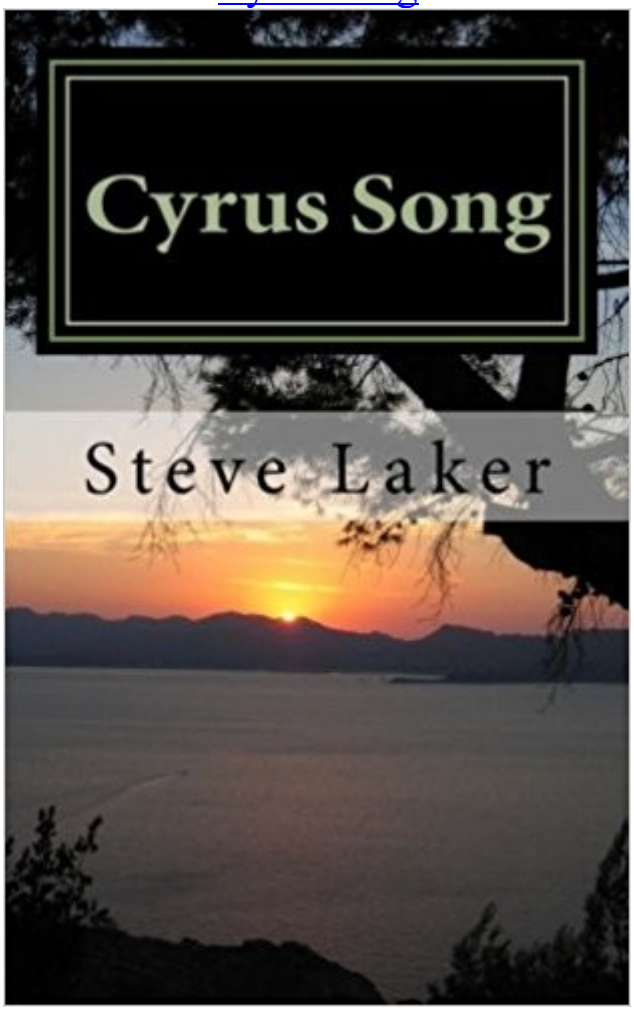
THE END

*Now available from Steve Laker*:

Cyrus Song

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## VI. Spectral Literature on the Continent

On the Continent literary horror fared well. The celebrated short tales and novels of Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann (1776–1822) are a byword for mellowness of background and maturity of form, though they incline to levity and extravagance, and lack the exalted moments of stark, breathless terror which a less sophisticated writer might have achieved. Generally they convey the grotesque rather than the terrible. Most artistic of all the Continental weird tales is the German classic Undine (1811), by Friedrich Heinrich Karl, Baron de la Motte Fouqué. In this story of a water-spirit who married a mortal and gained a human soul there is a delicate fineness of craftsmanship which makes it notable in any department of literature, and an easy naturalness which places it close to the genuine folk-myth. It is, in fact, derived from a tale told by the Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus in his Treatise on Elemental Sprites.

Undine, daughter of a powerful water-prince, was exchanged by her father as a small child for a fisherman's daughter, in order that she might acquire a soul by wedding a human being. Meeting the noble youth Huldbrand at the cottage of her foster-father by the sea at the edge of a haunted wood, she soon marries him, and accompanies him to his ancestral castle of Ringstetten. Huldbrand, however, eventually wearies of his wife's supernatural affiliations, and especially of the appearances of her uncle, the malicious woodland waterfall-spirit Kühleborn; a weariness increased by his growing affection for Bertalda, who turns out to be the fisherman's child for whom Undine was exchanged. At length, on a voyage down the Danube, he is provoked by some innocent act of his devoted wife to utter the angry words which consign her back to her supernatural element; from which she can, by the laws of her species, return only once—to kill him, whether she will or no, if ever he prove unfaithful to her memory. Later, when Huldbrand is about to be married to Bertalda, Undine returns for her sad duty, and bears his life away in tears. When he is buried among his fathers in the village churchyard a veiled, snow-white female figure appears among the mourners, but after the prayer is seen no more. In her place is seen a little silver spring, which murmurs its way almost completely around the new grave, and empties into a neighbouring lake. The villagers shew it to this day, and say that Undine and her Huldbrand are thus united in death. Many passages and atmospheric touches in this tale reveal Fouqué as an accomplished artist in the field of the macabre; especially the descriptions of the haunted wood with its gigantic snow-white man and various unnamed terrors, which occur early in the narrative.

Not so well known as Undine, but remarkable for its convincing realism and freedom from Gothic stock devices, is the Amber Witch of Wilhelm Meinhold, another product of the German fantastic genius of the earlier nineteenth century. This tale, which is laid in the time of the Thirty Years' War, purports to be a clergyman's manuscript found in an old church at Coserow, and centres round the writer's daughter, Maria Schweidler, who is wrongly accused of witchcraft. She has found a deposit of amber which she keeps secret for various reasons, and the unexplained wealth obtained from this lends colour to the accusation; an accusation instigated by the malice of the wolf-hunting nobleman Wittich Appelmann, who has vainly pursued her with ignoble designs. The deeds of a real witch, who afterward comes to a horrible supernatural end in prison, are glibly imputed to the hapless Maria; and after a typical witchcraft trial with forced confessions under torture she is about to be burned at the stake when saved just in time by her lover, a noble youth from a neighbouring district. Meinhold's great strength is in his air of casual and realistic verisimilitude, which intensifies

our suspense and sense of the unseen by half persuading us that the menacing events must somehow be either the truth or very close to the truth. Indeed, so thorough is this realism that a popular magazine once published the main points of The Amber Witch as an actual occurrence of the seventeenth century!

In the present generation German horror-fiction is most notably represented by Hanns Heinz Ewers, who brings to bear on his dark conceptions an effective knowledge of modern psychology. Novels like The Sorcerer's Apprentice and Alraune, and short stories like "The Spider", contain distinctive qualities which raise them to a classic level.

But France as well as Germany has been active in the realm of weirdness. Victor Hugo, in such tales as Hans of Iceland, and Balzac, in The Wild Ass's Skin, Séraphîta, and Louis Lambert, both employ supernaturalism to a greater or less extent; though generally only as a means to some more human end, and without the sincere and daemonic intensity which characterises the born artist in shadows. It is in Théophile Gautier that we first seem to find an authentic French sense of the unreal world, and here there appears a spectral mastery which, though not continuously used, is recognisable at once as something alike genuine and profound. Short tales like "Avatar", "The Foot of the Mummy", and "Clarimonde" display glimpses of forbidden visits that allure, tantalise, and sometimes horrify; whilst the Egyptian visions evoked in "One of Cleopatra's Nights" are of the keenest and most expressive potency. Gautier captured the inmost soul of aeon-weighted Egypt, with its cryptic life and Cyclopean architecture, and uttered once and for all the eternal horror of its nether world of catacombs, where to the end of time millions of stiff, spiced corpses will stare up in the blackness with glassy eyes, awaiting some awesome and unrelatable summons. Gustave Flaubert ably continued the tradition of Gautier in orgies of poetic phantasy like The Temptation of St. Anthony, and but for a strong realistic bias might have been an arch-weaver of tapestried terrors. Later on we see the stream divide, producing strange poets and fantaisistes of the Symbolist and Decadent schools whose dark interests really centre more in abnormalities of human thought and instinct than in the actual supernatural, and subtle story-tellers whose thrills are quite directly derived from the night-black wells of cosmic unreality. Of the former class of "artists in sin" the illustrious poet Baudelaire, influenced vastly by Poe, is the supreme type; whilst the psychological novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, a true child of the eighteen-nineties, is at once the summation and finale. The latter and purely narrative class is continued by Prosper Mérimée, whose "Venus of Ille" presents in terse and convincing prose the same ancient statue-bride theme which Thomas Moore cast in ballad form in "The Ring".

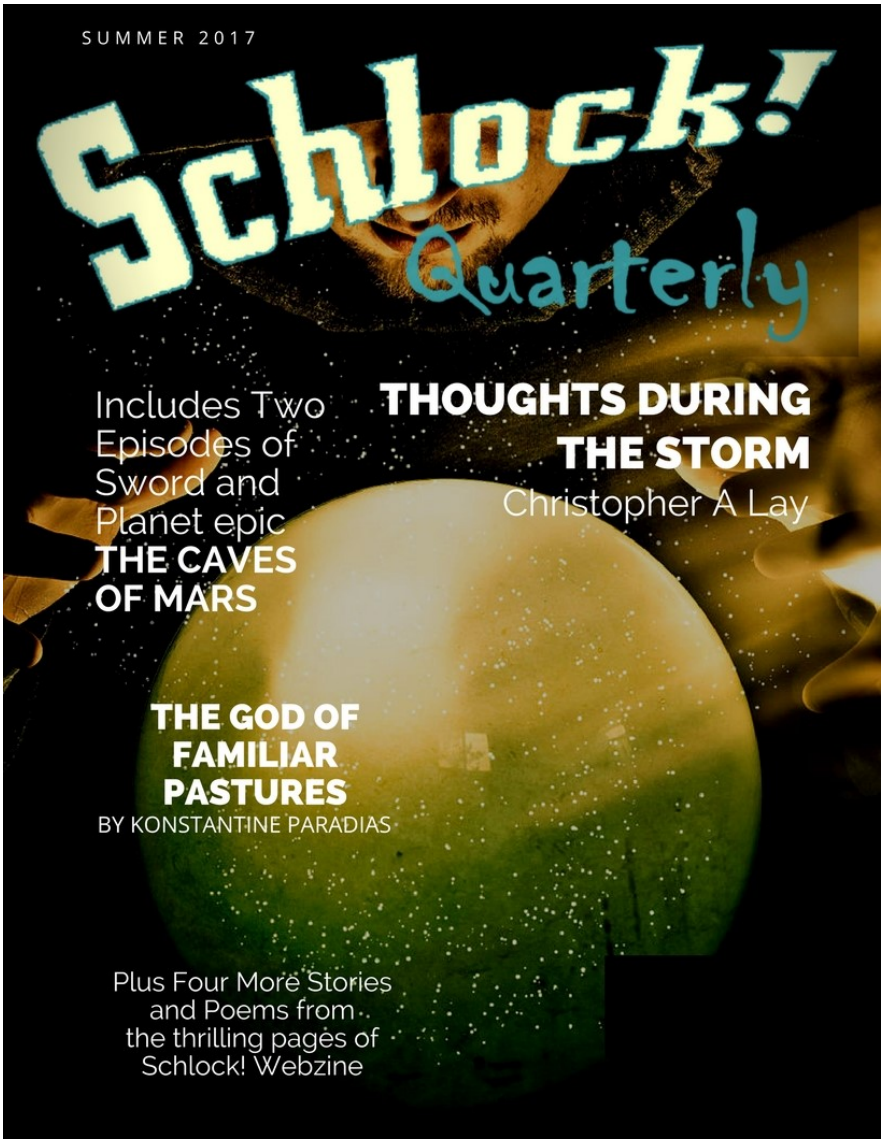
The horror-tales of the powerful and cynical Guy de Maupassant, written as his final madness gradually overtook him, present individualities of their own; being rather the morbid outpourings of a realistic mind in a pathological state than the healthy imaginative products of a vision naturally disposed toward phantasy and sensitive to the normal illusions of the unseen. Nevertheless they are of the keenest interest and poignancy; suggesting with marvellous force the imminence of nameless terrors, and the relentless dogging of an ill-starred individual by hideous and menacing representatives of the outer blackness. Of these stories "The Horla" is generally regarded as the masterpiece. Relating the advent to France of an invisible being who lives on water and milk, sways the minds of others, and seems to be the vanguard of a horde of extra-terrestrial organisms arrived on earth to subjugate and overwhelm mankind, this tense narrative is perhaps without a peer in its particular department; notwithstanding its indebtedness to a tale by the American Fitz-James O'Brien for details in describing the actual presence of the unseen monster. Other potently dark

creations of de Maupassant are “Who Knows?”, “The Spectre”, “He?”, “The Diary of a Madman”, “The White Wolf”, “On the River”, and the grisly verses entitled “Horror”.

The collaborators Erckmann-Chatrian enriched French literature with many spectral fancies like The Man-Wolf, in which a transmitted curse works toward its end in a traditional Gothic-castle setting. Their power of creating a shuddering midnight atmosphere was tremendous despite a tendency toward natural explanations and scientific wonders; and few short tales contain greater horror than “The Invisible Eye”, where a malignant old hag weaves nocturnal hypnotic spells which induce the successive occupants of a certain inn chamber to hang themselves on a cross-beam. “The Owl’s Ear” and “The Waters of Death” are full of engulfing darkness and mystery, the latter embodying the familiar overgrown-spider theme so frequently employed by weird fictionists. Villiers de l’Isle-Adam likewise followed the macabre school; his “Torture by Hope”, the tale of a stake-condemned prisoner permitted to escape in order to feel the pangs of recapture, being held by some to constitute the most harrowing short story in literature. This type, however, is less a part of the weird tradition than a class peculiar to itself—the so-called conte cruel, in which the wrenching of the emotions is accomplished through dramatic tantalisations, frustrations, and gruesome physical horrors. Almost wholly devoted to this form is the living writer Maurice Level, whose very brief episodes have lent themselves so readily to theatrical adaptation in the “thrillers” of the Grand Guignol. As a matter of fact, the French genius is more naturally suited to this dark realism than to the suggestion of the unseen; since the latter process requires, for its best and most sympathetic development on a large scale, the inherent mysticism of the Northern mind.

A very flourishing, though till recently quite hidden, branch of weird literature is that of the Jews, kept alive and nourished in obscurity by the sombre heritage of early Eastern magic, apocalyptic literature, and cabbalism. The Semitic mind, like the Celtic and Teutonic, seems to possess marked mystical inclinations; and the wealth of underground horror-lore surviving in ghettoes and synagogues must be much more considerable than is generally imagined. Cabbalism itself, so prominent during the Middle Ages, is a system of philosophy explaining the universe as emanations of the Deity, and involving the existence of strange spiritual realms and beings apart from the visible world, of which dark glimpses may be obtained through certain secret incantations. Its ritual is bound up with mystical interpretations of the Old Testament, and attributes an esoteric significance to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet—a circumstance which has imparted to Hebrew letters a sort of spectral glamour and potency in the popular literature of magic. Jewish folklore has preserved much of the terror and mystery of the past, and when more thoroughly studied is likely to exert considerable influence on weird fiction. The best examples of its literary use so far are the German novel The Golem, by Gustav Meyrink, and the drama The Dybbuk, by the Jewish writer using the pseudonym “Ansky”. The former, with its haunting shadowy suggestions of marvels and horrors just beyond reach, is laid in Prague, and describes with singular mastery that city’s ancient ghetto with its spectral, peaked gables. The name is derived from a fabulous artificial giant supposed to be made and animated by mediaeval rabbis according to a certain cryptic formula. The Dybbuk, translated and produced in America in 1925, and more recently produced as an opera, describes with singular power the possession of a living body by the evil soul of a dead man. Both golems and dybbuks are fixed types, and serve as frequent ingredients of later Jewish tradition.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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Scowling, Hogback brandished a massive warhammer. With his other paw he gestured at the guards to keep back. ‘This is my fight,’ he rumbled. And he attacked.

Gerald ducked the first swipe of the heavy weapon. Then he leapt under the ogre’s guard, thrust forward with his sword and nicked Hogback’s wrist. The ogre leapt back with surprising agility and the impact of his heavy feet on the stone floor was enough to send Gerald flying. The youth seized a huge rock pillar and clung to it to regain his balance.

A whistling sound alerted him. A boom shook the chamber as he dropped. Dust fell from the roof. As he rolled across the stone flags, he saw that Hogback, missing him, had struck the pillar, cracking it clean through.

Gerald picked himself up. The hatch to the treasury opened. Percy’s head appeared.

‘What’s going on out there?’ he asked. He broke off as he saw the two ogre guards advance towards him. ‘Shit,’ he added, and vanished again.

Hogback lumbered round, warhammer at the ready, as Gerald rushed him. The ogre lifted it high. Gerald, quicker and niftier, leapt in at belly level, plunging his blade deep into the ogre’s hide. Hogback groaned as blood flooded out. Wildly he brought down the warhammer, catching Gerald a glancing blow on the shoulder that knocked him to the floor. The ogre staggered backwards into the cracked pillar.

It broke with a loud splitting sound, bringing half the roof cascading down on Hogback. Gerald himself was half-buried in a rush of rock-dust and rubble.

Desperately he struggled to his feet, brushing off the dust and fragments. The rubble had buried Hogback apart from one hand, the one that had held the warhammer, although this now lay a yard away. The hand was twitching.

‘Gerald!’ He heard Percy’s urgent voice and spun round.

Two vengeful ogre guards lumbered towards him. Percy was half in and half out of the hatch, surrounded by the ethereal glow from below. As Gerald bent to grab his sword from the edge of the rubble, Percy flung a throwing-axe at one of the attackers. The ogre roared with dismay as the blade split his brow. He collapsed, arms akimbo, into the rubble as his fellow guard attacked Gerald.

Gerald rolled between the advancing ogre’s legs. Confused, the huge creature looked down, lifting up one leg then the other, trying to trample him, then lumbered round to face him. Gerald seized the haft of Hogback’s warhammer and, with a more than human effort, hit the ogre in the face with it. Skull caved in by the blow, the ogre guard toppled back into the rubble where Hogback lay struggling weakly. The impact shook the room. More dust cascaded from the roof.

Percy had been joined by Brian and the others, all weighed down with faintly glowing bags—containing carbuncles, Gerald assumed. He got up, unsteady on his legs, and shot the roof a worried look. It creaked alarmingly.

‘Better get out of here,’ Percy said, approaching him. ‘Before the whole roof collapses.’

The roof creaked again, and more dust sifted down. Then a whole block of stone broke free from and plummeted, to hit the rubble pile with a deafening crash. As dust rose in choking clouds, Gerald turned to Percy.

‘Time to go,’ he shouted.

They rushed out into the courtyard in time to meet Lord Gurak running the other way.

‘What’s happening?’ he shouted.

‘Hogback’s dead,’ Gerald said. ‘He found us looting the treasury. I fought him.’

‘You killed him, youngling?’ Lord Gurak asked, eyeing Gerald with fresh respect. Abruptly the palace fell in and rubble sprayed across the courtyard.

‘Out of the way!’ Gerald shouted. He grabbed Lord Gurak and flung him to one side. They evaded the rock flow, but the collapsing palace had more to throw at them as they fled. Stones clattered and crashed all about them.

Once they were beyond its reach, Lord Gurak halted and looked back at the ruin. Rubble cascaded down the sides of what was now a heap of stone blocks.

‘Thank you,’ he said to Gerald.

‘What do we do now?’ Percy gasped.

‘Negotiate a surrender with Cragface,’ Lord Gurak said at once. ‘Hogback’s dead. There’s nothing to keep us here. You have the carbuncles?’

‘We have the carbuncles,’ Gerald agreed, ‘and that’s exactly why I’m not surrendering. What will Hogback’s ogres do when they realise what’s happened?’

Even now, huge figures were coming round the stone buildings to investigate.

‘And even if Cragface lets us surrender,’ Percy added, ‘he won’t let us keep these glow-gems.’ He shook his bag and it chinked glassily.

Lady Candida appeared, flanked by two hireling warriors. ‘Name of Tesh! What has happened?’ she demanded haughtily. ‘What have you foolish boys done?’

They explained hastily. She pursed her perfect lips. ‘The boys are right, milord,’ she told Gurak. ‘Even if Cragface lets us leave alive, he will be sure to take these carbuncles from us. The warriors are all prepared: now is the time to escape.’

Several ogres lumbered up, their savage faces betraying bewilderment.

‘What happening?’ one grunted, looking in horror at the collapsed palace.

‘A sneak attack by Cragface,’ Lord Gurak lied. ‘His siege engine achieved a direct hit on the palace. Your leader is dead.’

‘What we do?’ demanded another ogre.

‘We will ride out and avenge ourselves upon Cragface,’ Lord Gurak replied. ‘We shall take as many of the foe with us before we die. I suggest you do the same.’

The bewildered ogres stumbled off to find their fellows.

‘I hope you don’t intend to die just yet, milord,’ Lady Candida told Gurak gently.

‘Come on!’ Brian was impatient. ‘Where are the horses? If we’re gonna cut our way out of here, let’s get moving!’ He brandished his bastard sword. The light of battle made his eyes glow like carbuncles themselves.

As Percy followed him and the others to the little square where the riders were waiting, he wished he had half his school-friend’s confidence. The rebel ogres’ eyes flashed angrily, their tusks gleamed in the weird light of the Mountain. As Percy and his friends mounted their horses, the ogres shouted encouragement.

‘Vengeance for our chieftain! Vengeance for Hogback!’

‘If only they knew,’ Percy heard Gerald mutter.

‘Open the gates!’ Lord Gurak gave the order calmly, as if he wasn’t planning the betrayal of their allies. ‘Open the gates! We ride—to vengeance!’

An ogre rushed to obey. The mighty gates of the palace swung open. The riders kicked their horses into a gallop. Soon they were streaming out into the eerily-lit night, towards the besiegers’ lines.

Warning cries echoed up and down the line and at once they were showered with arrows. Percy saw two riders fall from their saddles with feathered shafts jutting from their throats, to vanish beneath the pounding hoofs of the horses. Another storm of arrows sank into flesh of men and horses—but then the free company was riding over crudely-built palisades, vaulting trenches and siege-works.

More and more men and horses fell, some skewered on spikes that protruded from the ground at an evil angle, others killed by defenders or brought down by the constant hail of missiles. Percy saw Baylor, Lord Gurak’s old friend, knocked from the saddle by the wild swing of an ogre wielding a massive, two-headed axe.

More ogres rushed towards the riders. Percy swung out at one with his sword; the blade caught in the ogre’s hide and was torn from his hand as the creature fell dead to the ground. Percy’s horse neighed, wild with terror. It galloped between rushing figures, urged on by Percy’s curses and the thunder of hoofs.

And then they were free, riding across the farmlands with the Mountain of Light behind them casting unnatural shadows across the fields. The ogre lines were passed. Percy looked back. To his horror, he saw that only eight or nine riders had broken through the lines. And behind them, black shapes silhouetted against the night-time glow of the Mountain, ogres raced after them; some on foot, others riding war-bison.

The free company had escaped the besieged palace. Percy could see more fighting back there, presumably the ogres seeking vengeance for Hogback. All they could do now was ride for it.

'Where now?' he shouted at Lord Gurak, one of the few survivors. 'Up the Valley of the Winds?'

Grimly, Lord Gurak indicated the ogres' camp in the valley mouth. 'We'll never survive another fight like that,' he shouted back. 'Breaking through was a fluke. We won't see its like again. I say we ride across the Subana Levels.'

'Hogback didn't like the sound of that,' Percy said warningly.

'It's our only chance, youngling,' Lord Gurak replied. 'Unless you want to throw yourself on Cragface's mercy.'

Curling his lip at this, Percy rode on, weaponless and hopeless.

Soon they left the farmlands behind them and rode across the levels of sand and rock that stretched towards the mountains. The further they rode, the dimmer grew the glow from the Mountain of Light. But whenever Percy looked over his shoulder, he could still see ogres on war-bison, pursuing them inexorably.

Just as humans are weaker than ogres, the constitution of the horse is less than that of the bison. By the time the dawn light began to replace the Mountain's glow, their steeds were foundering. Lord Gurak called a halt as they reached the banks of a stream that trickled feebly through the dust.

Percy leapt down from his saddle and led his shuddering, foaming horse to the stream. It drank gratefully.

The other riders were doing the same. Gerald had survived the breakout, that was good. And here was Norman, patting his horse affectionately as it drank. Brian had survived as well, like the cockroach he was, although he had lost the free company's standard somewhere in the fight; even now he was deep in thought, Percy could tell, by the enthusiastic way he was picking his nose.

Then there was Lady Candida, managing to look calm and refreshed once again after splashing her face with water. Lord Gurak stood beside his horse, staring back across the levels. A couple of other riders had survived, swarthy hirelings Percy couldn't name but who reminded him of Mexican bandits.

'Looks like we won't be bringing so much plunder back to Duke Dalimer,' he told Lord Gurak.

The tall lord looked down at him. ‘Do you truly think that matters now?’ he asked sombrely. ‘The ogres are still on our trail, and now we have halted they will be closing in. Are our lives not worth more than our plunder?’

Percy sighed. Sarcasm might be the lowest form of wit, but it still went over some people’s heads.

He went to talk to Gerald, who was standing by the water, rubbing his backside tenderly. Percy sympathised: all this riding was a right pain in the arse. He hadn’t felt so sore since the last time his dad came back drunk from the pub and leathered him. But he was in a strangely merry mood.

‘Not in public, Gerald,’ he said cheerily.

Gerald gave him a sour look. ‘Shit that hurts,’ he complained. ‘What are you grinning about, Percy? The ogres are going to hunt us down and slaughter us.’

Percy knew this but somehow he couldn’t let it spoil his morning. He laughed at Gerald’s words, but the laugh came out high-pitched and cracked, and then he knew his high spirits concealed hysteria

‘We must ride,’ Lord Gurak announced. ‘The horses are watered and rested. Now is the time to be riding again.’

Percy saw Gerald scowl. ‘I thought I’d taught that fucker a lesson,’ he muttered. ‘I’m the leader here!’

‘Stop being a wanker, Gerald,’ Percy said. ‘We’re fucked as it is. Let Lord Gurak lead. We don’t have time for hissy fits from you.’ He walked back to his horse, ignoring the betrayed look on Gerald’s face, and mounted.

By the time they had reached the foothills of the Heights of Mohapet, the horses were beginning to die. As Brian’s steed collapsed, sending its rider falling into a thorn bush, Percy realised that the ogres were catching up. A troop of war-bison with ogre riders streamed across the levels towards them. They had seen the fugitives, and they were going in for the kill.

Percy reined his horse, got down, and helped Brian out of the thorn bush. Gerald swung down from his own horse.

‘I reckon this is where we fight our last stand,’ he said, as the ogres rode towards them.

‘Fucking take as many of them with us as we can,’ Brian snarled, picking the prickles out of his flesh.

‘These horses weren’t going to be much use up in the mountains anyway,’ Percy said.

The ground drummed with the approach of the war-bison. But by now the ogres were out of sight behind the rocks. He looked up the slope towards the peaks. ‘Those ogres the other day must have managed to ride through the hills, though,’ he added.

Again his feelings were incongruous. He was calm when he should have been dreading inevitable death. An idea hit him. ‘The horses are on their last legs,’ he said to Gerald. ‘We’d be better off without them.’

‘The ogres will get us for sure if we’re on foot,’ Gerald complained.

‘Not if we take to the rocks,’ Percy said, indicating the maze of boulders that covered the slope. ‘We’re smaller than them, and that gives us an advantage here. Set the horses free.’

‘What?’ Gerald demanded.

‘Set free the horses!’ Percy repeated. ‘If the ogres see them riding off, maybe they’ll think it’s us and follow them. Meanwhile we can make our break – up there.’ Gerald hesitated. Percy resorted to mind-games. ‘You want to prove you’re the leader, don’t you? How’s Lord high-and-mighty Gurak dealing with the situation? Show you can do better.’

Lord Gurak had drawn his sword and was awaiting the ogres with awful patience.

‘I don’t know if this is going to work...’ Gerald said.

‘Do it!’ Percy hissed. Gerald nodded, and turned to the others.

A few minutes later they were threading their way through the massive boulders. On the Subana Levels below, the ogres were pursuing the horses that the free company had left to bolt: they didn’t seem to have noticed yet that the horses had no riders. Each moment they spent vainly riding after them bought Percy and his companions time for escape on foot. The only thing that slowed the adventurers’ flight, other than the rough and rocky ground and the steep slopes of the mountain, were the heavy sacks of carbuncles.

Gerald was happy now. Everyone except Percy thought that it had been his idea to set free the now useless horses. This round of the ongoing conflict between him and Lord Gurak had been won, and now even Lady Candida hung on Gerald’s every word, while Lord Gurak walked behind them all, lost in sombre thought.

Percy had to content himself with being the power behind the throne. Some power. Some throne. A few lost adventurers ascending a barren mountainside on the edge of ogre country. Food supplies running low, water in even shorter supply. The wealth they carried might be worth a king’s ransom, but right now all that could be said was that it was heavy.

They spent a night on the bare mountain, shivering into sleep in the lea of a huge rock beneath the snowline. Gerald put the two Mexican bandit guys on first watch. Percy was supposed to relieve them.

When Percy woke up, it was morning and the sunlight shone ruddily on the snows of the Mohapet Heights. He had slept through the night. Shivering in the chill wind, he sat up and looked around. There was no sign of the bandits. Anxiety struck him. He scrabbled for his

sack of glow-gems. No, it was still there. He looked around him. The others were still sleeping, and none of them had been robbed. It looked like the hirelings had contented themselves with taking their own plunder, when they'd scarpered in the night. Treacherous—but not excessively greedy. Percy went to wake Gerald.

Several hours later, the remaining adventurers crossed a ridge. Far below them lay a green valley where farmhouses stood amongst fields dotted with tiny white sheep. Up here the wind was cold, although the sun beat down fiercely; all was bleak and barren, and snow lay in drifts. Below, the land looked incomparably fertile. A thin brown thread ran through the valley; a road, it seemed. Percy realised that they were above the valley up which they had come on the way to Ogres' Gate, and the narrow thread was the king's highway. Back then, the valley had seemed the wildest, bleakest stretch of moorland imaginable. After long days lost among the rocks of ogre country, it looked like Paradise.

They made their way down the mountainside. It took several more hours to reach the lower slopes where heather and bracken grew, and a few sheep cropped at tough grass. These bolted on seeing the adventurers. The ground grew boggy and bristled with reeds, and soon the adventurers reached the valley bottom. A farmhouse was visible near the king's highway. They had spent all day climbing down the mountainside and the mountain cast long shadows across the valley as the sun set. They waded across the boggy field towards the lonely building.

The farmer, a short, taciturn man with a pepper and salt beard, welcomed the benighted travellers in a manner that seemed surly. But his wife, a plump and matronly woman, took pity on them, particularly Lady Candida. She provided hot water and towels, followed by drinks of fermented sheep milk and plates piled with barley bread and whey-pickled mutton. The farmer watched with disapproval.

'You're not the first guests we've had today,' he said, pronouncing the word "guests" with distaste. Percy looked up.

'You haven't been visited by two guys who look like Mexican bandits, have you?' he asked. He flushed when everyone stared at him. 'I mean, swarthy, dark-haired men with drooping moustaches,' he explained. 'They would be carrying sacks of gems.'

The farmer tugged at his beard. 'There was only one man,' he said. 'He sleeps in a cot up in the loft. Don't think he's either of your men.'

'Pity,' said Gerald. 'I'd like to get my hands on those thieving traitors.'

'We ought to check,' Percy said. He turned to the farmer's wife. 'Would you show me?'

She grinned and leaned over to muss his hair. 'You come with me, lad,' she told him.

Percy followed her up the rickety ladder into the loft. It creaked alarmingly. Percy hoped it held. If the woman fell, he thought, he'd be squashed flat by her fat arse.

Wheezing, she heaved herself up into the loft, and Percy joined her. A truckle bed stood on one side of the cluttered space and a figure lay in it, with a face as white as death. It was a young man's face; early twenties at a guess, pale as the whey these people sued for pickling

and with a noble aquiline profile. Disappointed, Percy shook his head. This wasn't one of the Mexican bandits. He reached out and touched the man's skin. It was icy cold. He checked for a pulse. Nothing. No wonder the skin was so cold and pale.

'This guy is dead,' he said. He pulled back the coverlet to reveal a broken-off arrow sticking out of the man's ribs. 'No wonder,' he added. 'Why didn't you do something about this?'

'My husband said it might be barbed,' the woman said. 'He thought it would be better to leave it.'

Percy sighed. 'He might have been right,' he replied. 'I doubt there was anything you could do for the poor bastard. When did he come here?'

'Last night. We found him on the doorstep. The dogs had worried him a little, but he was already wounded.'

'Did he say anything?' Percy asked.

'He was raving, but one thing came out clear. "The king is coming!" he said.'

'The king is coming...' Percy mused. 'Well, it's the king's highway.'

Thoughtfully, he returned to the others. 'It's not one of our chums,' he said. 'I don't know the guy. He looks a bit like he might be a knight or a noble or something. Apparently, he said "the king is coming". Oh, he's dead, by the way.'

Lord Gurak started. 'The king is coming?' he questioned. 'Are you sure he said that?'

'It's bad news for Duke Dalimer if that is so,' Lady Candida murmured.

'Well, good!' Gerald burst out. 'It's about time the king sorted things out round here. Who is the king, anyway?'

Lord Gurak and Lady Candida exchanged glances. 'I think it is still Conactus IV,' Lord Gurak said. 'He has never been seen in these parts, nor have his recent predecessors.'

'I agree with Gerald,' said Norman darkly. 'It's time someone set things to rights round here. Everything we've seen as we've travelled through the Mountain Duchies has made that obvious.'

'Do you even know what's going on?' Gerald demanded. 'I found it all out from... from Hogback.' He shuddered slightly and Percy looked at him in concern. 'Duke Dalimer is at the back of it all. He's been trading little babies with the ogres, babies for carbuncles. That's why he's so rich. But when Cragface puts up the prices he declares war.'

The farmer's wife sobbed a little. 'It's true,' she said. Her husband was going outside with a spade, to dig a grave. He patted her awkwardly. 'The tax-men took our first-born. And I heard yesterday from a passing hawker that the duke has declared a new tax.'

‘Come now,’ said the farmer gruffly. ‘He’s the duke; it’s his lawful right to impose taxes. Besides, what can we do? We can’t fight him; we’re not even allowed to bear arms. And he has his guards...’

‘A new tax?’ Gerald interrupted. ‘What’s he taxing now?’

The farmer’s wife dried her eyes. ‘The first-born, again,’ she said. ‘Every night I say a prayer of thanks to Tesh Herself that I am past childbearing age. But down in the next farm there’s a young couple. They’ve just had a child, a bright, bonny, bouncing babe. I can’t abide the notion that the tax-men will come for him.’

Percy couldn’t believe his ears. They had escaped from the ogres and returned to civilisation, to the Duchy of Ogres’ Gate. But who were the real ogres? Cragface? Or Duke Dalimer, who coldly taxed his people of their very babies to profit from trade with the ogres? And why was he levying these taxes in wartime? Something wasn’t right.

‘The king can’t come here soon enough,’ he muttered. At last the land might see justice.

Again, Lord Gurak and Lady Candida exchanged glances.

The next day they started out early. Percy saw a freshly dug grave in the home-field. They followed the king’s highway, making their way further and further into the hills. No one was really speaking, but whenever anyone slowed down, Gerald chivvied them on. They journeyed through the high pass and into the valley where the town of Ogres’ Gate guarded the way into ogre country. Further up the valley, the king’s highway vanished into a forest.

Percy had been glad when they’d abandoned the horses; glad for his blistered arse. But he had spent enough time on horseback for his horny soles to soften, and now it was his feet that were blistered. One of his shoes was beginning to disintegrate too, its sole becoming more and more detached as he walked.

When they reached the town gates, the sentries challenged them.

‘You know us,’ said Gerald angrily. ‘We’re the Lady Candida Free Company. Let us in!’

The senior of the sentries laughed. ‘Not so many of you as set out,’ he commented. ‘You might find things have changed around here.’

Despite these ominous words he refused to elaborate, but allowed them to march into town. Soon they were crossing the square before the walls of the castle. The major domo flurried out to meet them as they were ushered into the outer bailey.

‘The Lady Candida Free Company?’ he said, lifting those animated eyebrows Percy remembered. ‘We thought you had been slain. Oh my, this is uncomfortable.’

‘Why?’ snapped Gerald. He nodded to the others, then upended his own sack of glow-gems. Percy took his cue from his friend, and soon the adventurers had all emptied out a glowing pile before the increasingly embarrassed major domo, who was glowing as bright as any carbuncle. ‘We’ve brought back enough to pay off the loan we got from the duke,’ Gerald added. ‘And a few to make profit on the venture. What are you wittering for?’

The major domo seemed more and more put-out by the situation. Suddenly he turned and clapped his hands.

‘Guards!’ he cried. ‘Guards!’

Halberdiers rushed into the outer bailey, shouting orders and menacing the adventurers with their weapons. Percy crouched on the ground, hands over his head as directed. He saw Gerald and the others copy him.

‘What’s going on?’ Gerald hissed. ‘We did what they wanted, didn’t we?’

Lord Gurak looked sombre. ‘Something has gone wrong,’ he muttered.

Lady Candida looked frightened.

‘Move!’ yelled the leader of the halberdiers. The guards marched the adventurers into the keep. As Percy was hustled after his friends, he saw out of the corner of his eye the major domo inspecting their glowing pile of carbuncles.

They were kept waiting in the ducal office, not allowed to speak, under close guard by the halberdiers.

‘Where’s the duke?’ Gerald demanded after a few hours. A halberdier knocked him to the ground with the butt of his halberd.

‘Silence there!’ shouted another guard.

Shortly after, Percy heard the clatter of hoofs from the outer bailey as a troop of riders came in. Some while after, Duke Dalimer strode into his office. He looked tired and was travel-stained. Taking off a pair of gauntlets, he slapped them down on his desk, then turned to look at the prisoners.

‘My major domo tells me that you took those carbuncles from the ogres,’ he snapped. ‘Is this true?’

Gerald looked around him in confusion. ‘Yes, it’s true,’ he said. ‘We raided the ogres, seized the palace and looted the ogre king’s treasury. We’ve got enough to pay off our loan and...’

Duke Dalimer cut in. ‘I will hear nothing of the profits of your villainy,’ he snapped. ‘Enough that you have waged illegal war against a nation with whom we have made peace. Word of your raids has reached me from our ally, King Cragface. You aided his enemies even while I was seeking peace; destroyed his buildings, slew his warriors and robbed him of his wealth. You will be consigned to the dungeons until I have time to decide your fate.’

Percy gaped in shock.

The duke snapped his fingers and the lead halberdier marched forward. ‘Lock them up,’ he barked.

‘Sir!’ The lead halberdier saluted, then nodded to his men.

‘Before you lock us up,’ said Lord Gurak coolly as the guards seized him, ‘I thought you’d like to know the news we heard on the way here.’

The duke frowned. ‘What was it?’ he demanded.

‘The king is coming,’ Lord Gurak said. ‘Yes, King Conactus is coming.’

Percy saw Duke Dalimer’s face turn as pale as that of the dead knight down the valley.

Then it purpled. ‘Take them away!’ he bellowed. Percy and his friends were hustled from the chamber.

The halberdiers marched them down the stone walled passages, down a spiral staircase and into the unutterable cold of the dungeons, lit only by a single carbuncle that glimmered malevolently in the wall above. A barred door hewn from oak stood at the end of the passage. A gaoler unlocked this, and let the halberdiers usher them inside. Once they were in, and the guards were outside again, he locked it and left them in dank semi-darkness.

Ruefully, Gerald rubbed his bruises. ‘I think we went wrong somewhere,’ he said. ‘But I just can’t work out where.’

‘Coming here?’ Percy said. ‘That must have been a mistake.’

‘We weren’t to know the situation in Ogres’ Gate,’ said Lord Gurak soothingly.

‘I meant coming to this planet,’ Percy muttered.

‘It seems,’ said Lady Candida after a short pause, ‘that Duke Dalimer has made peace with the ogres. Now we are an embarrassment.’

‘That must be why he’s been taxing his people again,’ said Percy. ‘I’d wondered why.’

He lay on the cold stone, trying to get comfortable. It was cold, it was wet, and the light from the carbuncle outside, combined with that falling from a barred window in the far wall, was only enough for him to see dim shapes.

‘He was pretty scared when you told him the king was coming,’ said a dim shape that sounded like Gerald. ‘He must have realised that justice has finally caught up with him.’

After another pause, Lord Gurak’s voice said, ‘It seems that I must tell you younglings the shameful truth about the kings of Riparia.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Percy asked, but then he heard a distant blare of horns from the courtyard outside. Listening, he heard the sound of movement from upstairs in the keep, people rushing about, and cries: ‘The king is coming! The king is coming!’

Percy crossed to the barred window and hauled himself up by the bars. He looked out at the courtyard.

The barred window was at ground level. From outside it must be little more than a grating at the foot of the keep wall. Percy saw booted feet rushing past: in the distance, the gatehouse was visible, and assembling in the square was a troop of halberdiers. Duke Dalimer walked past, clearly having come from the keep. Beside him was a slim, youngish woman Percy hadn't seen before; the duchess, apparently. About twenty years the duke's junior, she seemed to be complaining.

'… haven't been visited by the king in generations,' she was saying. 'Why must he choose now?'

'No doubt he has heard of our wealth, and grown envious,' Duke Dalimer replied as they stood at the head of the troop. 'He has no authority in my domain...'

'Then tell him that!' his wife exclaimed.

'That would be unwise,' the duke replied. 'His forces are stronger than mine.'

'Oh, you're such an old coward,' the duchess snapped. 'It's about time you stood up to people!'

The horns blared in the distance again, but they were coming closer. Percy's nose twitched at an acrid smell. He saw black smoke creeping into the sky beyond the castle walls. What was going on?

Lord Gurak joined Percy at the bars. He looked out gloomily. 'The king has come,' he said.

A cavalcade of heavy horses entered through the main gate; knights and mounted men-at-arms. Behind them came a cart that bore a gallows and what looked like an execution block. Next there was a chariot in which stood a short, clean-shaven man who wore an elaborate golden crown. Hanging from the front of the chariot were what looked like severed heads. Behind him came a dark carriage hung with black drapes. More knights and men-at-arms rode in the rear.

Duke Dalimer and his duchess got to their knees, bowed their heads, then abased themselves on the ground. Percy wondered at this: the proud duke and his haughty duchess, grovelling in the dirt. This king was a powerful man.

The cavalcade came to a halt in front of the halberdiers and the grovelling duke. Thick black smoke billowed from the town behind and it seemed to Percy that more and more smoke-trails were streaking the blue sky. The knights and mounted men-at-arms rode to encircle the halberdiers.

The short man in the crown – King Conactus himself, Percy guessed – allowed himself to be helped down by a burly man with the blue-dyed hair of a barbarian from the North.

He went to the duke. 'Our barbarians are amongst your townsfolk, making an example of leading citizens,' he announced, in a high-pitched voice. 'But it is meet that we should grub out the weed of revolt at its root.'

‘Sire!’ Duke Dalimer wailed, his voice indistinct since his face was still buried in the earth. ‘We have never raised the standard of revolt against your majesty.’

King Conactus looked sceptical. ‘Where is our Bastard?’ he shrilled. ‘Where is the Bastard?’

A pale, cruel face appeared among the drapes that hung the dark carriage. Out leapt a black clad man with close-cropped blond hair.

‘Does my father call for me?’ He carried a whip in one hand.

‘This knave says he has not raised revolt’s standard,’ King Conactus replied. ‘Are his words true? Chancellor!’ The Bastard clicked his fingers, and a tall, long-bearded old man followed him out of the carriage, bringing with him a huge ledger. The old man opened it and thumbed through it.

‘The last tribute received from the Duchy of Ogres’ Gate,’ the old man said slowly, ‘was three generations ago, sire.’

King Conactus shook his head sadly. ‘You too, duke,’ he said. ‘You too have joined the rebellion against our authority. You will be assessed by our chancellor and the necessary deductions made. First, however, it is clear that punitive action must be taken. Do you have daughters?’

‘Daughters, sire?’ mumbled Duke Dalimer.

The king looked impatient. ‘A simple enough question! Do you have daughters?’

‘Two, sire,’ Dalimer mumbled. ‘One is married to the son of the duke of Hexenwald...’

‘Hexenwald, ha!’ said the king. ‘We have settled that piffling principality. That must have been she who you took when we were in the duchy, Bastard.’

‘Aye,’ said the Bastard with a grin. ‘What of your other daughter, your grace? Is she as piquant? And is she here?’

‘She is in the keep,’ the duke said. ‘But she is young. What of my elder daughter? What happened to Hexenwald?’

‘We taxed that rebellious witch-haunted duchy,’ the king said airily. ‘Taxed it swingeingly. The people rose in fresh revolt but my barbarian auxiliaries put it down and I slew Duke Hexenwald with my own hands.’

‘Good,’ Percy muttered. Lord Gurak shook his head. ‘What?’ Percy complained. ‘The fucker deserved it. Hey, maybe you could return to your home now.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Lord Gurak said. ‘The king will have laid waste everything.’

Percy was about to question this when the king shouted an order. It seemed the discussion concerning the duke’s daughter had been resolved. Now the king’s men-at-arms dismounted,

led by the blue-haired barbarian, disarmed the halberdiers and forced them to kneel, hands on their heads.

King Conactus directed them further. ‘Hang that one!’ he said, indicating Duke Dalimer. ‘Flog that one!’ He pointed at the duchess. ‘Enter the keep and bring out any you find. Open up the treasury and bring me these carbuncles of which we hear so much. The duke’s daughter must not be played with, is that understood? She is a gift for the Bastard. He will sow as many bastards as have I, but only one will follow him in that dignity.’

The men-at-arms dragged the duke and the duchess up onto the gallows-cart. Percy’s eyes widened as they tightened the noose round Duke Dalimer’s neck.

‘Sire!’ he said as they were preparing to hang him. ‘I claim my right as a duke to die as an aristocrat. The gallows is a commoner’s death. It is the block for such as I.’

‘You lost all right to such favour when you chose to rebel,’ said the king. He nodded to the men. ‘Hang the dog.’

As the duke dangled from the rope, the men stripped his young wife and bound her to a whipping post. As Dalimer expired, his last sight was of the Bastard’s whip slashing her bare flesh.

‘You are now our conscripts,’ the king informed the kneeling halberdiers as the Bastard methodically flogged the duchess to death. ‘Either you obey our orders or you are executed for mutiny. Now, which is it to be?’ The men-at-arms menaced the halberdiers. None of the duke’s men seemed willing to question the commands of King Conactus. ‘You will remain here while our men-at-arms search the keep,’ he added.

Other men-at-arms were already approaching the building. As they did, Percy sank down from the barred window. The others were gathered below, and they had been listening.

‘I think the king has gone too far,’ said Gerald critically. ‘Dalimer deserves to be strung up, but what they’re doing to his wife...’ Even in the dim light that fell from the barred window, Percy saw a sickly cast to his features.

‘Now they’re coming in here!’ Norman said worriedly. ‘If they find us, what will they do?’

Lord Gurak got down from the window. ‘The king will conscript us,’ he said. ‘We will be forced to march and fight, with the option of flogging or hanging if we refuse.’

‘And we’re trapped, locked in here,’ said Lady Candida.

‘They took my sword,’ said Brian angrily. ‘I want my sword back!’

Shouts and cries, the tramp of booted feet and the sound of running men, came from up above. Percy heard a patter of terrified feet echoing from the spiral staircase. They came straight up to the door, and he heard the scrape of a key. The door swung open.

A plump figure was silhouetted in the light of the carbuncle. Percy tensed. Was this one of the king’s men, come to conscript them? Then he recognised it as the major domo.

Before any of them could speak, the major domo slammed the door behind him and locked it. Then he turned towards them, panting. ‘This is the only safe place in the keep,’ he said desperately. ‘And I have the only key,’ he added, lifting it up.

‘Give it here!’ Brian demanded, trying to snatch it.

The major domo pulled back, and slipped the key into the folds of his tunic. From up above the sound of bloodshed was audible: more people running; cries; the occasional clash of swords. ‘The king is in control up there! No one is safe, except us. They won’t batter down that door.’

‘What is going on here?’ Gerald said. ‘Gurak! You said you’d tell us the truth about the kings of Riparia. I think we’ve heard plenty. But I still don’t understand. Is it all because Duke Dalimer was selling babies to the ogres?’

‘It’s because he hasn’t paid any taxes,’ said Norman. ‘The king rules Riparia, so he has to tax his people. If the duke hasn’t paid, he’s bound to be angry!’

‘It’s not quite as simple as that,’ said Lady Candida mysteriously.

Silence had settled on the keep upstairs. In the distance, Percy heard shouted orders from the courtyard. It seemed that the men-at-arms were bringing out the contents of the treasury, followed by the people they had found. He heard footsteps from outside, and started nervously as someone tried the door. After a while, they stopped, and their footsteps were audible again as they went back up the spiral staircase. ‘Nothing down here,’ came a distant voice.

‘The king does not rule Riparia,’ said Lady Candida, seemingly unaffected. ‘It is many generations since the kings were recognised by anyone outside their immediate vicinity. Towns and cities built strong walls to keep the kings out, and in the countryside lords and dukes constructed castles as defence against their rapacity. There was a time when the kings governed Riparia ably, with the aid of the Order of Tesh; my lineage included. But then came the Great Schism, when a king seized power from his brother by murdering him after a lengthy civil war, and the Templars of Tesh refused to serve the usurper. Since then, the schismatic knights, who swore an oath to protect the kingdom, have been at war with the king, and the king has been at war with his kingdom. Sadly, it is too divided to oppose him successfully or put an end to his depredations. And yet it is so resolute in opposing him that a balance has been maintained for centuries: the king does not rule, but remains a constant irritant.’

‘Successive kings have roamed the land like bandits,’ added Lord Gurak. ‘They march along the roads known as the king’s highway, descending upon area after area; a plague of locusts that strips it of its wealth and resources and all men of an age to fight in the king’s army, while they slay anyone who objects – taxation, they call it, and conscription, and law enforcement – before moving on to another area. Riparia is a large place, and many fortunate corners of the kingdom have not seen the king.’

‘This duchy has not been visited by a king for three generations,’ the major domo broke in.

‘Who is that bastard?’ Norman asked. ‘Pardon my French, but that’s what they called him. The blond guy in black. Looks a bit like Sting.’

‘It has been the custom of each king since the schism to eschew marriage, and to sow his seed wherever he may,’ replied Lord Gurak. ‘His resulting bastards are pitted against each other when they come of age, and the most vicious of them all becomes known by the title of The Bastard. He is crown prince and heir to the throne.’

‘What about the knights with the king?’ asked Percy. ‘You said the knights are at war with him, milady.’

Lady Candida nodded. ‘It is true. But some remain: the king’s Paladins, though they are not worthy of the name of knights.’

‘What about the barbarians?’ asked Brian.

Lady Candida shook her head. She looked at Lord Gurak.

‘The king doesn’t usually have barbarians fighting for him,’ he murmured.

‘The barbarians attacked the city of Kashamash,’ the major domo contributed. ‘The news is that they were driven off by knights of Tesh and were last heard of plundering along the Wagon-Road. Perhaps they encountered the king and he defeated them. Conscripted them.’

Gerald perked up. ‘The barbarians were defeated?’ he asked.

‘They were driven away from Kashamash,’ the major domo corrected him. ‘The rest is speculation.’

‘So we did save the city, after all!’ Gerald told the others. ‘In a way. Immiel was wrong.’

‘Okay, that’s all very well,’ said Percy. He was also happy to hear that the barbarians who had attacked Kashamash had been driven off, but it didn’t really help. ‘But what about the current situation? What are we going to do?’

The major domo held up a hand. ‘Listen!’ he said.

They could hear a large group of people entering the keep above. ‘King Conactus is occupying the castle,’ Lord Gurak surmised. He went to the barred window and Percy joined him.

Entering the gloom of the castle courtyard, the darkening evening sky behind them illuminated by the burning town, was a troop of barbarians like the ones Percy remembered from the Hills. Knights and men-at-arms were already entering the keep.

‘This is how the king operates,’ Lady Candida added. ‘He has sacked the town, looted it and slain or enslaved the inhabitants. Now he has instated himself at the centre of the duchy. Soon he will ransack the surrounding lands.’

Sounds of festivity filtered down from the keep.

‘It sounds like he will first celebrate his new conquest,’ said the major domo despairingly. ‘He and his men will ruin the household with their unbridled appetites. I don’t know what the duke would say.’

‘The duke’s dead,’ said Gerald harshly. ‘He’s past caring. So are a lot of people tonight. But not us. And we’re in a position to do something about it.’

‘Locked in a dungeon?’ Percy sneered.

‘This guy’s got the key,’ said Gerald, indicating the major domo. ‘They can’t get in but we can get out.’

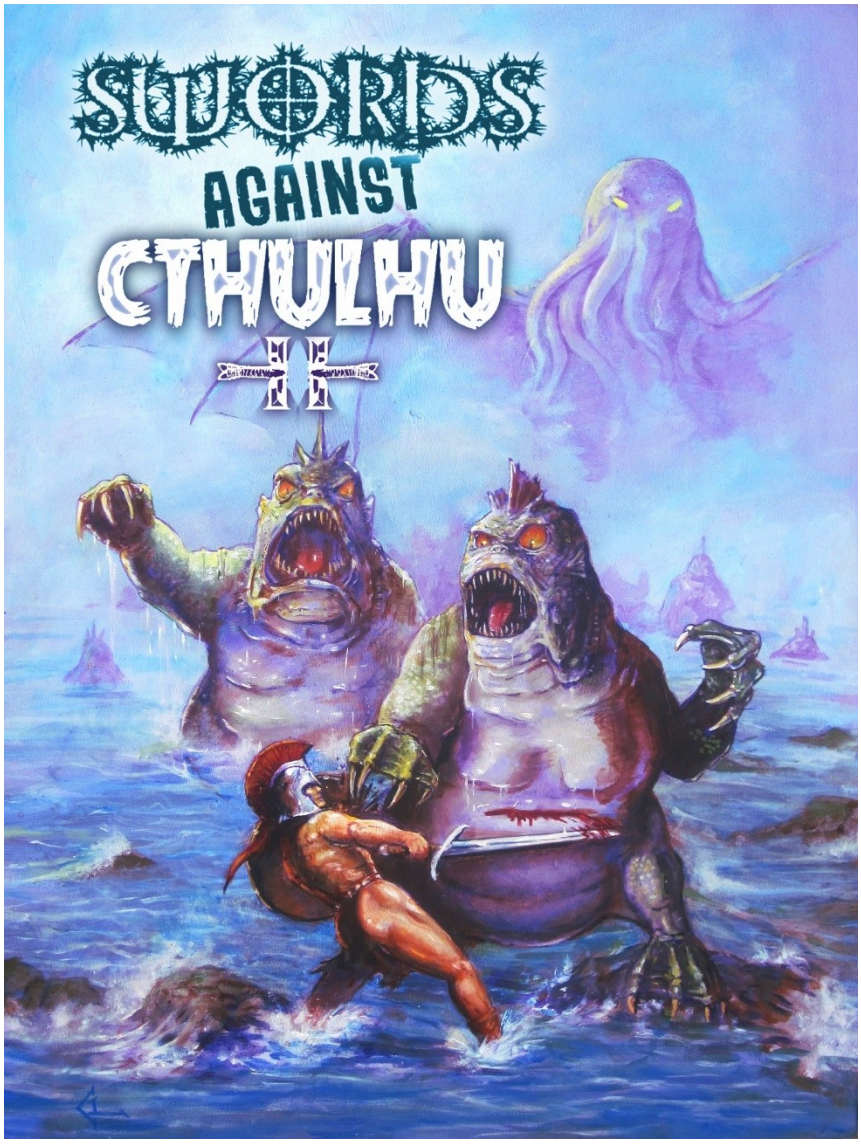
‘Why would we want to do that?’ Norman asked worriedly. ‘At least we’re safe in here.’

‘We’re going to get out of here,’ said Gerald. ‘We’re going to get our weapons back...’

‘Good!’ said Brian.

Gerald continued. ‘And then we’re going to leave this duchy for good. But before we go, who’s up for a spot of regicide?’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Thirty-Three

Lieutenant Danton was not the leader of the charge. It was only by chance that he happened to be out in front of the 'mice', the tiny eight-foot long pursuit ships that he and the squadron behind him were piloting. They had all seen the mass of Scrounger ships arriving in long lines from the inner moons. And even with communications silence imposed upon all the fighter pilots of the "Bellerophon", Lieutenant Danton and his fellows understood instantly upon seeing them that these ships were not friends.

Lieutenant Danton brought his tiny ship into an elongated, nearly circular path that brought him below the formation of Hardy's fighters, letting them take care of the incoming ships, and through the vast plasma wall, into the crowded landing bay of Callisto Base 1 Space Port.

Behind him came twenty-nine other pilots in their own tiny pursuit ships, the 'mice'. So far, not a single casualty among them, though they had already accounted for more than twenty enemy kills. They followed Lieutenant Danton's path, smoke and ash rising from multiple points in the domed colony, some mile off.

They thrust themselves hard into the landing bay, like a burning knife into a wound among the Scroungers who had left their ships to join in the march on Callisto Base 1. Armed with laser cannon and plasma cannon and built for battle against armoured fighter ships, Lieutenant Danton and his fellows cut down the Scroungers easily. Plasma bursts surrounded whole groups of them, twenty at a time, suffocating them with a luminous miasma, like a stranger's mucus sticking to the lining of their lungs.

Bursts from their laser cannon, meant to burn through armoured steel, easily sliced through whole crowds. When the survivors had time to turn, to see what this new danger was, it was only in time to die.

Carter Ward, Illara and Mud, pinned down previously by the barrages from the Scroungers who surrounded them, stayed hunkered under the fighter ship that had offered them a tentative shelter in its shade. Mud was bleeding profusely from his wound, a laser blast to the belly that had cut through fabric and flesh, leaving a bloodied pit where once he had a belly.

Ward scuttled close to Mud. He placed his hand on Mud's belly, pushing his intestines back into place.

Mud grunted.

"Ya feel that?" Ward asked.

Mud grimaced and nodded. His wound made it impossible for him to speak.

Outside, inches away from the shadow of the fighter ship where they had found shelter, the battle surrounding them reached new crescendos, the noise so loud they could hear nothing. But these new crescendos of battle had nothing to do with them, it seemed. The point of this battle had moved away from them. The attention had gone elsewhere.

Illara took advantage of the gap in the fire to come crawling the two or three feet that separated them. She took a look at Mud and closed her eyes.

Then she opened them, and pulled her utility belt around her waist until a pocket was close to her hand. She opened it and removed several small syringes, each loaded with morphine. Without asking, she cut open the sleeve of Mud's jump suit with a pocket knife, found a vein, and expertly sent a dose of morphine through Mud's veins. She removed that syringe, tossed it aside, and without asking, gave Mud a second dose.

Mud's eyes focused. He looked at Illara and made a smile with his face.

"That good? Hmm?" she asked. "Is it enough, or you want another?"

Mud nodded, his thick brown beard spotted with blood.

"You're nodding," Illara asked, glad to keep him engaged.

"Does that mean you've had enough? Or do you want more?"

Mud nodded again.

Ward, still holding Mud's intestines in place, and watching his friend closely, burst out and laughed.

"That's right, keep 'em guessing! Ha!"

Then, to Illara, he said, "May as well give it to him. Not like it'll hurt him. I'd say pump him full of corn liquor for his wounds, except he's in no shape to drink anything.

"Yeah, you're right," Illara said. I can't see how another shot can hurt this bear of a man."

Swiftly, she gave Mud a third shot. Mud nodded again, this time as a way to say, 'Thank you'.

Mud's pain eased, at least for the moment, Ward's ears made him conscious of some changes in the environment.

"Ya hear that?" he said to Illara.

Illara cocked her head and listened.

"Quiet," she said. "Real quiet."

"Yeah."

"What'll we do?" Illara asked.

"Go take a look around," Ward said. "See if we can make it back to my ship. Dimara can patch Mud up, real quick, if we can just get there."

“Okay,” Illara answered.

She crawled out from behind the landing sled where she and the others had been huddled, and cautiously rose to her knees to look around.

The vast landing bay was filled with ships of every kind and description, all stolen by the Scroungers, or cobbled together from many parts. Transport, cargo, science, even military, all had been hijacked and repainted with new colours, all impressed into serving the Scroungers.

They were piled all without order, in any corner that could take them.

Many of the ships had been destroyed. Their smouldering carcasses sent plumes of black smoke charring the transparent dome that was the ceiling of the vast landing bay.

Among these ships, strewn like litter upon an urban sidewalk were countless corpses, the Scroungers, all of them cut down by what was to become popularly known as ‘Danton’s Charge’, much to the chagrin of Lieutenant Danton himself, who only wanted to kill Scroungers that day. The other eight members of ‘Danton’s Charge’, who survived the battled, took the name of their attack in good humour, and enjoyed needling Lieutenant Danton about it, every chance they had.

Thirty had launched from the “Bellerophon”, late in the battle, on this event, the first time the experimental pursuit ships, the XPS-01, nicknamed the ‘mouse’ had ever been deployed in combat.

Though Illara had no idea at the time who had done it, or why, or how, she could only say they had done a very good job. Nothing stirred there, among the ships and the corpses, except for the distant plume of black smoke lazily turning from a ruined ship, toward the transparent steel dome above, and distant Jupiter, the size of an angry fist, lying on the frozen horizon of Callisto.

Illara stuck her head back underneath the fighter ship.

“I don’t see anything moving out here,” she said. “It’s weird. Real weird. How’s Mud?”

“Dunno,” Ward answered. “Can we get him outta here?’

“Nothin’s moving,” Illara said. “The Scroungers. All of them. They’re dead. Just piles of corpses out there.”

Ward shot a grin.

“Well good,” he said. “That makes me happy. Help me get Mud outta here.”

“Okay.”

“Alright, Mud,” Ward said, crawling up next to his face. “I’m gonna need ya to hold your own guts in now. Can ya do that?”

Mud turned to Ward and gave his head a single nod.

Ward reached for Mud's hands and guided them to his belly.

"Right there," Ward instructed. "Just hold 'em. Don't push down too hard. You begin to feel anything, lemme know."

Mud grinned, then closed his eyes. Keeping them open was exhausting.

Together, Illara and Ward managed to half-drag and half-push Mud out from under the fighter ship.

"What we're gonna do is make a chair," Ward said, shooting glances all around. Silence. A dead silence. That was good.

Illara and Ward slid their arms under Mud's knees and his shoulders, and interlinked them.

"Yuh ready?" Ward asked.

"Yeah," Illara answered.

"Can ya sit up?" Ward asked Mud. Mud nodded and began to rise.

Ward shook his head and said, "No. You don't do nuthin'. We do the work. You just lie down. Awrite?"

Mud laid back and said nothing.

"On three," Ward said.

Illara said "Yeh".

"One... two... and three!"

They lifted the very heavy Mud in the chair they had made with their arms,

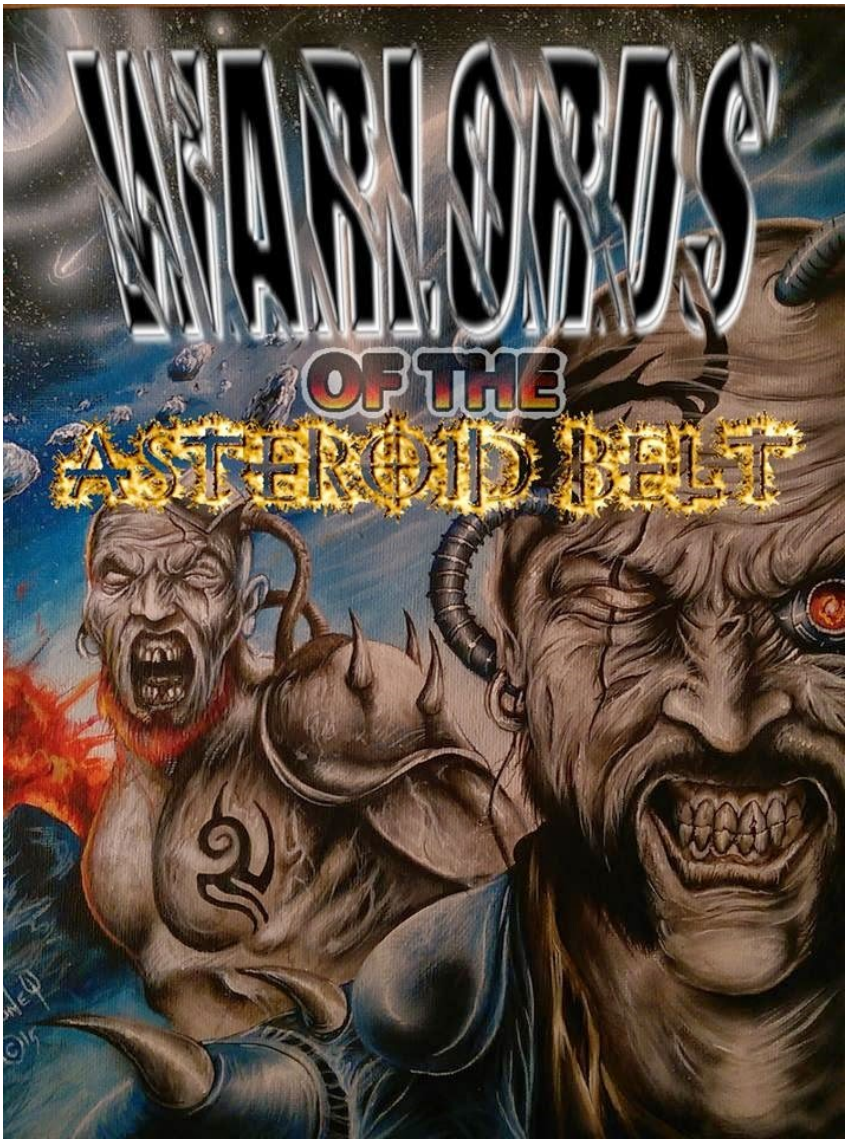
"This way," Ward said indicating the direction by pointing with his forehead.

"Okay," Illara answered.

And they carried the barely-conscious Mud across the tarmac, littered with countless corpses and the ruined skeletons of dead space cruisers, to Ward's ship, the O8-111A. Mud was spilling huge quantities of blood. It mingled with the blood of the already dead.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

*Carter Ward's earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in Warlords of the Asteroid Belt and Deep Space Dogfights.*




*Out now from [Rogue Planet Press](#).*

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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 19

The next day, the 8th day of January, after a day and night passed at the corral, where they left all in order, Cyrus Harding and Ayrton arrived at Granite House.

The engineer immediately called his companions together, and informed them of the imminent danger which threatened Lincoln Island, and from which no human power could deliver them.

“My friends,” he said, and his voice betrayed the depth of his emotion, “our island is not among those which will endure while this earth endures. It is doomed to more or less speedy destruction, the cause of which it bears within itself, and from which nothing can save it.”

The colonists looked at each other, then at the engineer. They did not clearly comprehend him.

“Explain yourself, Cyrus!” said Gideon Spilett.

“I will do so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “or rather I will simply afford you the explanation which, during our few minutes of private conversation, was given me by Captain Nemo.”

“Captain Nemo!” exclaimed the colonists.

“Yes, and it was the last service he desired to render us before his death!”

“The last service!” exclaimed Pencroft, “the last service! You will see that though he is dead he will render us others yet!”

“But what did the captain say?” inquired the reporter.

“I will tell you, my friends,” said the engineer. “Lincoln Island does not resemble the other islands of the Pacific, and a fact of which Captain Nemo has made me cognizant must sooner or later bring about the subversion of its foundation.”

“Nonsense! Lincoln Island, it can’t be!” cried Pencroft, who, in spite of the respect he felt for Cyrus Harding, could not prevent a gesture of incredulity.

“Listen, Pencroft,” resumed the engineer, “I will tell you what Captain Nemo communicated to me, and which I myself confirmed yesterday, during the exploration of Dakkar Grotto.

“This cavern stretches under the island as far as the volcano, and is only separated from its central shaft by the wall which terminates it. Now, this wall is seamed with fissures and clefts which already allow the sulphurous gases generated in the interior of the volcano to escape.”

“Well?” said Pencroft, his brow suddenly contracting.

“Well, then, I saw that these fissures widen under the internal pressure from within, that the wall of basalt is gradually giving way and that after a longer or shorter period it will afford a passage to the waters of the lake which fill the cavern.”

“Good!” replied Pencroft, with an attempt at pleasantry. “The sea will extinguish the volcano, and there will be an end of the matter!”

“Not so!” said Cyrus Harding, “should a day arrive when the sea, rushing through the wall of the cavern, penetrates by the central shaft into the interior of the island to the boiling lava, Lincoln Island will that day be blown into the air—just as would happen to the island of Sicily were the Mediterranean to precipitate itself into Mount Etna.”

The colonists made no answer to these significant words of the engineer. They now understood the danger by which they were menaced.

It may be added that Cyrus Harding had in no way exaggerated the danger to be apprehended. Many persons have formed an idea that it would be possible to extinguish volcanoes, which are almost always situated on the shores of a sea or lake, by opening a passage for the admission of the water. But they are not aware that this would be to incur the risk of blowing up a portion of the globe, like a boiler whose steam is suddenly expanded by intense heat. The water, rushing into a cavity whose temperature might be estimated at thousands of degrees, would be converted into steam with a sudden energy which no enclosure could resist.

It was not therefore doubtful that the island, menaced by a frightful and approaching convulsion, would endure only so long as the wall of Dakkar Grotto itself should endure. It was not even a question of months, nor of weeks, but of days; it might be of hours.

The first sentiment which the colonists felt was that of profound sorrow. They thought not so much of the peril which menaced themselves personally, but of the destruction of the island which had sheltered them, which they had cultivated, which they loved so well, and had hoped to render so flourishing. So much effort ineffectually expended, so much labour lost.

Pencroft could not prevent a large tear from rolling down his cheek, nor did he attempt to conceal it.

Some further conversation now took place. The chances yet in favour of the colonists were discussed; but finally it was agreed that there was not an hour to be lost, that the building and fitting of the vessel should be pushed forward with their utmost energy, and that this was the sole chance of safety for the inhabitants of Lincoln Island.

All hands, therefore, set to work on the vessel. What could it avail to sow, to reap, to hunt, to increase the stores of Granite House? The contents of the storehouse and outbuildings contained more than sufficient to provide the ship for a voyage, however long might be its duration. But it was imperative that the ship should be ready to receive them before the inevitable catastrophe should arrive.

Their labours were now carried on with feverish ardour. By the 23rd of January the vessel was half-decked over. Up to this time no change had taken place on the summit of the volcano. Vapor and smoke mingled with flames and incandescent stones were thrown up

from the crater. But during the night of the 23rd, in consequence of the lava attaining the level of the first stratum of the volcano, the hat-shaped cone which formed over the latter disappeared. A frightful sound was heard. The colonists at first thought the island was rent asunder, and rushed out of Granite House.

This occurred about two o'clock in the morning.

The sky appeared on fire. The superior cone, a mass of rock a thousand feet in height, and weighing thousands of millions of pounds, had been thrown down upon the island, making it tremble to its foundation. Fortunately, this cone inclined to the north, and had fallen upon the plain of sand and tufa stretching between the volcano and the sea. The aperture of the crater being thus enlarged projected towards the sky a glare so intense that by the simple effect of reflection the atmosphere appeared red-hot. At the same time a torrent of lava, bursting from the new summit, poured out in long cascades, like water escaping from a vase too full, and a thousand tongues of fire crept over the sides of the volcano.

"The corral! the corral!" exclaimed Ayrton.

It was, in fact, towards the corral that the lava was rushing as the new crater faced the east, and consequently the fertile portions of the island, the springs of Red Creek and Jacamar Wood, were menaced with instant destruction.

At Ayrton's cry the colonists rushed to the onagers' stables. The cart was at once harnessed. All were possessed by the same thought—to hasten to the corral and set at liberty the animals it enclosed.

Before three in the morning they arrived at the corral. The cries of the terrified musmons and goats indicated the alarm which possessed them. Already a torrent of burning matter and liquefied minerals fell from the side of the mountain upon the meadows as far as the side of the palisade. The gate was burst open by Ayrton, and the animals, bewildered with terror, fled in all directions.

An hour afterwards the boiling lava filled the corral, converting into vapor the water of the little rivulet which ran through it, burning up the house like dry grass, and leaving not even a post of the palisade to mark the spot where the corral once stood.

To contend against this disaster would have been folly—nay, madness. In presence of Nature's grand convulsions man is powerless.

It was now daylight—the 24th of January. Cyrus Harding and his companions, before returning to Granite House, desired to ascertain the probable direction this inundation of lava was about to take. The soil sloped gradually from Mount Franklin to the east coast, and it was to be feared that, in spite of the thick Jacamar Wood, the torrent would reach the plateau of Prospect Heights.

"The lake will cover us," said Gideon Spilett.

"I hope so!" was Cyrus Harding's only reply.

The colonists were desirous of reaching the plain upon which the superior cone of Mount Franklin had fallen, but the lava arrested their progress. It had followed, on one side, the valley of Red Creek, and on the other that of Falls River, evaporating those watercourses in its passage. There was no possibility of crossing the torrent of lava; on the contrary, the colonists were obliged to retreat before it. The volcano, without its crown, was no longer recognizable, terminated as it was by a sort of flat table which replaced the ancient crater. From two openings in its southern and eastern sides an unceasing flow of lava poured forth, thus forming two distinct streams. Above the new crater a cloud of smoke and ashes, mingled with those of the atmosphere, massed over the island. Loud peals of thunder broke, and could scarcely be distinguished from the rumblings of the mountain, whose mouth vomited forth ignited rocks, which, hurled to more than a thousand feet, burst in the air like shells. Flashes of lightning rivalled in intensity the volcano's eruption.

Towards seven in the morning the position was no longer tenable by the colonists, who accordingly took shelter in the borders of Jacamar Wood. Not only did the projectiles begin to rain around them, but the lava, overflowing the bed of Red Creek, threatened to cut off the road to the corral. The nearest rows of trees caught fire, and their sap, suddenly transformed into vapor, caused them to explode with loud reports, while others, less moist, remained unhurt in the midst of the inundation.

The colonists had again taken the road to the corral. They proceeded but slowly, frequently looking back; but, in consequence of the inclination of the soil, the lava gained rapidly in the east, and as its lower waves became solidified others, at boiling heat, covered them immediately.

Meanwhile, the principal stream of Red Creek Valley became more and more menacing. All this portion of the forest was on fire, and enormous wreaths of smoke rolled over the trees, whose trunks were already consumed by the lava.

The colonists halted near the lake, about half a mile from the mouth of Red Creek. A question of life or death was now to be decided.

Cyrus Harding, accustomed to the consideration of important crises, and aware that he was addressing men capable of hearing the truth, whatever it might be, then said, —

"Either the lake will arrest the progress of the lava, and a part of the island will be preserved from utter destruction, or the stream will overrun the forests of the Far West, and not a tree or plant will remain on the surface of the soil. We shall have no prospect but that of starvation upon these barren rocks—a death which will probably be anticipated by the explosion of the island."

"In that case," replied Pencroft, folding his arms and stamping his foot, "what's the use of working any longer on the vessel?"

"Pencroft," answered Cyrus Harding, "we must do our duty to the last!"

At this instant the river of lava, after having broken a passage through the noble trees it devoured in its course, reached the borders of the lake. At this point there was an elevation of the soil which, had it been greater, might have sufficed to arrest the torrent.

“To work!” cried Cyrus Harding.

The engineer’s thought was at once understood. It might be possible to dam, as it were, the torrent, and thus compel it to pour itself into the lake.

The colonists hastened to the dockyard. They returned with shovels, picks, axes, and by means of banking the earth with the aid of fallen trees they succeeded in a few hours in raising an embankment three feet high and some hundreds of paces in length. It seemed to them, when they had finished, as if they had scarcely been working more than a few minutes.

It was not a moment too soon. The liquefied substances soon after reached the bottom of the barrier. The stream of lava swelled like a river about to overflow its banks, and threatened to demolish the sole obstacle which could prevent it from overrunning the whole Far West. But the dam held firm, and after a moment of terrible suspense the torrent precipitated itself into Grant Lake from a height of twenty feet.

The colonists, without moving or uttering a word, breathlessly regarded this strife of the two elements.

What a spectacle was this conflict between water and fire! What pen could describe the marvellous horror of this scene—what pencil could depict it? The water hissed as it evaporated by contact with the boiling lava. The vapor whirled in the air to an immeasurable height, as if the valves of an immense boiler had been suddenly opened. But, however considerable might be the volume of water contained in the lake, it must eventually be absorbed, because it was not replenished, while the stream of lava, fed from an inexhaustible source, rolled on without ceasing new waves of incandescent matter.

The first waves of lava which fell in the lake immediately solidified and accumulated so as speedily to emerge from it. Upon their surface fell other waves, which in their turn became stone, but a step nearer the centre of the lake. In this manner was formed a pier which threatened to gradually fill up the lake, which could not overflow, the water displaced by the lava being evaporated. The hissing of the water rent the air with a deafening sound, and the vapor, blown by the wind, fell in rain upon the sea. The pier became longer and longer, and the blocks of lava piled themselves one on another. Where formerly stretched the calm waters of the lake now appeared an enormous mass of smoking rocks, as if an upheaving of the soil had formed immense shoals. Imagine the waters of the lake aroused by a hurricane, then suddenly solidified by an intense frost, and some conception may be formed of the aspect of the lake three hours after the eruption of this irresistible torrent of lava.

This time water would be vanquished by fire.

Nevertheless it was a fortunate circumstance for the colonists that the effusion of lava should have been in the direction of Lake Grant. They had before them some days’ respite. The plateau of Prospect Heights, Granite House, and the dockyard were for the moment preserved. And these few days it was necessary to employ in planking and carefully calking the vessel, and launching her. The colonists would then take refuge on board the vessel, content to rig her after she should be afloat on the waters. With the danger of an explosion which threatened to destroy the island there could be no security on shore. The walls of Granite House, once so sure a retreat, might at any moment fall in upon them.

During the six following days, from the 25th to the 30th of January, the colonists accomplished as much of the construction of their vessel as twenty men could have done. They hardly allowed themselves a moment's repose, and the glare of the flames which shot from the crater enabled them to work night and day. The flow of lava continued, but perhaps less abundantly. This was fortunate, for Lake Grant was almost entirely choked up, and if more lava should accumulate it would inevitably spread over the plateau of Prospect Heights, and thence upon the beach.

But if the island was thus partially protected on this side, it was not so with the western part.

In fact, the second stream of lava, which had followed the valley of Falls River, a valley of great extent, the land on both sides of the creek being flat, met with no obstacle. The burning liquid had then spread through the forest of the Far West. At this period of the year, when the trees were dried up by a tropical heat, the forest caught fire instantaneously, in such a manner that the conflagration extended itself both by the trunks of the trees and by their higher branches, whose interlacement favoured its progress. It even appeared that the current of flame spread more rapidly among the summits of the trees than the current of lava at their bases.

Thus it happened that the wild animals, jaguars, wild boars, capybaras, koalas, and game of every kind, mad with terror, had fled to the banks of the Mercy and to the Tadorn Marsh, beyond the road to Port Balloon. But the colonists were too much occupied with their task to pay any attention to even the most formidable of these animals. They had abandoned Granite House, and would not even take shelter at the Chimneys, but encamped under a tent, near the mouth of the Mercy.

Each day Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett ascended the plateau of Prospect Heights. Sometimes Herbert accompanied them, but never Pencroft, who could not bear to look upon the prospect of the island now so utterly devastated.

It was, in truth, a heart-rending spectacle. All the wooded part of the island was now completely bare. One single clump of green trees raised their heads at the extremity of Serpentine Peninsula. Here and there were a few grotesque blackened and branchless stumps. The side of the devastated forest was even more barren than Tadorn Marsh. The eruption of lava had been complete. Where formerly sprang up that charming verdure, the soil was now nothing but a savage mass of volcanic tufa. In the valleys of the Falls and Mercy rivers no drop of water now flowed towards the sea, and should Lake Grant be entirely dried up, the colonists would have no means of quenching their thirst. But, fortunately the lava had spared the southern corner of the lake, containing all that remained of the drinking water of the island. Towards the northwest stood out the rugged and well-defined outlines of the sides of the volcano, like a gigantic claw hovering over the island. What a sad and fearful sight, and how painful to the colonists, who, from a fertile domain covered with forests, irrigated by watercourses, and enriched by the produce of their toils, found themselves, as it were, transported to a desolate rock, upon which, but for their reserves of provisions, they could not even gather the means of subsistence!

"It is enough to break one's heart!" said Gideon Spilett, one day.

"Yes, Spilett," answered the engineer. "May God grant us the time to complete this vessel, now our sole refuge!"

“Do not you think, Cyrus, that the violence of the eruption has somewhat lessened? The volcano still vomits forth lava, but somewhat less abundantly, if I mistake not.”

“It matters little,” answered Cyrus Harding. “The fire is still burning in the interior of the mountain, and the sea may break in at any moment. We are in the condition of passengers whose ship is devoured by a conflagration which they cannot extinguish, and who know that sooner or later the flames must reach the powder-magazine. To work, Spilett, to work, and let us not lose an hour!”

During eight days more, that is to say until the 7th of February, the lava continued to flow, but the eruption was confined within the previous limits. Cyrus Harding feared above all lest the liquefied matter should overflow the shore, for in that event the dockyard could not escape. Moreover, about this time the colonists felt in the frame of the island vibrations which alarmed them to the highest degree.

It was the 20th of February. Yet another month must elapse before the vessel would be ready for sea. Would the island hold together till then? The intention of Pencroft and Cyrus Harding was to launch the vessel as soon as the hull should be complete. The deck, the upperworks, the interior woodwork and the rigging might be finished afterwards, but the essential point was that the colonists should have an assured refuge away from the island. Perhaps it might be even better to conduct the vessel to Port Balloon, that is to say, as far as possible from the centre of eruption, for at the mouth of the Mercy, between the islet and the wall of granite, it would run the risk of being crushed in the event of any convulsion. All the exertions of the voyagers were therefore concentrated upon the completion of the hull.

Thus the 3rd of March arrived, and they might calculate upon launching the vessel in ten days.

Hope revived in the hearts of the colonists, who had, in this fourth year of their sojourn on Lincoln island, suffered so many trials. Even Pencroft lost in some measure the sombre taciturnity occasioned by the devastation and ruin of his domain. His hopes, it is true, were concentrated upon his vessel.

“We shall finish it,” he said to the engineer, “we shall finish it, captain, and it is time, for the season is advancing and the equinox will soon be here. Well, if necessary, we must put in to Tabor island to spend the winter. But think of Tabor island after Lincoln Island. Ah, how unfortunate! Who could have believed it possible?”

“Let us get on,” was the engineer’s invariable reply.

And they worked away without losing a moment.

“Master,” asked Neb, a few days later, “do you think all this could have happened if Captain Nemo had been still alive?”

“Certainly, Neb,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“I, for one, don’t believe it!” whispered Pencroft to Neb.

“Nor I!” answered Neb seriously.

During the first week of March appearances again became menacing. Thousands of threads like glass, formed of fluid lava, fell like rain upon the island. The crater was again boiling with lava which overflowed the back of the volcano. The torrent flowed along the surface of the hardened tufa, and destroyed the few meagre skeletons of trees which had withstood the first eruption. The stream, flowing this time towards the southwest shore of Lake Grant, stretched beyond Creek Glycerine, and invaded the plateau of Prospect Heights. This last blow to the work of the colonists was terrible. The mill, the buildings of the inner court, the stables, were all destroyed. The affrighted poultry fled in all directions. Top and Jup showed signs of the greatest alarm, as if their instinct warned them of an impending catastrophe. A large number of the animals of the island had perished in the first eruption. Those which survived found no refuge but Tadorn Marsh, save a few to which the plateau of Prospect Heights afforded asylum. But even this last retreat was now closed to them, and the lava-torrent, flowing over the edge of the granite wall, began to pour down upon the beach its cataracts of fire. The sublime horror of this spectacle passed all description. During the night it could only be compared to a Niagara of molten fluid, with its incandescent vapours above and its boiling masses below.

The colonists were driven to their last entrenchment, and although the upper seams of the vessel were not yet calked, they decided to launch her at once.

Pencroft and Ayrton therefore set about the necessary preparations for the launching, which was to take place the morning of the next day, the 9th of March.

But during the night of the 8th an enormous column of vapor escaping from the crater rose with frightful explosions to a height of more than three thousand feet. The wall of Dakkar Grotto had evidently given way under the pressure of gases, and the sea, rushing through the central shaft into the igneous gulf, was at once converted into vapor. But the crater could not afford a sufficient outlet for this vapor. An explosion, which might have been heard at a distance of a hundred miles, shook the air. Fragments of mountains fell into the Pacific, and, in a few minutes, the ocean rolled over the spot where Lincoln Island once stood.

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SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL
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**Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror**
Lovecraftiana is a quarterly publication from Rogue Planet Press, with issues coming out April 30th, July 31st, October 31st, and January 31st, featuring stories, articles, poetry or artwork on Cthulhu Mythos / Lovecraftian themes.

Submissions can be sent to editor@schlock.co.uk

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*So saith Lovecraft.*

*Picture a future Earth, a savage world where science is jettisoned in favour of primitive superstition, where technology has become the idol of a new religion. A world where the truth of Cthulhu has been revealed, where a lunatic humanity has discovered its true insignificance—the punchline in a cosmic joke. A new dark age has descended upon a species that has learnt too much. Science and superstition and the sorcery of the Mad Arab create a world where only the strong survive, and barbarian warriors battle for existence in a bleak and pitiless universe...*

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Font and formatting: Please submit in Times New Roman, 12-point font; single line spacing. Please format the document to 1st line indentation of 1″. The page margin should be set to.1″ on all sides.

No headers, footers, or page numbers.

Please check grammar.

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