

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

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MAD THINGS

BY WALTER G
ESSELMAN
THEY HAD
BEEN PEOPLE
ONCE...

THE RENOWN BALLOON TRIAL

BY DOUGLAS J
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LOFT LADDER BY MELANIE DUFTY

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Douglas J Ogurek, Melanie Dufty, Gregory KH Bryant, Percy Greg, HG Wells*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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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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This week's cover illustration is Witch by [Dark Souls](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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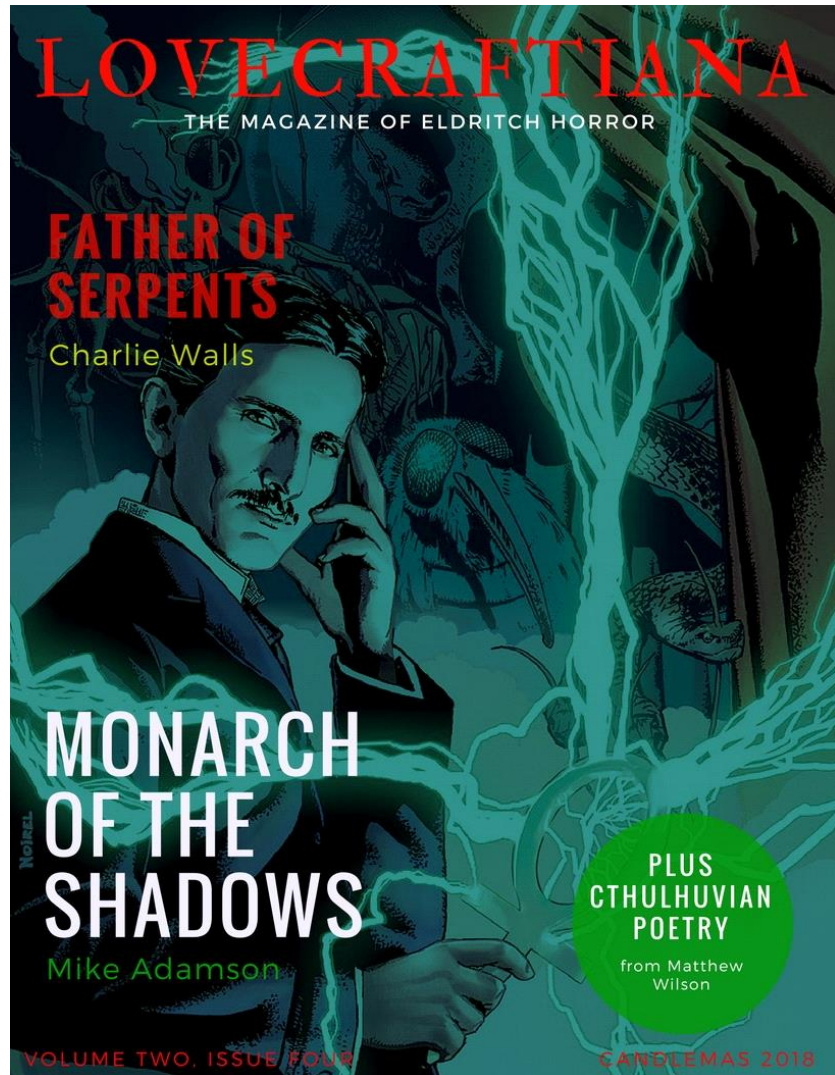
EDITORIAL

This week, a small group of survivors is pursued into a warehouse by Mad Things. Interior design is the issue in The ReNOWn Balloon Trial. Marie fears the darkness of the loft, but does the true source of fear lie elsewhere? A weak son seeks his shelter in poetry.

Holmes begins his investigation at the country house of Sir Digory Marency despite a cold welcome from his host. Mud questions Miriam. Our traveller to Mars continues his journey by sea. And we learn what the narrator and his curate companion saw from the ruined house...

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Candlemas 2018 edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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MAD THINGS by Walter G Esselman

Hasbro opened the door and levelled his shotgun into the room. Like the rooms behind them, it had a cement floor, rusted metal pillars, and very little light. Slipping through the door, he stepped carefully to the left. Hasbro kept his back against the wall, and he continued to watch the darkness for the beasts that used to be people, the Mad Things.

Boggs walked straight into the room with his baseball bat dangling by his side. He was looking around, a little bored.

“New guy!” hissed Hasbro in a low whisper, and Boggs turned to him.

“What?” asked Boggs in a normal voice.

But Hasbro continued to speak softly. “Haven’t you ever played video games? You never just walk straight into the middle of a room.”

Boggs rolled his eyes at that. “Really?” And he gave an exasperated noise. “What’re you, paranoi...”

Something jumped at Boggs and grabbed his head. As Boggs was propelled sideways, Hasbro was already moving back through the door.

Two more of the Mad Things ran out of the dark at Hasbro, but they hit the door at the same time getting wedged. The Mad Things started to shove at each other when Hasbro shot the one on his left. Its head snapped back from the deer shot. The remaining one, in its fast food uniform, glared at Hasbro with wild, deranged eyes.

Hasbro shot it down without exaltation. These were mad things, and did not know better, but they had been people once. He climbed over the bodies and saw that Boggs was holding the other thing away with his baseball bat.

“Help!” cried Boggs. “Get it off me!”

Aiming for the base of the Mad Thing’s skull, Hasbro shot it once. However, he had angled the shot away so that Boggs was not hit. But a little blood and gore still splattered on Boggs who angrily pushed the body aside.

“Gah!” cried Boggs as he stood up. “It got in my mou...”

And he stopped when Hasbro grabbed his shirt. Despite the fact that Hasbro was younger and shorter, Boggs saw the furious look in the boy’s eyes and froze.

“And THAT, is why you never walk into the middle of a goddamn room!” growled Hasbro.

Out in the hallway, footsteps slowed as they got close.

“Ha...Hasbro?” called out Lillian in a tenuous voice.

“This room’s clear,” replied Hasbro immediately. Lillian was too timid to tease, despite all her skill with a rifle.

“Th... the rest is clear too,” she said, and Hasbro could hear the relief in her voice.

Hasbro tried to stop himself from worrying about that morning. He was nervous that he had been too hard on Boggs. Or had he not yelled at Boggs hard enough? After they had locked all the doors into the warehouse, all the survivors had retreated to the upstairs offices, except for a guard posted below. Boggs had gone into a corner immediately and had just sat there refusing food.

Feeling like his insides were spinning wildly out of control, Hasbro stopped pacing, and looked out one of the office windows. The view was of an old metal roof, and in the distance, Lake Huron. He remembered what his therapist had said, before the world had gone to shit. She had said that he was human, and allowed to make mistakes. And in this case, he wasn’t even sure he had made one. Taking a few deep breaths, he tried to instil some calm, but his anxieties would not stop needling him.

Looking up, he saw Lillian kneeling in front of a box. Having counted the ammo in her clip, she slapped it back into her rifle, but then she paused. Her face screwed up in frustration, and she pulled the clip back out.

As she emptied the clip to count the ammo again, Hasbro was pulled from his own worries. He could hear his brother laughing at her for not trusting her first ammo count; or was this her fifth count?

Squatting down in front of Lillian, he looked at her. All he knew was that she had gone to the other high school in town. She saw him looking, and was suddenly self-conscious. Her rich brown hair hung in thick curtains on either side of her face, as if she could hide behind them at a moment’s notice.

“W-what?” she breathed nervously.

“Can I ask a personal question?” asked Hasbro in a low voice so as not to attract attention.

“I... I don’t know,” said Lillian wearily. “Depends.”

“Do you have OCD? Obsessive compulsive...” started Hasbro.

“I know what it is,” said Lillian in a quick, sharp tone, and she looked like she was about to be hit.

“It’s okay,” he replied quickly, and he stood up. He took a step back to view everyone.

“Two weeks ago,” he said in a louder voice, and then that terrible memory stopped him for a second. But he pressed on. “Two weeks ago, my brother tried to kill me. No warning. Just tried to stab me with the Taco Bell spork in his hand. And Thank God it was plastic.”

“You’ve already told us this,” said Mr. Patel, but without malice.

“I know, but I have a point,” said Hasbro patiently. “My brother was the star of the family. He didn’t have any fear, or concerns. Not like me. I had...have General Anxiety Disorder. He always said not to worry, like him. But two weeks ago, it was him that just went nuts.”

“You did say you had a point, didn’t you?” asked Boggs in a growl.

“I’m saying that everyone I know who turned into one of those Mad Things, as Lillian calls them, did not appear to have any type of...well, mental problem,” said Hasbro carefully.

“And you’re saying we do?” asked Mr. Patel in a defensive voice.

“I’m not going to ask you that,” said Hasbro quickly. “But ask yourself.”

“My Mom had a temper, but she didn’t have any mental problems,” said Lillian quietly.

“I would bet that Mr. Martinez down the street from my house didn’t have any either,” said Hasbro. “What I’m trying to say, probably badly, is that that might be why some people are surviving.”

“You think nutty people have some kind of immunity to...whatever it was?” asked Mr. Patel.

“I have had this odd tune in my head for a couple of weeks now,” said Hasbro as he thought furiously.

“Me too, and it’s been driving me crazy, because I can’t remember what it was,” said Lillian as she stood slowly.

“Kind of a Dum-da-da-da-dum,” replied Hasbro.

Lillian’s eyes widened even more. “W... What if it’s not a song we’ve heard before?”

“Wait,” said Mr. Patel. “So you’re saying that this song is driving people mad? How can that be?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Hasbro. “I don’t think it even changes our plan of going to the marina. Once we’re safe we can find a scientist, but right now...”

“It’s something,” nodded Lillian with a bright, almost hopeful, glint in her eye. “It means that

this might not all be completely random.”

“But where is the song even coming from?” asked Mr. Patel.

“No idea,” said Hasbro. “But we’ll figure it out.”

The guard from downstairs, Cho, burst into the offices.

“Haz!” called out Cho. “We got some sniffing below.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Boggs uncertainty.

“It means they found us,” said Hasbro kindly. “And if two found us...”

“...There’re more behind,” finished Lillian. She expertly reloaded her clip, and slapped it back into her rifle.

Everyone looked at Hasbro. He ignored the sizzle of anxiety because all these people were depending on him. He pushed the anxiety down for the moment.

“Plan has not changed,” said Hasbro definitely. “We still head for the marina. But we might have to fight our way out.”

“...again,” added Lillian sadly.

“Wha...what about the roof?” suggested Boggs nervously. Hasbro looked out the window at the metal roof that would get them almost to the marina.

Hasbro grinned at Boggs. “Great idea, new guy!”

THE END

See more of Walter G. Esselman’s work on Facebook with the keyword: Dragonson.

Or use the link: <https://www.facebook.com/Dragonson-154517599564/>

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

WINTER 2017-18

Schlock!

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Plus Five More Stories and
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from the thrilling pages of
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THE RENOWN BALLOON TRIAL by Douglas J Ogurek

Luke: 24:31: Their eyes were opened.

May 9, 2010

More invigorating than any bird's morning warble, the whirl of a circular saw slices through Krystal Celop's kitchenette. When construction finishes, SkyCarve will stand as an enviably elegant icon along Division Street.

Krystal slides her candle off a wedge of sunlight. Compared to her silver fingernail polish—they call it Urbane Élan—the candle's colours seem so... provincial.

Last night, Justine and Joan had cited the candle (for the thousandth time) to try to dissuade Krystal from using metal panels for the Atbridge Library entry façade. "It might not be the prettiest," Justine had said of the candle, "but we were never about pretty, right? We're about community. All these different voices? They come together, right? And the voices mould the solution."

"But we're designers," Krystal said. "We're the experts."

"We are architects." Justine used a stick—she must have picked it up in the lot—to fiddle with her shoelaces. Fluorescent green. So professional. "And Atbridge is a people community." She raised the stick like a sword. "Beer. Barbeques. Right? Baseball. Good, just good neighbourly people. Look at their slogan: 'Goodwill...' What is it?"

Joan flicked the bill of her baseball cap. "Where goodwill meets tradition." Then she shook her case, and her vitamin C tablets rattled. Justine and Joan. J.J., teaming up again.

Justine pointed the stick at Joan. "Right. So I think in this case, for this community? Brick does the job best."

"Oh, brick, brick," said Krystal. "Doesn't it seem rather—I don't know—uncouth?"

A tablet clacked against Joan's teeth. "Architecture's a team sport." Single-minded Joan, always churning out Justine's catchphrases. She offered a tablet. Krystal declined.

The whirl lacquers Krystal's condo with SkyCarve's grace. Sophisticatedly will Eydis Seidon's masterpiece wisp from the canon of contemporary architecture. It will inject the skyline with a svelte feminine force that will expose the Willis and the Hancock for the brutes they are.

Krystal removes the candle's lid. That aroma—it's called Thanksgiving—goads her with its vagueness.

"Think about its smell," Justine had said of the candle. "We can't say, 'This smells like pine,' or 'This smells like rose, or apples, or whatever.'" She picked at her stick, and the Pollyanna emerged. "It's all these smells blending, right? And the smell and the colours? We think of

friends and family. We think of them coming together. Schmandacular. That's what libraries do, Krys. They bring people together. And by designing them, we bring people together." We we we. One of these days, Justine would "we" Krystal to death.

"I'm the expert. I design it. And I know what looks right."

Joan slapped the cushion. "It's Tyet Partners..." That medicinal smell—the tablets were supposed to be fruity—slinked from her mouth. "... not Tyet Person." The parrot, repeating another Justine classic.

"You saw the AAG awards last year," said Krystal. "There was what? One masonry building. Masonry just isn't viable aesthetically."

Pollyanna giggled and took a whiff of the candle. "Is that who we're working for? AAG judges?" She was such a ten-year-old sometimes.

Krystal tried again. "Metal looks so much more beautiful, and sophisticated."

That's when Joan held Justine's half-filled coffee cup—part of Krystal's three hundred-and-fifty-dollar Ione collection—over the aquarium. "Maybe I should drop this."

"What are you doing?" said Krystal. "Those are platinum triggerfish. You'll kill them."

Joan raised the corner of her mouth. "But it would look more beautiful. More sophisticated with this in there." She shook her case. Figures it would be wood. Crude. Someone like Joan could never appreciate the refinement of metal, or the regal sleekness of platinum triggerfish.

A clinking, exultant, joins the whirl. This Mother's Day, the sounds of construction usher in an epoch. The New Epoch from which the True Female Artist will emerge. And soon, one will only need to look out Krystal's window to see the glimmering emblem that solidifies her connection to this epoch.

Krystal closes the candle's lid. Brick red, browns, ochres. So provincial. Of all the candles they could have picked as their internal symbol, couldn't they have selected something purer? Sleeker? More urbane?

A flicker catches Krystal's attention. From her balcony. She steps out, and SkyCarve's mechanistic symphony welcomes her. Lying on the balcony, as if it dripped from her condo's zinc cladding, is a mostly deflated silver balloon. Its string leads to a plastic bag that holds a postcard:

The ReNOWn Balloon Trial

ReNOWn magazine released this balloon and four others from its headquarters. Those who claim the balloons will be featured in a one-page profile of ReNOWn, the nation's fourth largest consumer magazine. Send an e-mail to renownbt@gmail.com. Include

your name, address, e-mail, the numeric code on this card, and where you found your balloon. We will contact you.

She squeezes and rotates the balloon until it offers a slightly expanded version of her face. Now she doesn't look so gaunt. A one-page profile. She'll wear Urbane Élan, perhaps her new silver blouse. The whirring and clinking across the street gleam inside her. What about silver eye shadow? The headline will read, "The Silver Sculptress," and they'll show images of Falone Valley and Mount Gallegos. Her libraries. Yes, this is a New Epoch, and Krystal Celop will be one of its progenitors.

She puts the candle in her cupboard. Time to take that off display for a bit.

July 3, 2010

On a conference room wall, the phrase "Architecture is a Team Sport" stretches across three large images: a woman showing a sketch of a building to laughing children, a man and woman at a library reference desk, and a group of people surrounding a model. On the latter image, a man in blue jeans and a flannel shirt points at the model.

Krystal Celop takes a knife out of Justine Baker's hand. "Well, I'm disappointed, severely."

Baker, sitting Indian-style on the table, wears fluorescent green shoelaces and a T-shirt with two cartoon characters on it. She holds a jar of peanut butter. "I'm just making some sandwiches."

"Nooooowah." Celop slides a lit candle, a glass of blue liquid, and a box of aluminium foil away from Baker. "Not that. This. The ID article I told you about? It's unacceptable." She sets a magazine article, highlighted in several places, before Baker, and then pulls her mirrored headband down over her eyes.

Baker reads and slides a finger along the table's curve. She smiles, revealing blue-tinted teeth. "Krys, Krys. This is schmandific. What's the matter?"

"I talked to the writer, the imbecile, for what? Like twenty minutes? I thought I'd have more quotes in there."

Baker scratches the loaf-shaped cartoon character on her shirt. "You got a big one, right here. 'Metal, more so than brick or concrete, distinguishes the owner. Krystal Celop.' There's your name."

"I said more than that, significantly more."

"You got one... two... three quotes in here."

“I sent him pictures. Of Falone Valley, Mount Gallegos? And of me.” Celop held the headband around her neck, then stuck out her tongue. “I thought maybe one would be on the cover. Nope. They didn’t put any in, anywhere. Not even a thumbnail. Absolutely unacceptable.”

Baker tears off a sheet of aluminium foil, then pushes her thumb through it.

Celop waves her arms. “Hey Justine, let’s get back to reality, here. This writer? He gave me the impression the article would be about my libraries. Our libraries. This thing’s about libraries in general.”

Baker punches another hole. “But we’re contributing here. We’re contributing to the literature on contemporary library design, right? For those who want that. And to get quoted in Iconic by Design? That’s schmandacular.”

Celop closes her eyes. “What’s today’s adventure?”

“Taking my niece and nephew to the arboretum. They’ve got these big ant sculptures there.”

“Couldn’t they have done something more majestic? Hawks or herons or something?”

“Ants are majestic, right?”

Celop brings up her headband. “I am getting another article, though. From ReNOWn.”

“No way. You mean the ReNOWn?”

Celop touches her temples, then raises her hands.

“So maybe you can get a couple of our projects in there? Like Wheatley Grove, or Ryerson. That would be schmandific.”

“I’ll send Falone Valley and Mount Gallegos, probably. But this article? Just so you’re aware. It’s more about me, as a designer.”

“You mean...” Baker hops off the table, then presses the foil sheet to her face. She looks through the holes, walks without bending her knees. “The Silver Sculptress? Krystal Celop is the Silver Sculptress.”

“Be good, Justine. Or I’m going to have to give you a detention.” Celop looks at her watch. “Where’s Joan?”

“Church.”

“On a Saturday?”

“Today’s the feast day of Saint Thomas, patron saint oooooof...” Baker, mimicking the Jeopardy tune, flaps the foil sheet.

“What is... being late to meetings?”

“Ehhhh. Architects, Krys, architects. Maybe Joan’s saying a few prayers for us.”

Celop taps her silver fingernails on a floor plan. “That’s not going to get these issues addressed.”

“You never know.”

“This is unacceptable. I have an appointment with my photographer in like two hours. I have to be there.”

Two minutes later, Celop cleans her sunglasses. Baker talks on the phone. “Hold on a sec.” She hands Celop an invitation. “Krys, Panville’s got this fundraiser. For a children’s reading garden at the library. It’s a picnic thing.”

Celop leans against the word “Team” on the wall and lowers her eyelids. “‘A Community Jamboree.’ How original. ‘Tug o’ war. Potato sack races?’ So wholesome. Oo oo. Maybe if the wives bake a pie? And the men really really like it? Maybe the wives can get a new bonnet then.”

Baker shapes the foil around her head like a bonnet, then presses the speakerphone button. “The thirty-first. We should go. All three of us. We should show our support.” She dips her finger in the candle’s liquid wax. “Joan’s in. What about you Krys?”

“Sorry. I have the Heartland Design Awards ceremony that day. But if you want to churn butter with the good folk of ye old Panville, go ahead.”

“I thought that thing’s at night. This thing’s around noon. It won’t take long.”

“It’s just not viable.” Celop taps her sunglasses, mirrored parallelograms, against the throat of the man in the flannel shirt.

“But Panville. You know, they don’t have a lot of nice landscaping.”

“But we were never about pretty, right?”

Baker sniffs a finger capped with the bronze-coloured wax. “You never know.”

“Sorry. I have a salon appointment. At twelve-thirty.”

“Maybe you could reschedule?”

Celop applies eye shadow. “At Gloria Partch? That won’t be viable.”

“We have to think about these Panville people, Krys. They just don’t have as much as people in Falone Valley.”

“They certainly don’t have as much discernment.”

“With this garden? They can have the beauty of nature.”

Celop’s eyelids shimmer. “I gave them something beautiful: my first concept. And they diluted it.”

“But they love what they got, right? They participated. They’re proud of it.”

“They destroyed my... it’s uncouth, that thing they have.”

Baker adjusts her foil bonnet.

Celop pretends to chip away a message. “Chink chink chink Stone Age chink chink garbage. Chink chink I am not chink chink chink going.”

From the phone: “Do it for the firm.”

“Ah Joan.” Celop puts fists to hips and lowers her voice. “It’s Tyet Partners, not Tyet Person.” She hands Baker the magazine, then points to a quote. “Read that. Read it.”

““People visit a library to learn something. Distinctive design reflects that sense of discovery. Distinctiveness magnetizes.””

“Distinctiveness magnetizes. I said that. When I go to the salon? I make myself distinct. When I go to the awards ceremony, my distinct designs magnetize, and I magnetize. That’s helping the firm. Some hokey festival with potato sack races? That doesn’t help us.”

Baker giggles and kneels. “All hail the Silver Sculptress.”

“What about you, with your Breaker & Knowly T-shirt and your green shoelaces and your blue teeth? You want to play these kindergarten games?” Celop yanks the foil off Baker’s head. “We’re supposed to be professionals. A professional design firm.”

Baker picks up a loaf of bread. “Here. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

Celop slaps it out of Baker’s hands. “Snack time ended in fifth grade.”

Baker shrugs, picks up the candle.

“Give me that. It’s like you two worship this thing. The hideous uncouth thing.”

“But think about what it represents, Krys.”

“Ahhh, I’ve heard it a trillion times.” Celop blows out the flame, then pulls off a long sheet of aluminium foil. “I designed something beautiful for them. Something svelte, but they rejected it, the Neanderthals. So now they have this monument to awfulness instead. And we let them.”

“We used their input, though. To refine your design.”

“Refine? They don’t even know what refine means. It was refined. They ruined it. Their provincial ignorance...”

Baker tilts her head. “But it was a joint effort, right? Lots of cooperation.”

“Oh, I know.” Celop grunts and beats her chest. “‘Architecture is a team sport.’ But those ignorant ignorant people.” She shakes the foil. “The Silver Sculptress? Yes, yes. That’s our future. They won’t question us. But now?” She places her hand over the eyes of the man with the flannel shirt. “My boy Jah-ny? He plays football, ya know? On the Colts. And I coach him. I coach them games. I got Jah-ny’s number on the back of my pick-up. And I got Colts flags on my pick-up too. Let’s have a cold one. And I’ll tell you how to design this thing.” She pins the foil over the image.

From the speaker: “They’re people, Krys. People.”

Celop pins foil sheets over the other two images. “You two keep going on your picnics and making your sandwiches. Keep on whoring our design to these Neanderthals. They defile it. Defile design. We worked too hard for this.” Celop rests her forehead against the foil.

The room is silent.

Baker picks up the phone, then exhales. “Good idea. All right. I’ll tell her.” She leans against the foil. “Joan thinks we should talk about this. Soon. We should go out to dinner or something. We’re worried about you, Krys.”

Celop carves letters in the aluminium on the wall: F U

Baker lowers the phone. “Krys, Joan says there’s another article. About Mount Gallegos.”

Celop stops at F U T U. “Where?”

“Where is it, Joan?” Baker picks up the bread. “The vault? In the vault.”

A small room lined with cabinets and boxes. Celop rifles through a stack of magazines. She sings, “Unac-CEP-table.” Then she slaps a box labelled “Sealfon Scented Candles. Scent: Thanksgiving. One dozen candles.” She yells, “That article, Justine? It shouldn’t be in here. It should be framed, in the lobby.”

The door closes, the bolt clicks. Celop pushes it. It does not open. She pounds it.

“Sorry, Krys.” The muffled voice of Baker. “We just think you need to cool off a minute. Or maybe warm up.” She giggles. “Think about—”

“What? Am I grounded now? Mom?”

“You don’t understand. Think about some of the things—”

“Brilliant move. Mature, Justine. Now where’s this article?”

“Krys, there is no article.”

Celop bashes a rolled drawing into the concrete wall. “You lied. You two lied to me?”

“You’re not getting it.”

“This is unacceptable. This isn’t how a partnership works.”

“Just take some time and cool off.”

“I don’t have time to take time.” Celop speaks through the rolled plans. “This isn’t very team-like, Justine. Joan’s the one who’s late. To a team meeting.”

“When she gets here, then we’ll talk.”

“I have an appointment, and I won’t be late.”

“You know we want the best for you, right?”

“Oh, I see. I get it. You’re locking me up.”

“Joan’s on board. I’m on board. Are you on board?”

“Like all those bastards tried to do? They tried to lock up all three of us. We’re supposed to rise above that.” Celop touches her shoulder blades then raises her hands. Her fingers jam into the ceiling. “I’ll soar. You two can’t cage me, Justine. I’ll soar, Justine. Justine?” No response. “It’s my turn. These uncouth crude ignorant Neanderthals won’t cage me.” She hurls the box of candles at the door.

Ten minutes later, fragments of glass and wax clutter the concrete floor. Celop, kneeling on boxes, examines a board on which rows of metal cladding samples shine dully. She removes one of the squares, then rubs it against her cheek.

Under the door darkness flickers. Crinkling on the other side. “You found me. Yipee! Is our little game over yet? Our little hide-and-seek game?”

A clacking noise, then something slides under the door. Light flocks to it, frolics on its craggy surface. Aluminium foil. A napkin-size piece of it. Straight on three sides, curved on one. Celop touches the lines that scar its centre, then flips it over. From the creases and light shards emerge words:

Krystal Celop, AAG
Chicago, IL
kcelop@tyetpartners.com

Black, hand-written. And no curves. All straight lines, sharp angles. “Oooo. This is so svelte. Maybe we should have it enlarged, hang it outside the studio?” No response. “Or maybe we can make a kite with it, and you two can hold the string. Would you like that? Holding the string?”

The buzzing of the lights kneads with the vault’s vague papery scent that Justine and Joan love so much. Celop examines the writing. The e’s, a’s, and p’s, with their triangular tops, look like pendants. Or weapons.

Celop wraps the foil around the one candle that she didn’t break. Not big enough. Those uncouth backwoods colours poke out. Justine and Joan. J.J. They’re the ones who are locked in. Locked into that belch and grunt design. Celop licks the zinc cladding sample. A punishing taste, but smooth and cool. A refinement entirely lacking in their brick and their ground-face block.

Justine, with her Sesame Street attitude. How could she keep that up with those Neanderthals? Aluminium foil under the door. Everything’s a game to her. And Joan, flicking her cap, rattling and clacking her tablets. General Joan Archbold: the tenacious warrior-architect.

Another piece of foil slips under the door. Same size, same shape. Same handwriting. It says, “Will she give you up?”

“Oh, goodie goodie. We’re onto a new game? Okay, let’s see. Will who give me up? The goddess of design? I and my mother are one. So who?”

Out there, aluminium foil tinkles, then the electric stapler snipes twice. A pound on the door, followed by determined scratching. But no speaking.

“Will who give me up, Justine? Justine, talk. Tell me.”

Another note slides into the vault. Something is attached to it. A picture, upside down, and beneath it, scrawled in that sharp accusatory handwriting, “HER.” Remnants of the zinc taste lash Celop as the photograph sets in. Justine, tied to a chair, on the conference room table. Worried eyes, and the Breaker & Knowly T-shirt. The person out there flicks the switch and the vault light goes out.

“Justine. What are you doing, Justine?” The dark compresses Celop, seems to seep through her skin. Her shoe sends a candle fragment skitching across the concrete. “I have my appointment. Let me out now. Please.” The last word vibrates off the metal shelving. The dark amplifies her breaths. Justine. And Joan’s on her way. There’s a lighter in here. Celop extends her arms and her breaths bound into the dark. Her hands slide over the cardboard boxes. Candle fragments crunch, skitch, poke, and the vault’s aroma scolds her.

Her hand locates the lighter. The flame flaps, and the crevices in the aluminium glow. Tape covers Justine’s mouth, and her eyes are red. Celop lights a candle, the one partly wrapped in foil. She did that.

Minutes later, that Thanksgiving scent has begun to gather within the vault’s aroma. Celop slides the zinc sample over her forehead and eyes. If it wasn’t J.J., then who? Some engineer she’s pissed off? No. Way too dull to conceive something like this. What about a client? Too stupid. In this light, the metal samples have a sickly pallor.

Two knocks, then the light turns on. No foil, but a scrap of paper this time. The aroma fusion glides and scrapes. She reads the scrap. It’s the “Distinctiveness magnetizes” callout, clipped from Iconic by Design. She squeezes the zinc. “I’m not ready. I don’t have—This is good, and I’m good. I said this to make a difference. We can talk...”

Now the foil slips in. Same shape as the others. Like a slice of bread. No words on this one, but a shape: a sperm. No, no. A balloon. A silver balloon. A card slides in. A postcard. The same postcard that was attached to the balloon.

More scratching on the other side. Calculated. Another foil slice slides through. The words slash across it disapprovingly. “I know you’re in there. She does not know that I know. If she gives you up, you die.” Celop feels herself falling.

Her body feels like dough splayed over the cold concrete. A stinging in her fingertip, and there is blood. Those uncouth candles. Her breaths, inhibited by the glistening feeling in her chest, grope around her. “I’m... I am... why are you doing this?”

He... they... whoever slides another piece of paper into the vault. Again, in the cultured font of Iconic by Design, her own words snub her: “Distinctiveness magnetizes.” The light turns off.

As Celop rises, the air latches onto her tear tracks. Who’s out there? A group? Some elitist cadre that invents these schemes to toy with its random victims? Or maybe it’s one person? Someone fed up with all the staid ideas, the crude masses. An individual who’s developed a totally

individualistic art form. An individual, perhaps not unlike her.

Joan. Where's Joan? She was supposed to get here ten minutes ago. Does he have her already? It's Tyet Partners, right Joan? So you'll put up a fight? We'll see. Celop's fingertip stings, and the blood streaks her nail. Urbane Élan doesn't look so urbane now.

The wax that pools around the flame glows vulgarly. She's seen that glow, somewhere.

And what's Pollyanna thinking now, with her red eyes and that tape? Where's your community now, Justine? And what's he doing to her? What's he offering her to give up Celop's location? Her life?

The blood on her nail looks brick red. Bricks. Celop speaks in a quiet baby voice. "Architecture is a team sport... a team sport." We'll see.

Wheatley Grove. That's where she's seen that glow. The way the sun whisked itself into the oak leaves that day. She dips the zinc square in the wax. People stood in clusters, ate bagels and muffins, and drank coffee in paper cups. Kids chased each other in a forest of blue jeans. And from the prairie restoration's rusts, browns, and mustards rose the reason for the gathering: a library addition. Tyet Partners' first project. Vulgar? Maybe that's not the right word.

Celop removes the foil around the candle. The bright orange sweatshirt Justine wore that morning. Her usual level of maturity. A Wheatley Grove High School Lynx sweatshirt. And Joan, thlapping her baseball glove, gave some boys her brick spiel. Justine bounced up to the mayor, said the masonry and the leaves colour coordinated for the dedication. "The day turned out good enough to spread butter on and eat."

The fragrance fusion cradles Celop. That library never won any awards, never graced the glossy pages of a design magazine. But that day, as the people gathered and the sun shone, there was a good feeling. The three of them had made that thing, however provincial it was. And the community members? They were proud of it.

But that was before Falone Valley and Mount Gallegos, before the awards. Before Celop, unlike her partners, evolved into a more discerning judge of aesthetics.

Thanksgiving. Through how many construction document marathons, and in how many conceptual design debates had the scent mingled among them? And now, its wax stifles the zinc sample, cuts off its gleam. Justine, going batty over those candles. Handing them out to clients, talking about how they represent teamwork. Going to all these hokey community events, like this jamboree in Panville. It is a vulgar glow, a vile vulgar glow that would stifle the New Epoch of the True Female Artist.

She picks at the wax, and the light snaps on. A foil slice skates in. "3rd is coming. No sounds. Or all 3 die." Joan's here. The lights turn off. From out there wanders a sound, like unravelling. Celop dips a finger in the wax and the nip soothes. The wax muffles the silver polish. Not unravelling, but rattling, a rhythmic rattle. The vitamin C tablets. Three hard shakes, a pause,

three more shakes. Getting louder. Joan, who refused to wear makeup.

A groan and a thump on the door. The patter of pills spilling on the carpet. One slides into the vault. Sliding against the door, and someone huffs. Dark dumps over the concrete near the door.

Celop rocks and the flame crackles. Muted silver on her nail. Joan, who, after seeing “The Passion of the Christ,” launched a brick that said “You Don’t Disrupt That Film” through the bay window of the teenage culprit’s home, releases a whine that slices through Celop. Then silence.

Later, Celop sits on the concrete and squeezes the stray vitamin C tablet. On this card, the latest, a photograph of her partners, taped, bound. Justine’s chair is propped up on the conference table, so that guy in the flannel shirt appears to point at her. The spirit that springs from her shoelaces and shirt contrasts with her expression.

Joan, also seated, glares at the camera. Her head blocks the “R” on the “Read” poster in the reference desk image behind her. It almost looks like “eat.” The children on the leftmost panel seem to point and laugh at her partners. Did he position them like this on purpose? Is this part of his game?

Below the photo, a message is grooved into the foil: “Will they give you up, Silver Sculptress?” The tails of the s’s slash off the foil, and Joan’s tablet feels gritty. Gritty Joan, who got kicked out of a bar for throwing her bloody pad at those jerks who called their undergraduate homeless shelter project “barbaric.” And Justine? Even now, she never knocks Celop’s preliminary concepts. Until the community sinks its claws into them. Celop runs her fingers across the unwaxed part of the zinc sample. So much smoother than Joan’s tablet.

They can’t give her up. She’s the one slated to get a “Porter of Progress” award. Her. She’s the one poised to evolve architecture. She’s the one, but now she might not get the chance. She stands. The one to bring in the New Epoch. She whips the tablet down. It splits on the concrete.

Celop has missed her photography appointment. She looks into her headband. It stretches her eyes too much, and her eyelids look like UFOs. She feels weak enough to liquefy. Krystal Celop, a silver puddle sliding across the concrete.

What does it smell like in here? Glue? No, something else. From the light beneath the door crawls an ant. Celop sets the headband in its path, but it climbs right onto it. She lifts the headband. The ant doesn’t stop to admire the accessory’s elegance, or to take stock of itself. It just keeps crawling. What did Justine call ants? Majestic. Majestic, when this thing would never scowl from a sports team’s logo, or ornament a critic’s description of SkyCarve, unless she’s talking about the people below. This creature has one goal: to gather food for its fellow ants. It crawls onto Celop’s blood-blemished fingernail. The design world may never see her get that “Porter of Progress” award. Colleagues and clients may never intuit her connection to the New Epoch as they admire SkyCarve from her condo.

She sets the ant back on the floor. The ReNOWn Balloon Trial. Why didn’t she look into it

before she sent that e-mail?

A crumb—it's twice the size of its carrier—moves determinately over the concrete. A piece of Joan's tablet. Celop sets the zinc square, now cleaned of the wax, in the ant's path. It stops. Probably looks ominous to the little guy. A vast stark gleaming wall. Celop gathers the three largest tablet fragments, then puts them in her mouth.

She rolls the pieces between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. Joan would rap a brick in front of a class of fourth graders. "You're right. Strong. Solid. These things? They don't rust or shatter. They don't dent or rot. Bricks last a long long time."

The ant changes direction, and through Celop's mouth spreads a gritty sweetness. Justine, almost skipping around the classroom. "Good, very good Leslie. They do feel like a beard, right? Rough like that?" Tossing granola snacks to kids who answer her odd questions. "Bread, ha. Bricks the colour of bread. Schmandacular. That's beautiful."

Again Celop blocks the ant, and again, it about-faces. What did metal remind kids of? She'd never asked. Once, she overheard a boy. "That lady there? When you peel away her skin? Underneath? I bet she's all metal underneath."

As the ant makes its way toward the door, Celop holds the square over it. How could it be majestic, when she could crush it so easily?

What did her captor believe in? Was this his supreme act of individualism? His art? He probably heard her conference room tirade, her "I magnetize," and he probably liked it. He probably identified with her work too.

Urbane Élan makes her fingers look welded to the square she holds over the ant. She's much better than this captor. Lately, she's been so focused on her image, her legacy, that she's neglected architecture's ultimate beneficiary: people. "I magnetize." How could she have said that, to Justine and Joan? Her partners. She had ignored them, devalued them. And they never got caught up in this cold quest for the New Epoch. They just wanted to do good, to give to communities, and to people. Like with this Panville reading garden. What a fool she's been.

They haven't given her up. If architecture is a team sport, her partners are living proof. The zinc square. Mount Gallegos had its gunmetal-coloured aluminium wall system. Falone Valley had its zinc panels, its perforated metal ceiling fixture. But Wheatley Grove—the scent in here resembles olive oil—had those glowing leaves, and there was that morning. The candle glows gently, and the ant passes beneath the door, back into the light.

Out there a sound, a tinkling, uneven, and footsteps. Keys jangling. Celop crawls backward and the light snaps on. She rises. Her palm stings and a grainy feeling moves through her. She brushes glass off her palms, her knees. A foil slice slides in. He has keys and the foil says, "Keep Back." Did they give her up? There is a tap and a click at the door. He's testing the keys. Two

more clicks and Celop backs into boxes. Justine and Joan wouldn't have. He took the keys. The gluh-luh-luh of a key entering the lock. The bolt schlucks. Justine and Joan are her partners. The door opens just enough for Celop to see the carpet, the filing cabinet.

A gun appears in the gap, then slips out of sight. Next a material, brown. Light clings to it and it jounces, then falls to the concrete. The door closes, locks.

The material is thick. Beneath it, a foil slice. The words carve through her:

Put this on
Knock
Step back
No sounds

She whispers to herself, "I'm not a robot not a robot no no. We... we we..." While she holds the hood at the top of her head, the candle, the aroma, and the vitamin C taste converge and, for a moment, unclog something. Then she pulls down the hood.

She knocks twice, then takes three steps back. The material absorbs her breaths, her sobs, offers a scent she recognizes. The lock schlucks. Celop reaches forward as the door squelches open. Someone is stepping toward her. On her forearm settles a hand, gloved. It guides her arms down, behind her. Clicking, then cold clamps around her wrists.

Silently he guides her, onto the carpeting. His grip on her arm is firm but not cruel. The hood smells like the elevator in the UWE library.

Pressure on the back of her knee. She steps up. A muted whine and a shlinking noise. She's in the conference room, with her partners.

Whining and pounding. A hand on her back, guiding her down, into a chair. Hundreds of times, that elevator carried the three of them between their study nooks and the main level.

Stomping, footsteps, sobbing. Then the noise stops.

It's Tyet Partners, not Tyet Person.

How long—five minutes, a half hour? —has she been sitting here, blinded by this hood, waiting for something—a shot, a scream, a footstep—anything besides her own snivelling and that occasional shlinking noise? Her hands and knees sting, and that foil script sticks in her mind.

There. A sound. It lasted half a second, yet still it spools around her and there, again. A rolling sound, rolling and now mumbling and heavy breathing. Rolling and the stomping starts. Is it Justine? Rolling, stomping, and that shlinking. Celop—these are her partners—rises amid the noise, bends over, and then shakes off the hood.

Her partners, hooded, are here. The conference room door is closed. Just the three of them. Justine rolls back and forth on the table, stomps and thrashes her head. Joan, cuffed to a filing cabinet handle—there's the shlink—slaps the wall.

At the far end of the table glows a candle, next to which lies a small key.

July 31, 2010

Wind fights to break up the Panville Library Community Jamboree, but the community fights back with stakes and with shoes and cans.

The woman across from Krystal—she calls herself C.C.—spoons shimmering mush into her daughter Thera's mouth and takes in the activity outside the tent. Behind her stands the library, the sunlight gathering on its bricks, on its limestone and copper accents.

Children's concepts for the future reading garden flutter on the trellises that mark its boundaries. Three girls colour over there. Probably working on their additions to the trellis.

The bigger boy with the grey star on his shirt—he's been badgering the girls for a while—watches them over his shoulder while he tosses a football with another boy.

C.C.'s pigtails sway, and her tanned skin looks tough enough to forge steel. Krystal asks her what she thinks about the library. "Oh I love it." The sun highlights a scar on her cheek. "I mean, my kids and me? We come, they get their things, you know? Their books, and movies if they're good. And I get all kinds of stuff. On animals and advertising. And on making your point. Persuasion?"

Gray Star points up and behind him.

C.C. seems more bartender than ad agent. Yet, she also seems more biker road trip than community jamboree. Krystal asks if she's in advertising.

"No no, I teach. At Knowlton Middle School. But I also started this website? Here." She hands Krystal a card: Mutt pact.com: Where Mixed Breed Owners Mix. "It's for mutt owners. We encourage people to adopt mutts."

"I've been thinking about getting a dog. I'll check that out." Colourful candies rise from the grey frosting—who makes grey frosting? —on Krystal's piece of cake.

"They offer just as much joy as purebreds."

Gray Star catches the football, then tramples the girls' pictures, kicks their crayons. The bully.

Shrieks and laughter behind Krystal. Wetness taps her right triceps. Five children assail Justine

with squirt guns. She fires back at them, then falls on the grass. “You got me. I can’t—you guys got me.” Convincing. “Break, break. I give up. Okay, I need a break.”

Justine straddles the bench, wrings out her lime and pink shirt. A couple of the balloons painted on her face have smudged. She points at the cake. “Grave cake?” Krystal holds it out to her, then Justine forks off a candy that rivals her shirt in boldness.

Krystal introduces C.C., to whom Justine explains Tyet Partners’ connection to the library. Now Joan is over there talking to the bully and the girls. She points toward the area where children play and adults cluster.

The tent’s fringes flap and C.C. talks. “. . . great job. Our apartment—we moved in a couple months ago? —it’s just down the road. And I think the library, it’s one of the reasons.” Thera puts her finger through a small hole in C.C.’s T-shirt. “When I see it? I think, now that’s friendly. It’s just solid, it’s a solid friendly place.”

Justine goes for another candy. “Schmandacular. I’ve got something—” There is a rustle and Justine’s eyes widen. She clenches her teeth—the fork clinks—and she lunges toward Krystal. The cake slice mashes into Justine’s shirt.

Krystal feels something settle on her head, then she smells the nylon and knows it is the tent. Justine, her top rippling, clutches the metal support pole that would have struck Krystal.

When others come to help, Justine sticks her finger in the white glob on her shirt. “Look. It’s only grey on the outside, right?” She licks her finger. “C.C., I have something for you. I’ll be right back.”

Justine, arms raised, swerving, children in tow, runs toward the parking lot.

In the opposite direction, Joan, the two girls, and the bully stand by a huge mud puddle. The girls run to one side of it. Joan shows Gray Star the screen on her video camera and says something. He looks up at her as if she’s dumping hot wax on him. Then he shuffles to the side opposite the girls. Joan passes a rope between them. People start to gather.

Thera grasps a pigtail and reaches toward the trellises as her mother watches the group.

Joan—her ponytail keeps the wind from seizing her hat—raises her hand. Whatever’s on that video camera, it isn’t pretty. Krystal says, “Remember, Goliath lost.” Joan’s hand comes down.

A minute later, the people of Panville cheer, and the boy with the grey star is covered in mud.

The wind rips C.C.’s card from Krystal’s hand, sends it flapping off the table. Joan sprints toward the rising card. Her vitamin C tablets clack with each stride. She leaps off a cooler and then, with her taut body extended, snatches the card from the air.

Krystal thanks Joan, then taps her video camera. “Hard to believe those girls were stronger.”

“They needed to learn something. So did he.” Joan flicks her cap and sits. Her sunglasses reflect C.C. lifting Thera over her head, and behind them, the fluttering drawings. “Don’t you have that salon appointment?”

“No. I’ve decided... I don’t need that.”

Justine returns with one of the boxed candles, then gives it to C.C. “A housewarming gift. From us.”

C.C. reads aloud the tagline on the box: “Tyet Partners: Let’s Learn Together.” She removes the candle, then lets Thera touch the glass. “Thank you. This is, Thanksgiving. What’s it smell like?”

“Schmandific. Mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. Just kidding.” Justine points at Krystal’s shoulder.

A piece of confetti, crown-shaped, glimmers on her top. Probably planted by the wind. “You know, we’re not sure what it smells like,” says Krystal. “It’s all these nice smells, mixed together. Kind of a mutt candle.”

C.C. removes the candle’s top, then takes a big whiff. She thinks of the dog park. Different breeds, different people. The setting sun paints the prairie grass that surrounds them, stitches three orange stripes on the dark blue silo in the distance. “It’s—wow. There’s a hint of banana bread, I think. Here.”

As Justine smells the candle, she notices that Krystal’s Panville shirt ripples. “Hm. You never know.” With her orange and brown athletic shorts, and without all that eye-shadow, Krystal looks so much better. More human. “What do you think, Krys? Banana bread?”

The aroma comforts Krystal, and somehow fuses with her surroundings. It seems to hoist those bricks, and, like a proud parent, to nod at the people of Panville. A solid friendly place. “Maybe... yeah, could be. Your call.” She picks off the confetti crown, then passes the candle to Joan.

As Joan inhales, something flashes behind Krystal. Joan recognizes it as the tinfoil that wraps the wheat bread that she baked for the event. Foil, she thinks. Such a versatile material. It deflects, it covers, it protects, and, as she and Justine discovered, it even makes a good writing surface.

THE END

NB: This story first appeared in Dark Things V published by Pill Hill Press.

Bio

Douglas J. Ogurek is the pseudonym for a writer living somewhere on Earth. Though banned on

Mars, his fiction appears in over fifty Earth publications, including Schlock! Webzine. Ogurek founded the controversial literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a positive message. He guest-edited Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #58: UNSPLATTERPUNK!, the first ever unsplatterpunk anthology. He reviews films at that same magazine. Recent longer works include the young adult novel Branch Turner vs the Currants (World Castle Publishing) and the horror/suspense novella Encounter at an Abandoned Church (Scarlet Leaf Publishing). More at www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com Twitter: @unsplatter

[Cyrus Song](#)



Cyrus Song

Steve Laker

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LOFT LADDER by Melanie Dufty

Marie looked at the calendar and gulped.

November the thirtieth.

Tonight, Mum would unveil her advent calendar, and she'd have to go up the loft and retrieve the Christmas decorations.

She dunked her spoon back into her chocolatey cereal. Mum was busily filling up her lunchbox.

"I've given you an apple, love. There's no Penguins left."

Marie was sure she'd seen a full packet in Mum's shopping bag yesterday. Later, she would find all the wrappers hidden at the bottom of the bin.

Mum came up behind her, hugged her round the shoulders and squeezed. She had her excited voice on. "Christmas decs tonight," she singsonged. Marie smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thanks for going up the loft for me, love. My knees won't take that ladder and I'm worried I'll get stuck up there."

Marie watched Mum's bum wobbling as she walked back over to the toaster to butter her third slice. She thought of the loft and gulped again.

She hated the loft, dark and full of spiders hiding and leaking dark monsters through the hatch, onto the landing. She hated having to stand on the beams, not the thin floor the ceiling ready to swallow her leg through with its hungry jaws.

Mum had the house ready when she got in from school, even though she hadn't changed out of her pyjamas. There was a Christmas tape playing, hot chocolate in a pan on the stove and jam sandwiches.

"I've been waiting all day for you, love. Come on. Get changed and get the decs down, and we can do the whole house up before Coronation Street starts."

The ladder felt rickety and it was hard for Marie to climb it and hold the torch in her hand. The bulb had gone up there and Marie wasn't tall enough to change it yet. The torch beam wouldn't reach the furthest corners of the loft so she tried to switch her brain off, stopped thinking of everything that could be in the dark.

She knew exactly where the Christmas boxes were—back corner, next to the fuse box. Mum had

stored them safely up here last year before the sadness and the new wobbly bum and puffy face.

It was warm and the dark was touching her damply on her face, and the back of her neck, a spider's tickle.

She could hear mum downstairs singing along with 'Jingle-bell Rock' and the click-click-click as she went around the house putting all the lamps onto make it cosy.

Marie loved coming home to Mum, especially on a winter's afternoon after school. The house always smelt lovely and, from the top of the street, she could see the yellow lampglow in the front window. It was even better when there were Christmas fairy lights too, little pricks of colour in the grey street.

She smiled, growing brave at the thought, and flicked the torch onto the boxes in the corner. Something moved. A skittering something. Her stomach flipped. She hated mice. What if she picked the box up and, halfway down the ladder, a mouse ran down her arm? Her mind flicked back to Pongo the hamster who hadn't been seen for over a year now. She stepped carefully beam to beam, keeping her eyes and imagination away from the dark. The boxes were stacked, she'd need to take them one at a time down the ladder into the warm yellow light of home. Then, they'd put out all their familiar things, the dishes and garlands, lights and stockings and all the little houses and fake snow on the mantelpiece—Marie's favourite. Not long now, and she'd be out of this dusty dark and sitting snuggled with Mum in the living room. In the dark, Marie picked up the first box with the torch balanced on top.

Downstairs, in the warm light of the kitchen, Mum heard a knock on the backdoor and danced towards it with a tea towel over her shoulder. She wasn't prepared at all. You don't expect to see one, not in broad daylight in your own garden. They're meant to live in the dark, in your nightmares, in the black. It took a step over the threshold. Marie didn't hear a thing. She was safe in the loft.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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THE LAMENT by Mathias Jansson

O mighty Gods
hear my lament
why did you make my son
so weak
that he seek his shelter
in poetry
instead of the battlefield?
The sky darkened
a roaring growing
and in front of him
stood the God of Thunder
You fool of a father to a son!
Don't you see
that his words
are more dangerous
than any mighty sword
when they hit our enemies
right in the soul?
Don't you see
that his poems
are sharper
than any weapon
and could overthrow
every king
as an arrow
right in the heart?
Don't you see
that his writings
are stronger
than any army?
With his pen he could
bring back every hero
fallen in history
full armoured in glory
and win the war

THE END

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman and a young child. The woman is holding a large, dark, textured axe over her face, partially obscuring it. The child is looking over the woman's shoulder. The overall tone is dark and mysterious.

WINTER 2017-18

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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST-MEN OF ATLANTIS by Milly “Mad Dog”
McGuigan

Chapter Three

Not taking his hands from the reins, Holmes turned his gaze upon the man in the invalid chair.

‘My dear sir,’ he replied with a laugh. ‘You seem to have the advantage of knowing my name. You, I suppose, must be Sir Digory Marency, and this will be Chivers.’

Sir Digory purpled. ‘Never mind my butler! You had no invitation from me, Holmes. Now be off with you, back to London where you belong, and that other vagabond with you!’

For a former missionary, Sir Digory seemed distinctly destitute of the milk of human kindness, but I could see from where I sat beside Holmes that the fellow was suffering from some kind of wasting disease, no doubt picked up in the filthy climate of British West Africa. Perhaps it was this that confined him to his invalid chair, since it seemed doubtful that he had discovered any lost cities in such a condition. Nevertheless, it was clear that he had once been a fine, imposing figure of a man, with hawkish nose, blazing eyes and iron grey hair, thinning at the corners. When his face was not red with anger, it was jaundice yellow, but there was still a hint of the bronze tan of far-off African suns.

‘Father,’ came a reproving voice from the side of the house. I looked up to see Miss Marency standing there, accompanied by a tall, vital man with a shock of auburn hair, dressed in shooting tweeds. With them was a short, shabby looking grey-haired fellow with a lined face, huge grey whiskers, and an Aldermanic belly. ‘I told you that Mr Holmes was on his way. You must remember your manners and welcome your guest into your home.’

At this reproof, Sir Digory relented somewhat. ‘I tell you I don’t need any detectives,’ he said gruffly. ‘Some ruffian fired a shot at me, but Chivers here chased him off. That’s all.’

‘This isn’t the bush, old chap,’ said the tall man as the three of them joined us. From his Scotch accent I assumed him to be McAllister, the district commissioner. ‘You don’t get raiders in the Old Country. I’ve never been in these parts myself before, but it’s a peaceful place, not British West Africa. If someone took a shot at you, Sir Digory, you should be very worried indeed.’

‘Particularly, if I may say so,’ oozed the grey whiskered fellow, speaking with the accent of a Boer, ‘considering the auction of the map.’ He must be Krueger, I told myself.

‘Anyone taking pot-shots at me,’ said Sir Digory, gesturing to Chivers to wheel him back inside, ‘must need his head examining if he thinks he’ll be able to get his claws on my map. I won’t let it go alive or dead unless it’s sold for a good price that can pay off all my father’s debts.’

He and Chivers vanished inside. Miss Marency came to stand by the dog cart while McAllister and Krueger spoke in low tones by the front door.

‘Welcome to Marency Hall, gentlemen,’ she said a little stiffly. ‘I must apologise for my father’s abrupt manner. I have been unable to persuade him that he needs your services. He’s fearless!’ She called a stable boy to drive our hired dog cart round to the coach house and made arrangements for our belongings to be taken up to our rooms, and we climbed down to join her.

Holmes and I shook hands with McAllister and Krueger, who welcomed us with more warmth than their old friend.

‘So sorry about your welcome,’ McAllister said with a booming laugh. ‘Our old friend’s not been the same since, well... you know.’

‘He had a bad time of it in the bush,’ Krueger snapped. ‘But the famous Sherlock Holmes will have done his research,’ he added with a sneer.

‘Please follow me,’ said Miss Marency, ignoring the Boer’s rudeness.

She led us into the house and through into a sitting room in what she told us was the seventeenth century wing of the building. There was no sign of her father.

‘I think Papa has gone to his study,’ she said, giving us a sweet smile. ‘He will be showing everyone the map tonight after dinner, so he is preparing himself.’

A maid served us with drinks and we relaxed as Miss Marency made polite conversation. I gazed out through the French windows—no doubt introduced since the seventeenth century—and listened to her inconsequential chatter. Holmes followed my gaze. He had been taking everything in as is his way, but now he politely interrupted Miss Marency.

‘What a beautiful garden,’ he said. We were on the northward facing side of the house, having come from the south. Indeed it was a handsome enough garden, if overgrown, with a terrace overlooking a croquet lawn with a shrubbery and trees in the distance. Far off I saw the blue shimmer of what I suspected to be quite a large lake. Somehow this reminded me of Stanley sailing round Lake Uganda, no doubt a larger pond, but whilst reading his account I couldn’t stop myself from imagining children playing at the bottom of the garden.

‘Thank you,’ said Miss Marency. ‘I’m afraid the garden has been neglected liked so much of the estate. My father has plans to make sweeping changes after the sale of the map.’

‘And it’s his closest friends from the old days who are bidding?’ I said perceptively.

McAllister laughed, but Krueger gave me a sour look. ‘Close friends?’ he drawled. ‘I don’t think so...’

Before he could elaborate, McAllister interrupted in his domineering way. ‘Only we stayed at his side, it’s true. Both of us have our own reasons for wanting to purchase the map. I want to open up the interior of British West Africa to civilisation, schools and hospitals and missions, and that needs paying for. These diamond mines will be better exploited by overseas companies than if

they remain in the hands of natives who don't have a notion of the market price of the shiny things. Mynheer here, on the other hand...

'I've worked hard for forty years,' Krueger said, 'trading up and down the Colonies. I have a little capital set aside, or I'd not be bidding against this overpaid, over principled idiot beside me. I want a nice little nest egg to retire on. Get meself a little place like this one.' He indicated the blackened oak rafters above with a stubby paw. 'Opening up the diamond fields could do just that for me.'

Sherlock Holmes changed the subject. 'Was it out on this terrace?' he asked Miss Marency. 'The attempt on your father's life?'

'Ever the professional, Mr Holmes,' said McAllister wryly. He put down his glass and rose. 'Come along, Krueger,' he instructed the Boer. 'We'll leave these gentlemen to their labour. It's about time we were dressing for dinner anyway.' He made his farewells to Miss Marency and us. As Krueger followed the Scot from the living room, I heard the Boer grumbling about how he never had to dress for dinner while outspanning in the bush.

'An interesting pair,' Sherlock Holmes observed to me in an undertone as Miss Marency led us outside. 'Almost as intriguing as our truculent host.'

We stood on the terrace. In the distance the sun was beginning to decline over the evening woods. Miss Marency pointed towards the bushes. 'Over there are the rhododendrons where Chivers glimpsed the man we believe shot at my father.'

'And where were the guests at this point?' Holmes asked her.

She looked at him sharply. 'As far as I know, and I have spoken to the servants at length since last speaking with you, everyone has been accounted for, other than Mr McAllister, who appeared a little later, saying he had been resting in his room.'

'But no one can corroborate this?' Holmes asked. She shook her head. 'What of Mynheer Krueger?'

'He certainly was in his room,' she told us, 'since he was the last of the guests to arrive. He was in his room at the time, unpacking his luggage.'

'He didn't leave this to a servant?' Holmes asked. When she shook her head in silence, he said, 'A rugged individualist, this Boer.' My friend went to examine the terrace. 'Where was your father at the time of the shot?' he asked.

Miss Marency showed him the spot. He knelt down and examined the ground, then shook his head in irritation. 'Newbold's flatfooted constables have trampled all the ground here,' he said. 'There is nothing I can find.'

'Surely it should be the rhododendrons that you should investigate,' I told him.

He shot me a dark look, then strode down the steps and across the lawn. I trailed after him while Miss Marency watched from the terrace, remaining at my friend's request in the same position as her father at the time of the shooting. Holmes found more signs of clumsy investigation. He turned and studied Miss Marency, then aimed an imaginary firearm in her direction.

'It must have been here that the man was standing,' he muttered, examining the ground in a desultory fashion. 'Hello!' he said suddenly. 'Something has survived the descent of the Law.'

Two shallow footprints could be seen in the mud at the base of a bush, as if someone had been standing in its shelter. Holmes examined the prints and then stood astraddle them. Finally, he sighted on Miss Marency a second time. 'But where is the cartridge?' I heard him mutter. 'The shot can't have come from here.'

I looked keenly about but there was indeed no sign of a cartridge.

We returned to Miss Marency and the terrace. 'Aha!' said Holmes, stalking forwards. Miss Marency looked at the ground beside her and I followed her gaze. My friend seemed to genuflect before her, then whipped out a large magnifying glass. She lifted her skirts demurely and moved back a pace. I joined Holmes to find him inspecting a bloodstain on a flagstone.

'Chivers' blood, I assume,' Miss Marency murmured, watching over our shoulders.

Holmes straightened up. 'Without a doubt,' he said, 'unless other blood has been shed here?' She shook her head. 'Good. We need to determine where the shot went, however, after passing through the butler's arm. Or perhaps more blood will be shed here before the night is out.'

He looked about him, and hunted up and down the terrace while I followed at his heels. Miss Marency watched in silence as Holmes studied the wall of the house adjacent to the terrace. Giving an ejaculation, he pointed.

'What's this?' he demanded. I followed his finger and saw a white scar in the stonework, a fresh bullet hole.

I shrugged. 'The bullet hit the wall here, I suppose.'

'Precisely,' said Mr Sherlock Holmes. He leapt up onto a stone bench and examined the mark, working out the exact angle then turning and sighting back. To my surprise he seemed to be looking in the direction of the far end of the west wing of the house.

He leapt back down and approached Miss Marency, dusting off his hands. 'Well, I've finished my preliminary investigation,' he told her with a grin.

'So I see,' she said. 'Have you drawn any conclusions?'

'For the moment, Miss Marency,' he prevaricated, 'I'd rather not jump to any rash assumptions.'

Is that the dinner gong?’

Acknowledging the distant clangour, she nodded. ‘Shall we go in?’

After we had dressed for dinner in our rooms, Holmes and I made our way down the imposing sweep of the main staircase together.

‘You seemed to think the shot came not from the garden,’ I remarked, ‘but from the west wing.’

He nodded. ‘It was impossible to ascertain which window,’ he said, ‘but certainly it did not come from the shrubbery.’

‘A guest?’ I asked, and he nodded silently. ‘One of the ones who have fled?’ I added, ‘Or one of the ones who have stayed? And who was it who was standing there in the shrubbery? Do we have two would-be assassins?’

But by then we had reached the entrance to the dining room, and Holmes lifted one long finger to his lips, enjoining silence.

Sir Digory proved more hospitable over dinner, sitting at the head of the long dining table, talking most wittily of his time in Africa, provoking much laughter from his two old friends, although Miss Marency sat in silence. Holmes spoke at length about his theories, which Sir Digory confessed to finding fascinating, and I entertained the company with reminiscences of Army life in Afghanistan. I was just about to embark on another story over pudding when Sir Digory spoke.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said. ‘So sorry to interrupt, but all this conviviality cannot drive away the very important reason for this night. In just a little while, I will be revealing, as I had intended to do with a larger audience, the map I have drawn up showing the route, as best I remember it, to the lost city of Nkume.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Holmes complacently. ‘The lost city. I’ll be fascinated to see it.’

‘It will only be a glimpse, mind,’ said Sir Digory, looking round at our faces. ‘An earnest of good faith. There are some who doubt the map’s existence, even doubt the truth of my tale. I shall prove the former, but it will be the responsibility of the purchaser to affirm the latter.’

‘You’re selling us a pig in a poke,’ Krueger grumbled. ‘A fine way to treat old friends.’

‘A fellow like you ought to recognise a bargain when you see one,’ McAllister said drily. ‘Sir Digory is willing to raise sufficient funds to refurbish this old place,’ he waved his hands in disrespectful compass of the house and lands surrounding us, ‘in return for the means to become the richest man in the British Empire. Personally, I know which I’d rather have.’

‘All for the good of your d—ed country, of course,’ Krueger said savagely.

‘Sir,’ I said in reproof, with a glance at Miss Marency, who had not turned a hair, ‘there are ladies present.’

Miss Marency favoured me with a smile. ‘Thank you, Dr Watson,’ she said softly, her tones thrilling my sinews, ‘but you forget I grew up in the bush. I have heard much worse in my time.’

Sir Digory banged on the table with his spoon. Everyone fell silent. The baronet signalled to the servants to begin clearing away, and Chivers vanished into the study.

‘Thank you,’ Sir Digory said, looking impressively round the table. ‘I opened the safe earlier, and placed the map on the desk. It takes time, you see, because of my hands.’ He shook the offending members, which were twisted with rheumatism. ‘I have sent Chivers to bring the map from the study. You will have precisely one minute, gentlemen, to see that the map is genuine. Then it will be put away for the night and the bidding will begin in earnest at noon tomorrow.’

Chivers entered carrying a leather portfolio of the kind used by solicitors. He placed it on the now empty table and opened it up. We all gathered round as he took out the map and smoothed it out on the table...

Chapter Four

I saw a large quarto sized sheet of paper on which had been plotted a sketch map of some accuracy, if I was any judge. During my time in Afghanistan I had seen such charts drawn up by scouts and understood it to be reliable. It showed the coast of Africa on the left-hand side, with little to give it context other than the fact that it was in the west; the neatly inscribed legend “British West Africa” made this plain. I remembered maps of the colony; what I saw of the coast, with the short peninsula more or less dead centre containing the town of Nago, and the surrounding hinterland, tallied with what I remembered, as did the areas of jungle inland in the south, and the arid regions to the north. What was new was a large tract of land to the east. If the map was reliable, Sir Digory Marency’s inadvertent explorations had opened up a vast area. The Mountains of Kong were for the most part a rumour, but here they were visible, striding across the landscape in all their majesty, and the source of the Great River, up in those highlands, was clearly delineated.

‘Here is the colony as we know it,’ Sir Digory told us, indicating Nago and the surrounding country. ‘Over here, in happier times, stood my mission.’ The place indicated was a long way upriver, but many days’ march of veldt and jungle and swamp stood between it and the mountains. At a release of breath I turned to my left and saw that it was Miss Marency who had sighed. Her face was rapt, but the expression in it was unidentifiable; whether it was of fear or excitement I could not tell.

Everyone’s eyes were intent on the map, even those of Holmes. I did not study the map, to my later regret, but instead the faces of those present. Sir Digory’s expression was one of cunning and expectation; Holmes’ one of deep concentration; Miss Marency’s unreadable as I have already said; Krueger’s a picture of naked greed; and McAllister was intent, fascinated. Only

Chivers seemed unmoved.

‘What of this area?’ asked McAllister, indicating the wide sweep of the east. ‘I thought those mountains had been deemed mythical.’

Sir Digory shook his head irritably. ‘No, you fool,’ he said. ‘I know they exist, because I was there among them, just like the Portuguese before me. But I went further than any Dago; I went to Nkume itself.’

‘You were carried off by Kaffirs, I was led to understand,’ Krueger carped.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Sir Digory. ‘I did not go willingly. Nor did my poor wife.’ He looked sombre. ‘But nevertheless, I have lived in those lands for long enough to be able to direct anyone rash enough or sufficiently enterprising to wish to open up the area, with all its riches. Oh yes,’ he added with a smirk, ‘you’re getting a glimpse now, to prove that the map exists...’

‘I never doubted you, old chap,’ McAllister protested.

‘But with the map come detailed instructions of the journey there and back again,’ Sir Digory said, ignoring the interruption. ‘It is many days’ march to the foothills, then several more up into the plateau...’

As he spoke, his gnarled hand traced a route eastward towards the mountains. It crossed swamp and jungle, then followed the riverbank for many miles—how many I couldn’t say. The river path led up a long, narrow gorge, then the path left it and went across the plateau. Here, beneath a mountain drawn with smoke belching from the peak to indicate its volcanic nature, was a symbol that seemed to indicate habitation, and the single word ‘Nkume’.

‘Where are the diamond fields?’ asked Krueger, licking his lips.

Sir Digory indicated to Chivers to roll up the map, to the disappointment of all. He flashed a savage grin at the Boer. ‘If you outbid your competitor, you’ll have all that information in the notes that go with the map,’ he said, indicating some very dense handwriting that took up much of its north eastern portion. ‘Even then it will be a dangerous journey, but stray off the path I have shown just once, and you will never be seen again.’

Chivers by now had placed the map in its container and at Sir Digory’s instructions took it from the room and back into the baronet’s study. ‘I shall return it to the safe presently,’ he told his servant in an undertone that was nonetheless audible to all in the dining room. ‘Now, I think it’s high time you were in bed, Kate, and as for you, gentlemen, I would counsel the same. You’ll want to be fresh and bright for the bidding tomorrow.’

Chivers departed from the room, bearing the map and its container as if they represented a sacred trust. Miss Marency took her father’s advice and after saying goodnight to us withdrew. Krueger and McAllister both turned in for the night, and Sir Digory left the room for his study.

Holmes and I remained by the table. My friend was deep in thought. I waited patiently for some pronouncement.

I broke the silence after some time. 'What do you think, Holmes?'

He turned on his heel and looked at me quizzically. 'H'm? What was that, Watson? I was thinking.'

'So I could see,' I said drily. 'What are your thoughts? Are you ready to share them?'

He looked pensive. 'Whoever becomes owner of that map and the notes written upon it, detailed as they are, has the potential to become a very rich man. Personally, I have no interest in the matter, but our two friends, the Scot and the Boer, have other ideas.'

'Clearly, Holmes,' I said with a sigh. 'But what of our discoveries on the terrace?'

Holmes was about to speak when his catlike ears caught a sound of movement from outside the dining room. In two long strides he was at the door, which he threw open.

Standing there, blinking in surprise, was the district commissioner, McAllister. 'Ah, there you are, old chap,' he said, and seeing me, amended it to, 'and Dr Watson.'

'May we help you, McAllister?' I said impatiently. 'Was there something you wanted from us?'

He gaped at me, then said, 'I'm not ready for bed myself. Was wondering if anyone would like a game of whist.' He produced a pack of cards from within his jacket.

'You need four for whist,' came a heavily accented voice from down the passage.

We all turned to see Krueger coming from the direction of the stairs, a dark look on his face. 'I wondered where you had got to,' he told McAllister, menace evident in his voice.

I deferred to my friend. 'What do you think, Holmes?'

Holmes yawned and stretched. 'After that dinner and such fascinating conversation,' he said, 'I think I'll follow Sir Digory's lead and take to my bed. Perhaps you gentlemen could find a different game to play.'

With that, he strode away down the passageway, passing Krueger, who gave him a malignant glare, then vanished in the direction of the stairs.

Unenthusiastically, McAllister turned to me. 'What's your game?' he asked.

'Patience,' I told him, and brushed past, following in the footsteps of my friend.

When I reached the grand staircase there was no sign of him. I hurried up the stairs one at a time,

eager to discuss the behaviour of those two odd fish, but Holmes must have hurried ahead: I saw no sign of him as I ascended the first landing. I was about to hasten up the next flight when I heard talking from below, and I paused, pressing myself back against the wall so I could not be seen from below.

‘...someone fired on Sir Digory,’ McAllister’s booming tones were saying, ‘And we know who the finest marksman of the veldt is, don’t we? We’ve heard endless stories of your prowess against rhinos and wildebeest!’

‘And why would I want to shoot my old friend?’ Krueger’s voice was sarcastic. Was this a confession? It was hardly gentlemanly of me, but I must confess that I strained my ears to listen further. ‘Besides, I was indoors when the shot was fired, and we know that the killer was chased away through the shrubbery.’

‘Someone was chased away,’ said McAllister. ‘But how do we know that it was the killer? Perhaps the killer was somewhere indoors.’

I caught my breath. McAllister had reached the same conclusion as Holmes! Then it couldn’t have been him. Surely that left only one...

I realised that both men had stopped speaking. Silence hung heavy. I could picture them eyeing each other with mutual suspicion. Would they fight? I was pretty certain that one if not both of these rugged Colonials was at least capable of attempted murder.

Then I heard something that surprised me. ‘We can discuss this tomorrow,’ said McAllister. ‘Too many ears listening and eyes watching to talk now.’ He raised his voice. ‘I’m going up to my room.’

I took the hint, and vanished upstairs like a shadow in the moonlight.

As I reached my own door, hearing McAllister ascending behind me, another shadow flitted into view, a long, tall, silent shadow.

‘Eavesdropping, Dr Watson?’ murmured Holmes reprovingly. ‘You were almost caught that time. I was watching from further up. Now you’ve awoken their suspicions.’

‘Surely they were suspicious of us already,’ I said. ‘At least, whichever one of them was the would-be killer.’

He drew me into his own room, which stood adjacent to mine, closing the door to a crack, but kept an eye to it. I heard the heavy, confident tread of a man passing outside. Holmes looked up.

‘Who was it?’ I asked in a hiss.

Holmes closed the door fully, in total silence. ‘Krueger,’ he said.

‘Krueger?’ I asked. ‘The crack shot of the veldt? But what of McAllister?’

‘Indeed,’ said Holmes. ‘A very good question.’

‘Should one of us look for him?’ I said. ‘I’ll go.’

As I rose, he put a hand on my arm. ‘I’m sure McAllister has his reasons. Perhaps he has gone to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich.’

I threw his hand off. ‘You don’t really think that, do you?’

He shook his head. ‘No. But I don’t believe that McAllister is a danger.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s Krueger, obviously. But he seems to have gone to bed. McAllister’s behaviour is a mystery.’

‘Krueger?’ Holmes tapped his lips pensively. ‘Krueger was inside the house when the shot was fired, it’s true. But who was the watcher from the rhododendrons? That’s the real mystery.’

I gave him a pained look. ‘Holmes, you yourself established that whoever was hiding in the shrubbery, they couldn’t be the one who shot at Sir Digory. No sign of any shell, and the angle of the shot itself establishes that the assassin was in the west wing—the direction in which Krueger has just gone. The shot came from his room.’

‘But who was watching from the bushes?’ Holmes persisted. ‘A confederate?’

‘Probably just a poacher,’ I said dismissively, ‘or a tramp. A trespasser. Someone of no significance, we can be sure of that.’

‘There is no such thing as somebody of no importance,’ Holmes told me darkly. ‘But for now, I think we had best seek our respective beds. Nothing will happen while we are still up and about.’

I searched his lean face. ‘You think something will happen tonight? Is Sir Digory in danger? Shouldn’t we warn him?’

‘Sir Digory has been in danger ever since he decided to auction the map,’ Holmes told me. ‘His daughter knows that, and in his heart of hearts he knows it too. But the only way we can identify his would-be killer is by waiting.’

I stared at him. ‘You’re hoping to trap the fellow?’

He nodded. ‘Now go to bed. I’d advise you not to get undressed, and try not to fall too deeply asleep. Keep your service revolver within reach.’

I was electrified. ‘You think the attempt will be made tonight?’

He patted my shoulder. 'I do indeed. Now go to your room. For the moment, it's a waiting game. The kind that hunters play, out on the veldt.'

Returning to my room I did as Holmes had told me. Fully dressed, I lay down on the bed, my revolver on the cabinet beside me. But it had been a tiring day. Despite all my best intentions, I found my head nodding.

I rose, and paced up and down. What did Holmes expect tonight? An attempt on Sir Digory's life? Or the theft of the map? Surely the latter was more likely.

I lay down on the bed again. Before I knew what was happening, I was deep in the middle of a dream where I waded through a mangrove swamp, pursued by fierce ape-men. One leapt from a tree at me, screaming hideously. I saw its bare yellowing fangs coming straight for me, ready to open my veins and drink my blood. There was a shot, distant and muffled, and it didn't come from my gun.

I awoke into a nightmare.

The shrieking came from downstairs. I immediately thought of Miss Marency. Springing from the bed, pausing only to snatch up my revolver, I ran out into the passageway.

The house was in uproar, with servants shouting and crying out. Miss Marency ran up to me. Clearly it was not her who was screaming, but she was clad in little more than a diaphanous nightgown.

'You heard that shot?' she gasped. Shot? So it hadn't been a dream. And now there was the screaming.

'Please return to your bed, Miss Marency,' I told her calmly. 'This will be men's work.'

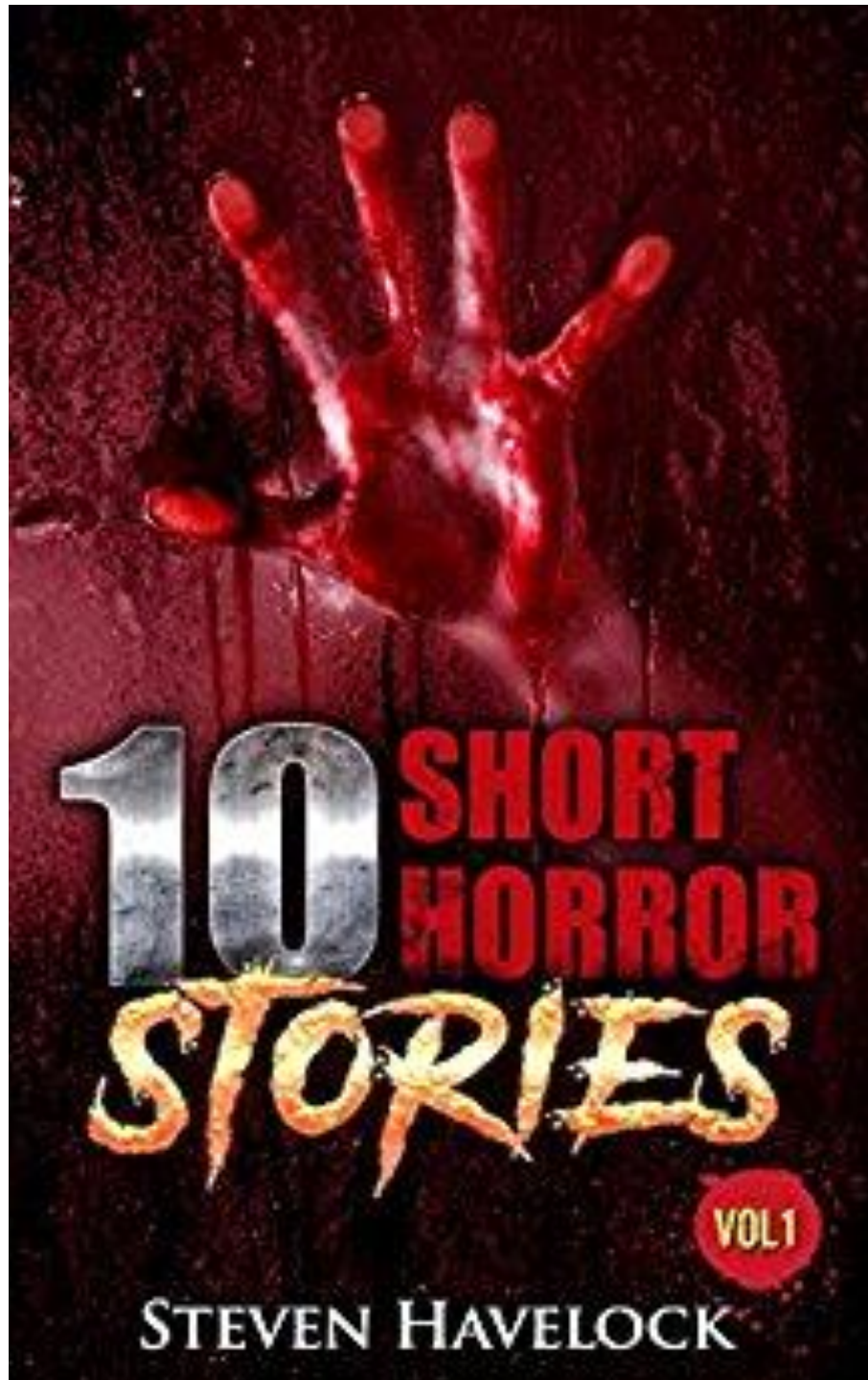
'That screaming is one of the maids,' she said. 'Something has upset her. Make haste, Dr Watson. She may need medical attention. Follow me.'

She dashed down the passage towards the staircase. Clutching my revolver tightly, I followed her.

As we reached the top of the steps, the screaming broke off abruptly. Someone had silenced the maid. I looked at Miss Marency. She gave me a steady look, then turned and hurried downstairs.

Another shot rang out.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Eight

Two weeks passed on Earth between the time Ward left asteroid AT-4442-ST and the time that Mud returned to it. He docked the “Charon” where he had before and sauntered back to Ed’s place. Same music as before, Mud noted. Ward would have laughed it off. Mud chuckled to himself at the thought.

The place was quiet. Maybe only a half-dozen people sitting at the bar and at a few of the tables. No one was fucking. No blow jobs in the shadowed corners. Ed was nowhere to be seen.

“Guess the man deserves some time off now’n then,” he shrugged, resigning himself to a few wasted hours.

A blonde with thick red lipstick and heavy eyeliner came up to where Mud had settled himself at the end of the bar. A hand-rolled cigarette tucked neatly behind her ear. A stained apron tied loosely around her waist.

“I hain’t been seein’ ya `round here, afore. Whatcha gonna have?” she smiled.

“Whyncha gimme sumpin with bourbon?” Mud asked.

“I can do that for ya, sweetie. Ya want anything to wash that down with?”

“Sure, beautiful. Lemme have a couple beers.”

“Anything particular?”

“Nah. Just keep `em warm and comin’.”

“I can that for you, sweetness. Ennything else?”

“Nah. You made happy for now. If I’m gunna be needin’ ennythin’, I’ll give ya a holler.”

“The name is Miriam,” she grinned with a row of slightly stained but otherwise perfect teeth.

“My friends call me Mud,” he replied with a laugh.

“Now why they wanna call you that?” she demanded with a smile.

“Keeps me humble,” Mud answered, grinning broadly, and showing off two rows of strong teeth.

Miriam pushed herself down the counter to get Mud his bourbon and his beers. Mud, for his part, turned around and leaned with his elbows up against the bar, making no effort to hide the fact that he was carefully studying everybody within it.

Quiet evening, if evening it was. Out here, among the asteroids, it was impossible to tell. Mud was not going draw attention to himself by asking a lot of questions. Where was Ed? Lacey? That little prick calling himself `Rat'? No, as far as anyone in Ed's place was concerned, Mud was just whiling away a few hours.

Miriam came back and slid a transparent plastic cup of bourbon into the slots on the counter which would keep it from floating off in the nearly weightless environment of this remote asteroid. A button on the side of the cup released an opening at top that allowed Mud to sip from it without fear of spilling. Next to the cup of bourbon, Miriam slid two larger cups of beer into their respective slots.

"Want me to run a tab for ya, sweetie?" she asked. Mud turned halfway in his seat, and tapped his wristband to hers, transferring a sizeable tip.

"Good idea," Mud said. "I got nuthin' much to do right now, and you got the best show in town here."

"Thanks," Miriam answered. "It's not mine. I just work here. Only trying to pick up enough Credits to get back to Mars."

"That where ya from?"

"Not originally. I was born on Ceres. Mom and Dad sent me to Mars for my schoolin'. Then after my school days, I lit out, just too see how far out I could go. Done that by coming here, and now I want to get back to Mars, where I can feel some real gravity under my feet, and look up through the domes and see the sky."

"Yeah, I gotcha on that. Ya come to miss that stuff sometimes. Sunsets, sunrises. All that nostalgia stuff," Mud said.

"I miss it a lot. All the time," Miriam replied. "Just between you, me and the wall, this place is just a wee tad too organic for my taste. She glanced around the bar. Still quiet. Still largely empty."

"That's why I ask Ed to let me work this shift. Not too noisy around this time. Later, though, it can get real gobular, if ya know what I mean."

Mud grinned and drew a long sip from his bourbon.

"Yah, I can guess. Ed gonna be around anytime soon?"

"You a friend of his, or you just only lookin' for a job?" Miriam asked.

"Can't say either one, not properly. Just come by his place a couple times, talked him up a bit, get the hang of things around here."

“Oh, okay. I wasn’t bein’ nosy, just had ta ask,” Miriam said. “A lotta folk, they come in, makin’ out to be Ed’s good friend, and he said their money’s no good here and they can drink for free.”

Mud laughed.

“Nah... I don’t ever hope to be so hard on my luck, I gotta be cheatin’ anybody out of a free drink. Nor especially any purty lookin’ lady like Miriam,” he said.

It was Miriam’s turn to laugh.

“Now I know you’re just a smooth-talkin’ liar,” she said. “Because I hain’t been called anything like purty since my school days.”

“All I can say to that is the grunts around here don’t know what’s good.”

“Come back in six hours or so, and you’ll see some purty. Those girls keep themselves real kept up. Make a good living outta looking purty,” Miriam said.

“I might have to do that,” Mud replied. “There’s one I met, last time I come by. Real friendly. Chatty. We sat in that booth over there.”

Mud indicated the booth with a nod of his head. A shadow passed over Miriam’s face when she saw the booth Mud gestured toward. Mud pretended not to notice.

“Yeah?” Miriam asked.

“Said her name was Lacey. Any chance she gonna be by here later?”

Miriam said nothing for a moment. Her eyes quickly searched the bar. Now there were only three others there, including the other bartender who was taking care of the two drowsy customers.

Miriam lowered her voice.

“Prob’ly not,” she said.

“No?”

“Look, maybe I shouldn’t oughta be tellin’ you this, but... was it Ed, set you up at that table with Lacey?”

“Matter of fact, yeah, it was,” Mud said.

Miriam chewed her lips nervously before she spoke again.

“Uh-huh... well, look... that table’s wired. Ed... he’s a good guy... good enough. But he plays it

close. Real close. He has to. He came out this way on account of some warrants, back home. Now he just wants to live it peaceable. Stay outta trouble, keep the law, well, back on Mars, y'know?"

"Yeah. I gotta couple friends, got themselves in the same kinda predicament."

"But the Scroungers are thick around here, ya know? Real thick. And just to keep his head on his shoulders, instead of decorating some Scrounger's wall, well, he's gotta play nice with them. As long as he's worth more to them alive, then he won't... you know... wake up dead."

"Sure. I gotcha."

Mud kept his face a mask. He was not quite as good at it as was Carter Ward, yet still he gave no indication of the sinking feeling that was congealing in the pit of his belly.

"And yeah, that Lacey, she do like to talk. Now, I'm not sayin' it was you. She talked to a lotta guys. And she didn't know anything about that booth. At least, I don't expect she did. Ed wired it, and he didn't tell much of anybody, on account of, well... it was just a way he had to get noise and news for the Scroungers.

Mud was silent. He was suddenly hating himself, a most unusual experience for him. Miriam, unable to read his expression, nonetheless sensed his inward agitation.

"Look, I'm not sayin' you had anything to do with it. Maybe you dint. Probably you dint..."

"So where's Lacey now?"

"I dunno," Miriam answered. "I haven't seen her in, well, I dunno how long..."

"Has anybody?" Mud asked.

"I dunno."

Miriam paused and searched her mind.

"There's one guy you might maybe wanna track down."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Not a nice fella. Nasty. Seedy. I dunno why anybody puts up with him."

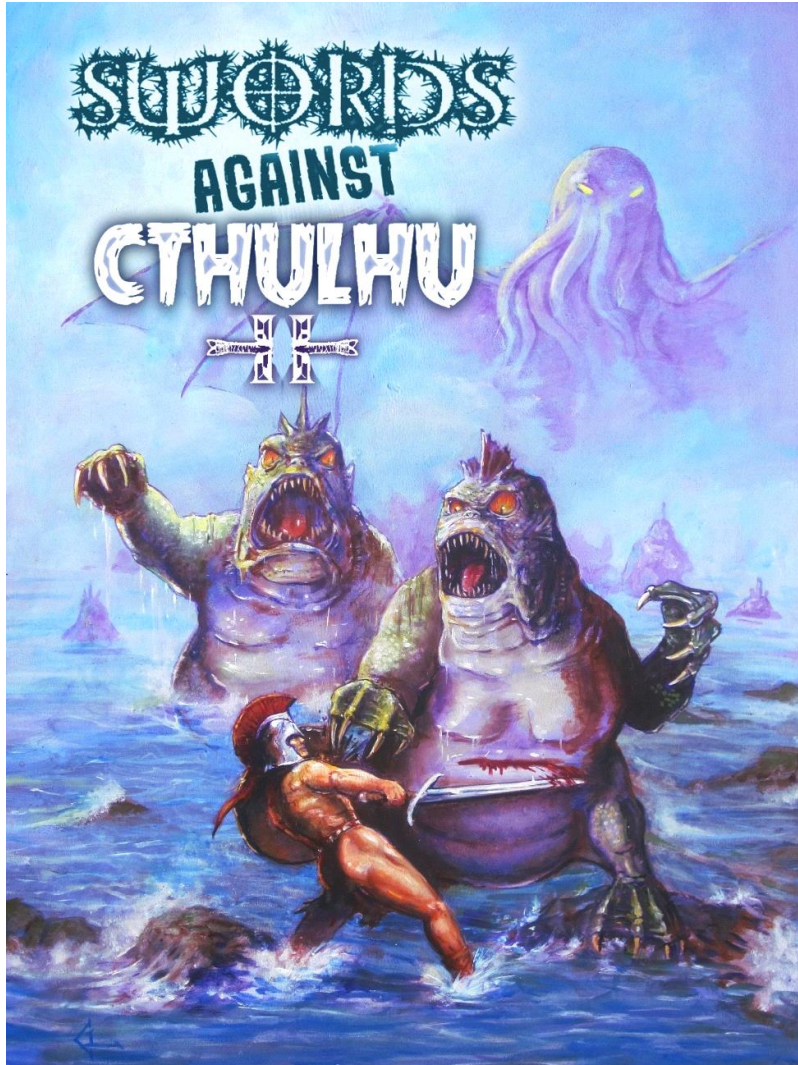
"In a place like this, that's sayin' something," Mud replied.

Miriam answered with a sad smile.

"So who is this guy?" Mud said. "I think I do wanna talk with him."

“He’s real close with the Scroungers. Real buddy, buddy... everybody calls him ‘Rat’.

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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XIV—By Sea.

An hour after sunrise next morning. Esmo, his son, and our host accompanied us to the vessel in which we were to make the principal part of our journey. We were received by an officer of the royal Court, who was to accompany us during the rest of our journey, and from whom, Esmo assured me, I might obtain the fullest information regarding the various objects of interest, to visit which we had adopted an unusual and circuitous course. We embarked on a gulf running generally from east to west, about midway between the northern tropic and the arctic circle. As this was the summer of the northern hemisphere, we should thus enjoy a longer day, and should not suffer from the change of climate. After taking leave of our friends, we went down below to take possession of the fore part of the vessel, which was assigned as our exclusive quarters. Immediately in front of the machine-room, which occupied the centre of the vessel, were two cabins, about sixteen feet square, reaching from side to side. Beyond these, opening out of a passage running along one side, were two smaller cabins about eight feet long. All these apartments were furnished and ornamented with the luxury and elegance of chambers in the best houses on shore. In the foremost of the larger cabins were a couple of desks, and three or four writing or easy chairs. In the outer cabin nearest to the engine-room, and entered immediately by the ladder descending from the deck, was fixed a low central table. In all we found abundance of those soft exquisitely covered and embroidered cushions which in Mars, as in Oriental countries, are the most essential and most luxurious furniture. The officer had quarters in the stern of the vessel, which was an exact copy of the fore part. But the first of these rooms was considered as public or neutral ground. Leaving Eveena below, I went on deck to examine, before she started, the construction of the vessel. Her entire length was about one hundred and eighty feet, her depth, from the flat deck to the wide keel, about one half of her breadth; the height of the cabins not much more than eight feet; her draught, when most completely lightened, not more than four feet. Her electric machinery drew in and drove out with great force currents of water which propelled her with a speed greater than that afforded by the most powerful paddles. It also pumped in or out, at whatever depth, the quantity of water required as ballast, not merely to steady the vessel, but to keep her in position on the surface or to sink her to the level at which the pilot might choose to sail. At either end was fixed a steering screw, much resembling the tail-fin of a fish, capable of striking sideways, upwards, or downwards, and directing our course accordingly.

Ergimo, our escort, had not yet reached middle age, but was a man of exceptional intellect and unusual knowledge. He had made many voyages, and had occupied for some time an important official post on one of those Arctic continents which are inhabited only by the hunters employed in collecting the furs and skins furnished exclusively by these lands. The shores of the gulf were lofty, rocky, and uninteresting. It was difficult to see any object on shore from the deck of the vessel, and I assented, therefore, without demur, after the first hour of the voyage, to his proposal that the lights, answering to our hatches, should be closed, and that the vessel should pursue her course below the surface. This was the more desirable that, though winds and storms are, as I have said, rare, these long and narrow seas with their lofty shores are exposed to rough currents, atmospheric and marine, which render a voyage on the surface no more agreeable than a passage in average weather across the Bay of Biscay. After descending I was occupied for some time in

studying, with Ergimo's assistance, the arrangement of the machinery, and the simple process by which electric force is generated in quantities adequate to any effort at a marvellously small expenditure of material. In this form the Martialists assert that they obtain without waste all the potential energy stored in ... [About half a score lines, or two pages of an ordinary octavo volume like this, are here illegible.] She (Eveena?) was somewhat pale, but rose quickly, and greeted me with a smile of unaffected cheerfulness, and was evidently surprised as well as pleased that I was content to remain alone with her, our conversation turning chiefly on the lessons of last night. Our time passed quickly till, about the middle of the day, we were startled by a shock which, as I thought, must be due to our having run aground or struck against a rock. But when I passed into the engine-room, Ergimo explained that the pilot was nowise in fault. We had encountered one of those inconveniences, hardly to be called perils, which are peculiar to the waters of Mars. Though animals hostile or dangerous to man have been almost extirpated upon the land, creatures of a type long since supposed to be extinct on Earth still haunt the depths of the Martial seas; and one of these—a real sea-serpent of above a hundred feet in length and perhaps eight feet in circumference—had attacked our vessel, entangling the steering screw in his folds and trying to crush it, checking, at the same time, by his tremendous force the motion of the vessel.

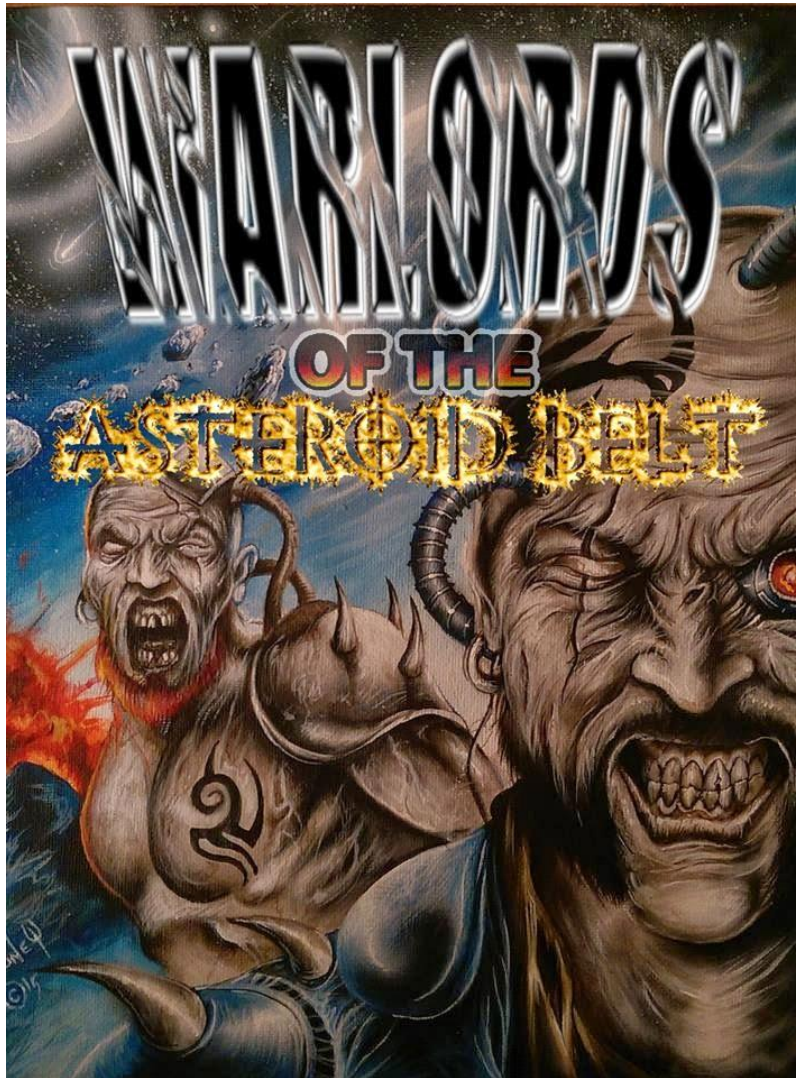
“We shall soon get rid of him, though,” said Ergimo, as I followed him to the stern, to watch with great interest the method of dealing with the monster, whose strange form was visible through a thick crystal pane in the stern-plate. The asphyxiator could not have been used without great risk to ourselves. But several tubes, filled with a soft material resembling cork, originally the pith of a Martial cane of great size, were inserted in the floor, sides, and deck of the vessel, and through the centre of each of these passed a strong metallic wire of great conducting power. Two or three of those in the stern were placed in contact with some of the electric machinery by which the rudder was usually turned, and through them were sent rapid and energetic currents, whose passage rendered the covering of the wires, notwithstanding their great conductivity, too hot to be touched. We heard immediately a smothered sound of extraordinary character, which was, in truth, no other than a scream deadened partly by the water, partly by the thick metal sheet interposed between us and the element. The steering screw was set in rapid motion, and at first revolving with some difficulty, afterwards moving faster and more regularly, presently released us. Its rotation was stopped, and we resumed our course. The serpent had relaxed his folds, stunned by the shock, but had not disentangled himself from the screw, till its blades, no longer checked by the tremendous force of his original grasp, striking him a series of terrific blows, had broken the vertebrae and paralysed if not killed the monstrous enemy.

At each side of the larger chambers and of the engine-room were fixed small thick circular windows, through which we could see from time to time the more remarkable objects in the water. We passed along one curious submarine bank, built somewhat like our coral rocks, not by insects, however, but by shellfish, which, fixing themselves as soon as hatched on the shells below or around them, extended slowly upward and sideways. As each of these creatures perished, the shell, about half the size of an oyster, was filled with the same sort of material as that of which its hexagonal walls were originally formed, drawn in by the surrounding and still living neighbours; and thus, in the course of centuries, were constructed solid reefs of enormous extent. One of these had run right across the gulf, forming a complete bridge, ceasing, however, within some five feet of the surface; but on this a regular roadway had been constructed by

human art and mechanical labour, while underneath, at the usual depth of thirty feet, several tunnels had been pierced, each large enough to admit the passage of a single vessel of the largest size. At every fourth hour our vessel rose to the surface to renew her atmosphere, which was thus kept purer than that of an ordinary Atlantic packet between decks, while the temperature was maintained at an agreeable point by the warmth diffused from the electric machinery.

On the sixth day of our voyage, we reached a point where the Gulf of Serocasfe divides, a sharp jutting cape or peninsula parting its waters. We took the northern branch, about fifteen miles in width, and here, rising to the surface and steering a zigzag course from coast to coast, I was enabled to see something of the character of this most extraordinary strait. Its walls at first were no less than 2000 feet in height, so that at all times we were in sight, so to speak, of land. A road had been cut along the sea-level, and here and there tunnels ascending through the rock rendered this accessible from the plateau above. The strata, as upon Earth, were of various character, none of them very thick, seldom reproducing exactly the geology of our own planet, but seldom very widely deviating in character from the rocks with which we are acquainted. The lowest were evidently of the same hard, fused, compressed character as those which our terminology calls plutonic. Above these were masses which, like the carboniferous strata of Earth, recalled the previous existence of a richer but less highly organised form of vegetation than at present exists anywhere upon the surface. Intermixed with these were beds of the peculiar submarine shell-rock whose formation I have just described. Above these again come strata of diluvial gravel, and about 400 feet below the surface rocks that bore evident traces of a glacial period. As we approached the lower end of the gulf the shores sloped constantly downward, and where they were no more than 600 feet in height I was able to distinguish an upper stratum of some forty yards in depth, preserving through its whole extent traces of human life and even of civilisation. This implied, if fairly representative of the rest of the planet's crust, an existence of man upon its surface ten, twenty, or even a hundred-fold longer than he is supposed to have enjoyed upon Earth. About noon on the seventh day we entered the canal which connects this arm of the gulf with the sea of the northern temperate zone. It varies in height from 400 to 600 feet, in width from 100 to 300 yards, its channel never exceeds 20 feet in depth, Ergimo explained that the length had been thought to render a tunnel unsuitable, as the ordinary method of ventilation could hardly have been made to work, and to ventilate such a tunnel through shafts sunk to so great a depth would have been almost as costly as the method actually adopted. A much smaller breadth might have been thought to suffice, and was at first intended; but it was found that the current in a narrow channel, the outer sea being many inches higher than the water of the gulf, would have been too rapid and violent for safety. The work had occupied fifteen Martial years, and had been opened only for some eight centuries. The water was not more than twenty feet in depth; but the channel was so perfectly scoured by the current that no obstacle had ever arisen and no expense had been incurred to keep it a clear. We entered the Northern sea where a bay ran up some half dozen miles towards the end of the gulf, shortening the canal by this distance. The bay itself was shallow, the only channel being scarcely wider than the canal, and created or preserved by the current setting in to the latter; a current which offered a very perceptible resistance to our course, and satisfied me that had the canal been no wider than the convenience of navigation would have required in the absence of such a stream, its force would have rendered the work altogether useless. We crossed the sea, holding on in the same direction, and a little before sunset moored our vessel at the wharf of a small harbour, along the sides of which was built the largest town of this subarctic landbelt, a village of some fifty houses named Askinta.

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Two: What We Saw from The Ruined House

After eating we crept back to the scullery, and there I must have dozed again, for when presently I looked round I was alone. The thudding vibration continued with wearisome persistence. I whispered for the curate several times, and at last felt my way to the door of the kitchen. It was still daylight, and I perceived him across the room, lying against the triangular hole that looked out upon the Martians. His shoulders were hunched, so that his head was hidden from me.

I could hear a number of noises almost like those in an engine shed; and the place rocked with that beating thud. Through the aperture in the wall I could see the top of a tree touched with gold and the warm blue of a tranquil evening sky. For a minute or so I remained watching the curate, and then I advanced, crouching and stepping with extreme care amid the broken crockery that littered the floor.

I touched the curate's leg, and he started so violently that a mass of plaster went sliding down outside and fell with a loud impact. I gripped his arm, fearing he might cry out, and for a long time we crouched motionless. Then I turned to see how much of our rampart remained. The detachment of the plaster had left a vertical slit open in the debris, and by raising myself cautiously across a beam I was able to see out of this gap into what had been overnight a quiet suburban roadway. Vast, indeed, was the change that we beheld.

The fifth cylinder must have fallen right into the midst of the house we had first visited. The building had vanished, completely smashed, pulverised, and dispersed by the blow. The cylinder lay now far beneath the original foundations—deep in a hole, already vastly larger than the pit I had looked into at Woking. The earth all round it had splashed under that tremendous impact—"splashed" is the only word—and lay in heaped piles that hid the masses of the adjacent houses. It had behaved exactly like mud under the violent blow of a hammer. Our house had collapsed backward; the front portion, even on the ground floor, had been destroyed completely; by a chance the kitchen and scullery had escaped, and stood buried now under soil and ruins, closed in by tons of earth on every side save towards the cylinder. Over that aspect we hung now on the very edge of the great circular pit the Martians were engaged in making. The heavy beating sound was evidently just behind us, and ever and again a bright green vapour drove up like a veil across our peephole.

The cylinder was already opened in the centre of the pit, and on the farther edge of the pit, amid the smashed and gravel-heaped shrubbery, one of the great fighting-machines, deserted by its occupant, stood stiff and tall against the evening sky. At first I scarcely noticed the pit and the cylinder, although it has been convenient to describe them first, on account of the extraordinary glittering mechanism I saw busy in the excavation, and on account of the strange creatures that were crawling slowly and painfully across the heaped mould near it.

The mechanism it certainly was that held my attention first. It was one of those complicated

fabrics that have since been called handling-machines, and the study of which has already given such an enormous impetus to terrestrial invention. As it dawned upon me first, it presented a sort of metallic spider with five jointed, agile legs, and with an extraordinary number of jointed levers, bars, and reaching and clutching tentacles about its body. Most of its arms were retracted, but with three long tentacles it was fishing out a number of rods, plates, and bars which lined the covering and apparently strengthened the walls of the cylinder. These, as it extracted them, were lifted out and deposited upon a level surface of earth behind it.

Its motion was so swift, complex, and perfect that at first I did not see it as a machine, in spite of its metallic glitter. The fighting-machines were coordinated and animated to an extraordinary pitch, but nothing to compare with this. People who have never seen these structures, and have only the ill-imagined efforts of artists or the imperfect descriptions of such eye-witnesses as myself to go upon, scarcely realise that living quality.

I recall particularly the illustration of one of the first pamphlets to give a consecutive account of the war. The artist had evidently made a hasty study of one of the fighting-machines, and there his knowledge ended. He presented them as tilted, stiff tripods, without either flexibility or subtlety, and with an altogether misleading monotony of effect. The pamphlet containing these renderings had a considerable vogue, and I mention them here simply to warn the reader against the impression they may have created. They were no more like the Martians I saw in action than a Dutch doll is like a human being. To my mind, the pamphlet would have been much better without them.

At first, I say, the handling-machine did not impress me as a machine, but as a crablike creature with a glittering integument, the controlling Martian whose delicate tentacles actuated its movements seeming to be simply the equivalent of the crab's cerebral portion. But then I perceived the resemblance of its grey-brown, shiny, leathery integument to that of the other sprawling bodies beyond, and the true nature of this dexterous workman dawned upon me. With that realisation my interest shifted to those other creatures, the real Martians. Already I had had a transient impression of these, and the first nausea no longer obscured my observation. Moreover, I was concealed and motionless, and under no urgency of action.

They were, I now saw, the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive. They were huge round bodies—or, rather, heads—about four feet in diameter, each body having in front of it a face. This face had no nostrils—indeed, the Martians do not seem to have had any sense of smell, but it had a pair of very large dark-coloured eyes, and just beneath this a kind of fleshy beak. In the back of this head or body—I scarcely know how to speak of it—was the single tight tympanic surface, since known to be anatomically an ear, though it must have been almost useless in our dense air. In a group round the mouth were sixteen slender, almost whiplike tentacles, arranged in two bunches of eight each. These bunches have since been named rather aptly, by that distinguished anatomist, Professor Howes, the hands. Even as I saw these Martians for the first time they seemed to be endeavouring to raise themselves on these hands, but of course, with the increased weight of terrestrial conditions, this was impossible. There is reason to suppose that on Mars they may have progressed upon them with some facility.

The internal anatomy, I may remark here, as dissection has since shown, was almost equally

simple. The greater part of the structure was the brain, sending enormous nerves to the eyes, ear, and tactile tentacles. Besides this were the bulky lungs, into which the mouth opened, and the heart and its vessels. The pulmonary distress caused by the denser atmosphere and greater gravitational attraction was only too evident in the convulsive movements of the outer skin.

And this was the sum of the Martian organs. Strange as it may seem to a human being, all the complex apparatus of digestion, which makes up the bulk of our bodies, did not exist in the Martians. They were heads—merely heads. Entrails they had none. They did not eat, much less digest. Instead, they took the fresh, living blood of other creatures, and injected it into their own veins. I have myself seen this being done, as I shall mention in its place. But, squeamish as I may seem, I cannot bring myself to describe what I could not endure even to continue watching. Let it suffice to say, blood obtained from a still living animal, in most cases from a human being, was run directly by means of a little pipette into the recipient canal...

The bare idea of this is no doubt horribly repulsive to us, but at the same time I think that we should remember how repulsive our carnivorous habits would seem to an intelligent rabbit.

The physiological advantages of the practice of injection are undeniable, if one thinks of the tremendous waste of human time and energy occasioned by eating and the digestive process. Our bodies are half made up of glands and tubes and organs, occupied in turning heterogeneous food into blood. The digestive processes and their reaction upon the nervous system sap our strength and colour our minds. Men go happy or miserable as they have healthy or unhealthy livers, or sound gastric glands. But the Martians were lifted above all these organic fluctuations of mood and emotion.

Their undeniable preference for men as their source of nourishment is partly explained by the nature of the remains of the victims they had brought with them as provisions from Mars. These creatures, to judge from the shrivelled remains that have fallen into human hands, were bipeds with flimsy, siliceous skeletons (almost like those of the siliceous sponges) and feeble musculature, standing about six feet high and having round, erect heads, and large eyes in flinty sockets. Two or three of these seem to have been brought in each cylinder, and all were killed before earth was reached. It was just as well for them, for the mere attempt to stand upright upon our planet would have broken every bone in their bodies.

And while I am engaged in this description, I may add in this place certain further details which, although they were not all evident to us at the time, will enable the reader who is unacquainted with them to form a clearer picture of these offensive creatures.

In three other points their physiology differed strangely from ours. Their organisms did not sleep, any more than the heart of man sleeps. Since they had no extensive muscular mechanism to recuperate, that periodical extinction was unknown to them. They had little or no sense of fatigue, it would seem. On earth they could never have moved without effort, yet even to the last they kept in action. In twenty-four hours they did twenty-four hours of work, as even on earth is perhaps the case with the ants.

In the next place, wonderful as it seems in a sexual world, the Martians were absolutely without

sex, and therefore without any of the tumultuous emotions that arise from that difference among men. A young Martian, there can now be no dispute, was really born upon earth during the war, and it was found attached to its parent, partially budded off, just as young lilybulbs bud off, or like the young animals in the fresh-water polyp.

In man, in all the higher terrestrial animals, such a method of increase has disappeared; but even on this earth it was certainly the primitive method. Among the lower animals, up even to those first cousins of the vertebrated animals, the Tunicates, the two processes occur side by side, but finally the sexual method superseded its competitor altogether. On Mars, however, just the reverse has apparently been the case.

It is worthy of remark that a certain speculative writer of quasi-scientific repute, writing long before the Martian invasion, did forecast for man a final structure not unlike the actual Martian condition. His prophecy, I remember, appeared in November or December 1893, in a long-defunct publication, the Pall Mall Budget, and I recall a caricature of it in a pre-Martian periodical called Punch. He pointed out—writing in a foolish, facetious tone—that the perfection of mechanical appliances must ultimately supersede limbs; the perfection of chemical devices, digestion; that such organs as hair, external nose, teeth, ears, and chin were no longer essential parts of the human being, and that the tendency of natural selection would lie in the direction of their steady diminution through the coming ages. The brain alone remained a cardinal necessity. Only one other part of the body had a strong case for survival, and that was the hand, “teacher and agent of the brain.” While the rest of the body dwindled, the hands would grow larger.

There is many a true word written in jest, and here in the Martians we have beyond dispute the actual accomplishment of such a suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence. To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brain and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being.

The last salient point in which the systems of these creatures differed from ours was in what one might have thought a very trivial particular. Micro-organisms, which cause so much disease and pain on earth, have either never appeared upon Mars or Martian sanitary science eliminated them ages ago. A hundred diseases, all the fevers and contagions of human life, consumption, cancers, tumours and such morbidities, never enter the scheme of their life. And speaking of the differences between the life on Mars and terrestrial life, I may allude here to the curious suggestions of the red weed.

Apparently the vegetable kingdom in Mars, instead of having green for a dominant colour, is of a vivid blood-red tint. At any rate, the seeds which the Martians (intentionally or accidentally) brought with them gave rise in all cases to red-coloured growths. Only that known popularly as the red weed, however, gained any footing in competition with terrestrial forms. The red creeper was quite a transitory growth, and few people have seen it growing. For a time, however, the red weed grew with astonishing vigour and luxuriance. It spread up the sides of the pit by the third or fourth day of our imprisonment, and its cactus-like branches formed a carmine fringe to the

edges of our triangular window. And afterwards I found it broadcast throughout the country, and especially wherever there was a stream of water.

The Martians had what appears to have been an auditory organ, a single round drum at the back of the head-body, and eyes with a visual range not very different from ours except that, according to Philips, blue and violet were as black to them. It is commonly supposed that they communicated by sounds and tentacular gesticulations; this is asserted, for instance, in the able but hastily compiled pamphlet (written evidently by someone not an eye-witness of Martian actions) to which I have already alluded, and which, so far, has been the chief source of information concerning them. Now no surviving human being saw so much of the Martians in action as I did. I take no credit to myself for an accident, but the fact is so. And I assert that I watched them closely time after time, and that I have seen four, five, and (once) six of them sluggishly performing the most elaborately complicated operations together without either sound or gesture. Their peculiar hooting invariably preceded feeding; it had no modulation, and was, I believe, in no sense a signal, but merely the expiration of air preparatory to the suctional operation. I have a certain claim to at least an elementary knowledge of psychology, and in this matter I am convinced—as firmly as I am convinced of anything—that the Martians interchanged thoughts without any physical intermediation. And I have been convinced of this in spite of strong preconceptions. Before the Martian invasion, as an occasional reader here or there may remember, I had written with some little vehemence against the telepathic theory.

The Martians wore no clothing. Their conceptions of ornament and decorum were necessarily different from ours; and not only were they evidently much less sensible of changes of temperature than we are, but changes of pressure do not seem to have affected their health at all seriously. Yet though they wore no clothing, it was in the other artificial additions to their bodily resources that their great superiority over man lay. We men, with our bicycles and road-skates, our Lilienthal soaring-machines, our guns and sticks and so forth, are just in the beginning of the evolution that the Martians have worked out. They have become practically mere brains, wearing different bodies according to their needs just as men wear suits of clothes and take a bicycle in a hurry or an umbrella in the wet. And of their appliances, perhaps nothing is more wonderful to a man than the curious fact that what is the dominant feature of almost all human devices in mechanism is absent—the wheel is absent; among all the things they brought to earth there is no trace or suggestion of their use of wheels. One would have at least expected it in locomotion. And in this connection it is curious to remark that even on this earth Nature has never hit upon the wheel, or has preferred other expedients to its development. And not only did the Martians either not know of (which is incredible), or abstain from, the wheel, but in their apparatus singularly little use is made of the fixed pivot or relatively fixed pivot, with circular motions thereabout confined to one plane. Almost all the joints of the machinery present a complicated system of sliding parts moving over small but beautifully curved friction bearings. And while upon this matter of detail, it is remarkable that the long leverages of their machines are in most cases actuated by a sort of sham musculature of the disks in an elastic sheath; these disks become polarised and drawn closely and powerfully together when traversed by a current of electricity. In this way the curious parallelism to animal motions, which was so striking and disturbing to the human beholder, was attained. Such quasi-muscles abounded in the crablike handling-machine which, on my first peeping out of the slit, I watched unpacking the cylinder. It seemed infinitely more alive than the actual Martians lying beyond it in the sunset light, panting, stirring

ineffectual tentacles, and moving feebly after their vast journey across space.

While I was still watching their sluggish motions in the sunlight, and noting each strange detail of their form, the curate reminded me of his presence by pulling violently at my arm. I turned to a scowling face, and silent, eloquent lips. He wanted the slit, which permitted only one of us to peep through; and so I had to forego watching them for a time while he enjoyed that privilege.

When I looked again, the busy handling-machine had already put together several of the pieces of apparatus it had taken out of the cylinder into a shape having an unmistakable likeness to its own; and down on the left a busy little digging mechanism had come into view, emitting jets of green vapour and working its way round the pit, excavating and embanking in a methodical and discriminating manner. This it was which had caused the regular beating noise, and the rhythmic shocks that had kept our ruinous refuge quivering. It piped and whistled as it worked. So far as I could see, the thing was without a directing Martian at all.

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