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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 20
4TH FEBRUARY 2018

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Paul Lubaczewski, Steven Havelock, Garret Schuelke, Percy Greg, HG Wells, Sabine Baring-
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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 20
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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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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

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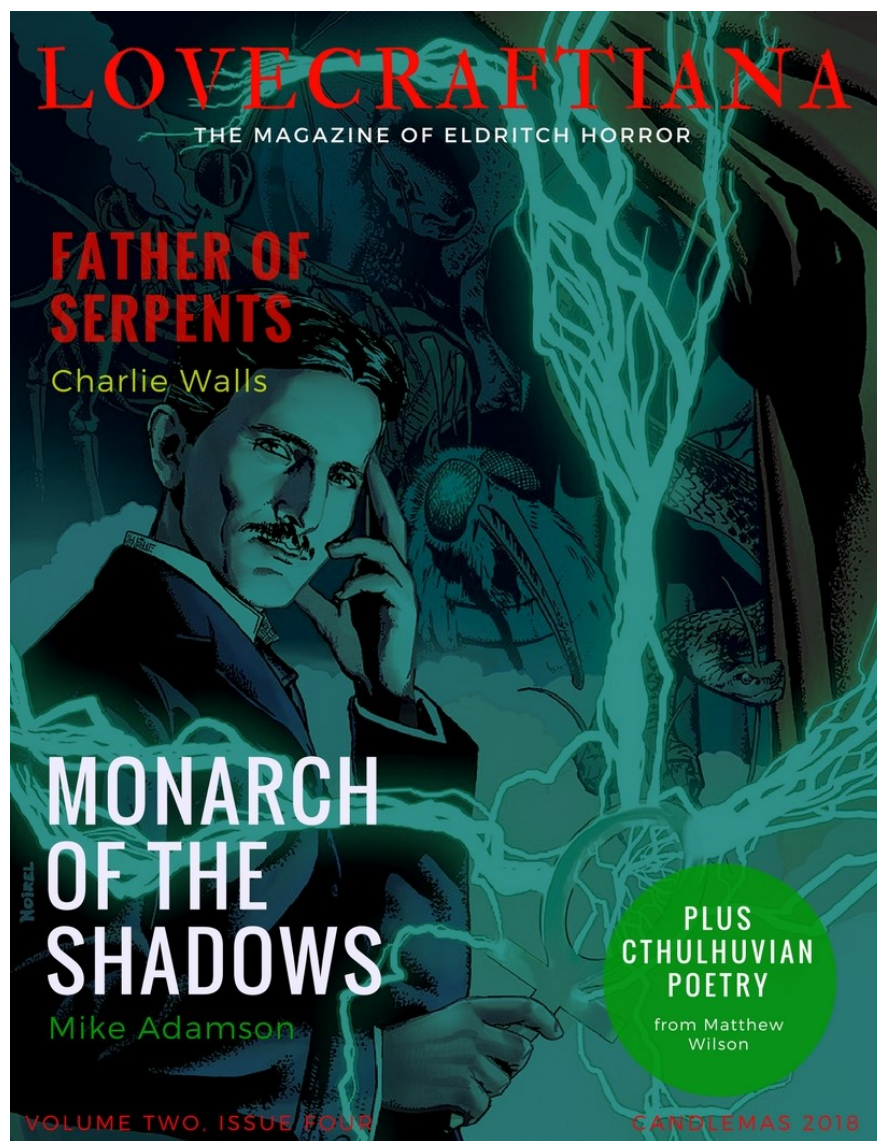
EDITORIAL

This week, a villager visits the dwellers in the towers. A drug house is the scene of horror. A down and out girl achieve the life of her dreams, at a price. And a visitor to Bayonne hears a tale of the dismembered.

John C Adams reviews ES Wynn's Wraeththu novel, *Whispers of the World that Was*. Tucker reveals his secret identity in Part Two of *The Grey Wolf of Chicago*. The Astronaut encounters the inhabitants of the new world. And back on Earth the fighting begins.

—Gavin Chappell

And this week, Rogue Planet Press is proud to present the Candlemas 2018 edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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BENEATH THE TOWERS by Alex S Johnson

1. The Windows

In those days many lived in the village, beneath the towers. We looked by night at the windows that winked from the towers. Through uniform frames—ovals of sizzling silver—the glass within created an illusion: thousands of embedded miniature windows, all of a different size, shape and colour. Distinct as pebbles on a beach, those meta-windows formed patterns responsive to our moods as certain musical harmonies or the base notes of perfumes exhaled from unstopped vials in a scent organ. It seemed to us that they followed our subtle trends of thought and feeling and turned them into tailor-made narratives as we watched, breathless.

Sometimes, accompanied by the sounds made by the chattering gods, ten steps removed, they appeared to mock us, but the mockery on reflection proved no deeper than that provided by the clay masks in the Middle Era tragedies of Bacc-ran the Elder—surely you recall his self-as-other protagonist Morbid Sammy, and the price he paid for fiddling with the spooky glove. The masks' relentless ridicule first drove Sammy mad, then blasted him to yet another level, a higher wisdom the glove only hinted at. More often the windows' message was elevating, a story that spoke directly to our deepest hopes and aspirations.

One night I was out on the back patio, pondering my place in village life, wondering whether I might aspire higher or elsewhere, when I glimpsed, then raptly followed, a pattern trail. It began at the bottom of the tower region proper, then ascended in a steep arc towards the place where the windows nestle together and merge, as do the smoky souls of lovers. From there began a tale that seemed to end before it acquired anything like a coherent storyline. My heart sank. Was the beautiful blonde Fredericka to be carried off by the villainous saviour Rudolph, fight for her life, only to be dashed against random rocks? Could Rudolph's past as a triple spy redeem him? Had the availability of so many channels of entertainment simply cored out my brain? It appeared I'd never know the answers to any of these questions. Then, like a miracle, resolution: a last-minute twist so unexpected and satisfying I nearly wept. It was like watching a field of daffodils erupt into the trails of shooting stars, from there to intertwine, popping out wild golden synergies.

"Yes," I wanted to shout. "Yes, yes!" For a brief moment, it all made sense. Maybe the blarggcow maid who was my model for Fredericka didn't have her cunning or spirits, but she was kind, and would make a fine, more than adequate mate. As for my sojourns in the spy network battling the forces of the Darkweb, they could only illuminate and enliven my activities in the village (besides the travel opportunities). The matter of entertainment, while troublesome, seemed like a problem I shared with most during that period, and probably would never reach the core-out line at the rate I pursued it.

Eureka.

I tried to tell somebody, anyone, but when I looked across the rooftops I saw my neighbours sitting there with looks of amazement. They too were captivated by the windows. My sense of intimacy with them felt like voyeurism.

Abashed, I looked down, but when I glanced up again, the pattern trail was gone and the neighbours had gone indoors. This came as a great relief. The moment was too intense; prolonged, I feared it might actually prove fatal.

While a kind of interaction, these hermetic exercises hardly substituted for real communication. We wanted to know the true thoughts and feelings of the tower dwellers. More, we wanted them to know us, directly. Was the nightly dialog between the villagers and the tower windows some accident? Was it a matter of design? Nobody knew; worse, none of the villagers voiced these questions even among themselves.

Of course, we encountered the tower people daily, hurrying through the market square, heads down, focused on some esoteric matter or another. But our interactions were formal, almost programmatic, and focused largely on the weather. Weather talk partook of broad strokes, particularly as climate change forced stark contrasts: fiery skies by day, and at night, electrical storms that seemed to shatter the very atmosphere into discrete blocks of darkness. Some sample exchanges: “Red skies again, mate.” “Aye.” “Crackling black.” “No doubt.” And so forth. Then with a gruff excuse of some sort or another, they moved on. There was simply no time or opportunity to ask about the windows.

2. The Child and the Tall Bikes

Following immemorial native practice, some took to stilts and tall bikes. We hoped in these ways to be noticed, winding higher and higher until the roads looked like vapor. We jettisoned the weight then, the bikes becoming slimmer, lighter, in some cases almost translucent. But the architects of the towers, predicting our course according to the formulae available at the time, worked a mechanism into these buildings, such that all any of the tower people might see was the glimpse of a conical hat, while the wearer of the hat cycled furiously and to no avail.

All we knew about the tower dwellers was this, what every village child was taught: the rudiments. They of the towers followed a path of deep recursion predicted by surreal math and chaos vortices. They wrote histories based on what they observed, looking about themselves; of the bubble that contained the port into the realm of the Iridescent Shore, where the caravans came to rest after journeys across that vast land none had seen directly—for you see, the bridge that carried them over into the land became lost in a kind of fog. So absorbed were they in their own inquiries—writing of people like them who wrote of people like them, with sketches on the margins of a possible relationship between the writers and the fog-folk—that those who lived outside this tightly circumscribed realm barely registered. But we forged on, passionately. We would get their attention, had to, because we knew one thing they didn’t.

This was what we knew: how all of it would end, in the Deluge, or something similar. It seemed impossible that this knowledge could be one-sided, because were they aware, they’d want to institute some kind of dialog. Granted, we of the village and they of the towers came from places as far removed as one could imagine. But in the absolute analysis, we were all human beings. Pooling information, we might even be able to forestall the Deluge before all of us were drowned. But that entailed a conversation, a back and forth. So we fell back on ways that served us in the past. With the aid of a visiting Wizard, we found a young boy whose skill with the tall bike—as a designer, craftsman and rider—was simply unparalleled. His eyes shone bright when informed of his task. He was to sketch a prototype tall bike with

limitless levels; indeed, a bike made of materials and through a technology that nobody yet had access to, an organic, self-archived marvel. Somehow he'd be the one to break through. Through trial, error, fevered experiment and disastrous, flaming accidents, the boy, whose name was Pritchard, finally arrived one day, coming down the road to the village, with a singular vehicle. It glowed like something unearthly. When he ascended it, it rose, taller and taller, until we saw with astonishment the logic of its design.

No matter how clever the architects of the tower had been, Pritchard was cleverer. He was downright ingenious. And oh how our hearts swelled with pride, seeing the short spikes of his blond hair, his laughing blue eyes, and a tall, hand-made conical cap spackled with stars. The day arrived when Pritchard began up the winding roads that twisted about the towers. The journey was long and perilous and lasted well into evening. At first came some kind of grotesque, comic toggle-switch action, Pritchard's conical hat rising past the windows, the windows shuttling up and away. But after hours and hours of this farce, a change. They saw him, and he spoke.

The story that every window then told was the same: of the boy whose purity of purpose, simplicity of spirit and iron will had broken through the wall of ice that divided the village from the towers. Before our astonished eyes, one of the central windows opened, a long platform emerged, and the boy was let in.

When daylight arrived, the boy exited the tower from the bottom door and revealed the mysteries of that abode for the first time. We learned of rooms where wild animals roamed, of thick jungle foliage, of dolls, mannequins, cabinets of rapture, miniature landscapes that glittered like jewels and held profound secrets, of nightmares chained in the dark, and of a creatrix goddess who had forgotten herself to become simply another tower-bound student writing recursive histories in her room. He also told us what he'd learned about the Deluge, how the creatrix manufactured it as an element in the code that held a symbiotic destiny. We of the village were cut off from the world of the towers, while they would suffer the fate reserved for them and their mirrors, their doppelgangers, those of the invisible city beyond the Iridescent Shore. It seemed that in fact we knew nothing.

They had never spoken with us because according to their reckoning of time, theirs was a meaningless blip on the horizon of the villagers, a hazy memory. Over generations the tower dwellers would simply pass into legend.

They were finished. But we, ah we, had only begun.

With a hero, Pritchard, and his tall bike.

We of the village were also the future.

THE END

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SAYETH THE LORD by Paul Lubaczewski

The phone rang. Dee ran over to get it. Funny that, she wasn't his girlfriend, it technically was his Mom's trailer, but since he said she could stay here while they got it together to move to the city, he never actually talked on his phone. He didn't even answer it anymore, no point, it wasn't for him anyway. If he said anything over the phone at all, it was filtered through her, because she was on the other line, he'd just say something, she'd pass it on, and then click back to her conversation.

She talked excitedly in to the phone, his manners were good enough though, he wasn't listening but trying to pay attention to the TV. That, and Dee talking excitedly about anything signified nothing, she could get violently worked up over the weather. That, in and of itself, explained why she wasn't his girlfriend, he'd experienced enough drama in his life, and she exuded it like perfume. She was probably very exciting to date, but then again car accidents were very exciting as well.

He heard her finally hang up, and looked over at her to tell her to grab him a beer while she was out there. That's when he saw that she was crying heavily. Bullshit drama or not, full blown water works were a rarity. This was probably a good time to try to attempt to be a decent human being.

"Dee, what's up?" he asked coming in to the kitchen where she just stood there crying. She responded by just sinking in to his chest sobbing away for a while. After letting her cry for a bit, he wanted to break his own unease if anything else, and tried again, "Y'know I might do a better job of this if I knew exactly WHAT I was comforting here?"

"Jennie...Jennie..." she sobbed at him.

"Jennie what Dee?" now this was sounding serious.

"She was... raped, Jim!" Dee blubbered out.

"Okay...Ummm...OKAY...we're gonna take a moment, you can cry...uhh take the time you need, and then you can tell me what happened," he said his face suddenly turned to stone in anger. Jennie was a mutual friend, a compatriot in the young adult war against normalcy and complacency. They had all been planning to move up to the city together. Jim's Mom's was sort of a way station to secure free rent while saving up, but Jennie had gotten a boyfriend and moved up there ahead of them. But that was sort of like an advanced force in a war, they were all still in the same army.

Something about the steadiness of his voice seemed to snap her out of it, "It's...it's OKAY" She pulled away a little bit, but kept his chest in easy weeping range just in case it would be needed again. "Some guys broke in to the squat with guns... they think they were from the crack house down the block...they made Arnie watch while..." and it was back to crying. But now he knew the important facts of it.

After giving her a minute he called out, "Jerry, do me a favour?"

Jerry was staring at the whole thing in mute horror, letting Jim handle the comforting, "Yeah?"

“Take Dee out for a little wander around to calm down a little bit, and then we’ll get our crap together to go get Jennie OKAY? We’ll get there in an hour and a half easy.”

After they had stepped out in to the field and were likely out of earshot, he went to find something to punch. It turned out to be the flimsy door to the trailers heater. He slammed his fist against it in a hammer blow. The force of the blow went right through the flimsy fibreboard that passed for trailer construction and his fist crunched a bit against the metal of the heater itself. His Mom would be pissed about that, but they door was just for show anyway, and at least it wasn’t a window this time.

“Ow,” he said quietly.

He drove to the city, not even because he really wanted to, but Dee was a mess, Jerry couldn’t drive, and that left him. He didn’t have a license but then again, he was the least likely to wreck the car at the moment. Dee sat next to him up front, he occasionally patted her leg in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. Life had already gotten enough shots in on him, he was really good at looking like nothing was wrong at all while the crisis was still ongoing. Crying was for when the fire had been reduced to steam, not for when it was still blazing away in the night. The world needs people like that to operate, god only knows what people like that need. Nobody asks.

Sometimes it made him seem cold or distant, but those who knew him best knew that it was a damned thankful thing that he kept things so tightly wound. The heater door was a testament to when he let that unwind a little bit. Chilliness was his public service. He was wound especially tight right now, again you’d have to know him. But he hadn’t flipped off or called a single other driver an asshole, Jerry was getting kind of worried about that.

As the lights of the tunnel whipped by them his voice came from the back seat of the elderly Caprice wagon, “Dude, you OKAY?”

“You’ll have to speak up, I can’t hear you over the wind!” Jim said loudly. He was being a dick, he knew he was, he heard him. But the wind whistling through the taped up busted side window gave him an excuse. The last time they had been in the city someone had helped themselves to the elderly roach of car’s stereo, which just goes to show, no matter how close to garbage something is, somebody, somewhere, is still willing to steal it.

With that he reached down and turned up the volume on the little mini-thing they had to play tunes with. Portable meant hide-able, of course it also meant shitty sound quality. Jim Carroll scratchily called out in to the tunnel as they plunged along, “Every night I have the same dream, the other night I had a strange dream.”

It took forever to find a parking spot, it always did, and as always, it was forever away from where they wanted to be. A city with over ten million people involves walking a lot. Dee was going off to find Jennie, who was staying with a friend. Jerry who used to stay at the same squat, where Jennie had lived was to go pick up Jennie’s stuff, and check on Arnie her

boyfriend. That part would probably be brief, he had probably wrapped himself in a needle of self-pity. As long as he was alive they could consider him “checked on”.

Jim gave them a time to all meet back at the car, and watched them go. He had given them some vague story about finding somebody to keep half an eye on Arnie after they left. Jerry had said he could find somebody at the squat, but agreed when Jim pointed out that if anybody at the squat was competent in finding their ass with both hands and a map, they wouldn’t even be here picking Jennie up right now.

After they had all gotten out of the car, he locked it up for as much as it mattered with the window. They might steal a stereo out of a Caprice but the vehicle itself was probably safe. Too big to be worth the trouble, if you couldn’t sell it on a blanket laid out on a sidewalk why bother? He gave them a time to meet back at the car for about three hours from now, which should be plenty of time. Dee said a quick “bye” and hurried off, so he set in to a loping city pace next to Jerry.

Neither of them talked much, there really wasn’t much to say. Both of them were locked in to their own heads with their own worries and anger. Expressing it right now wasn’t going to happen, there wasn’t any women present, they didn’t need to express anything, they were both pissed and upset, and each of them knew it, why spoil it by talking? Young men use their vocal skills mainly for arguments, picking up girls and dumb jokes, not the time, not the place.

At some point Jerry was going north and he wasn’t planning to. “OKAY,” Jerry said, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Yep,” he replied stone faced, “see you back at the car.”: He watched Jerry go for a while and then kept walking down East the way he had been heading. They had useful things they needed to do, so did he. He wanted to get a good look at the place these bastards had come from.

It was getting past dusk by now, winter hours, so the streets were all pretty dimly lit. After a few blocks he turned north himself. His intention was to zig zag up to where he could get a good look without Jerry seeing him heading that way. It was dangerous but necessary, Jerry wasn’t much of a fighter, so why get him in to it? Finally, when he was paralleling a block south, he saw what he needed, a hole in the row line where a house had been torn down or burned down at some point.

He cut through the gaping hole, avoiding the crazily twisted and dangling fire escape of one of the more rotted buildings as he kept to the shadows. He looked around, sure enough connected to what had been the common yard area was another missing tooth in the jaw of the skyline. It should be right in line of sight with the crack house itself, so he headed over to have a look at it from the shadows.

The place was a train wreck, no real surprise there. Kind of a shame because it might have been a nice area once, old steps and old brick. It must have been pretty once. Now it was dirty, and covered in spray paint. Most notable though was the wound over the whole facade, the metal front door. Its purpose was pretty obvious, even a farm boy could figure it out, “We sell drugs in here, and you only come inside of here if we let you. Put your money through the slot, and crack pops out, thank you, come again, and you will.” So, he wasn’t going to get

a good look at the inside tonight that was for sure. But he was seeing enough of the outside. Two soldiers of the operation were standing nonchalantly outside, who, he was pretty sure, were carrying something very lethal in their bulky jackets. The nonchalant routine was as much laziness as an attempt to seem unobtrusive, no cop in his right mind who ever wanted to see retirement would come anywhere near this block.

There was no point in reporting the attack, no-one was ever going to investigate it. If Jennie had even called out, no-one would have come to her aid. No-one that valued their skin. All of the houses still in good enough shape to have tenants were barred tight, nobody was out on the street. The animal instinct to hide when flight wasn't available had taken root here.

He heard something knock over something in the lot behind him. He whipped around quickly to see a sunken corpse of a human lunging towards him. The man had his hand in the pocket of his horrid thrift store disco era brown leather jacket, and that hand was thrust forward to indicate he was packing something in it.

The remains of a man were startled to see him whirl around like that, but rallied, "Give me your wallet white boy, call it a tax for trespassing."

"Ain't got a wallet on me, man," he replied his face staying completely deadpan.

"Bullshit! you got money on you. You here for the same thing I am," the man rasped in desperation, reaching out with his free hands to pat at Jim's pants pockets.

"Look, dude, you're wasting your time here. I'll even empty out my coat pockets," Jim said. The crack head wasn't even looking at him now, as he was frantically pulling Jim's pants pockets out and checking the thigh pockets of his BDU's.

It might have made some difference in what happened next. Jim got his left hand wrapped around the knife that was in his inside coat pocket, and stepped quickly to one side, as he did he took out the knife and stabbed down hard on the arm whose hand was wedged so threateningly inside the coat pocket. The man started to yowl in shock and pain until Jim brought his other elbow slamming down in to his nose with an awful crunching noise.

You could see that the smashing of his nose had stunned the shuffling human remains in to silence. Jim levered hard on his knife, wrenching the man's hand out of his coat pocket. It was empty. He slapped at the pocket itself to make sure it was empty as well, and wrenched the knife out of his would be assailant's arm. Released as it were, whatever frenetic energy had been driving him, completely drained away and the mugger-in-training collapsed on the ground.

Jim looked at him for a second and then drove his boot in to his ribs hard enough to lift the desiccated body up off the ground. "That, is for bluffing on an empty hand fuck face!" he said as he started sprinting back for the car. The crack head had made enough noise to grab someone's attention, no point in being anywhere near him if anyone got curious enough to check. It didn't matter, he'd seen what he had needed, no point wearing out your welcome.

After he had gone a few blocks and no uproar or pursuit had happened, he slowed down to a casual walk. He had a lot of time to kill so he stopped at a bodega and bought a 40 Ouncer and a hip bottle of vodka for after they got back home. If the crackhead had checked his

jacket pockets first, then he might have found the money he had on him. Oh well he probably did the poor wreck a favour, a nice stay in the hospital right about now might end up saving the guys life, and trying to mug people in this neighbourhood with no weapon would certainly be the end of it, most of the denizens of this neighbourhood weren't as forgiving.

Jerry finally rolled up looking a little sullen, "So how'd it go?" Jim asked.

"He was nodding out when I got up there. A couple of people said they'd keep an eye on him, but, junkies watching over a depressed junkie?" he shrugged his shoulders.

"Wanna get a slice? We probably got a little bit," he asked.

"No point in being hungry and pissed off, I guess," said Jerry as they set off.

They were leaning against the car about a half an hour later when Dee came down the street, with Jennie in tow. Jerry and Jim didn't say anything but just hugged her for a minute. Eventually Jim broke off and opened the back door to the car and said, "Let's get you home. You're safe now."

The girls were ensconced in his room now, him and Jerry had set up camp in the living room with him. They weren't talking much. The TV was turned up, mainly so they couldn't hear the girls talking in his room. It was only a trailer, with those thin walls privacy was strictly an illusion you sold to yourself. Jennie needed comforting of a non-threatening variety, and neither of them qualified nearly so much as the childhood friend she'd come to this part of the world with.

Jennie and Dee had come to this industrialized part of the east coast hub of cities from an Okie ass backwards central state town. One of the itty bitty little cities that centred around coal or something. Maybe steel. Who knew? Whatever the people had done there, they didn't do it anymore. Mainly they seemed to collect welfare checks and bitch about the Government on the way to the unemployment office, Jim had gone out there with them once. The girls hadn't wanted that, and had their eyes set on a nice east coast Sid And Nancy fantasy.

They had moved to this area as a trial half step. But, Jennie had gotten a boyfriend up in the big city and had gone ahead. They had all been planning to do the same as well. They probably still would, here wasn't going anywhere fast either, but the fantasy seemed a lot more fantastic today. It might not put off any moves, but reality had shown itself to everybody today.

But for right now, tonight, there was one thing he could do here, and only here, something he'd lose when he left. Something he'd always been afraid to try before now. But sometimes, the night calls out for vengeance, and he felt ready to listen just this once.

"I'm goin' for a walk out back, I need to think a bit," he announced. With that, he popped the back door, jumped on to the oil tank for the heater, and down in to the long grass. The property hadn't been cut for hay again this year, so it was up and dead and dry. It whipped along his legs as he walked through the empty property. His Mom and Aunt had both inherited when Great Grandma Dandridge died, so now they had a bunch of empty land they

had no plans for and taxes that took all of the spending money away. Oh well it wasn't like his Mom spent what little money they had wisely anyway.

His great grandmother had walked him back here once when he was a kid, while the adults were all talking around the TV. She was old, and he was young, during that visit. Nobody really pays a lot of attention to either. Both are assumed to have the same complete lack of intellect, and it was assumed they would be happier not having their minds cluttered by what the adults were discussing. Pretty insulting on both counts, but people are like that.

The moon was high and full, it made the dead hay in the field practically look white, it almost seemed to glow. It was a long walk to where he was going on the property. It was a good walk though, away from everyone else, his Mom hiding in her room, or out watching TV with Jerry, Dee and Jennie locked in his room, away from everyone with their sadness. He almost felt a level of peace here and now.

But he wasn't here for peace, that was for sure. The trees of the hedgerow were starting to loom up, and made the entire area look dark and foreboding. It didn't matter much, he knew right where he was going. He'd been here before. It didn't take him long to find the little stream that hid in the trees. Now all he had to do was follow it down the hill. Just like he had done the first time. all those years ago.

He walked past garbage that had been dumped here for generations. No trash pickup this far in the country, if it didn't burn it got hauled out here to the fence line. He moved a couple of large sheets of old tin roofing, that were hiding the same thing that they were hiding all those years ago.

The shrine.

Of course, shrine connotes something holy, he could tell even when the old lady first took him here, this was quite the opposite. She was a good woman, old and worn out, which kind of made her look like a witch. Old farm women always look like that, and she was in her late 80s by then. But she had this as her secret out here, maybe she was a witch, but she didn't act like one most of the time, she taught him how to play solitaire too, and that wasn't very burning at a stake worthy. His little kid memories just rebelled at the thought. Then again, that side of the family had been here since the 1700's. Maybe the way you stick around that long, IS having something tucked out in the woods like this. In case of emergencies and all. She wasn't sure what the real nature of the god was that owned this shrine, she'd said it was best not ask too many questions sometimes. She did say though, that if it was being used for revenge, the person or person would fall by their own greatest weapon. Maybe the dark god of the alcove fancied irony. Maybe when this was over, he'd look up what gods rolled that way.

He looked at it, a dark on dark alcove on the side of the stream bank, hidden by refuse normally, uninteresting to most, even if it wasn't. Who looks hard for a trickle of a stream on a hillside, and another piece of garbage sticking up past the dead washing machine and the ancient bike frame? There was some kind of dark statue hidden in its dark recesses. He hadn't looked too carefully at it when she'd brought him out here as a kid, and now under the tree's he couldn't see what it was that lurked in there even if he wanted to. He was pretty sure he didn't want to exactly know now, as long as this worked it could look like Bozo the freaking Clown for all he cared.

He'd brought along a packet of herbs, she had said it hadn't really mattered too much what kind, but like old people do, she rattled off a list of the type she liked. The elderly do that, "any kind of soap will do, but PERSONALLY..." but those were easy enough to come by. He had kept some stashed away in the trailer just in case anyway, his Mom probably thought it was weed, or maybe she'd been taken out here too and was willing to ignore it. He set the herbs in a little cup in front of the alcove and then lit them, the smoke was sweet smelling, a homey feeling oddly enough. After that he lit two candles on either side of the alcove which still didn't provide enough light to see what lurked in there, thank someone for small blessings.

Well, here we were then. Was this important enough to put the stain and tarnish on his soul? Once he started the chant there was no turning back, he'd have that black mark to work off no matter what, because intent would certainly be there. He had never even considered it before really, maybe in a temper tantrum sort of way, but not really. No matter what kind of bad things had happened, he had never sat here before, with the candles lit and the herbs in the cup before.

But one thing was clear as the night air to him, there ought to be some vengeance in this world against men who rape teenage girls. Maybe he couldn't be there for every one that suffered. Certainly, he couldn't do anything for every victim, every little girl suffering the misery caused by another's capricious lusts and cruelties and greed upon their body. But Jennie was his friend. He could damned well do something about this one.

He started to chant.

*Corruption expands, rust, slime, and rot
Fear takes control let's see what we've got?
Fight or flight, my dears which shall it be?*

It looked to be a slow night. Most of the drones and hangers-on had left for the night, other than customers at the door there wasn't much to look after. Willy was out front tonight, Jamaal was supposed to be as well, but fuck that, it was cold out. Nobody in their right mind would try anything anyway, and Big D barely even came down from the top floor anymore, he'd never know.

Jamaal was sitting down on the shitty couch with Terry watching TV, that and the hotplates on the third floor that was all that was allowed to be plugged in by the workers. Any of the scumbags using a room had best not be plugging shit in. D could plug in whatever he wanted in his own private room. But too much power being drawn might red-light the pencil pushers downtown. Once paperwork became involved, they might have to increase their bribes. Hooking in to the grid for free did have downsides.

There was a knock on the door, which meant a customer. He sighed and got up from the Batman re-run they were watching and went to see how much they wanted. He loved corny old TV shows and old horror movies, so the distraction was not welcome. While he was away down the hall, Terry thought he heard some kind of cracking noise from in the wall. But nothing dimmed, and the TV was still on, so he figured it was just rats. He passed out some vials threw the slot, and took the money.

Then he swore he smelled smoke. If one of those crack heads upstairs had set something on fire, swear to god!

It was just as Jamaal came back down the hallway, that the wall cracked away. Revealing billowing flames behind it. The whole room seemed to shimmer for a second then, like a haze had fallen over everything and then just lifted up. That's when he saw something leap out of the couch. Where Terry had been.

Something out of his childhood nightmares.

It looked like one of the vampires that used to give him nightmares as a kid, after he'd watched *Blade* when he was told by his Mom he wasn't allowed to. All fangs and pointed ears and shiny skin. It snarled at him menacingly. Then it started towards him like lightening, those things were always fast in the movies.

Jamaal screamed and fired multiple rounds from the Glock, he always had drawn when he went to the door. He screamed again and holstered the Glock and slung his Semi-auto in to his hand and ran for the door.

When he got there, he tugged on it screaming, but no matter how hard he pulled it wouldn't open/ He threw back the slot and looked out. Standing right outside was another one of the monsters waiting for him. My god what was happening here? Why was this happening? He had to warn D, but first he slipped the muzzle of the semi-auto through the slot and opened fire at the thing. He didn't bother to check on it, the fire was billowing out of the room where the first one had been. He had to warn D.

Up the stairs to the boss, that was the important part now.

The haze seemed to be on his eyes, everywhere he looked now, things looked hazy and wavy, almost like looking through glass with a slight warp on it. He must have gotten something in his eyes from the fire. Get to the big man and get him out of here on the fire escape that was the important part.

He reached the second floor where all the crackheads they let in the building "lived" if you could call what they did living. He heard moans. Man, he'd heard something like this in the movies too. He stood real still and quiet on the steps for a second and listened. He thought for sure he heard shuffling over the sound of the fire below. Something moving through all the garbage that collected on this floor from their "tenants".

That's when he saw the first one leaning out of the doorway moaning and looking at him.

Its flesh was rotting off, its clothes were rotting off. You could see bone sticking through in places. Soon all of the doorways leading out in the hall were filled with one, or two struggling to get past the first one. Oh crap! He knew this one too! Zombies! What in the hell was happening here? This was like every nightmare he'd had as a kid, but real!

But he knew how to deal with them, he'd seen enough films, aim for the head! He started firing quick bursts at head height. It was with no small degree of satisfaction he saw them drop one by one. As he worked his way up the last set of steps, fumbling in his pocket for the

keys to the big man's floor he kept up a steady stream of lead to return these horrors to the grave.

Denzel was scared out of his mind now. He'd heard the gun fire in HIS building. First on the ground floor, and now it was on the stairs leading up here. He was pretty sure somebody was finally making a move on him. You get a little bit of money and some other son of a bitch gets jealous, you had a hard time sleeping at night worrying about it. That's always the way. Well they weren't getting through that door. And if their ass did, he had enough fire power to take out an army. He had a car stashed that no mother fucker in his right mind would be dumb enough to mess with, once he was sure it was clear, he was out of here, with his money and his guns and a plan to start over. But right now, he was scared, they were coming for him.

There was someone at the door now, he could hear the key in the lock, they must have gotten it off one of his soldiers. He waited now with his gun pointed right at the doorway as he heard the jingling of the keys and the fall of the tumblers. His finger was twitching uncontrollably waiting to pull down hard on the trigger under it, and sweat was pouring down his face, it sure was hot in here for some reason.

The door swung open, and just as he feared. There stood the thing he was afraid of most in life, Manny from uptown finally looking to put him out of business for good. Just like he had stood there in every nightmare he'd had for the last six months. But it wasn't going to happen today. He let his finger do what it had wanted to do so badly and then the shotgun erupted. In the echoes left by the blast he heard a body falling down the steps.

He approached the doorway cautiously, just because one of them was down, that was no reason to assume there wasn't more of them out there. When he got to the door, he felt the flames, smelled the smoke, and finally saw the tongues of fire leaping up the stairwell towards him.

No way out there, and what he really needed was a way out now.

He had the only window in the place with metal grates and a key, it led out to the fire escape, and the courtyard below, they'd bricked up every other window that went to it. Escape was at the top of his mind right now. He ran over to the window popped the lock and yanked it open. Climbing out on to the window sill he could see the bottom floors now. Fire was gushing out of the windows where it had burnt through.

It was now or never, so he grabbed a duffle bag of money and he jumped down on to the fire escape. Almost immediately after his feet landed on the grating though, he heard a loud series of snaps, and then the whole construction lurched sideways. Oh no! The fire escape, it was pulling free of the building! Panic seized him by his throat, and instinct took over, he lunged back at the window sill. It was slightly out of his reach by now. No choice, no chance, had to jump for it. His whole body tensed, and he leapt for it.

His left hand caught the edge of the sill for a second, he was just swinging his other arm over to grab it with both hands, his arm slowed by the weight of the bag. Then that second ended. Gravity having discovered what he was about, unleashed her dreadful fury upon him, and he

plummeted. His head bounced a couple of times on his flight, off the remains of the fire escape, so he was probably dead already when it finally came to a crashing end in a pile of trash behind the building.

With one thing and another, his body wouldn't actually be discovered for weeks. The last body to be recovered and identified. Between the fire, and all the people with bullet holes in them, the coroner and the police were too busy to start searching for bodies out back.

The police had already pulled up front by now, which meant reporters weren't far behind them, and soon enough there would be fire trucks. Fire trucks always came last in this neighbourhood, they didn't show up until the police made the area safe to work. For those people now coming out of their houses, who actually payed rent to live there, there were now clear looks of relief on their faces, despite the flames and the worry about their own buildings catching.

Better one evening of worrying about things, then a lifetime of fearing for your life.

Jim drove into town while everyone was still asleep. He wasn't a morning person at all, but he hadn't bothered to sleep that night. Smokes don't buy themselves and all, so everybody would be happy to see he'd picked some up. The rolling country soon turned to town, and town to city again. You get far enough from the big city, the distance between farmland and moderate city was brief. You can go from 100,000 souls working and dying within inches of each other, to cows within a few miles.

Finally, he parked the elderly wreck, and walked off to the local news stand. It wasn't a big city one, with the papers all splayed out in front and a little window to a confined and claustrophobic booth. This far out, it was a little hole in the wall store, with racks of magazines.

He asked for a couple of packs of butts and then looked down at the days papers on a rack in front of the cash register. There piled up, was one of the cities tabloids, the headline screamed, "DRUG HOUSE HORROR SCENE!". He picked one up, and looked at it, then he smiled. He picked another one up for Jennie and put them on the counter.

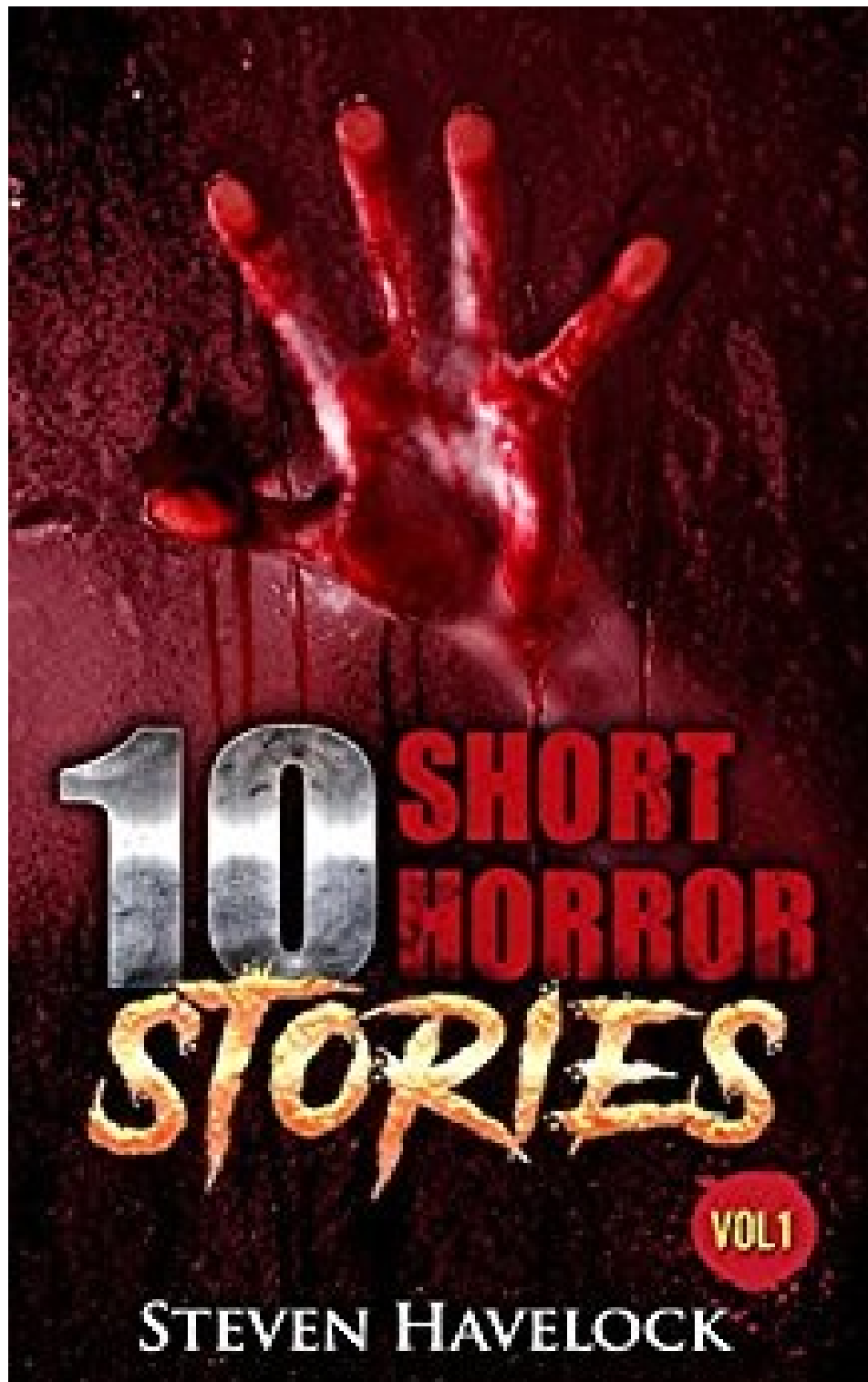
"You gonna read em or pay for em?" asked the gruff old timer working the cash register.

He happily plunked down the money.

"What d'ya think happened?" asked the old man.

"Maybe they finally saw the bogeyman in the mirror?" he said, smiling.

THE END



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THE GIFT by Steven Havelock

Jane saw the tall dark-skinned man on the corner as she walked home in the rain.

Damn! I forgot to check the weather this morning and now I'm soaked.

She looked into the man's eyes as she walked past. Something about the man warmed her heart and melted her pain.

I've never got married, no one wanted me...Those eyes...There was something in those eyes...

A few minutes later Jane was back at home.

I can't stop thinking of that tall dark-skinned man...

She took off her coat which was drenched and looked at herself in the mirror by her front door.

I look a mess! My hair all soaked, my coat drenched...

She remembered the unpleasantness she had experienced at the job centre.

That mean good-for-nothing at the job centre sanctioned me...

She felt her stomach rumble and went to the fridge.

Nothing...Completely bare...Not even a can of beans...

Then she noticed the four-day old chicken that she'd thought she had finished.

I've got no money...Nothing...Not even enough for a bag of chips...The four-day old chicken...

Jane heard the rain pelting down outside.

The rain that had absolutely drenched her.

The tall handsome man must have thought I was a right stupid fool to be caught out in the rain like that.

Jane felt her stomach rumble again...

She pulled out the plastic container the chicken was in.

God! It stinks...

Jane slammed it into the microwave.

As she stood there waiting for the chicken to heat up she looked out the patio door of her ground floor flat.

A mangy looking emaciated black cat, the colour of the darkest night sat there staring in at her.

The rain pelted down on the cat and Jane could see it was totally soaked.

“Meooooowww!”

Something about the cat tugged at Jane’s heart.

“Meeeeooooowww!”

Jane suddenly heard the ring of the microwave. She picked up the plate of the four-day old chicken and stared at it.

God! I’m so hungry...

Then she looked again at the mangy, hungry looking black cat at the patio door.

Lightning flashed somewhere in the distance.

“Meooooowww!”

Jane looked at the cat again and their eyes met, and something passed between them.

I may not have anything to eat but that cat not only has nothing to eat but it also has nowhere to go to get out of this storm...

Jane opened the patio door and placed the plate of chicken on the floor.

The cat gave small tiny “meow” as if in gratitude. Jane closed the door and headed upstairs.

I need to lie down; I feel so weak and faint after not eating for the last few days...

Jane lay down and heard the storm rumble on for the next few hours. Sleep eventually came and with it a release from exhaustion.

Jane awoke.

Thank God, the noise of the storm has stopped.

She went downstairs and looked at the calendar on wall and calculated it would be another 4 days before she received any benefit money.

I've got no one to rely on but myself.

Then she thought about that awful night again. That one night three years ago that had destroyed her world. Jane had been with her family travelling to a wedding when the truck had run into them. Only Jane had survived.

My whole family...wiped out...in just a few seconds...

Tears came unbidden to her eyes, but she fought them back.

Then Jane noticed something twinkling by the patio door.

What's that?

She walked over and saw it was a two-pound coin.

My heart feels a hundred times lighter. Yes! I will be able to get some bread and a can of beans!

It was raining again.

I got to get some food.

Jane headed out in the heavy rain, without even an umbrella as she couldn't afford one.

Just this old coat to keep me dry.

When she got back from the shop she was completely drenched again just like yesterday.

She slammed the beans in the microwave and put the bread in the toaster and waited...

"Meoooooww!"

Jane looked towards the garden.

It's the black cat again.

Ring!

Jane pulled the food out of the microwave.

She looked again at the weak small emaciated mangy looking cat.

Again, like the day before something about the cat tugged Jane's heart.

She put some beans in another plate and set the plate outside the patio door for the black cat.

The cat meowed loudly in appreciation or gratitude Jane couldn't tell. Jane sat down by the door and watched the cat eat up all the beans with relish. She stroked the cat and the cat licked Jane's fingers in gratitude.

Jane was about to get up when the unbelievable happened.

Never tell anyone about me ever and you will live a life you could never have imagined.

The words entered Jane's head.

What the heck!

Promise never to tell anyone about me!

"I promise..."

Promise with all your heart.

The cat was looking up at her with the strangest expression.

An expression of love and fear...

"I promise," she said again a little louder.

Jane looked up as lightning flashed across the sky and thunder rolled over the heavens again.

She looked back down, the cat had gone and in its place was a fifty-pound note. Jane smiled.

Gosh! A fifty-pound note! I feel so happy, rain or not I'm going out to get some food.

Jane was on her way back from food shopping at the local supermarket just near her house.

Damn! I bought more than I can really carry.

There he is again!

The tall handsome black man was standing on the corner again.

As she walked passed, they looked at each other and something passed between them.

“Excuse me, miss? Do you need a hand with those bags?”

That had been the start of their relationship. The tall man would soon go on to become her husband.

Jane had left the one-bedroom council flat behind and moved into a three-million-pound mansion of her now husband in an expensive part of the city.

A few years later she had two beautiful young girls.

I feel so blessed....So, so blessed...

And yet.... And yet.... something about that one fateful day when the black cat had been standing at Jane’s patio door haunted her...

I know I promised...But...But the secret is too hard...Just too hard to keep...

Jane had been having counselling as the death of her family still haunted her. Then she had done it, even though all her heart and mind screamed against it. She had done it. The secret had just been too hard to keep.

She had opened up to the counsellor about the black cat and that one fateful day when the man of her dreams had walked into her life...

The counsellor in return had promised not to reveal Jane’s deeply held secret to anyone but had encouraged her to write sand paint and sculpt to ease the burden of her secret and she had...

Exactly ten years later

Her husband Matt arrived home from work at about six pm. Her two young girls were upstairs asleep on this cold November night.

“Matt.”

“Yes, Jane?”

“Come into my art room, there’s something I want to show you.”

“Okay, Jane.” They both headed into Jane’s art room.

“Close your eyes, Matt.”

He did as asked.

Jane pulled open the art closet. She pulled out a sculptor of a black cat and placed it in Matt's hands. Next she uncovered an easel and on it was a picture of the black cat.

"Open your eyes, Matt."

He did so. The expression on his face was impossible to read.

"What's all this about?"

Jane picked up some A4 sheets of paper on her desk and removed the sculptor from his hands and gave him the A4 sheets.

"Read, Matt. This is something I have been dying to tell you about for years."

"What are you saying?"

"In your hands is a short story of the day we met, in the heavy thunderstorm."

Jane heard crying. She looked to the door way of the art room, her two girls, one aged eight and one aged six were standing there.

"Mummy! Mummy! No!"

Matt read the story.

She saw the expression on Matt's face. An expression she had never seen before.

"You promised," he said simply.

Jane's heart beat like a giant drum and suddenly she felt like she was in her worst nightmare.

"The heavens gave me the power to transform on the basis that you would never tell."

Jane looked to the doorway again and saw her two daughters had transformed into two black cats.

She heard them in her mind.

Mummy! Mummy! No!

Then she looked again at Matt. He picked up the sculptor and slammed it into the far wall. It shattered into a million pieces.

Pain flashed through her face as Matt scratched her.

His hands! They have turned into claws!

“You promised!” He squealed more cat like than human.

Then he attacked again. Slicing huge cat like claws across her arm.

Outside she heard the heavy patter of rain and a loud bang as thunder rolled across the heavens.

Just like on that fateful day we met.

She looked at Matt’s eyes they were slitted and green like a cats’.

“Fight it! Please fight it!” she screamed.

She saw the tortured face of someone who until a minute ago had being the love of her life and hope glimmered inside her...

“Fight it! Please...”

A heavy blow struck her. She passed out.

Eventually...Eventually she awoke.

Her body cried out in pain as she noticed it was ravaged by claw marks.

A small painful smile spread across her lips.

I’m still alive. My love...My forever love fought it... I will never see my family again, but at least I’m still alive...I will carry the joy of our memories until my dying days...I only hope and pray that wherever they are they will one day forgive me...

One day...

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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A BOOK OF GHOSTS by Sabine Baring-Gould

McAlister

The city of Bayonne, lying on the left bank of the Adour, and serving as its port, is one that ought to present much interest to the British tourist, on account of its associations. For three hundred years, along with Bordeaux, it belonged to the English crown. The cathedral, a noble structure of the fourteenth century, was reared by the English, and on the bosses of its vaulting are carved the arms of England, of the Talbots, and of other great English noble families. It was probably designed by English architects, for it possesses, in its vaulting, the long central rib so characteristic of English architecture, and wholly unlike what was the prevailing French fashion of vaulting in compartments, and always without that connecting rib, like the inverted keel of a ship, with which we are acquainted in our English minsters. Under some of the modern houses in the town are cellars of far earlier construction, also vaulted, and in them as well may be seen the arms of the English noble families which had their dwellings above.

But Bayonne has later associations with us. At the close of the Peninsular War, when Wellington had driven Marshal Soult and the French out of Spain, and had crossed the Pyrenees, his forces, under Sir John Hope, invested the citadel. In February 1814, Sir John threw a bridge of boats across the Adour, boats being provided by the fleet of Admiral Penrose, in the teeth of a garrison of 15,000 men, and French gunboats which guarded the river and raked the English whilst conducting this hazardous and masterly achievement. This brilliant exploit was effected whilst Wellington engaged the attention of Soult about the Gaves, affluents of the Adour, near Orthez. It is further interesting, with a tragic interest, on account of an incident in that campaign which shall be referred to presently.

The cathedral of Bayonne, some years ago, possessed no towers—the English were driven out of Aquitaine before these had been completed. The west front was mean to the last degree, masked by a shabby penthouse, plastered white, or rather dirty white, on which in large characters was inscribed, “Liberté égalité et fraternité.”

This has now disappeared, and a modern west front and twin towers and spires have been added, in passable architecture. When I was at Bayonne, more years ago than I care to say, I paid a visit to the little cemetery on the north bank of the river, in which were laid the English officers who fell during the investment of Bayonne.

The north bank is in the Department of the Landes, whereas that on the south is in the Department of the Basses Pyrénées.

About the time when the English were expelled from France, and lost Aquitaine, the Adour changed its course. Formerly it had turned sharply round at the city, and had flowed north and found an outlet some miles away at Cap Breton, but the entrance was choked by the moving sand-dunes, and the impatient river burst its way into the Bay of Biscay by the mouth through which it still flows. But the old course is marked by lagoons of still blue water in the midst of a vast forest of pines and cork trees. I had spent a day wandering among these tree-covered landes, seeking out the lonely lakes, and in the evening I returned in the direction of Bayonne, diverging somewhat from my course to visit the cemetery of the English. This was a square walled enclosure with an iron gate, rank with weeds, utterly neglected, and with the tombstones, some leaning, some prostrate, all covered with lichen and moss. I could not get

within to decipher the inscriptions, for the gate was locked and I had not the key, and was quite ignorant who was the custodian of the place.

Being tired with my trudge in the sand, I sat down outside, with my back to the wall, and saw the setting sun paint with saffron the boles of the pines. I took out my Murray that I had in my knapsack, and read the following passage: —

“To the N., rises the citadel, the most formidable of the works laid out by Vauban, and greatly strengthened, especially since 1814, when it formed the key to an entrenched camp of Marshal Soult, and was invested by a detachment of the army of the Duke of Wellington, but not taken, the peace having put a stop to the siege after some bloody encounters. The last of these, a dreadful and useless expenditure of human life, took place after peace was declared, and the British forces put off their guard in consequence. They were thus entirely taken by surprise by a sally of the garrison, made early on the morning of April 14th; which, though repulsed, was attended with the loss of 830 men of the British, and by the capture of their commander, Sir John Hope, whose horse was shot under him, and himself wounded. The French attack was supported by the fire of their gunboats on the river, which opened indiscriminately on friend and foe. Nine hundred and ten of the French were killed.”

When I had concluded, the sun had set, and already a grey mist began to form over the course of the Adour. I thought that now it was high time for me to return to Bayonne, and to table d’hôte, which is at 7.30 p.m., but for which I knew I should be late. However, before rising, I pulled out my flask of Scotch whisky, and drained it to the last drop.

I had scarcely finished, and was about to heave myself to my feet, when I heard a voice from behind and above me say— “It is grateful, varra grateful to a Scotchman.”

I turned myself about, and drew back from the wall, for I saw a very remarkable object perched upon it. It was the upper portion of a man in military accoutrements. He was not sitting on the wall, for, if so, his legs would have been dangling over on the outside. And yet he could not have heaved himself up to the level of the parapet, with the legs depending inside, for he appeared to be on the wall itself down to the middle.

“Are you a Scotchman or an Englishman?” he inquired.

“An Englishman,” I replied, hardly knowing what to make of the apparition.

“It’s mabbe a bit airly in the nicht for me to be stirring,” he said; “but the smell of the whisky drew me from my grave.”

“From your grave!” I exclaimed.

“And pray, what is the blend?” he asked.

I answered.

“Weel,” said he, “ye might do better, but it’s guid enough. I am Captain Alister McAlister of Auchimachie, at your service, that is to say, his superior half. I fell in one of the attacks on the citadel. Those”—he employed a strong qualification which need not be reproduced—

“those Johnny Crapauds used chain-shot; and they cut me in half at the waistbelt, and my legs are in Scotland.”

Having somewhat recovered from my astonishment, I was able to take a further look at him, and could not restrain a laugh. He so much resembled Humpty Dumpty, who, as I had learned in childhood, did sit on a wall.

“Is there anything so rideeculous about me?” asked Captain McAlister in a tone of irritation. “You seem to be in a jocular mood, sir.”

“I assure you,” I responded, “I was only laughing from joy of heart at the happy chance of meeting you, Alister McAlister.”

“Of Auchimachie, and my title is Captain,” he said. “There is only half of me here—the etceteras are in the family vault in Scotland.”

I expressed my genuine surprise at this announcement. “You must understand, sir,” continued he, “that I am but the speeritual presentment of my buried trunk. The speeritual presentment of my nether half is not here, and I should scorn to use those of Captain O’Hooligan.”

I pressed my hand to my brow. Was I in my right senses? Had the hot sun during the day affected my brain, or had the last drain of whisky upset my reason?

“You may be pleased to know,” said the half-captain, “that my father, the Laird of Auchimachie, and Colonel Graham of Ours, were on terms of the greatest intimacy. Before I started for the war under Wellington—he was at the time but Sir Arthur Wellesley—my father took Colonel Graham apart and confided to him: ‘If anything should happen to my son in the campaign, you’ll obleege me greatly if you will forward his remains to Auchimachie. I am a staunch Presbyterian, and I shouldn’t feel happy that his poor body should lie in the land of idolaters, who worship the Virgin Mary. And as to the expense, I will manage to meet that; but be careful not to do the job in an extravagant manner.’”

“And the untoward Fates cut you short?”

“Yes, the chain-shot did, but not in the Peninsula. I passed safely through that, but it was here. When we were makin’ the bridge, the enemy’s ships were up the river, and they fired on us with chain-shot, which ye ken are mainly used for cutting the rigging of vessels. But they employed them on us as we were engaged over the pontoons, and I was just cut in half by a pair of these shot at the junction of the tunic and the trews.”

“I cannot understand how that your legs should be in Scotland and your trunk here.”

“That’s just what I’m aboot to tell you. There was a Captain O’Hooligan and I used to meet; we were in the same detachment. I need not inform you, if you’re a man of understanding, that O’Hooligan is an Irish name, and Captain Timothy O’Hooligan was a born Irishman and an ignorant papist to boot. Now, I am by education and convection a staunch Presbyterian. I believe in John Calvin, John Knox, and Jeannie Geddes. That’s my creed; and if ye are disposed for an argument——”

“Not in the least.”

“Weel, then, it was other with Captain O’Hooligan, and we often had words; but he hadn’t any arguments at all, only assertions, and he lost his temper accordingly, and I was angry at the unreasonableness of the man. I had had an ancestor in Derry at the siege and at the Battle of the Boyne, and he spitted three Irish kerns on his sabre. I glory in it, and I told O’Hooligan as much, and I drank a glass of toddy to the memory of William III., and I shouted out Lillibulero! I believe in the end we would have fought a duel, after the siege was over, unless one of us had thought better of it. But it was not to be. At the same time that I was cut in half, so was he also by chain-shot.”

“And is he buried here?”

“The half of him—his confounded legs, and the knees that have bowed to the image of Baal.”

“Then, what became of his body?”

“If you’ll pay me reasonable attention, and not interrupt, I’ll tell you the whole story. But—sure enough! Here come those legs!”

Instantly the half-man rolled off the wall, on the outside, and heaving himself along on his hands, scuttled behind a tree-trunk.

Next moment I saw a pair of nimble lower limbs, in white ducks and straps under the boots, leap the wall, and run about, up and down, much like a setter after a partridge.

I did not know what to make of this.

Then the head of McAlister peered from behind the tree, and screamed “Lillibulero! God save King William!” Instantly the legs went after him, and catching him up kicked him like a football about the enclosure. I cannot recall precisely how many times the circuit was made, twice or thrice, but all the while the head of McAlister kept screaming “Lillibulero!” and “D—— the Pope!”

Recovering myself from my astonishment, and desirous of putting a term to this not very edifying scene, I picked up a leaf of shamrock, that grew at my feet, and ran between the legs and the trunk, and presented the symbol of St. Patrick to the former. The legs at once desisted from pursuit, and made a not ungraceful bow to the leaf, and as I advanced they retired, still bowing reverentially, till they reached the wall, which they stepped over with the utmost ease.

The half-Scotchman now hobbled up to me on his hands, and said: “I’m varra much obleeged to you for your intervention, sir.” Then he scrambled, by means of the rails of the gate, to his former perch on the wall.

“You must understand, sir,” said McAlister, settling himself comfortably, “that this produces no pheelsical inconvenience to me at all. For O’Hooligan’s boots are speeritual, and so is my trunk speeritual. And at best it only touches my speeritual feelings. Still, I thank you.”

“You certainly administered to him some spiritual aggravation,” I observed.

“Ay, ay, sir, I did. And I glory in it.”

“And now, Captain McAlister, if it is not troubling you too greatly, after this interruption would you kindly explain to me how it comes about that the nobler part of you is here and the less noble in Scotland?”

“I will do so with pleasure. Captain O’Hooligan’s upper story is at Auchimachie.”

“How came that about?”

“If you had a particle of patience, you would not interrupt me in my narrative. I told you, did I not, that my dear father had enjoined on Colonel Graham, should anything untoward occur, that he should send my body home to be interred in the vault of my ancestors? Well, this is how it came about that the awkward mistake was made. When it was reported that I had been killed, Colonel Graham issued orders that my remains should be carefully attended to and put aside to be sent home to Scotland.”

“By boat, I presume?”

“Certainly, by boat. But, unfortunately, he commissioned some Irishmen of his company to attend to it. And whether it was that they wished to do honour to their own countryman, or whether it was that, like most Irishmen, they could not fail to blunder in the discharge of their duty, I cannot say. They might have recognised me, even if they hadn’t known my face, by my goold repeater watch; but some wretched camp-followers had been before them. On the watch were engraved the McAlister arms. But the watch had been stolen. So they picked up—either out of purpose, or by mistake—O’Hooligan’s trunk, and my nether portion, and put them together into one case. You see, a man’s legs are not so easily identified. So his body and my lower limbs were made ready together to be forwarded to Scotland.”

“But how—did not Colonel Graham see personally to the matter?”

“He could not. He was so much engaged over regimental duties. Still, he might have stretched a point, I think.”

“It must have been difficult to send the portions so far. Was the body embalmed?”

“Embalmed! no. There was no one in Bayonne who knew how to do it. There was a bird-stuffer in the Rue Pannceau, but he had done nothing larger than a seagull. So there could be no question of embalming. We, that is, the bit of O’Hooligan and the bit of me, were put into a cask of eau-de-vie, and so forwarded by a sailing-vessel. And either on the way to Southampton, or on another boat from that port to Edinburgh, the sailors ran a gimlet into the barrel, and inserted a straw, and drank up all the spirits. It was all gone by the time the hogshead reached Auchimachie. Whether O’Hooligan gave a smack to the liquor I cannot say, but I can answer for my legs, they would impart a grateful flavour of whisky. I was always a drinker of whisky, and when I had taken a considerable amount it always went to my legs; they swerved, and gave way under me. That is proof certain that the liquor went to my extremities and not to my head. Trust to a Scotchman’s head for standing any amount of whisky. When the remains arrived at Auchimachie for interment, it was supposed that some mistake had been made. My hair is sandy, that of O’Hooligan is black, or nearly so; but there was no knowing what chemical action the alcohol might have on the hair in altering its

colour. But my mother identified the legs past mistake, by a mole on the left calf and a varicose vein on the right. Anyhow, half a loaf is better than no bread, so all the mortal relics were consigned to the McAlister vault. It was aggravating to my feelings that the minister should pronounce a varra eloquent and moving discourse on the occasion over the trunk of a confounded Irishman and a papist.”

“You must really excuse me,” interrupted I, “but how the dickens do you know all this?”

“There is always an etherial current of communication between the parts of a man’s body,” replied McAlister, “and there is speeritual intercommunication between a man’s head and his toes, however pairted they may be. I tell you, sir, in the speeritual world we know a thing or two.”

“And now,” said I, “what may be your wishes in this most unfortunate matter?”

“I am coming to that, if you’ll exercise a little rational patience. This that I tell you of occurred in 1814, a considerable time ago. I shall be varra pleased if, on your return to England, you will make it your business to run up to Scotland, and interview my great-nephew. I am quite sure he will do the right thing by me, for the honour of the family, and to ease my soul. He never would have come into the estate at all if it had not been for my lamented decease. There’s another little unpleasantness to which I desire you to call his attention. A tombstone has been erected over my trunk and O’Hooligan’s legs, here in this cemetery, and on it is: ‘Sacred to the Memory of Captain Timothy O’Hooligan, who fell on the field of Glory. R. I. P.’ Now this is liable to a misunderstanding for it is me—I mean I, to be grammatical—who lies underneath. I make no account of the Irishman’s nether extremities. And being a convinced and zealous Presbyterian, I altogether conscientiously object to having ‘Requiescat in pace’ inscribed over my bodily remains. And my great-nephew, the present laird, if he be true to the principles of the Covenant, will object just as strongly as myself. I know very weel those letters are attached to the name of O’Hooligan, but they mark the place of deposition of my body rather than his. So I wish you just to put it clearly and logically to the laird, and he will take steps, at any cost, to have me transferred to Auchimachie. What he may do with the relics of that Irish rogue I don’t care for, not one stick of barley sugar.”

I promised solemnly to fulfil the commission entrusted to me, and then Captain McAlister wished me a good night, and retired behind the cemetery wall.

I did not quit the South of France that same year, for I spent the winter at Pau. In the following May I returned to England, and there found that a good many matters connected with my family called for my immediate attention. It was accordingly just a year and five months after my interview with Captain McAlister that I was able to discharge my promise. I had never forgotten my undertaking—I had merely postponed it. Charity begins at home, and my own concerns engrossed my time too fully to allow me the leisure for a trip to the North.

However, in the end I did go. I took the express to Edinburgh. That city, I think candidly, is the finest for situation in the world, as far as I have seen of it. I did not then visit it. I never had previously been in the Athens of the North, and I should have liked to spend a couple of days at least in it, to look over the castle and to walk through Holyrood. But duty stands before pleasure, and I went on directly to my destination, postponing acquaintance with Edinburgh till I had accomplished my undertaking.

I had written to Mr. Fergus McAlister to inform him of my desire to see him. I had not entered into the matter of my communication. I thought it best to leave this till I could tell him the whole story by word of mouth. I merely informed him by letter that I had something to speak to him about that greatly concerned his family.

On reaching the station his carriage awaited me, and I was driven to his house.

He received me with the greatest cordiality, and offered me the kindest hospitality.

The house was large and rambling, not in the best repair, and the grounds, as I was driven through them, did not appear to be trimly kept. I was introduced to his wife and to his five daughters, fair-haired, freckled girls, certainly not beautiful, but pleasing enough in manner. His eldest son was away in the army, and his second was in a lawyer's office in Edinburgh; so I saw nothing of them.

After dinner, when the ladies had retired, I told him the entire story as freely and as fully as possible, and he listened to me with courtesy, patience, and the deepest attention.

"Yes," he said, when I had concluded, "I was aware that doubts had been cast on the genuineness of the trunk. But under the circumstances it was considered advisable to allow the matter to stand as it was. There were insuperable difficulties in the way of an investigation and a certain identification. But the legs were all right. And I hope to show you to-morrow, in the kirk, a very handsome tablet against the wall, recording the name and the date of decease of my great-uncle, and some very laudatory words on his character, beside an appropriate text from the Screeptures."

"Now, however, that the facts are known, you will, of course, take steps for the translation of the half of Captain Alister to your family vault."

"I foresee considerable difficulties in the way," he replied. "The authorities at Bayonne might raise objections to the exhuming of the remains in the grave marked by the tombstone of Captain O'Hooligan. They might very reasonably say: 'What the hang has Mr. Fergus McAlister to do with the body of Captain O'Hooligan?' We must consult the family of that officer in Ireland."

"But," said I, "a representation of the case—of the mistake made—would render all clear to them. I do not see that there is any necessity for complicating the story by saying that you have only half of your relative here, and that the other half is in O'Hooligan's grave. State that orders had been given for the transmission of the body of your great-uncle to Auchimachie, and that, through error, the corpse of Captain O'Hooligan had been sent, and Captain McAlister buried by mistake as that of the Irishman. That makes a simple, intelligible, and straightforward tale. Then you could dispose of the superfluous legs when they arrived in the manner you think best."

The laird remained silent for a while, rubbing his chin, and looking at the tablecloth.

Presently he stood up, and going to the sideboard, said: "I'll just take a wash of whisky to clear my thoughts. Will you have some?"

“Thank you; I am enjoying your old and excellent port.”

Mr. Fergus McAlister returned leisurely to the table after his “wash,” remained silent a few minutes longer, then lifted his head and said: “I don’t see that I am called upon to transport those legs.”

“No,” I answered; “but you had best take the remains in a lump and sort them on their arrival.”

“I am afraid it will be seriously expensive. My good sir, the property is not now worth what it was in Captain Alister’s time. Land has gone down in value, and rents have been seriously reduced. Besides, farmers are now more exacting than formerly; they will not put up with the byres that served their fathers. Then my son in the army is a great expense to me, and my second son is not yet earning his livelihood, and my daughters have not yet found suitors, so that I shall have to leave them something on which to live; besides”—he drew a long breath— “I want to build on to the house a billiard-room.”

“I do not think,” protested I, “that the cost would be very serious.”

“What do you mean by serious?” he asked.

“I think that these relics of humanity might be transported to Auchimachie in a hogshead of cognac, much as the others were.”

“What is the price of cognac down there?” asked he.

“Well,” I replied, “that is more than I can say as to the cask. Best cognac, three stars, is five francs fifty centimes a bottle.”

“That’s a long price. But one star?”

“I cannot say; I never bought that. Possibly three francs and a half.”

“And how many bottles to a cask?”

“I am not sure, something over two hundred litres.”

“Two hundred three shillings,” mused Mr. Fergus; and then looking up, “there is the duty in England, very heavy on spirits, and charges for the digging-up, and fees to the officials, and the transport by water——” He shook his head.

“You must remember,” said I, “that your relative is subjected to great indignities from those legs, getting toed three or four times round the enclosure.” I said three or four, but I believe it was only twice or thrice. “It hardly comports with the family honour to suffer it.”

“I think,” replied Mr. Fergus, “that you said it was but the speeritual presentment of a boot, and that there was no pheesical inconvenience felt, only a speeritual impression?”

“Just so.”

“For my part, judging from my personal experience,” said the laird, “speiritual impressions are most evanescent.”

“Then,” said I, “Captain Alister’s trunk lies in a foreign land.”

“But not,” replied he, “in Roman Catholic consecrated soil. That is a great satisfaction.”

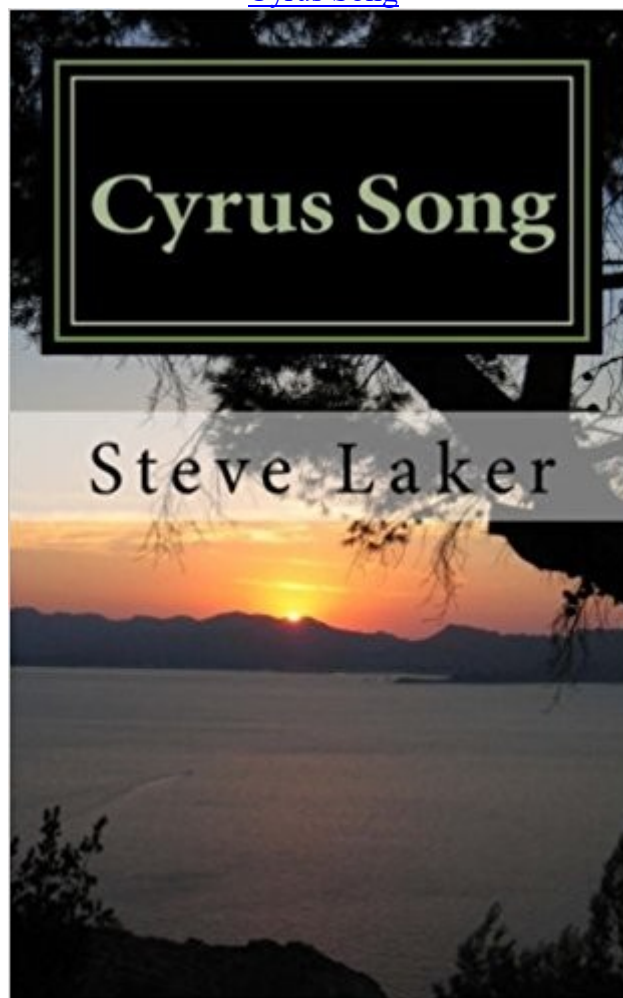
“You, however, have the trunk of a Roman Catholic in your family vault.”

“It is so, according to what you say. But there are a score of McAlisters there, all staunch Presbyterians, and if it came to an argument among them—I won’t say he would not have a leg to stand on, as he hasn’t those anyhow, but he would find himself just nowhere.”

Then Mr. Fergus McAlister stood up and said: “Shall we join the ladies? As to what you have said, sir, and have recommended, I assure you that I will give it my most serious consideration.”

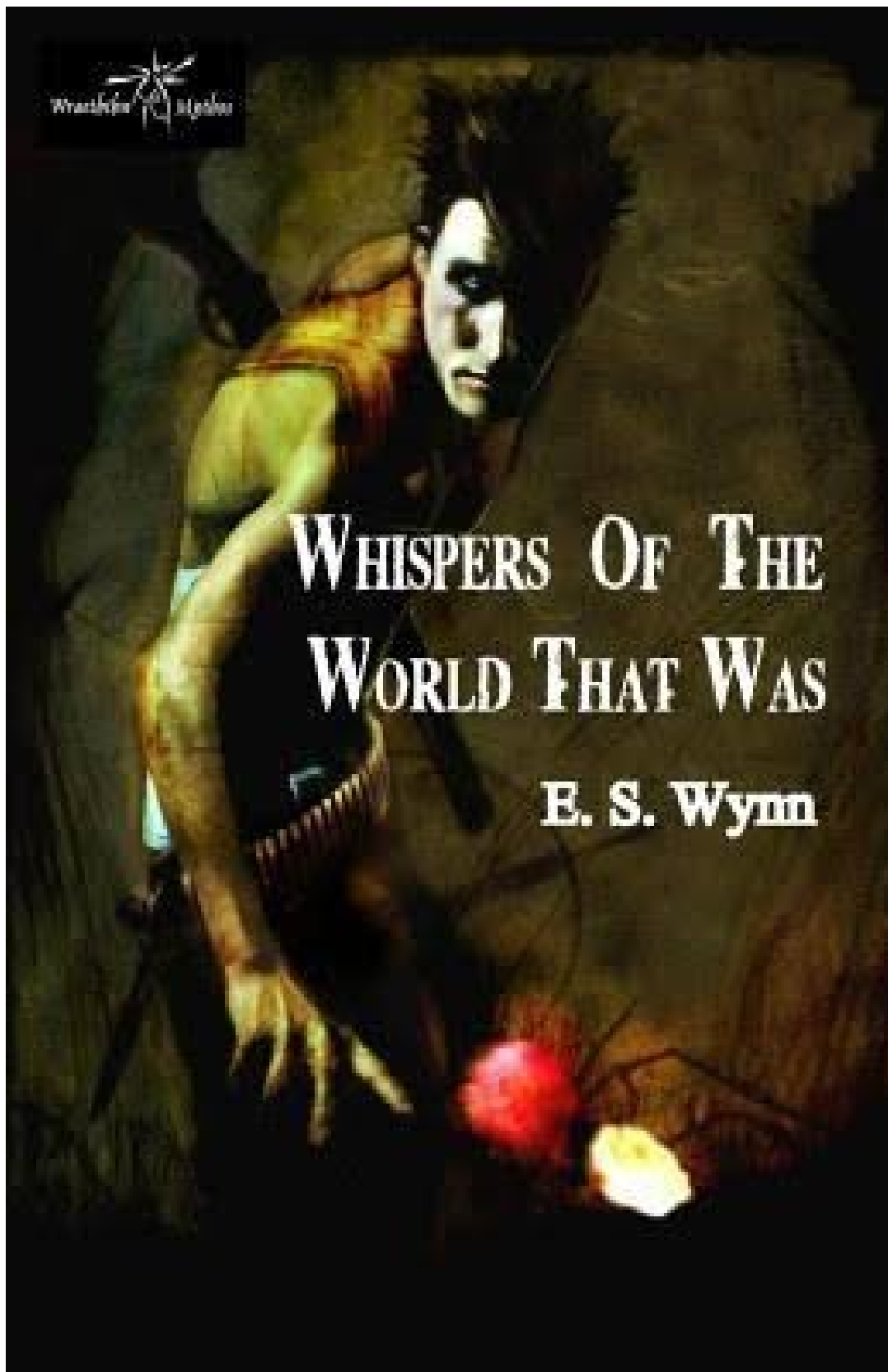
THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



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REVIEW by John C Adams



Whispers of the World That Was by E S Wynn

Whispers of the World That Was by E S Wynn is set within Storm Constantine's world of the Wraeththu Mythos. It explores the premise that not all humans who've been turned hara find it easy to embrace the transition and remain permanently within its restrictions. For those new to the mythos, a handy introduction by Constantine sets the scene.

It's years since the old world order failed. After the credit crunch and power outages were over, disease, floods and volcanic explosions ravaged what little was left of civilisation. Small bands of survivors were left to get by: some ranching in the Gold Country, others diving for metal and canned foods in the flooded areas. No wonder Tyse is having trouble getting his head around it all:

The world is weird these days. Oceans where there should be cities. Men with dicks that turn into pussies. Maybe even genuine space aliens.

For Tyse, Captain Hara and their buddies, life means dodging the many roving gangs who can rob them at any time when they're trying to get safely to Cinder Hill market to sell the little they've scavenged from the sea floor.

Tyse, like the rest of his group, has become hara in a post-human world. Some of the others have embraced their new lives with greater ease, but he's finding it more difficult to adjust to a world in which being with a woman is a distant memory and your sex organs can adapt to both male and female designs:

I hand Stoff the rifle without saying anything else. I know that my eyes are hard, dark with resolve. It's a battle leaving the canyon. A silent battle, waged entirely within me, but with every step, I can feel my human side winning.

Other living creatures aren't their only concern. A single machine mind has learnt how to operate drones and is using them to pick off the hara:

We come across the first corpse just beyond the orchard. I recognise the guy but can't place his name. Stoff only glances at him, keeps walking. I can't help but linger. The way he's lying, the skin on his face sallow and stretched, showing teeth in a disturbing scream, his mouth open, full of flies.

Whispers of the World That Was has a mellow style that's just so restful and easy to read. But it's full of dense action and danger, too. The story hits that unusual sweet spot: a brave hero whose emotional journey unfolds as compellingly as his everyday fight for survival. I loved the way that the solutions to both challenges were cleverly entwined as Tyse moves deeper and deeper into an exploration of what it is to be har.

Enjoy!

THE END

WINTER 2017-18

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THE GREY WOLF OF CHICAGO by Garret Schuelke

Part Two

“Will you take that thing off, Tucker?” Lana said. “We’re not even close to the club.”

Tucker tightened his mask. “I’m getting this party started right now. Fuck waiting for Gareth.”

Lana vaped and rolled her eyes. Come on, Haruki, she thought, I hate babysitting him.

Norman started laughing. “Having fun there, homie?” Sturgill asked.

“Some guy around the corner is wearing a ninja mask and dancing around,” Norman replied.

Upton took the glasses and put them on himself. He laughed. “Let’s get ourselves a private show, gentleman.”

Haruki came out of the tavern. He saw Tucker gyrating toward traffic.

“Aw, ain’t that cute?” Haruki said.

“Yeah, but it’s WRONG,” Lana said.

A party bus honked its horn. The women on the bus cheered Tucker on. One of them threw beads, hitting him the chest. Tucker picked up the beads and raised them over his head in a victorious pose.

Upton’s tentacle wrapped itself around Tucker’s leg. Upton grunted, and the tentacle immediately retracted, dragging Tucker down the street.

“TUCK!” Haruki yelled as he watched his boyfriend disappear into the alley.

“DAMN, MAN!” Norman yelled as Upton held Tucker up in front of them by his leg.

“You should see me when I go fishing,” Upton said.

“LET ME GO!” Tucker yelled, swinging his fists frantically.

Upton nodded, and dropped him. Tucker scrambled to his feet and raised his fists.

“We like those moves you were showing off back there,” Sturgill said, crossing his arms as he moved behind Tucker.

“Our friend here just moved back,” Upton pointed at Norman. “We were hoping you could do us a solid and give him a private show.”

“HELL YEAH!” Norman yelled, clasping his hands.

“Norm just loves drunk, muscular white boys who rock tight shirts.”

Norman's smile disappeared. "FUCK YOU, MAN!" he yelled, pushing Upton.

Upton laughed as he bumped into the building. "Come on, I know why you really want him here."

"NO, I WANTED—"

Tucker punched Norman, sending him reeling against a dumpster. Upton had his tentacle wrap itself around Tucker's neck.

"Holy shit," Upton said, gesturing to Sturgill to put down his gun. "You have courage," He squeezed Tucker's neck, "to fuck with a Rudkus."

"You're..." Tucker wheezed, "A Russ?"

"RUDKUS, MOTHERFUCKER!" Sturgill yelled, punching Tucker in the stomach.

"Back off for a sec!" Upton yelled, bring Tucker closer to him. "You know any other motherfuckers in Chicago with powers like this?"

Tucker held his stomach, alternating between coughing and wheezing. Upton released him. He immediately tried to stand up, but fell to his knees.

"So, are you just not from around here, then?" Upton asked, getting down on one knee.

"I'm..." Tucker looked up, "Godan."

Upton looked up at Sturgill, who gave him a confused look. "Woden?"

Tucker glared at him. "GO-DEN."

Upton giggled. "GO-DAN?"

Tucker shook his head. "You nearly got it."

Norman kicked Tucker in the side. "FAGGOT ASS PUNK!"

"HA! He got you good, man!" Upton said.

"TUCK!" a voice down the alley yelled. They looked up, and saw Gareth, with Haruki and Lana behind him.

"Get out of the way, guys," Gareth said.

"One of them has a gun!" Lana yelled.

Gareth dashed down the alley. Sturgill raised his gun. Lana screamed as she and Haruki got out of the entrance way and pressed themselves against the wall. Sturgill fired. Gareth dodged the bullets. Lana and Haruki both screamed as the windows in the store across the street were

shattered by the gunfire. Gareth grabbed the gun, pistol-whipped Sturgill, and crushed the gun.

Norman back away, and hid behind the dumpster. Upton stood up, eyes widened. He was amazed by Gareth's speed. He then remembered Mysta telling him about her interest in giving him super speed. He got angry.

"Hey, who the fuck are you?" he asked.

Gareth glared at him. He dropped the crushed gun on top of Sturgill.

"You aren't a Rudkus," Upton slowly moved his tentacle behind Gareth, "but you're definitely a superhuman."

Gareth moved towards him. Upton stood his ground, frantically searching his mind for a clue of who Gareth was.

"Did Mysta give you that speed? Huh?"

Gareth lifted Tucker to his feet. "I have no clue what you're going on about, man." He leaned into Tucker's ear. "Ruki and Lana are out front. I'll take care of this."

"FUCK THAT!" Tucker yelled, pushing Gareth away. "HE'S MINE!" He charged Upton.

"DUDE, NO!"

Upton used this opportunity to wrap his tentacle around Gareth's waist. Tucker cocked his fist back. Upton brought Gareth forward, slamming him into Tucker. He then swung Gareth into a dumpster.

"FUCK!" Norman yelled, jumping out from behind the dumpster.

"PUSSY! Upton yelled. "Rudkuses don't hide!" He saw that Tucker was on his knees and elbows. He growled, and raised his foot above his head.

Gareth stood up, grabbed the tentacle, and yanked Upton towards him. He threw a punch. Upton moved his head before Gareth's fist connected. Gareth's thumb claw scratched Upton's cheek.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" Upton yelled, making his tentacle instantly constrict Gareth's waist, stunning him. He grabbed Gareth by the shoulders and kned him in the crotch.

"Come on, Tuck," Haruki whispered, helping Tucker to his feet.

Upton noticed them out of the corner of his eye. "I'm putting you all in the ground!" he yelled.

"GO!" Gareth yelled, grabbing the tentacle. Haruki and Tucker both ran.

Upton punched Gareth in the side of the head. Gareth laughed.

“WHAT?!” Upton yelled.

“I haven’t been kicked in the nuts since high school,” Gareth said, shaking his head. “I guess there is still a place on my body that hurts when weaklings hit it.”

Upton grabbed Gareth by his shirt and wound up to punch him again. Gareth gripped the tentacle and crushed it. Upton felt like he had been shot. He screamed, and the tentacle tightened around Gareth. Gareth growled, and put his hands on the tentacle, trying to pry it off. Upton gripped his hair, and began crying.

“WHO’S THE PUSSY NOW?” Gareth yelled. He looked down at the tentacle and got an idea. He flattened his hand, raised it, and brought it down. His claws sliced through the metal.

The most intense pain Upton had ever felt shot through him. He started to spasm. The tentacle loosened and fell to the ground. Gareth stepped away and looked over Upton, who was foaming at the mouth.

“Wow, I really fucked you up, huh?” he said, putting his hands on his hips. He noticed that Upton’s pants were wet. He shook his head and snickered.

Norman wrapped his arm around Gareth’s neck and drove his knife into Gareth’s side. Gareth screamed, and tried to whip him away. Norman held on while continuously stabbing him.

Gareth grabbed Norman’s wrist as he went for another stab. He crushed his wrist. Norman released both Gareth and his knife and howled.

“NICE TRY!” Gareth yelled, punching him. Norman fell to the ground. “Let’s see how you well you can handle being stabbed!” Gareth flattened both of his hands, and drove his claws into Norman’s legs. Norman screamed, and tried to crawl away.

“You’re staying right here!” Gareth said, dragging him closer.

Norman spit in Gareth’s face. Gareth felt the spit hit his lips. He took his claws out and wiped his mouth. Norman scrambled up and limped down the alley. Gareth leapt on him and began slashing his back. He barely heard Lana’s screams beneath his own roars as he watched Norman’s clothing, flesh, and blood splatter all around him. He heard ‘Gare, stop!’ but assumed it was Norman, which made him slash away faster.

A piece of concrete hit him in the forehead. He looked up, and saw Lana yelling at him. He stopped attacking Norman and calmed down.

Gareth rubbed his forehead. “Ouch.”

“COME ON, GET UP!” Lana said, grabbing him by the arm and leading him down the alley
“God, are you...look at you!”

Gareth looked down at himself when they emerged onto the street. His shirt was covered in blood. “I’m good,” he said, taking off his shirt and using it to wipe his hands, arms, and face off.

Lana gasped, and backed away.

“That bad?” Gareth asked.

“‘That bad’?!” Lana took a deep breath. “How are you even standing right now?!”

“I can take a lot of punishment.”

Lana came closer. “Hold still, I’m a nurse. I don’t think—”

“Watch this trick,” Gareth interrupted. He clasped his hands together and grunted. Lana’s eyes widened as she watched the stab wounds close and the bruises disappear.

“A healing factor comes in handy in these types of situations,” Gareth said, smiling.

“WE’RE GOING!” Lana said, grabbing Gareth’s hand. Gareth stuffed his blood soaked shirt into a trash can. Lana led them to Haruki and Tucker, who were chilling on a nearby stoop.

“Gare, are you all right?” Tucker asking, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m fine. I should be asking you if you’re all right.”

Lana tried hailing a cab. Tucker took his hands away, revealing a black eye. “They made me look like half a raccoon!”

Gareth smiled. “I can finish the job if you want it to match.”

A cab pulled up. “IN, IN!” Lana said, ushering everyone along. Gareth put on his sweatshirt and squished in the back.

“Take us to Bridgeport,” Lana said.

“WHAT?!” Tucker yelled, re adjusting himself. “No, we gotta hit the club!”

“What?! You’re in no condition to go dancing!”

“I am,” Gareth said.

Lana glared. “I know you are, you freak! Tuck isn’t a superhuman, though.”

“Sir, please stop thrashing around,” the cabbie said to Tucker

“One of us should have sat up front,” Haruki muttered.

Tucker glared at the cabbie. “Do you know who I am?!” He lifted the mask he had hanging around his neck. “I’m Godan, bitch!”

Gareth reached over and patted Tucker’s shoulder. “Chill, dude. Take us to the club, sir.”

The cabbie put up his hands. “WHAT CLUB?!”

“We’re going home!” Lana said.

“Take us to Frankfurt,” Haruki said.

“GUYS!” Lana glared back-and-forth. “NO!”

“I say we vote,” Gareth said. “We cool with that?”

Lana sighed. “I’m gonna lose.”

“That’s democracy. All in favour of going to the club?”

Gareth, Tucker, and Haruki raised their hands. The cabbie raised his hand as well.

“Sir, no offense, but your vote doesn’t really count here,” Haruki said.

The cabbie shrugged. “Either way, I get paid.”

Lana looked into Tucker’s eyes. “Tuck, sweetie, are you absolutely sure you’re up for this?”

Tucker put his head down. He took a deep breath, re-tied his mask to his face, and clenched his fists.

“I’m always up for dancing!” Tucker yelled, extending his around Haruki and Lana’s shoulders, smiling.

Lana looked at the cabbie. “Frankfurt, please.”

The cabbie muttered ‘Christ’. On the way, Gareth asked them about the Rudkuses. Haruki explained that the Rudkuses were a super powered gang who hailed from the Back of the Yards neighbourhood on Chicago’s south side. He then went into various stories about them that he either heard from friends or from the local news. Haruki admitted that, since they personally never encountered a Rudkus until tonight, he and Tucker thought after they first met Gareth at Critical Mass that he was possibly a member. Gareth also asked them if they heard of someone called “Mysta”. Tucker said he heard of a company called Mysta, but did not know what they did.

“How about you, sir?” Gareth asked the cabbie. “Got any Rudkus experiences to share?”

“NO!” the cabbie said, shaking his head frantically. He pulled up to the curb. “We’re here.”

Lana paid the cabbie and they got out. Haruki and Tucker rushed inside. The cabbie drove off with a squeal.

“Jeez, it’s not like I’m an undercover cop or anything,” Gareth said, scratching his head.

“Well, we’re here,” Lana wrapped her arm around Gareth’s. “Let’s not think about Chicago’s most ferocious gangbangers.”

“You’ve really come around.”

Lana paid the bouncer. “I adapt pretty quickly to the flow of things.”

She led him inside. They moved to the side and looked around for Haruki and Tucker. Gareth marvelled at all the party people—the majority of whom were in costume—the two stages that had burlesque dancers performing on them, and the DJ who was hyping up the crowd with the wildest electronic music that he had ever heard.

Lana dragged him onto the dance floor next to Haruki and Tucker. Haruki was grinding against Tucker. Tucker had his hands underneath Haruki’s shirt, and was kissing his neck. Lana began dancing with Gareth, who awkwardly shuffled about.

“Got no moves?” Lana asked.

“I’m better in the pit,” Gareth replied.

Lana unzipped Gareth’s sweatshirt. She put her arms around his neck and started grinding against him. Gareth grabbed her ass and pressed himself against her.

“There you go, baby,” Lana said.

Gareth leaned in and kissed her. The music stopped. Gareth heard Lana moan. The music started again as they kissed each other more deeply.

Upton suddenly woke up. He was in an operating room, lying on his stomach. He felt completely refreshed and full of energy. He turned onto his side. He saw Sturgill sitting in a chair, his head bandaged, and holding an ice pack to his wound. Norman was unconscious on the other operating table, also faced down. Doctor Mysta was working on her computer.

“Yo, where are we?” Upton asked, looking around as he sat up. “This isn’t your lab.”

“This is one of my satellites,” Mysta said, turning her chair around to face him.

“We should be at your lab.”

“That was where I told Sturgill you would be going after he called to have you guys picked up.” Mysta stood up, grabbing a small metal case on her desk. Upton looked over at Sturgill, who nodded. “I then realized that I left the serum at this lab, so I had the drive redirect to here.”

“Serum?”

“Yes. How do you feel?”

“Peachy. What did you do to me?”

Mysta opened the case, revealing two syringes. “I gave you a shot of my Alkaline Radicals.”

Upton gave her a confused look. “The fuck is a ‘Radical’?” he asked, standing up.

“It increases healing, durability, speed, and strength, both in the short and long term.”

“So it’s a steroid?”

Mysta waved her finger. “It’s beyond that. It immediately increases all I just mentioned. That’s why you’re back on your feet despite getting beat down like you did.”

Upton growled. He reached his hand behind himself. He touched the base of his tentacle. Pain shot through him. He cringed.

“Yeah, don’t do that. Your battle with your grey opponent showed me that having the tentacles so directly fused with your nervous system was a terrible idea.”

Upton looked Mysta directly in the eyes. “This grey guy—”

“Sturgill filled me in.”

“HEY!” Upton slammed his hands against the table. “IS HE ONE OF YOUR EXPERIMENTS?!”

Mysta shook her head. “Sturgill asked me the same thing. I checked my records, and there was no one of that description listed.”

They were interrupted by Norman groaning loudly and shifting on the table.

“Why isn’t he up and about?” Upton asked.

“I just gave him morphine. I’m not going to waste any radical on a non-superhuman Rudkus.”

Upton gritted his teeth. “Fuck that lame motherfucker!”

He saw a nearby mirror. He walked up to it and saw the cuts and bruised that covered his body. “I want to go through with ‘mechanization’.”

Mysta raised her eyebrow. “Oh?”

“How long will it take?”

“Based on current enhancements,” Mysta hummed, “and some new things I would like to try out if you’re up for it—”

“I want whatever it takes to get stronger.”

Mysta smiled. “A little over a year. Anything shorter would produce undesirable results.”

“Fine. When are we gonna start?”

Norman moaned loudly again. He mumbled a prayer.

“SHUT UP!” Upton yelled.

Mysta took out a syringe. “We can start now. Extend your arm.”

Upton did so. Mysta took hold, and inject the rest of the Alkaline Radicals into him. She took out the syringe and stepped back.

Upton watched as blood came out of the puncture wound. His eyes widened as the wound then closed.

“Here we go,” Mysta said. She took out her phone and started recording.

Upton’s arm muscles instantly bulked up. Warmth washed over him as his pecks and abs also became enlarged.

Mysta put up two fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

Upton snapped to attention. “What? Two.”

“Okay, you’re still with us. Good.”

Upton flexed his arms. “What are you talking about?”

“I lessened the potency in the dose I gave you, to test the extent of its healing properties.” She circles Upton, recording every inch of him with her phone. “Seems like this potency also doesn’t induce the same type of rage the regular dose does.”

Norman moaned again. Upton growled, cracked his knuckles, and walked over to him. He flipped Norman upright.

“...dark times, God,” Norman mumbled, “be there—”

Upton put his fist through Norman’s chest. Norman coughed violently. Upton pulled out a lung. He smiled, tossed the lung aside, and wound his fist back again. He put his entire weight into the punch, creating another hole in Norman’s chest, and punching straight through the table.

Upton breathed heavily as he watched Norman die. He turned his head back towards Mysta.

“Go ahead,” Mysta said, steadying her phone, “destroy him.”

Upton nodded, and started rapidly punching Norman’s corpse. Sturgill jumped out of his chair and ran across the room as blood splattered everywhere. Upton grabbed Norman’s arms and, with a bit more effort, ripped them off. He did the same with his legs. Finally, he clasped

his hands together, raised them above his head, and brought them down onto Norman's skull, crushing it.

"Excellent," Mysta said, ending her recording.

"We're almost there, you guys," Haruki said, cradling Tucker's head, "chill out."

Lana readjusted herself on Gareth's lap and continued making out with him. Haruki snickered. He saw their house up ahead. He woke Tucker up, instructed the cabbie where to pull over, and they got out.

"Well, I had fun tonight," Gareth said, putting his arm around Lana's waist.

"It's far from over," Lana said, stroking Gareth's chest.

YES, Gareth thought. He slapped Lana's ass.

"OW!" Lana yelled, jumping forward, holding her cheek. "You poked me!"

Gareth scratched his head, confused. "That's what I thought I was about to do."

"You put a hole in my pants!" Lana put a finger in the rip. She winced, pulled out her finger, and saw it was covered in blood. "And you stabbed me!"

Gareth looked at his claws. "Whoops."

"HEY! You two!" Tucked said, opening the front door. "STOP YOUR BITCHING!"

"Silence!" Haruki said, covering Tucker's mouth. "You'll wake Salt Chunk Mary."

"Asshole," Lana mumbled, walking towards the door.

"Wait, I can change!" Gareth said, his claws retracting and his hair turning brown as he returned to normal.

"You're hotter with grey hair," Lana said, closing the door.

Gareth face palmed himself. "Nothing can ever work out perfectly," he mumbled.

He entered the house. Tucker was passed out on the couch. Haruki came out of the kitchen with a glass of water in one hand, and small trash can in the other, and a bottle of ibuprofen underneath his chin.

"Well, I fucked up," Gareth said.

"Do you know how to sow?" Haruki asked, putting the water on the table and the trash can next to Tucker.

Gareth shook his head. “Negative.”

Haruki let the ibuprofen drop down his chest. “Buy her a patch tomorrow,” he caught the bottle and put it next to the water, “and all will be forgiven.”

“Gotcha.” Gareth looked down at Tucker. “So, what was he talking about earlier? What’s ‘Godan’?”

“Oh, Tucker’s a mythology nerd. He’s especially interested in all things Norse.” Haruki covered Tucker with a blanket. “He’s also Italian, and I guess when he learned that ‘Godan’ is the name that some Italian tribe worshipped Odin by, so he latched onto it.”

Tucker grunted and shifted. His mask slid down onto his chin.

“That’s cool,” Gareth said. “And the superhero gimmick?”

Haruki untied the mask. “I guess he came up with it at some Halloween party back when he was a teen.” He walked up to Gareth. “I don’t know, it’s weird. I love him anyway.”

Haruki twirled the mask. He looked Gareth in the eye and smiled. Gareth nodded, and smiled back.

“What?” Gareth asked. Haruki tried putting the mask on him. Gareth ducked his head. “Hey now!”

“Sorry, I think it would look good on you.” Haruki said.

Gareth snickered. “Thanks, but I’m good with my own identity.”

Haruki put his arms around Gareth’s neck and pressed himself against him.

“Uh, hi,” Gareth said.

“Thanks for being there tonight,” Haruki said. “I’m glad we met you.”

Gareth nodded. “It’s good to be here.”

“You don’t deserve to be alone tonight.”

Gareth sighed. “I was thinking the same thing when I was coming into the house.”

“Well, I don’t want to be alone tonight either.”

Haruki slid his fingers into Gareth’s hair. He pulled his head forward, and they kissed. Gareth wrapped his arms around Haruki’s waist and pressed him closer.

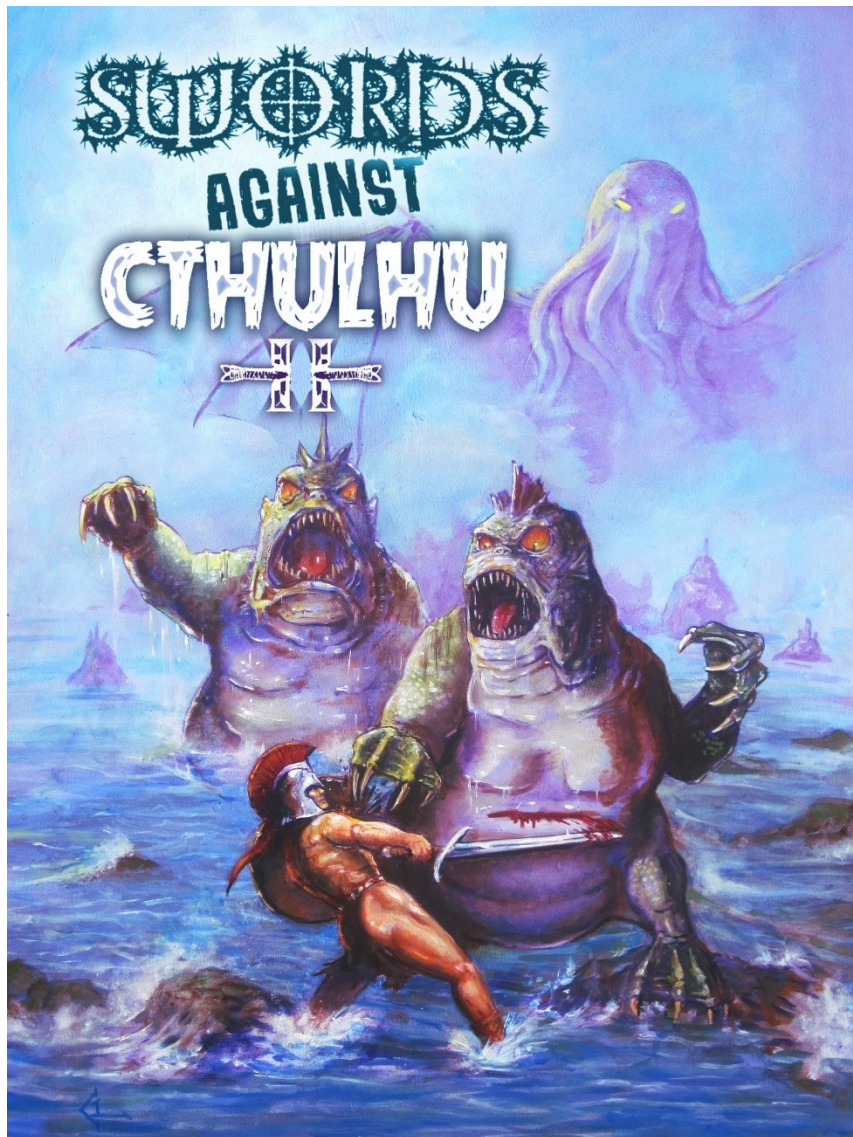
“That was the reaction I was hoping for,” Haruki said.

“Say what?” Gareth asked.

“Nothing.” Haruki locked lips with Gareth again, and then pulled away. “Let’s go to bed.”

Haruki intertwined his fingers with Gareth’s. He dropped Tucker’s mask on the table and led them up the stairs.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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Chapter IV—A New World.

I will not attempt to express the intensity of the mingled emotions which overcame me as I realised the complete success of the most stupendous adventure ever proposed or even dreamed by man. I don't think that any personal vanity, unworthy of the highest lessons I had received, had much share in my passionate exultation. The conception was not original; the means were furnished by others; the execution depended less on a daring and skill, in which any courageous traveller or man of science knowing what I knew might well have excelled me, than on the direct and manifest favour of Providence. But this enterprise, the greatest that man had ever attempted, had in itself a charm, a sanctity in my eyes that made its accomplishment an unspeakable satisfaction. I would have laid down life a dozen times not only to achieve it myself, but even to know that it had been achieved by others. All that Columbus can have felt when he first set foot on a new hemisphere I felt in tenfold force as I assured myself that not, as often before, in dreams, but in very truth and fact, I had traversed forty million miles of space, and landed in a new world. Of the perils that might await me I could hardly care to think. They might be greater in degree.

They could hardly be other in kind, than those which a traveller might incur in Papua, or Central Africa, or in the North-West Passage. They could have none of that wholly novel, strange, incalculable character which sometimes had given to the chances of my ethereal voyage a vague horror and mystery that appalled imagination. For the first time during my journey I could neither eat nor sleep; yet I must do both. I might soon meet with difficulties and dangers that would demand all the resources of perfect physical and mental condition, with heavy calls on the utmost powers of nerve and muscle. I forced myself, therefore, to sup and to slumber, resorting for the first time in many years to the stimulus of brandy for the one purpose, and to the aid of autohypnotism for the other. When I woke it was 8h. by my chronometer, and, as I inferred, about 5h. after midnight of the Martial meridian on which I lay. Sleep had given me an appetite for breakfast, and necessary practical employment calmed the excitement natural to my situation. My first care, after making ready to quit the Astronaut as soon as the light around should render it safe to venture into scenes so much more utterly strange, unfamiliar, and unknown than the wildest of the yet unexplored deserts of the Earth, was to ascertain the character of the atmosphere which I was presently to breathe. Did it contain the oxygen essential to Tellurian lungs? Was it, if capable of respiration, dense enough to sustain life like mine? I extracted the plug from the tubular aperture through which I had pumped in the extra quantity of air that the Astronaut contained; and substituted the sliding valve I had arranged for the purpose, with a small hole which, by adjustment to the tube, would give the means of regulating the air-passage at pleasure. The difficulty of this simple work, and the tremendous outward pressure of the air, showed that the external atmosphere was very thin indeed. This I had anticipated. Gravity on the surface of Mars is less than half what it is on Earth; the total mass of the planet is as two to fifteen. It was consequently to be expected that the extent of the Martial atmosphere, and its density even at the sea-level, would be far less than on the heavier planet. Rigging the air-pump securely round the aperture, exhausting its chamber, and permitting the Martial air to fill it, I was glad to find a pressure equal to that which prevails at a height of 16,000 feet on Earth. Chemical tests showed the presence of oxygen in somewhat greater proportion than in the purest air of terrestrial mountains. It would sustain life, therefore, and without serious injury, if the change from a dense to a light atmosphere were not too suddenly made. I determined then gradually to diminish the density of the internal atmosphere to something not very much

greater than that outside. For this purpose I unrigged the air-pump apparatus, and almost, but not quite, closed the valve, leaving an aperture about the twentieth part of an inch in diameter. The silence was instantly broken by a whistle the shrillest and loudest I had ever heard; the dense compressed atmosphere of the Astronaut rushing out with a force which actually created a draught through the whole vessel, to the great discomfiture of the birds, which roughed their feathers and fluttered about in dismay. The pressure gauge fell with astonishing rapidity, despite the minuteness of the aperture; and in a few minutes indicated about 24 barometrical inches. I then checked the exit of the air for a time, while I proceeded to loosen the cement around the window by which I had entered, and prepared for my exit. Over a very light flannel under-vesture I put on a mail-shirt of fine close-woven wire, which had turned the edge of Mahratta tulwars, repelled the thrust of a Calabrian stiletto, and showed no mark of three carbine bullets fired point-blank. Over this I wore a suit of grey broadcloth, and a pair of strong boots over woollen socks, prepared for cold and damp as well as for the heat of a sun shining perpendicularly through an Alpine atmosphere. I had nearly equalised the atmospheric pressure within and without, at about 17 inches, before the first beams of dawn shone upward on the ceiling of the Astronaut. A few minutes later I stepped forth on the platform, some two hundred yards in circumference, whereon the vessel rested. The mist immediately around me was fast dispersing; five hundred feet below it still concealed everything. On three sides descent was barred by sheer precipices; on the fourth a steep slope promised a practicable path, at least as far as my eye could reach. I placed the weaker and smaller of my birds in portable cages, and then commenced my experiment by taking out a strong-winged cuckoo and throwing him downwards over the precipice. He fell at first almost like a stone; but before he was quite lost to sight in the mist, I had the pleasure of seeing that he had spread his wings, and was able to sustain himself. As the mist was gradually dissolving, I now ventured to begin my descent, carrying my bird-cages, and dismissing the larger birds, several of which, however, persistently clung about me. I had secured on my back an air-gun, arranged to fire sixteen balls in succession without reloading, while in my belt, scabbarded in a leathern sheath, I had placed a well and often tried two-edged sword. I found the way practicable, though not easy, till I reached a point about 1000 feet below the summit, where farther progress in the same direction was barred by an abrupt and impassable cleft some hundred feet deep. To the right, however, the mountain side seemed to present a safe and sufficiently direct descent. The sun was a full hour above the horizon, and the mist was almost gone. Still I had seen no signs of animal life, save, at some distance and in rapid motion, two or three swarms of flying insects, not much resembling any with which I was acquainted. The vegetation, mostly small, was of a yellowish colour, the flowers generally red, varied by occasional examples of dull green and white; the latter, however, presenting that sort of creamy tinge which I had remarked in the snow. Here I released and dismissed my birds one by one. The stronger and more courageous flew away downwards, and soon disappeared; the weakest, trembling and shivering, evidently suffering from the thinness of the atmosphere, hung about me or perched upon the cages.

The scene I now contemplated was exceedingly novel and striking. The sky, instead of the brilliant azure of a similar latitude on earth, presented to my eye a vault of pale green, closely analogous to that olive tint which the effect of contrast often throws over a small portion of clear sky distinguished among the golden and rose-coloured clouds of a sunset in our temperate zones.

The vapours which still hung around the north-eastern and south-eastern horizon, though dispelled from the immediate vicinity of the Sun, were tinged with crimson and gold much deeper than the tints peculiar to an earthly twilight. The Sun himself, when seen by the naked

eye, was as distinctly golden as our harvest moon; and the whole landscape, terrestrial, aerial, and celestial, appeared as if bathed in a golden light, wearing generally that warm summer aspect peculiar to Tellurian landscapes when seen through glass of a rich yellow tint. It was a natural inference from all I saw that there takes place in the Martial atmosphere an absorption of the blue rays which gives to the sunlight a predominant tinge of yellow or orange. The small rocky plateau on which I stood, like the whole of the mountainside I had descended, faced the extremity of the range of which this mountain was an outpost; and the valley which separated them was not from my present position visible. I saw that I should have to turn my back upon this part of the landscape as I descended farther, and therefore took note at this point of the aspect it presented. The most prominent object was a white peak in the distant sky, rising to a height above my actual level, which I estimated conjecturally at 25,000 feet, guessing the distance at fifty miles. The summit was decidedly more angular and pointed, less softened in outline by atmospheric influences, than those of mountains on Earth. Beyond this in the farthest distance appeared two or three peaks still higher, but of which, of course, only the summits were visible to me. On this side of the central peak an apparently continuous double ridge extended to within three miles of my station, exceedingly irregular in level, the highest elevations being perhaps 20,000, the lowest visible depressions 3000 feet above me. There appeared to be a line of perpetual snow, though in many places above, this line patches of yellow appeared, the nearer of which were certainly and the more distant must be inferred to be covered with a low, close herbaceous vegetation. The lower slopes were entirely clothed with yellow or reddish foliage. Between the woods and snow-line lay extensive pastures or meadows, if they might be so called, though I saw nothing whatever that at all resembled the grass of similar regions on Earth. Whatever foliage I saw—as yet I had not passed near anything that could be called a tree, and very few shrubs—consisted distinctly of leaves analogous to those of our deciduous trees, chiefly of three shapes: a sort of square rounded at the angles, with short projecting fingers; an oval, slightly pointed where it joined the stalk; and lanceolate or sword-like blades of every size, from two inches to four feet in length. Nearly all were of a dull yellow or copper-red tinge. None were as fine as the beech-leaf, none succulent or fleshy; nothing resembling the blades of grass or the bristles of the pine and cedar tribes was visible.

My path now wound steadily downward at a slope of perhaps one in eight along the hillside, obliging me to turn my back to the mountains, while my view in front was cut off by a sharp cross-jutting ridge immediately, before me. By the time I turned this, all my birds had deserted me, and I was not, I think, more than 2000 feet from the valley below. Just before reaching this point I first caught sight of a Martial animal. A little creature, not much bigger than a rabbit, itself of a sort of sandy-yellow colour, bounded from among some yellow herbage by my feet, and hopped or sprang in the manner of a kangaroo down the steep slope on my left. When I turned the ridge, a wide and quite new landscape burst upon my sight. I was looking upon an extensive plain, the continuation apparently of a valley of which the mountain range formed the southern limit. To the southward this plain was bounded by the sea, bathed in the peculiar light I have tried to describe, and lying in what seemed from this distance a glassy calm. To eastward and northward the plain extended to the horizon, and doubtless far beyond it; while from the valley north of the mountain range emerged a broad river, winding through the plain till it was lost at the horizon. Plain I have called it, but I do not mean to imply that it was by any means level. On the contrary, its surface was broken by undulations, and here and there by hills, but all so much lower than the point on which I stood that the general effect was that of an almost flat surface. And now the question of habitation, and of human habitation, seemed to be solved. Looking through my field-glass, I saw, following the windings of the river, what must surely be a road; serving also, perhaps, as an

embankment, since it was raised many feet above the level of the stream. It seemed, too, that the plain was cultivated. Everywhere appeared extensive patches, each of a single colour, in every tint between deep red and yellowish green, and so distinctly rectangular in form as irresistibly to suggest the idea of artificial, if not human, arrangement. But there were other features of the scene that dispelled all doubt upon this point. Immediately to the south-eastward, and about twenty miles from where I stood, a deep arm of the sea ran up into the land, and upon the shores of this lay what was unquestionably a city. It had nothing that looked like fortifications, and even at this distance I could discern that its streets were of remarkable width, with few or no buildings so high as mosques, churches, State-offices, or palaces in Tellurian cities. Their colours were most various and brilliant, as if reflected from metallic surfaces; and on the waters of the bay itself rode what I could not doubt to be ships or rafts. More immediately beneath me, and scattered at intervals over the entire plain, clustering more closely in the vicinity of the city, were walled enclosures, and in the centre of each was what could hardly be anything but a house, though not apparently more than twelve or fourteen feet high, and covering a space sufficient for a European or even American street or square. Upon the lower slopes of the hill whereon I stood were moving figures, which, seen through the binocular, proved to be animals; probably domestic animals, since they never ranged very far, and presented none of those signs of watchfulness and alarm which are peculiar to creatures not protected by man from their less destructive enemies, and taught to lay aside their dread of man himself. I had descended, then, not only into an inhabited world—not only into a world of men, who, however they might differ in outward form, must resemble in their wants, ideas, and habits, in short, in mind if not in body, the lords of my own planet—but into a civilised world and among a race living under a settled order, cultivating the soil, and taming the brutes to their service.

And now, as I came on lower ground, I found at each step new objects of curiosity and interest. A tree with dark-yellowish leaves, taller than most timber trees on Earth, bore at the end of drooping twigs large dark-red fruits—fruits with a rind something like that of a pomegranate, save for the colour and hardness, and about the size of a shaddock or melon. One of these, just within reach of my hand, I gathered, but found it impossible to break the thin, dry rind or shell, without the aid of a knife. Having pierced this, a stream of red juice gushed out, which had a sweet taste and a strong flavour, not unlike the juice expressed from cherries, but darker in colour. Dissecting the fruit completely, I found it parted by a membrane, essentially of the same nature as the rind, but much thinner and rather tough than hard, into sixteen segments, like those of an orange divided across the middle, each of which enclosed a seed. These seeds were all joined at the centre, but easily separated. They were of a yellow colour and about as large as an almond kernel. Some fruits that, being smaller, I concluded to be less ripe, were of a reddish-yellow. After walking for about a mile through a grove of such trees, always tending downwards, I came to another of more varied character. The most prevalent tree here was of lower stature and with leaves of great length and comparatively narrow, the fruit of which, though protected by a somewhat similar rind, was of rich golden colour, not so easily seen among the yellowish leaves, and contained one solid kernel of about the size of an almond, enclosed entirely in a sort of spongy material, very palatable to the taste, and resembling more the inside of roasted maize than any other familiar vegetable. As I emerged entirely from the grove, I came upon a ditch about twice as broad as deep. On Earth I certainly could not have leaped it; but since landing on Mars, I had forgotten the weightless life of the Astronaut, and felt as if on Earth, but enjoying great increase of strength and energy; and with these sensations had come instinctively an exalted confidence in my physical powers. I took, therefore, a vigorous run, and leaping with all my strength, landed, somewhat to my own surprise, a full yard on the other side of the ditch.

Having done so, I found myself in what was beyond doubt a cultivated field, producing nothing but one crimson-coloured plant, about a foot in height. This carpeted the soil with broad leaves shaped something like those of the laurel, and in colour exactly resembling a withered laurel leaf, but somewhat thicker, more metallic and brighter in appearance, and perfectly free from the bitter taste of the bay tribe. At a little distance I saw half-a-dozen animals somewhat resembling antelopes, but on a second glance still more resembling the fabled unicorn. They were like the latter, at all events, in the single particular from which it derived its name: they had one horn, about eight inches in length, intensely sharp, smooth and firm in texture as ivory, but marbled with vermilion and cream white. Their skins were cream-coloured, dappled with dark red. Their ears were large and protected by a lap which fell down so as to shelter the interior part of the organ, but which they had not quite lost the power to erect at the approach of a sound that startled them. They looked up at me, at first without alarm, afterwards with some surprise, and presently bounded away; as if my appearance, at first familiar, had, on a closer examination, presented some unusual particulars, frightening them, as everything unusual frightens even those domestic animals on Earth best acquainted with man and most accustomed to his caprices. I noticed that all were female, and their abnormally large udders suggested that they were domestic creatures kept for their milk. Not being able to see a path through the field, I went straight forward, endeavouring to trample the pasture as little as I could, but being surprised to remark how very little the plants had been injured by the feet of the animals. The leaves had been grazed, but the stems were seldom or never broken. In fact, the animals seemed to have gathered their food as man would do, with an intelligent or instinctive care not to injure the plant so as to deprive it of the power of reproducing their sustenance.

In another minute I discerned the object of my paramount interest, of whose vicinity I had thus far seen nearly every imaginable evidence except himself. It was undoubtedly a man, but a man very much smaller than myself. His eyes were fixed upon the ground as if in reverie, and he did not perceive me till I had come within fifty yards of him, so that I had full time to remark the peculiarities of his form and appearance. He was about four feet eight or nine inches in height, with legs that seemed short in proportion to the length and girth of the body, but only because, as was apparent on more careful scrutiny, the chest was proportionately both longer and wider than in our race; otherwise he greatly resembled the fairer families of the Aryan breed, the Swede or German. The yellow hair, unshaven beard, whiskers, and moustache were all close and short. The dress consisted of a sort of blouse and short pantaloons, of some soft woven fabric, and of a vermilion colour. The head was protected from the rays of an equatorial sun by a species of light turban, from which hung down a short shade or veil sheltering the neck and forehead. His bare feet were guarded by sandals of some flexible material just covering the toes and bound round the ankle by a single thong. He carried no weapon, not even a staff; and I therefore felt that there was no immediate danger from him. On seeing me he started as with intense surprise and not a little alarm, and turned to run. Size and length of limb, however, gave me immense advantage in this respect, and in less than a minute I had come up with and laid my hand upon him.

He looked up at me, scanning my face with earnest curiosity. I took from my pocket first a jewel of very exquisite construction, a butterfly of turquoise, pearl, and rubies, set on an emerald branch, upon which he looked without admiration or interest, then a watch very small and elaborately enamelled and jewelled. To the ornament he paid no attention whatever; but when I opened the watch, its construction and movement evidently interested him. Placing it in his hands and endeavouring to signify to him by signs that he was to retain

it, I then held his arm and motioned to him to guide me towards the houses visible in the distance. This he seemed willing to do, but before we had gone many paces he repeated two or three times a phrase or word which sounded like “r’mo-ah-el” (“whence-who-what” do you want?). I shook my head; but, that he might not suppose me dumb, I answered him in Latin. The sound seemed to astonish him exceedingly; and as I went on to repeat several questions in the same tongue, for the purpose of showing him that I could speak and was desirous of doing so, I observed that his wonder grew deeper and deeper, and was evidently mingled first with alarm and afterwards with anger, as if he thought I was trying to impose upon him. I pointed to the sky, to the summit of the mountain from which I had descended, and then along the course by which I had come, explaining aloud at the same time the meaning of my signs. I thought that he had caught the latter, but if so, it only provoked an incredulous indignation, contempt of a somewhat angry character being the principal expression visible in his countenance. I saw that it was of little use to attempt further conversation for the present, and, still holding his hand and allowing him to direct me, looked round again at the scenes through which we were passing. The lower hill slopes before us appeared to be divided into fields of large extent, perhaps some 100 acres each, separated by ditches. We followed a path about two yards broad, raised two or three inches above the level of the ground, and paved with some kind of hard concrete. Each ditch was crossed by a bridge of planks, in the middle of which was a stake or short pole, round which we passed with ease, but which would obviously baffle a four-footed animal of any size. The crops were of great variety, and wonderfully free from weeds. Most of them showed fruit of one kind or another, sometimes gourd-like globes on the top of upright stalks, sometimes clusters of a sort of nut on vines creeping along the soil, sometimes a number of pulpy fruits about the size of an orange hanging at the end of pendulous stalks springing from the top of a stiff reed-like stem. One field was bare, its surface of an ochreish colour deeper than that of clay, broken and smoothed as perfectly as the surface of the most carefully tended flower-bed. Across this was ranged a row of birds, differing, though where and how I had hardly leisure to observe, from the form of any earthly fowl, about twice the size of a crow, and with beaks apparently at least as powerful but very much longer. Extending entirely across the field, they kept line with wonderful accuracy, and as they marched across it, slowly and constantly dug their beaks into the soil as if seeking grubs or worms beneath the surface. They went on with their work perfectly undisturbed by our presence. In the next field was a still odder sight; here grew gourd-like heads on erect reed-like stems, and engaged in plucking the ripe purple fruit, carefully distinguishing them from the scarlet unripened heads, were half-a-score of creatures which, from their occupation and demeanour, I took at first to be human; but which, as we approached nearer, I saw were only about half the size of my companion, and thickly covered with hair, with bushy tails, which they kept carefully erect so as not to touch the ground; creatures much resembling monkeys in movement, size, and length, and flexibility of limb, but in other respects more like gigantic squirrels. They held the stalks of the fruit they plucked in their mouths, filling with them large bags left at intervals, and from the manner in which they worked I suspected that they had no opposable thumbs—that the whole hand had to be used like the paw of a squirrel to grasp an object. I pointed to these, directing my companion’s attention and asking, “What are they?” “Ambau,” he said, but apparently without the slightest interest in their proceedings. Indeed, the regularity and entire freedom from alarm or vigilance which characterised their movements, convinced me that both these and the birds we passed were domesticated creatures, whose natural instincts had been turned to such account by human training.

After a few moments more, we came in sight of a regular road, in a direction nearly at right angles to that which followed the course of the river. Like the path, it was constructed of a

hard polished concrete. It was about forty paces broad, and in the centre was a raised way about four inches higher than the general surface, and occupying about one-fourth of the entire width. Along the main way on either side passed from time to time with great rapidity light vehicles of shining metal, each having three wheels, one small one in front and two much larger behind, with box-like seat and steering handle; otherwise resembling nothing so much as the velocipedes I have seen ridden for amusement by eccentric English youths. It was clear, however, that these vehicles were not moved by any effort on the part of their drivers, and their speed was far greater than that of the swiftest mail-coach: —say, from fifteen to thirty miles an hour. All risk of collision was avoided, as those proceeding in opposite directions took opposite sides of the road, separated by the raised centre I have described. Crossing the road with caution, we came upon a number of small houses, perhaps twenty feet square, each standing in the midst of a garden marked out by a narrow ditch, some of them having at either side wings of less height and thrown a little backward. In the centre of each, and at the end of the wings where these existed, was what seemed to be a door of some translucent material about twelve feet in height. But I observed that these doors were divided by a scarcely perceptible line up to six feet from the ground, and presently one of these parted, and a figure, closely resembling that of my guide, came out.

We had now reached another road which led apparently towards the larger houses I had seen in the distance, and were proceeding along the raised central pathway, when some half-dozen persons from the cottages followed us. At a call from my guide, these, and presently as many more, ran after and gathered around us. I turned, took down my air-gun from my back, and waving it around me, signalled to them to keep back, not choosing to incur the danger of a sudden rush, since their bearing, if not plainly hostile, was not hospitable or friendly. Thus escorted, but not actually assailed, I passed on for three or four miles, by which time we were among the larger dwellings of which I have spoken. Each of them stood in grounds enclosed by walls about eight feet high, each of some uniform colour, contrasting agreeably with that chosen for the exterior of the house. The enclosures varied in size from about six to sixty acres. The houses were for the most part some twelve feet in height, and from one to four hundred feet square. On several flat roofs, guarded by low parapets, other persons, all about the size of my guide, now showed themselves, all of them interested, and, as it seemed, somewhat excited by my appearance. In a few cases groups differently dressed, and, from their somewhat smaller stature, slighter figures, and the long hair here and there visible, probably consisting of women, were gathered on a remoter portion of the roof. But these, when seen by those in front, were always waived back with an impatient or threatening gesture, and instantly retired. Presently two or three men more richly dressed than my escort, and in various colours, came out upon the road. Addressing one of these, I pointed again to the sky, and again endeavoured to describe my journey, holding out to him at the same time, as the thing most likely to conciliate him, a watch somewhat larger than that I had bestowed upon my guide. He, however, did not come within arm's length; and when I repeated my signs, he threw back his head with a sort of sneer and uttered a few words in a sharp tone, at which my escort rushed upon and attempted to throw me down. For this, however, I had been long prepared, and striking right and left with my air-gun—for I was determined not to shed blood except in the last extremity—I speedily cleared a circle round me, still grasping my guide with the left hand, from a providential instinct which suggested that his close contiguity might in some way protect me. A call from the chief of my antagonists was answered from the roof of a neighbouring house. I heard a whizzing through the air, and presently something like a winged serpent, but with a slender neck, and shoulders of considerable breadth, and a head much larger than a serpent's in proportion to the body, and shaped more like a bird's, with a sharp, short beak, sprang upon and coiled round my left arm. That it was trying to

sting with an erectile organ placed about midway between the shoulders and the tail I became instinctively aware, and presently felt something like a weak electric thrill over all my body, while my left hand, which was naked, sustained a severe shock, completely numbing it for the moment. I caught the beast by the neck, and flung him with all my force right in the face of my chief antagonist, who fell with a cry of terror. Looking in the direction from which this dangerous assailant had come, I perceived another in the air, and saw that not a moment was to be lost. Dropping my gun with the muzzle between my feet, and holding it so far as I could with my numbed left hand—releasing also my guide, but throwing him to the ground as I released him—I drew my sword; and but just in time, with the same motion with which I drew it, I cut right through the neck of the dragon that had been launched against me. My principal enemy had quickly recovered his feet and presence of mind, and spoke very loudly and at some length to the person who had launched the dragons. The latter disappeared, and at the same time the group around me began to disperse. Whatever suited them was certain not to suit me, and accordingly, still holding my sword, I caught one of them with each hand. It was well I had done so, for within another minute the owner of the dragons reappeared with a weapon not wholly unlike a long cannon of very small bore fixed upon a sort of stand. This he levelled at me, and I, seeing that a danger of whose magnitude and nature I could form no exact estimate was impending, caught up instinctively one of my prisoners, and held him as a shield between myself and the weapon pointed at me. This checked my enemy, who for the moment seemed almost as much at a loss as myself. Fortunately his hostile intention evidently endangered not only my life but all near me, and secured me from any close attack.

At this moment a somewhat remarkable personage came to the front of the group which had gathered some few yards before me. He wore a long frock of emerald green and trousers of the same colour, gathered in at the waist by a belt of a red metal. On earth I should have taken him for a hale and vigorous gentleman of some fifty years; he was two inches short of five feet, but well-proportioned as a man of middle size. Gentleman I say emphatically; for something of dignity, gravity, and calm good-breeding, was conspicuous in his manner, as authority unmixed with menace was evident in his tone. He called, somewhat peremptorily as I thought, to the man who was still aiming his weapon at my head, then waived back those behind him, and presently advanced towards me, looking me straight in the eyes with a steadiness and intensity of gaze far exceeding, both in expressiveness and in effect, the most fixed stare of the most successful mesmerists I have known. I doubt whether I should have had the power to resist his will had I thought it wise to do so. But I was perfectly aware that, however successful in repelling the first tumultuous attack, prolonged self-defence was hopeless.

I must, probably at the next move, certainly in a few minutes, succumb to the enemies around me. I could not conciliate those whose malignity I could not comprehend. I had done them no injury, and they could hardly be maddened by fear, since my size and strength did not seem to overawe them save at close quarters, and of my weapons they were certainly less afraid than I of theirs. My only chance must lie in finding favour with an individual protector. When, therefore, the new-comer fearlessly laid his hand on an arm which could have killed him at a blow, and rather by gesture than by force released my captives, policy as well as instinct dictated submission. I allowed him to disarm and make me in some sense his prisoner without a show of resistance. He took me by the left hand, first placing my fingers upon his own wrist and then grasping mine, and led me quietly through the crowd, which gave way before him reluctantly and not without angry murmurs, but with a certain awe as before one superior either in power or rank.

Thus he led me for about half a mile, till we reached the crystal gate of an enclosure of exceptional size, the walls of which, like the gate itself, were of a pale rose-colour. Through grounds laid out in symmetrical alternation of orchard and grove, shrubbery, close-carpeted field, and garden beds, arranged with evident regard to effect in form and colour, as well as to fitting distribution of shade and sun, we followed a straight path which sloped under a canopy of flowering creepers up to the terrace on which stood the house itself. There were some eight or nine crystal doors (or windows) in the front, and in the centre one somewhat larger than the others, which, as we came immediately in front of it, opened, not turning on hinges, but, like every other door I had seen, dividing and sliding rapidly into the walls to the right and left. We entered, and it immediately closed behind us in the same way. Turning my head for a moment, I was surprised to observe that, whereas I could see nothing through the door from the outside, the scene without was as visible from within as through the most perfectly transparent glass. The chamber in which I found myself had walls of bright emerald green, with all the brilliant transparency of the jewel; their surface broken by bas-reliefs of minutely perfect execution, and divided into panels—each of which seemed to contain a series of distinct scenes, one above the other—by living creepers with foliage of bright gold, and flowers sometimes pink, sometimes cream-white of great size, both double and single; the former mostly hemispherical and the latter commonly shaped as hollow cones or *À vide* shallow champagne glasses. In these walls two or three doors appeared, reaching, from the floor to the roof, which was coloured like the walls, and seemingly of the same material. Through one of these my guide led me into a passage which appeared to run parallel with the front of the house, and turning down this, a door again parted on the right hand, through which he led me into a similar but smaller apartment, some twenty feet in width and twenty-five in length. The window—if I should so call that which was simply another door—of this apartment looked into one corner of a flower-garden of great extent, beyond and at each end of which were other portions of the dwelling. The walls of this chamber were pink, the surface appearing as before of jewel-like lustre; the roof and floor of a green lighter than that of the emerald. In two corners were piles of innumerable cushions and pillows covered with a most delicate satin-like fabric, embroidered with gold, silver, and feathers, all soft as eider-down and of all shapes and sizes. There were three or four light tables, apparently of metal, silver, or azure, or golden in colour, in various parts of the chamber, with one or two of different form, more like small office-tables or desks. In one of the walls was sunk a series of shelves closed by a transparent sheet of crystal of pale yellow tinge. There were three or four movable seats resembling writing or easy-chairs, but also of metal, luxurious all though all different. In the corner to the left, farthest from the inner court or peristyle, was a screen, which, as my host showed me, concealed a bath and some other convenient appurtenances. The bath was a cylinder some five feet in depth and about two in diameter, with thin double walls, the space between which was filled with an apparatus of small pipes. By pressing a spring, as my protector pointed out, countless minute jets of warm perfumed water were thrown from every part of the interior wall, forming the most delicious and perfect shower-bath that could well be devised.

My host then led me to a seat among the cushions, and placed himself beside me, looking for some time intently and gravely into my face, but with nothing of offensive curiosity, still less of menace in his gaze. It appeared to me as if he wished to read the character and perhaps the thoughts of his guest. The scrutiny seemed to satisfy him. He stretched out his left hand, and grasping mine, placed it on his heart, and then dropping my hand, placed his upon my breast. He then spoke in words whose meaning I could not guess, but the tone sounded to me as that of inquiry. The question most likely to be asked concerned my character and the place from which I had come. I again explained, again pointing upward. He seemed dubious or

perplexed, and it occurred to me that drawing might assist explanation; since, from the bas-reliefs and tracery, it was evident that the art was carried to no common excellence in Mars. I drew, therefore, in the first place, a globe to represent the Earth, traced its orbit round the Sun, and placed a crescent Moon at some little distance, indicating its path round the Earth. It was evident that my host understood my meaning, the more clearly when I marked upon the form of the Earth a crescent, such as she would often present through a Martial telescope. Sketches in outline roughly exhibiting different stages of my voyage, from the first ascent to the final landing, appeared to convince my host of my meaning, if not of my veracity. Signing to me to remain where I was, he left the room. In a few minutes he returned, accompanied by one of the strange squirrel-like animals I had seen in the fields. I was right in conjecturing that the creature had no opposable thumb; but a little ingenuity had compensated this so far as regarded the power of carrying. A little chain hung down from each wrist, and to these was suspended a tray, upon which were arranged a variety of fruits and what seemed to be small loaves of various materials. Breaking one of these and cutting open with a small knife, apparently of silver, one of the fruits, my host tasted each and then motioned to me to eat. The attendant had placed the tray upon a table, disengaged the chains, and disappeared; the door opening and closing as he trod, somewhat more heavily than had been necessary for my host, upon particular points of the floor.

The food offered me was very delicious and various in flavour. My host showed me how to cut the top from some of the hard-rind fruits, so as to have a cup full of the most delicately-flavoured juice, the whole pulp having been reduced to a liquid syrup by a process with which some semicivilised cultivators on Earth are familiar. When I had finished my meal, my host whistled, and the attendant, returning, carried away the tray. His master gave him at the same time what was evidently an order, repeating it twice, and speaking with signal clearness of intonation. The little creature bowed its head, apparently as a sign of intelligence, and in a few minutes returned with what seemed like a pencil or stylus and writing materials, and with a large silver-like box of very curious form. To one side was affixed a sort of mouthpiece, consisting of a truncated cone expanding into a saucer-shaped bowl. Across the wider and outer end of the cone was stretched a membrane or diaphragm about three inches in diameter. Into the mouth of the bowl, two or three inches from the diaphragm, my host spoke one by one a series of articulate but single sounds, beginning with â, a, aa, au, o, oo, ou, u, y or ei (long), i (short), oi, e, which I afterwards found to be the twelve vowels of their language. After he had thus uttered some forty distinct sounds, he drew from the back of the instrument a slip of something like gold-leaf, on which as many weird curves and angular figures were traced in crimson. Pointing to these in succession, he repeated the sounds in order. I made out that the figures in question represented the sounds spoken into the instrument, and taking out my pencil, marked under each the equivalent character of the Roman alphabet, supplemented by some letters not admitted therein but borrowed from other Aryan tongues. My host looked on with some interest whilst I did this, and bent his head as if in approval. Here then was the alphabet of the Martial tongue—an alphabet not arbitrary, but actually produced by the vocal sounds it represented! The elaborate machinery modifies the rough signs which are traced by the mere aerial vibrations; but each character is a true physical type, a visual image, of the spoken sound; the voice, temper, accent, sex, of a speaker affect the phonograph, and are recognisable in the record. The instrument wrote, so to speak, different hands under my voice and under Esmo's; and those who knew him could identify his phonogram, as my friends my manuscript.

After I had been employed for some time in fixing these forms and the corresponding sounds in my memory, my host advanced to the window, and opening it, led me into the interior

garden; which, as I had supposed, was a species of central court around which the house was built.

The construction of the house was at once apparent. It consisted of a front portion, divided by the gallery of which I have spoken, all the rooms on one side thereof looking, like the chamber I first entered, into the outer enclosure; those on the other into the interior garden or peristyle. Beyond the latter was a single row of chambers opening upon it, appropriated to the ladies and children of the household. The court was roofed over with the translucent material of the windows. It was about 360 feet in length by 300 in width. At either end were chambers entirely formed of the same material as the roof, in one of which the various birds and animals employed either in domestic service or in agriculture, in another the various stores of the household, were kept. In front of these, two inclined planes of the same material as the walls of the house led up to the several parts of the roof. The court was divided by broad concrete paths into four gardens. In the centre of each was a basin of water and a fountain, above which was a square opening of some twenty feet in the roof. Each garden was, so to speak, turfed with minute plants, smaller than daisy roots, and even more closely covering the soil than English lawn grass. These were of different colours—emerald, gold, and purple—arranged in bands. This turf was broken by a number of beds of all shapes, the crescent, circle, and six-rayed star being apparently the chief favourites. The smaller of these were severally filled with one or two flowers; in the larger, flowers of different colours were set in patterns, generally rising from the outside to the centre, and never allowing the soil to be seen through a single interval. The contrast of colours and tints was admirably ordered; the size, form, and structure of the flowers wonderfully various and always exquisitely beautiful. The exact tints of silver and gold were frequent and especially favoured. At each corner of every garden was a hollow silvery pillar, up which creepers with flowers of marvellous size and beauty, and foliage of hues almost as striking as those of the flowers, were conducted to form a perfect arch overhead, parting off the gardens from the walks. In each basin were fishes whose brilliancy of colouring and beauty of form far surpassed anything I have seen in earthly seas or rivers.

At the meeting of the four cross paths was a wide space covered with a soft woven carpet, upon which were strown cushions similar to those in my room. On these several ladies were reclining, who rose as the head of the family approached. One who seemed by her manner to be the mistress, and by her resemblance to some of her younger companions the mother, of the family, wore a sort of light golden half-helmet on the head, and over this, falling round her half-way to the waist, a crimson veil, intended apparently to protect her head and neck from the sun as much as to conceal them. Her face was partially uncovered. The dress of all was, except in colour and in certain omissions and additions, much the same. The undergarments must have been slight in material and few in number. Nothing was to be seen of them save the sleeves, which were of a delicate substance, resembling that of the finest Parisian kid gloves, but far softer and finer. Over all was a robe almost without shape, save what it took from the figure to which it closely adapted itself, suspended by broad ribbons and jewelled clasps from the shoulders, falling nearly to the ankles, and gathered in by a zone at the waist. This garment left the neck, shoulders, and the upper part of the bosom uncovered; but the veil, whether covering the head completely, drawn round all save the face, or consisting only of two separate muslin falls behind either ear, was always so arranged as to render the general effect far more decorous than the “low dresses” of European matrons and maidens. The ankles and feet were entirely bare, save for sandals with an embroidered velvety covering for the toes, and silver bands clasped round the ankles. The eldest lady wore a pale green robe of a fine but very light silken-seeming fabric. Three younger ones wore a

similar material of pink, with silver head-dresses and veils hiding everything but the eyes. All these had sleeves reaching to the wrist, ending in gloves of the same fabric. Two young girls were robed in white gauze, with gauze veils attached over either ear to a very slight silver coronal; their arms bare till the sleeve of the under-robe appeared, a couple of inches below the shoulder; their bright soft faces and their long hair (which fell freely down the back, kept in graceful order here and there by almost invisible silver clasps or bands) were totally uncovered. "A maiden," says the Martialist, "may make the most of her charms; a wife's beauty is her lord's exclusive right." One of the girls, my host's daughters, might almost have veiled her entire form above the knees in the masses of rich soft brown hair inherited from her father, but mingled with tresses of another tinge, shimmering like gold under certain lights. Her eyes, of deepest violet, were shaded by dark thick lashes, so long that when the lids were closed they traced a clear black curve on either cheek. The other maiden had, like their mother, and, I believe, like the younger matrons, the bright hair—flaxen in early childhood, pale gold in maturer years—and the blue or grey eyes characteristic of the race. My host spoke two or three words to the chief of the party, indicating me by a graceful and courteous wave of the hand, upon which the person addressed slightly bent her head, laying her hand at the same time upon her heart. The others acknowledged the introduction by a similar but slighter inclination, and all resumed their places as soon as my host, seating himself between us, signed to me to occupy some pillows which one of the young ladies arranged on his left hand, I had observed by this time that the left hand was used by preference, as we use the right, for all purposes, and therefore was naturally extended in courtesy; and the left side was, for similar reasons, the place of honour.

Three or four children were playing in another part of the court. All, with one exception, were remarkably beautiful and healthy-looking, certainly not less graceful in form and movement than the happiest and prettiest in our own world. Their tones were soft and gentle, and their bearing towards each other notably kind and considerate. One unfortunate little creature differed from the rest in all respects. It was slightly lame, misshapen rather than awkward, and with a face that indicated bad health, bad temper, or both. Its manner was peevish and fractious, its tones sharp and harsh, and its actions rough and hasty. I took it for a mother's sickly favourite, deformed in character to compensate for physical deformity. Watching them for a short time, I saw the little creature repeatedly break out in all the humours of an ill-tempered, over-indulged youngest-born in an ill-managed family; snatching toys from the others, and now and then slapping or pinching them. But they never returned either word or blow, even when pain or vexation brought the tears to their eyes. When its caprices became intolerable most of its companions withdrew; one, however, always remaining on the watch, even if driven from the immediate neighbourhood by its intolerably provoking temper, tones, and acts.

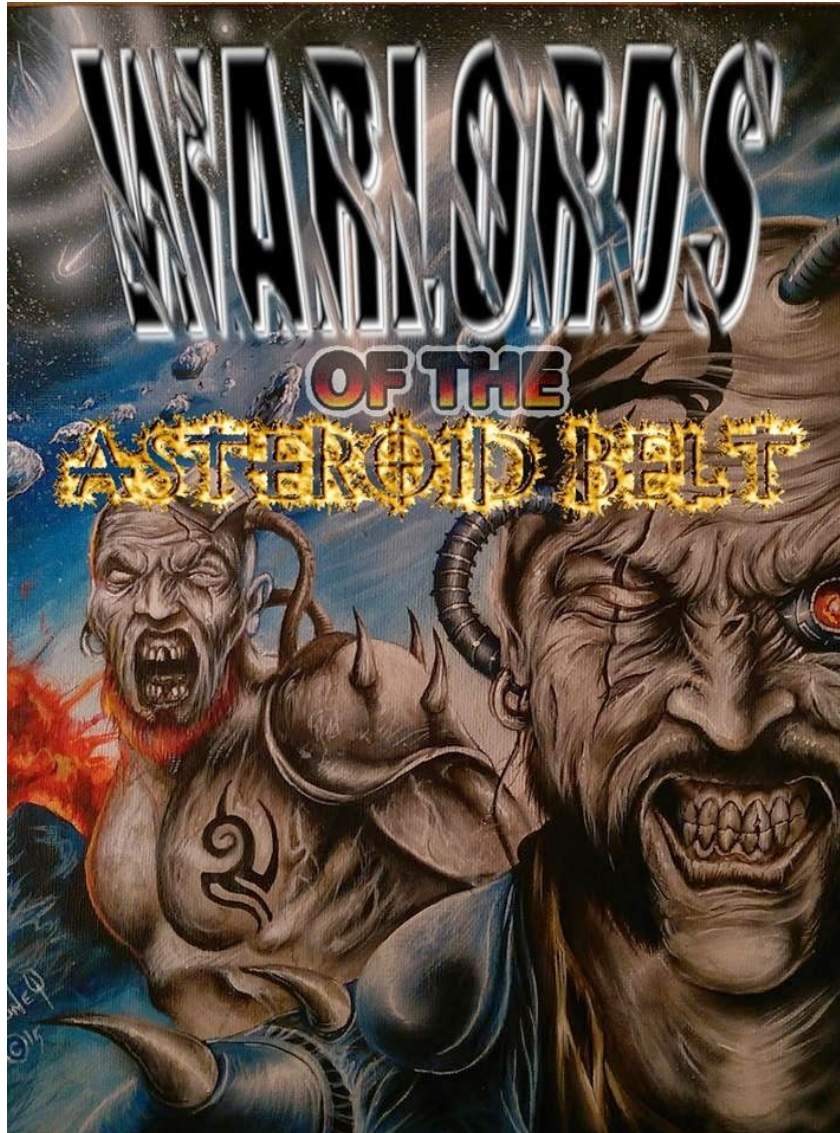
Before sunset we were joined by a young man, who, first approaching my host with a respectful inclination of the head, stood before him till apparently desired by a few quiet words to speak; when he addressed the head of the family in some short sentences, and then, at a sign from him, turned to two of the squirrel-like animals, "ambau," which followed him. These then laid at my feet two large baskets, or open bags of golden network, containing many of the smaller objects left in the Astronaut. Emptying these, they brought several more, till they had laid before me the whole of my wardrobe and my store of intended presents, books, and drawings, with such of my instruments as were not attached to the walls. It was evident that great care had been taken not to injure or dismantle the vessel. Nothing that actually belonged to it had been taken away, and of the articles brought not one had been broken or damaged. It was equally evident that there was no intention or idea of appropriating

them. They were brought and handed over to me as a host on Earth might send for the baggage of an unexpected guest. Of the various toys and ornaments that I had brought for the purpose, I offered several of the most precious to my host. He accepted one of the smallest and least valuable, rather declining to understand than refusing the offer of the rest. The bringer did the same. Then placing in the chief's hands an open jewel-box containing a variety of the choicest jewellery, I requested by signs his permission to offer them to the ladies. The elder ones imitated his example, and graciously accepted one or two tasteful feminine ornaments, of far less beauty and value than any of the few splendid jewels that adorned their belts and clasped their robes at the shoulder, or fastened their veils. The white-robed maidens shrank back shyly until the box was pressed upon them, when each, at a word from the mistress, selected some small gold or silver locket or chain; each at once placing the article accepted about her person, with an evident intention of adding to the grace with which it was received and acknowledging the intended courtesy. How valueless the most valuable of these trifles must have been in their eyes I had begun to suspect from what I saw, and was afterwards made fully aware. As the shades of evening fell, the fountains ceased to play, the young man pressed electric springs which closed the openings in the roof, and, finally, turning a small handle, caused a bright light to diffuse itself over the whole garden, and through the doors into the chambers opening upon it. At the same time a warmer air gradually spread throughout the interior of the building. A meal was then served in small low trays, which was eaten by all of us reclining on our cushions; after which the ladies retired, and my host conducted me back to my chamber, and left me to repose.

My books and sketches, as well as the portfolios of popular prints which I had selected to assist me in describing the life and scenery of our world, were, with my wardrobe and other properties, arranged on my shelves by theambau, under the direction of Kevimâ, the young gentleman who had superintended their removal and conveyance to his father's house. The portfolios gave me occasional means and topics of pleasant intercourse with the family of my host, before we could converse at ease in their language. The children, though never troublesome or importunate, took frequent opportunities of stealing into the room to look over the prints I produced for their amusement. The ladies also, particularly the violet-eyed maiden, who seemed to be the especial guardian of the little ones, would draw near to look and listen. The latter, though she never entered the room or directly addressed me, often assisted in explaining my broken sentences to her charges, some of them not many years younger than herself. I took sincere pleasure in the children's company and growing confidence, but they were not the less welcome because they drew their sisters to listen to my descriptions of an existence so strange and so remote in habits and character, as well as in space. Perhaps their gentle governess learned more than any other member of the family respecting Earth-life, and my own adventures by land and water, in air and space. For, though just not child enough to share the children's freedom, she took in all they heard; she listened in silence during our evening gatherings to the conversation in which her father and brother encouraged me to practise the language I was laboriously studying. She had, therefore, double opportunities of acquiring a knowledge which seemed to interest her deeply; naturally, since it was so absolutely novel, and communicated by one whose very presence was the most marvellous of the marvels it attested. How much she understood I could not judge. Except her mother, the ladies did not take a direct part in my talk with the children, and but very seldom interposed, through my host, a shy brief question when the evening brought us all together. The maidens, despite their theoretical privileges, were even more reserved than their elders, and the dark-haired Eveena the most silent and shy of all.

I learned afterwards that the privilege of intercourse with the ladies of the household, restricted as it was, was wholly exceptional, and even in this family was conceded only out of consideration for one who could not safely be allowed to leave the house.

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Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Nine: The Fighting Begins

Saturday lives in my memory as a day of suspense. It was a day of lassitude too, hot and close, with, I am told, a rapidly fluctuating barometer. I had slept but little, though my wife had succeeded in sleeping, and I rose early. I went into my garden before breakfast and stood listening, but towards the common there was nothing stirring but a lark.

The milkman came as usual. I heard the rattle of his chariot and I went round to the side gate to ask the latest news. He told me that during the night the Martians had been surrounded by troops, and that guns were expected. Then--a familiar, reassuring note--I heard a train running towards Woking.

"They aren't to be killed," said the milkman, "if that can possibly be avoided."

I saw my neighbour gardening, chatted with him for a time, and then strolled in to breakfast. It was a most unexceptional morning. My neighbour was of opinion that the troops would be able to capture or to destroy the Martians during the day.

"It's a pity they make themselves so unapproachable," he said. "It would be curious to know how they live on another planet; we might learn a thing or two."

He came up to the fence and extended a handful of strawberries, for his gardening was as generous as it was enthusiastic. At the same time he told me of the burning of the pine woods about the Byfleet Golf Links.

"They say," said he, "that there's another of those blessed things fallen there--number two. But one's enough, surely. This lot'll cost the insurance people a pretty penny before everything's settled." He laughed with an air of the greatest good humour as he said this. The woods, he said, were still burning, and pointed out a haze of smoke to me. "They will be hot under foot for days, on account of the thick soil of pine needles and turf," he said, and then grew serious over "poor Ogilvy."

After breakfast, instead of working, I decided to walk down towards the common. Under the railway bridge I found a group of soldiers--sappers, I think, men in small round caps, dirty red jackets unbuttoned, and showing their blue shirts, dark trousers, and boots coming to the calf. They told me no one was allowed over the canal, and, looking along the road towards the bridge, I saw one of the Cardigan men standing sentinel there. I talked with these soldiers for a time; I told them of my sight of the Martians on the previous evening. None of them had seen the Martians, and they had but the vaguest ideas of them, so that they plied me with questions. They said that they did not know who had authorised the movements of the troops; their idea was that a dispute had arisen at the Horse Guards. The ordinary sapper is a great deal better educated than the common soldier, and they discussed the peculiar conditions of the possible fight with some acuteness. I described the Heat-Ray to them, and they began to argue among themselves.

"Crawl up under cover and rush 'em, say I," said one.

“Get aht!” said another. “What’s cover against this ‘ere ‘eat? Sticks to cook yer! What we got to do is to go as near as the ground’ll let us, and then drive a trench.”

“Blow yer trenches! You always want trenches; you ought to ha’ been born a rabbit, Snippy.”

“Ain’t they got any necks, then?” said a third, abruptly--a little, contemplative, dark man, smoking a pipe.

I repeated my description.

“Octopuses,” said he, “that’s what I calls ‘em. Talk about fishers of men--fighters of fish it is this time!”

“It ain’t no murder killing beasts like that,” said the first speaker.

“Why not shell the darned things strite off and finish ‘em?” said the little dark man. “You carn tell what they might do.”

“Where’s your shells?” said the first speaker. “There ain’t no time. Do it in a rush, that’s my tip, and do it at once.”

So they discussed it. After a while I left them, and went on to the railway station to get as many morning papers as I could.

But I will not weary the reader with a description of that long morning and of the longer afternoon. I did not succeed in getting a glimpse of the common, for even Horsell and Chobham church towers were in the hands of the military authorities. The soldiers I addressed didn’t know anything; the officers were mysterious as well as busy. I found people in the town quite secure again in the presence of the military, and I heard for the first time from Marshall, the tobacconist, that his son was among the dead on the common. The soldiers had made the people on the outskirts of Horsell lock up and leave their houses.

I got back to lunch about two, very tired for, as I have said, the day was extremely hot and dull; and in order to refresh myself I took a cold bath in the afternoon. About half past four I went up to the railway station to get an evening paper, for the morning papers had contained only a very inaccurate description of the killing of Stent, Henderson, Ogilvy, and the others. But there was little I didn’t know. The Martians did not show an inch of themselves. They seemed busy in their pit, and there was a sound of hammering and an almost continuous streamer of smoke. Apparently they were busy getting ready for a struggle. “Fresh attempts have been made to signal, but without success,” was the stereotyped formula of the papers. A sapper told me it was done by a man in a ditch with a flag on a long pole. The Martians took as much notice of such advances as we should of the lowing of a cow.

I must confess the sight of all this armament, all this preparation, greatly excited me. My imagination became belligerent, and defeated the invaders in a dozen striking ways; something of my schoolboy dreams of battle and heroism came back. It hardly seemed a fair fight to me at that time. They seemed very helpless in that pit of theirs.

About three o'clock there began the thud of a gun at measured intervals from Chertsey or Addlestone. I learned that the smouldering pine wood into which the second cylinder had fallen was being shelled, in the hope of destroying that object before it opened. It was only about five, however, that a field gun reached Chobham for use against the first body of Martians.

About six in the evening, as I sat at tea with my wife in the summerhouse talking vigorously about the battle that was lowering upon us, I heard a muffled detonation from the common, and immediately after a gust of firing. Close on the heels of that came a violent rattling crash, quite close to us, that shook the ground; and, starting out upon the lawn, I saw the tops of the trees about the Oriental College burst into smoky red flame, and the tower of the little church beside it slide down into ruin. The pinnacle of the mosque had vanished, and the roof line of the college itself looked as if a hundred-ton gun had been at work upon it. One of our chimneys cracked as if a shot had hit it, flew, and a piece of it came clattering down the tiles and made a heap of broken red fragments upon the flower bed by my study window.

I and my wife stood amazed. Then I realised that the crest of Maybury Hill must be within range of the Martians' Heat-Ray now that the college was cleared out of the way.

At that I gripped my wife's arm, and without ceremony ran her out into the road. Then I fetched out the servant, telling her I would go upstairs myself for the box she was clamouring for.

"We can't possibly stay here," I said; and as I spoke the firing reopened for a moment upon the common.

"But where are we to go?" said my wife in terror.

I thought perplexed. Then I remembered her cousins at Leatherhead.

"Leatherhead!" I shouted above the sudden noise.

She looked away from me downhill. The people were coming out of their houses, astonished.

"How are we to get to Leatherhead?" she said.

Down the hill I saw a bevy of hussars ride under the railway bridge; three galloped through the open gates of the Oriental College; two others dismounted, and began running from house to house. The sun, shining through the smoke that drove up from the tops of the trees, seemed blood red, and threw an unfamiliar lurid light upon everything.

"Stop here," said I; "you are safe here"; and I started off at once for the Spotted Dog, for I knew the landlord had a horse and dog cart. I ran, for I perceived that in a moment everyone upon this side of the hill would be moving. I found him in his bar, quite unaware of what was going on behind his house. A man stood with his back to me, talking to him.

"I must have a pound," said the landlord, "and I've no one to drive it."

"I'll give you two," said I, over the stranger's shoulder.

“What for?”

“And I’ll bring it back by midnight,” I said.

“Lord!” said the landlord; “what’s the hurry? I’m selling my bit of a pig. Two pounds, and you bring it back? What’s going on now?”

I explained hastily that I had to leave my home, and so secured the dog cart. At the time it did not seem to me nearly so urgent that the landlord should leave his. I took care to have the cart there and then, drove it off down the road, and, leaving it in charge of my wife and servant, rushed into my house and packed a few valuables, such plate as we had, and so forth. The beech trees below the house were burning while I did this, and the palings up the road glowed red. While I was occupied in this way, one of the dismounted hussars came running up. He was going from house to house, warning people to leave. He was going on as I came out of my front door, lugging my treasures, done up in a tablecloth. I shouted after him:

“What news?”

He turned, stared, bawled something about “crawling out in a thing like a dish cover,” and ran on to the gate of the house at the crest. A sudden whirl of black smoke driving across the road hid him for a moment. I ran to my neighbour’s door and rapped to satisfy myself of what I already knew, that his wife had gone to London with him and had locked up their house. I went in again, according to my promise, to get my servant’s box, lugged it out, clapped it beside her on the tail of the dog cart, and then caught the reins and jumped up into the driver’s seat beside my wife. In another moment we were clear of the smoke and noise, and spanking down the opposite slope of Maybury Hill towards Old Woking.

In front was a quiet sunny landscape, a wheat field ahead on either side of the road, and the Maybury Inn with its swinging sign. I saw the doctor’s cart ahead of me. At the bottom of the hill I turned my head to look at the hillside I was leaving. Thick streamers of black smoke shot with threads of red fire were driving up into the still air, and throwing dark shadows upon the green treetops eastward. The smoke already extended far away to the east and west--to the Byfleet pine woods eastward, and to Woking on the west. The road was dotted with people running towards us. And very faint now, but very distinct through the hot, quiet air, one heard the whirr of a machine-gun that was presently stilled, and an intermittent cracking of rifles. Apparently the Martians were setting fire to everything within range of their Heat-Ray.

I am not an expert driver, and I had immediately to turn my attention to the horse. When I looked back again the second hill had hidden the black smoke. I slashed the horse with the whip, and gave him a loose rein until Woking and Send lay between us and that quivering tumult. I overtook and passed the doctor between Woking and Send.

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