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Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 12, ISSUE 9
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BRIGHTER THAN THE SUN

**BY WALTER G ESSELMAN—
THE ANDROID GRINNED
SHYLY...**

SLUDGEHAMMER

**BY RICK MCQUISTON
— SIT DOWN AND
CLOSE YOUR EYES...**

THE KILLER BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

SO LONG AND THANKS FOR ALL THE ANIMALS BY STEVE LAKER

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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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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[EDITORIAL](#)

[BRIGHTER THAN THE SUN](#) by Walter G Esselman—*The android grinned shyly...*

SCIENCE FICTION

[SLUDGEHAMMER](#) by Rick McQuiston—*Sit down and close your eyes...* HORROR

[THE KILLER](#) by Steven Havelock—*Ten years younger. It's worth it...* HORROR

[SO LONG AND THANKS FOR ALL THE ANIMALS](#) by Steve Laker—*Technology we don't understand...* HORROR

[SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE](#) Part 5 by HP Lovecraft—*The Aftermath of Gothic Fiction...* ARTICLE

[THE YOUNG WARLORDS](#) by Gavin Chappell—*The Mountain of Light...* FANTASY

[THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO](#) Episode Thirty-Two by Gregory KH Bryant—*Born between the asteroids...* SCIENCE FICTION

[THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND](#) Part Three: Chapter Eighteen by Jules Verne—*What Captain Nemo feared...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

[ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL](#)

EDITORIAL

This week, Cian copes with a hull puncture in space. Luke is startled by April's latest culinary invention. Lisa's approach to beauty therapy causes problems for Zack. And Jay and Kay investigate some enigmatic relics.

Lovecraft tells all about the aftermath of Gothic Fiction. In Ogre Country, the adventurers continue their battle. On Callisto, Yamir questions Tu Hit. And on the Mysterious Island, the volcano blows its top.

—Gavin Chappell

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[Lovecraftiana Halloween 2017](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

BRIGHTER THAN THE SUN by Walter G Esselman

Cian was tinkering when he heard the sound. He was almost completely buried inside the *Ghost Chili*'s temperamental engine, but his feet were still dangling outside the shuttle.

Suddenly, they felt very, very exposed. He tried to pull them deeper inside the shuttle.

Odd, he thought. It almost sounded like someone had whispered his name. They had even pronounced it right: Key-in. Shrugging, he went back to work on the engine, which was still experiencing the occasional power spike.

Someone grabbed his foot.

Cian bucked and whanged his head on a pipe.

"Ow, ow, ow," he complained as he climbed out of the shuttle's innards. He was dimly aware that someone was apologizing profusely. He sat down heavily beside the shuttle and finally focused on the person standing in front of him.

Cian stumbled out the words. "You're blonde."

The android, Tiki, grinned rather shyly. Her hair was indeed blonde now.

"Do you like?" asked Tiki hopefully.

"It's great," said Cian, which made Tiki bounce on her toes. "Why the change?"

Tiki grew nervous for a moment. "I just felt like it."

"It works," replied Cian.

"And I'm sorry for scaring you!" cried Tiki as she suddenly remembered why he had been hurt. "I was trying to surprise you."

"Well, you did," replied Cian, but not unkindly.

"What can I do to make it better?" asked Tiki.

Now it was Cian's turn to stop for a moment. "Um, you could kiss it better."

"Okay," said Tiki and she leaned forward and gently kissed his forehead. Cian felt a sudden urge to reach out to her, but those damn Naval rules stopped him. The fleet had no-fraternization rules to begin with. Beyond that, there was a No-touching-the-ship's-android Rule that even the captain, who he wasn't, could not break. Tiki moved a little away from him, but she smiled brilliantly.

Tiki's skin was a soft blue that contrasted perfectly with her jade green eyes. She looked almost human. Very, very human to Cian. Too human, he thought. He started to lean towards her, rules be damned.

There was shudder throughout the ship. Cian hind-brain started to cry out in alarm, but it was muffled by the rest of him. He was so close to her. She smelled of strawberries.

Something punched through the port hull of the shuttle bay. The air immediately started to bleed, and a fierce, bright light poured in. More holes appeared in the port side near the other shuttle, the Habanero. Cian turned and grabbed the side of the shuttle. Atmosphere immediately started to haemorrhage through the holes. It became hard to move, but he managed to crawl towards the door to the *Ghost Chili*.

Tiki grabbed the back of his uniform and locked her feet to the ground magnetically. She guided him to the door and pushed him through. After stepping inside the shuttle, Tiki dropped the door and the air replenished automatically. Cian gasped happily.

“That...that was too close,” grinned Cian. He looked at Tiki. “Thank you.”

“Just doing my job,” shrugged Tiki as she demagnetized her feet.

“Saving butt,” chuckled Cian. “Great job description.”

“CIAN! Report!” called out a voice from their comms.

“Alive and well, Captain Cisely,” said Cian. “Tiki’s here too, saving my rear.”

“Good to hear,” said Captain Cisely.

“What hit us?” asked Cian.

“We’re not sure yet,” said Captain Cisely. “We’re rolling the ship so the holes are away from the sun.”

While Cian did not feel the movement of the ship, he saw the front window of the shuttle darken. Their ship was currently conducting a scientific survey of the sun. He got up and went to the front of the shuttle.

“Okay, it’s looking darker,” said Cian.

“What can you see?” asked the captain.

“We have multiple punctures in the side of ship here,” reported Cian. “It looks like whatever came through punched into the other shuttle.”

“Bad?” asked the captain.

“I’m not sure yet,” said Cian. “But whatever it was, kicked the shuttle about five feet to the side.”

“That’s not good,” murmured the captain. Cian turned to the back of the shuttle and the two environment suits there.

“I’m suiting up now to go outside and start repairs,” said Cian.

“I’ll help,” said Tiki, and Cian smiled at her.

“Copy that. Give me updates on the half-hour,” replied Captain Cisely and the comm went dead. Tiki ran over to one of the environment suits, and hesitated.

“Maybe we should save the second environment suit for someone else,” said Tiki tenuously.

“No. Repairs can be dangerous work,” replied Cian with genuine concern. “You need some protection out there. Suit up.”

Tiki nodded and slipped on the suit. After cycling out the atmosphere in the craft, they walked out into the shuttle bay. Cian and Tiki moved over to the shuttle that was hit. Two holes were punched into the side of it.

“Well, there’s your problem,” said Cian with a grin. He turned to the holes in the hull. Some were the size of basketballs and he counted three that were just in the shuttle bay. “I have a kit for just this kind of repair, complete with scrap metal.”

“You’re always prepared,” said Tiki, and he looked at her oddly for a moment.

“Not always,” he said, and they were both at a loss for words. After a moment, Cian coughed. “Um, we better get the kit.”

It took both of them to drag the heavy kit out of a supply closet.

“Let’s head out,” said Cian. They went into the airlock. Even though there was scant atmosphere left in the hanger, they had to wait while the airlock cycled through. “Maybe we should’ve just climbed out the holes.”

“Too small,” replied Tiki.

“You should never tell a guy that,” said Cian with mock seriousness.

Tiki’s eyes grew wide with joyful shock, and then she smacked Cian on the arm playfully. “Stop that.”

The airlock doors opened to space, and Cian and Tiki moved out onto the hull of the ship. The Sun created a halo around the edge of the vessel.

“There are thirteen holes in the side of the ship ranging from two to 28 inches,” reported Tiki. They set the repair kit down and locked it magnetically to the side of the ship before going to work.

“What’s this?” asked Cian as he paused over a puncture in the hull. Tiki came over and looked at the hole.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“There’s something just inside the hole,” said Cian.

“It looks like a crystalline formation,” said Tiki. She used the edge of the welder as a pointer and touched it. The crystal shivered and she pulled the welder away. Cian hit his comm and called the captain.

“Captain, we have some odd crystal formation around the holes of the ship,” reported Cian.

“Do we know what they are?” asked the captain. Cian looked at Tiki.

“It is a complex structure that seems to respond to stimuli, like touch,” said Tiki.

“Then no, we don’t know what it is,” said the captain. “I’ll send the first officer to investigate. Just patch those holes.”

“We might be sealing those things inside,” said Cian.

“Just seal up my ship,” said the captain. “We’ll worry about those things later. Captain out.”

Tiki and Cian looked at each other. “Well, we...”

And then Tiki stopped. She looked at the end of the welder.

“Is that...?” asked Cian.

A small crystal formation was now growing on the tip of the welder where Tiki had touched it.

“What do we do?” asked Tiki.

“Does it burn off?” suggested Cian.

Tiki gave the welder’s trigger a quick pull, and that sent out a little blast of heat. The crystal, immediately and frighteningly, expanded to cover the welder and crawled over Tiki’s forearm. She suddenly cried out.

Cian stepped forward. “Teek?”

“Don’t get too close,” cried Tiki, and he stopped.

“What is it?” asked Cian.

“The crystal pierced through the suit, and my arm,” said Tiki. “And it really, really hurts.”

Cian picked up a small piece of scrap metal and approached her crystal covered arm.

“Careful,” said Tiki.

“I just want to see,” said Cian. He reached out with the piece of metal and touched the crystal. Pulling the metal away, he saw that some of the crystal was now on the scrap.

“It transfers to anything it touches,” said Tiki. Cian threw the scrap metal away from the ship.

“But that still leaves us with a bigger problem,” said Cian as he looked at Tiki. Cian hit his comm.

“Captain, don’t expose the crystals to heat, or touch them,” said Cian. “It’s bad.”

“Noted,” replied the captain crisply, and then she cut the comm. Tiki shuddered in pain and Cian moved to her side.

“What’s wrong?” asked Cian.

“It’s growing,” replied Tiki.

“Growing? What do you mean growing?”

“The warmth in my body is helping the crystals to grow through my arm.” Tiki shook for a moment. “It’s growing in my arm!”

Cian moved around her trying to quell his panic.

“We can take you back in,” suggested Cian.

“Where it’s warm,” countered Tiki.

“Damn, damn, damn,” growled Cian as he saw the crystals grow up past her elbow. Then he stopped. “I have a bad idea.”

“I’m listening,” said Tiki.

“We separate you from the crystal,” said Cian. “But that also includes your arm.”

Tiki thought about it a moment, and then she nodded quickly. “I’m in.”

Cian took a Tok wrench from his belt and moved behind her.

“Once I open the suit,” said Cian. “You’ll not be able to talk anymore with the depressurising. Anything you need to say?”

“Just get this over with, and then fix the ship,” said Tiki.

“I’ll take you in first,” said Cian.

“Don’t. I can survive in zero atmosphere for a long while,” said Tiki. “Just get these crystals away from me!”

Tiki grimaced as the crystals moved into her upper arm. Cian used the versatile Tok wrench to open the shoulder seam of her environment suit and the air blew out. Soon, he had separated the shoulder of the suit and he ran his fingers over her shoulder. He could see the crystals farther inside the suit. They did not have much time.

“Sorry,” he said, though he knew she could not hear him. He flipped a switch on the other end of the Tok wrench, and it lit the plasma cutter. Tiki screamed as the cutter sliced through her arm. Her body spasmed, but Cian held her fast.

Cian’s face scrunched in sympathetic pain as Tiki’s arm came free. Crystal tendrils tried to reach out of the severed arm, but quickly froze in space. Pulling Tiki away from the arm, he watched it drift away.

“Cian! Where’s Tiki,” cried the captain. “She just went off-line.”

“Those crystals got into her arm,” reported Cian. “I... I had to take off the arm. Maybe the shock of it reverberated through her and damaged her uplink to the ship.”

“She okay?” asked the captain.

Cian turned her around and looked through her faceplate.

Tiki smiled weakly and she gave a thumbs-up with her good arm.

“She’s good,” he reported, breathing out with relief.

Cian pulled her close and his heart pounded. He took her over to the repair box, and tethered her to it for safety. He went back to work, moving as quickly as he could. The hull repairs took longer than he would have liked. He would often look back at Tiki, who would wave to him.

Then the comm came on for a moment.

“...tch.o..an, t...cr....is.....ng ov.....ple!”

Cian straightened up.

“Hello?” as he activated his comm. “Please repeat.”

But nothing came back through. Cian was worried, but there were still holes in the ship. He had orders and there were a dozen capable people inside. After a moment, he went back to his job.

The last hole was plugged up forty minutes later. Cian moved over to Tiki. He touched his face plate against hers, and he was thrilled and relieved to see that she was still alert.

Cian took her, and the repair kit, back to the airlock, which showed that the shuttle bay had re-pressurized. Once through the airlock, he dragged the repair kit just outside of it and dropped it.

Back in the airlock, Cian picked Tiki up in his arms. She was heavy, but he did not have far to go. He moved quickly across the shuttle bay and his arms burned with exertion.

Cian did not notice the crystal formations blossoming on the hull, and in the shuttle, the Habanero.

“You don’t have to carry me,” murmured Tiki, but her eyes were unfocused.

Through a door to starboard, Cian went into his engineering bay. He set Tiki on her feet by one of his messy benches. With a free arm, he swiped all the papers and components off the bench. He lifted her onto it. Quickly, he pulled off Tiki’s helmet.

“Hi,” smiled Tiki weakly. Her face was a pale blue.

“Hi yourself,” replied Cian. “I’m going to need to take off this suit.”

“Don’t you need to buy me a drink first?” giggled Tiki.

“Maybe later,” replied Cian as he tried to joke, but he was really worried. He used his versatile Tok Wrench to undo the sides of the environment suit. Slowly, he pulled off the suit. She winced when he had to lift her up to remove the back piece. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Tiki.

Cian grabbed a chair and sat right beside her wounded shoulder. He did not even take time to remove his form fitted gloves. Quickly, he started patching up her severed arm.

Almost a half hour later, he sat back as he taped a bandage over the wound.

“Just in case of leaks,” he murmured. He looked up at Tiki, and she had a relieved smile on her face. “You okay there?”

“I’ll survive,” said Tiki.

“You better!” replied Cian with mock sternness. “You okay to get up?”

Tiki nodded. Slowly, he helped her to her feet. She wobbled a bit, but steadied herself.

“I’m good,” assured Tiki.

“Okay,” said Cian. “No dancing for a week, and bed early.”

“Yes doctor,” smiled Tiki.

Cian’s face grew worried. “Yikes, I forgot to call the captain and tell her the repairs were done.”

Cian activated his comm.

“Captain, repairs are done.”

There was silence on the other side of the comm.

“Captain?”

Cian turned to Tiki. “Maybe the comms are down?”

Tiki closed her eyes for a moment, and then she opened them.

“I still can’t connect with the ship,” she reported.

Cian sighed. “Maybe we should head to the bridge.”

As he moved over to the door, Tiki cleared her throat. He glanced at her as he pressed the button to open the door.

“Don’t you want to take off your suit first?” she asked.

Something jumped out as the door opened. Cian brought up his arm defensively as he was pushed back into the room. Crystal formations jutted out of Captain Cisely’s pale face. The captain opened her mouth and revealed that her teeth were also covered by more crystals.

“Ca...captain?” gasped Cian as he was pushed back. He levered his forearm under her chin and swatted one of her hands away. “Captain, what happened!”

The captain just made a guttural noise and tried to bite Cian’s arm. But his suit prevented any damage. Gnawing on his environment suit, Cisely grew frustrated and spotted Tiki out of her suit.

Jumping aside, the captain went for Tiki. But Cian grabbed her and they both toppled forward. The engineer held onto the captain’s legs while trying to keep his face away from her clothes, just in case of contamination. Cisely was bucking hard when Tiki appeared above them.

“Jump aside!” cried Tiki. Cian saw that she was swinging a tube of liquid coolant towards them. He rolled aside as Tiki smashed the tube over the captain. The supercooled liquid splashed over Cisely and instantly froze the captain’s upper body.

Tiki stumbled away. The captain’s legs shook for a moment longer, and then stopped.

“Thanks,” said Cian.

“And back to you.”

The engineer looked at his suit and saw crystals forming on the arms and chest, but they had not penetrated inside yet. Thoughtfully, he dipped his gloved hands into some of remaining coolant near the captain.

“Careful,” said Tiki.

Rubbing the coolant on the crystal growths, he found that they became flaky and were easily brushed off. It took only a minute to remove the rest of the crystals from the suit. When he was done, Cian looked up at Tiki.

“We need to find you another suit,” he said.

“And quickly. Then we need to check on the rest of the crew.”

Cian put on his helmet and picked up a piece of pipe from the ground near his work bench. He hefted it, but then saw Tiki’s curious and amused look.

“Just in case,” he answered.

Moving to the door, which went back into the shuttle bay, he opened it carefully and braced himself. But no one jumped out. Moving past the shuttles, they walked quickly, but Tiki grabbed his arm.

“Look!” she said, and she pointed at the other shuttle, the *Habanero*. Through the forward viewing windows were crystalline structures that were growing quickly.

“And that was my good shuttle,” moaned Cian in almost a whine. They went to a small room off the shuttle bay and found several suits. Cian looked over them quickly. “They’re clean.”

After helping Tiki into a new suit, Cian tried his comm.

“Anyone out there?” asked Cian, but they got no response.

“We should get into the remaining shuttle,” she said, and he looked at her in surprise.

“Abandon ship?” asked Cian.

“Just get to a safe distance until we can figure this out,” said Tiki. “We can also scan for life signs more easily from outside.”

Tiki began to move towards the second shuttle, the *Ghost Chili*, when she stopped. Cian was not moving. He stared at the door leading deeper into the ship. She gently put her hand on his arm.

“If we’re in a shuttle,” she said. “We just have to get any survivors to the nearest airlock to get them out. Instead of bringing them back here.”

Finally, Cian nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

Sadly, he turned and they moved quickly towards the *Ghost Chili*. Soon he had it prepped and ready to go. Cian gave a silent thank you to the engineering gods that the engine was behaving itself.

But Cian stopped before lifting off and he activated his comm.

“This is Engineer Cian in the shuttle bay,” he called out. “Is there anyone there? Can anyone hear me?”

Cian waited when the far door to the shuttle bay opened. He leaned forward and held his breath. Tiki bit her lower lip.

But Dr. Burke stumbled out of the door covered in crystal growths. Burke howled when he saw Cian and Tiki in the shuttle and started to move towards them.

“Let’s go,” said Cian softly.

Lifting off, Cian backed the shuttle out of the bay and steered clear of the ship. From the outside, he could not see any difference to the outside of the ship apart from his repairs. Tiki’s one hand touched the instrument panel and she instantly connected to the shuttle. She turned to him and started to speak, but then she stopped.

“No one, eh?” he said sadly.

“I’m sorry,” said Tiki. “There are no life signs.”

Cian took a long, deep breath as he watched the dead ship.

“I’ve downloaded the black box,” said Tiki. “We’re going to need to put you in stasis for the flight.”

“I hate Stasis Chambers,” grumbled Cian.

“Still, you need to sleep.”

Cian watched the dead ship. “It just feels wrong leaving her here.”

“I know,” said Tiki. “But right now, my mission is to get you home. And I can pilot us to Venus station. It’s only a month away.”

Cian sighed and deflated in his chair. Tiki stood and suddenly hugged him. He looked up in surprise and she kissed him quickly. That brought a little smile to his face.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“For saving my life,” said Tiki. She paused a heartbeat and leaned into Cian kissing him hard. “And that was for me.”

Cian could not help but smile broadly.

“Thank God you’re safe,” he whispered in relief, and he pulled her into his lap despite their environment suits. He held her close for a long time. Then he looked up at her. “Have you ever been to Michigan? My family still lives there.”

Later, the stasis chamber opened, and Cian nervously stepped in. He had stripped to his jumpsuit and his hands fidgeted.

“Don’t forget me in here,” he said.

“I won’t,” smiled Tiki.

“I just don’t want to get Freezer Burn.”

“It’s only a month,” chided Tiki. “Now sleep.”

Tiki activated the stasis chamber and it filled with gas leaving a fog on the inside window. A hand came through the gas and quickly sketched an image. Then it froze in place.

Tiki reached out to touch the sketch of an anatomically correct heart, and smiled warmly.

THE END

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Fossemò



[Return to Contents](#)

SLUDGEHAMMER by Rick McQuiston

Luke was starving. He'd had a long day at work and hoped that April had dinner ready when he got home.

He decided to call her.

"Hi honey, it's me."

"Hi Luke." April's voice was as energetic as she was.

"Please tell me you have dinner started. I'm really hungry. The morning meeting was pushed back to the afternoon so I had to take lunch early. I haven't eaten a thing since eleven o'clock."

April chuckled. "Yes, I have dinner ready, but you have to wait until you get home to find out what it is."

Luke was puzzled, but didn't care. "I'd eat a horse, even if it was still moving," he said, and then added: "I'm coming up on our street now."

"Remember, it's a surprise."

On pulling into his driveway Luke jumped out of his car and into the house. He couldn't wait to see what April had whipped up in the kitchen. She was a great cook, always experimenting with new concoctions, and he knew that whatever it was it would be delicious.

"I'm home. April?" Luke set his briefcase on the floor, kicked off his shoes, and sauntered down the hallway. "April? I'm ready for your surprise."

April walked out of the kitchen. She looked beautiful, wearing a light blue blouse and snug black dress slacks. Her long blond hair was tied into a tight ponytail and her pretty face was embellished by skilfully applied makeup.

"Well, hello there," Luke said with a wide grin. "What's the special occasion?" For a second he was worried that he'd forgotten their anniversary, but then remembered that it wasn't until the following month.

"Just because I love you," April replied with an equally large smile. She took Luke's hand and led him into the dining room. "Now sit down and close your eyes."

"What?"

"You heard me, close your eyes. You can't open them until I say so. I made a special meal and I want it to be a surprise."

Luke sniffed the air and crinkled his face. The aroma was like fish cooked over burning leaves, but not totally unpleasant. His mouth began to water.

He sat down at the table and promptly closed his eyes.

After a few minutes, he called out: “April? How much longer? I’m starved.”

April walked into the room and set a plate down in front of Luke.

“Smells good. What on Earth is it?” In his head he tried to place the aroma with various foods but couldn’t nail it down to anything specific.

“Okay,” April whispered in his ear, “you can open your eyes now.”

Luke’s eyes popped open and he stared at what was on his plate.

It was a heaping slab of dark brown sludge. Several different shades of goo oozed from the mess and pooled around the central mass, creating a nauseating miniature island. And nestled within the slop were distinct white pustules that gradually meshed with their surroundings, forming what looked like tiny eyeballs floating in a polluted sea.

Luke struggled to keep from vomiting. If he had anything in his stomach he probably would have spilled it out right then and there.

April kissed Luke on the cheek and cheerfully skipped over to her own chair. Her plate had an identical mess on it.

Luke pushed his chair back from the table, all the while watching April as she raised her fork and began to dig into the stuff.

“Hurry mup and eath it before it geths cold,” she mumbled with a full mouth. Slime trickled down her chin and stained her blouse. “You’ll lovths it.” A fork tine speared one of the pustules, causing it to burst. “And iths healthy too.”

Luke lost it. “Have you lost your mind!?” he shouted. “What is this mess!?” He jumped up, his arms flailing above his head. “We have to clean this up!”

April set her fork down and quietly stood up. “Honey,” she said. “Take it easy. We’re not finished eating yet.”

Luke stared at his wife. He opened his mouth but no words came out. He was dumbfounded.

He turned to leave just as April, her arm suddenly changing into the same sludge that was on the plates, reared back and took him down with one violent strike to the head.

Leaning over the twitching body of her husband, April dislodged her arm and held it up to study. Bits of sludge-coated brain matter dripped off the appendage and made tiny puddles on the floor.

She stepped over to her plate. The slop on it had gelled into a semi-solid state, moulding itself to the perimeter of the plate like warmed-over pudding.

She smiled. It had been her best creation yet, a veritable stroke of culinary genius, stumbled on purely by accident and taking on a life of its own...literally.

April raised her hand and promptly scooped up a generous portion of sludge from the plate.

She walked over to where Luke was.

She reached down with her free hand and pried apart his mouth.

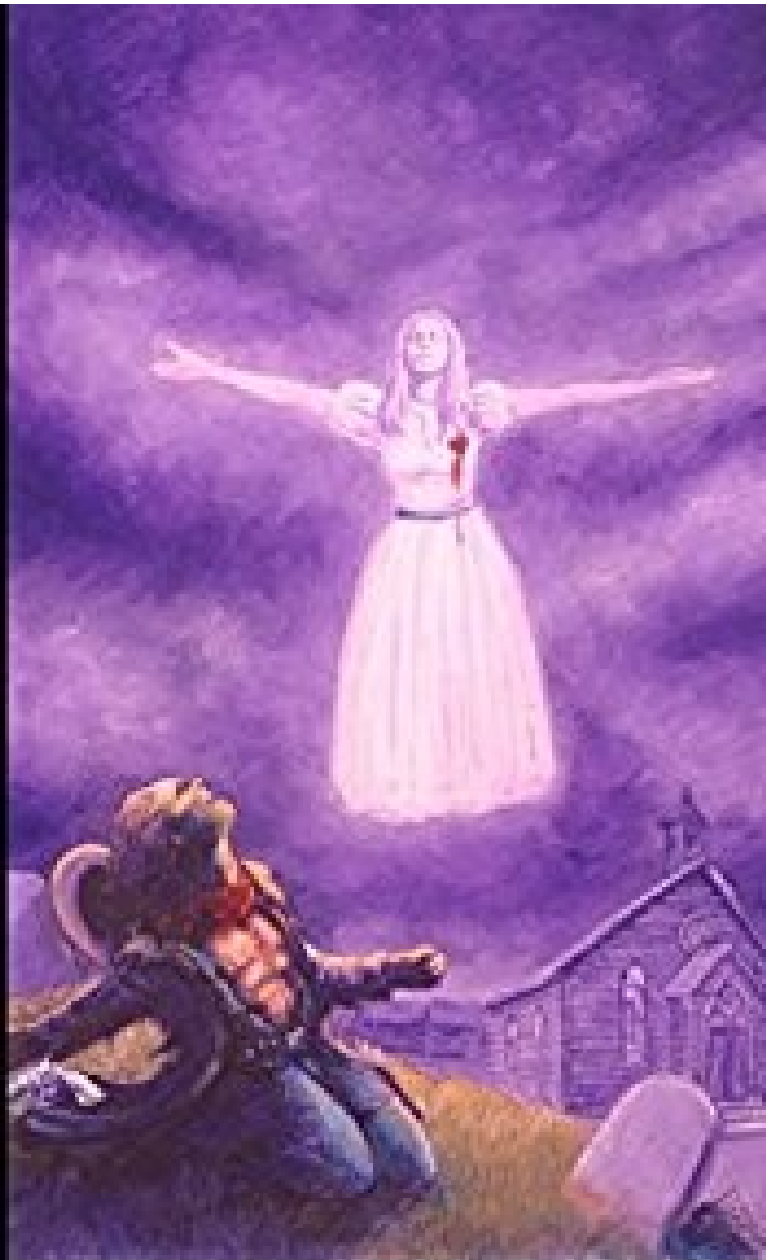
She shovelled the sludge into his mouth and closed it.

Then she sat next to the corpse, waiting for its eyes to open.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

[Return to Contents](#)

THE KILLER by Steven Havelock

Lisa awoke to the whine of her alarm clock.

Blasted thing!

As she opened her eyes she noticed the dust motes dancing in the morning sunlight which faintly made its way through the expensive curtains.

She paused...

So beautiful...

I'm like that, I can see the beauty in the smallest things. Maybe because my own childhood was so rough...

She looked over to her husband Dominic, who was snoring soundly.

Securely in the land of Nod; let him sleep. I don't want to disturb his sleep.

Lisa climbed out of bed as quietly as possible and went into the next bedroom to check on her two-year-old daughter.

Jamie was sleeping soundly as well.

She smiled, bent over and kissed Jamie on her forehead. The girl stirred momentarily then was silent again.

She went downstairs into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

Damn! No milk, Dominic must have forgotten to bring it yesterday, on his way back from work. I'll just pop down to the local shop and pick some up.

Zack was stressed. He looked at the clock. It read 10:00.

Flipping heck! Jill the teaching assistant hasn't turned up, and I've got to start now.

Today is observation day. My tutorial teacher from the uni is here to observe me. Shit! This isn't turning out to be a good day!

He looked over to the desk at the back which his teacher had taken. The teacher was looking down, giving the impression he wasn't watching him.

Nothing for it. I've got to start without the assistant. Zack pulled out his worksheets and handed them to the students himself.

Flipping silly cow! I know she's only a volunteer, but today of all days she could have at least been on time.

It seemed to happen in slow motion. Jill saw the lorry move to the left. The woman on the bike had no chance. The bike went under the lorry's huge tyres along with one of the woman's legs. A scream of anguish ripped through the normal quiet Sunday morning.

Jill ran up to the scene of the accident. She had been walking to her Sunday morning English class, where she assisted in teaching migrant domestic workers from foreign climes.

Oh my God! There's blood everywhere!

The woman cyclist's leg had been completely crushed and her breathing was rapid and her eyes kept opening and closing as she fought for her life.

Like a fish flopping on a boat she thought.

She reached the scene. Although she had seen scenes like this many times before it still shook her.

Aww, God!

She reached out her hand and grabbed the woman's cyclist pale slender hand in her own. A final scream ripped out and the woman's eye started to close. Jill grabbed her by her shirt collars and gave her a shake.

"Hey lady! Don't you die on me!"

The woman's eyes blinked opened and focused on Jill. Jill was already dialling the ambulance on her phone.

"You are not going to die!"

Faint hope glimmered in the woman's eyes, and she seemed to be more aware of her surroundings than she had a been a moment ago.

"The ambulance is on its way." Jill looked at the woman; she saw gratitude in the woman's eyes.

"What's your name?"

"Lisa."

"What's your second name?"

"Cooper."

"How old are you, Lisa?"

"I'm twenty-nine." Blood bubbled from her mouth.

A smile spread across Jill's face but she hid it again quickly.

What I wouldn't give to be twenty-nine again.

"Where do you live, Lisa?"

"125 Eastern Avenue."

Lisa's eyes started to lose focus. *Shit, she's going to pass out again!*

Jill heard sirens in the background. *Police or ambulance? Probably ambulance but I'm not really bothered.*

Lisa's eyes closed. Jill grabbed her hand in her own and whispered something under her breath.

Jill held Lisa's hand, concentrating with all her mind.

Block out the traffic. Block out the people...Concentrate...Just concentrate....

She's dead....

Jill got up from the side of the road and sat on the other side of the pavement, on a chair outside a cafe. The police and ambulance were suddenly there.

I'm going to be late for my class.

Once the police had established the woman's identity, the paramedics loaded the now dead woman into the ambulance and headed to the local morgue

About thirty minutes later it was all over. The police left. The driver of the lorry walked over to Jill. He was an Albanian. He had a smile on his face.

"Well done," said Jill.

He held out his hand. Jill reached into her handbag and produced a brown envelope.

"Five thousand pounds." Jill said, "just like we agreed."

The driver looked at Jill's face. He had only met her twice. *Each time she looks ten years younger. How?* he thought, puzzled. *She's definitely a crazy woman and a serial murderer...But as long as I get my money...that's all that matters right now.*

Zack heard a sound and looked to the door.

Thank God! She's here!

Zack saw Jill walk through the door looking shaken.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

As she came closer, Zack noticed something different about her. *She looks ten years younger? How...?*

Jill sat down on a chair. “Just give me a second to catch my breath, please.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Zack “You look shaken up.”

“I just saw a terrible accident. A lorry and a bike. She had no chance. She died there.”

Zack took a deep breath.

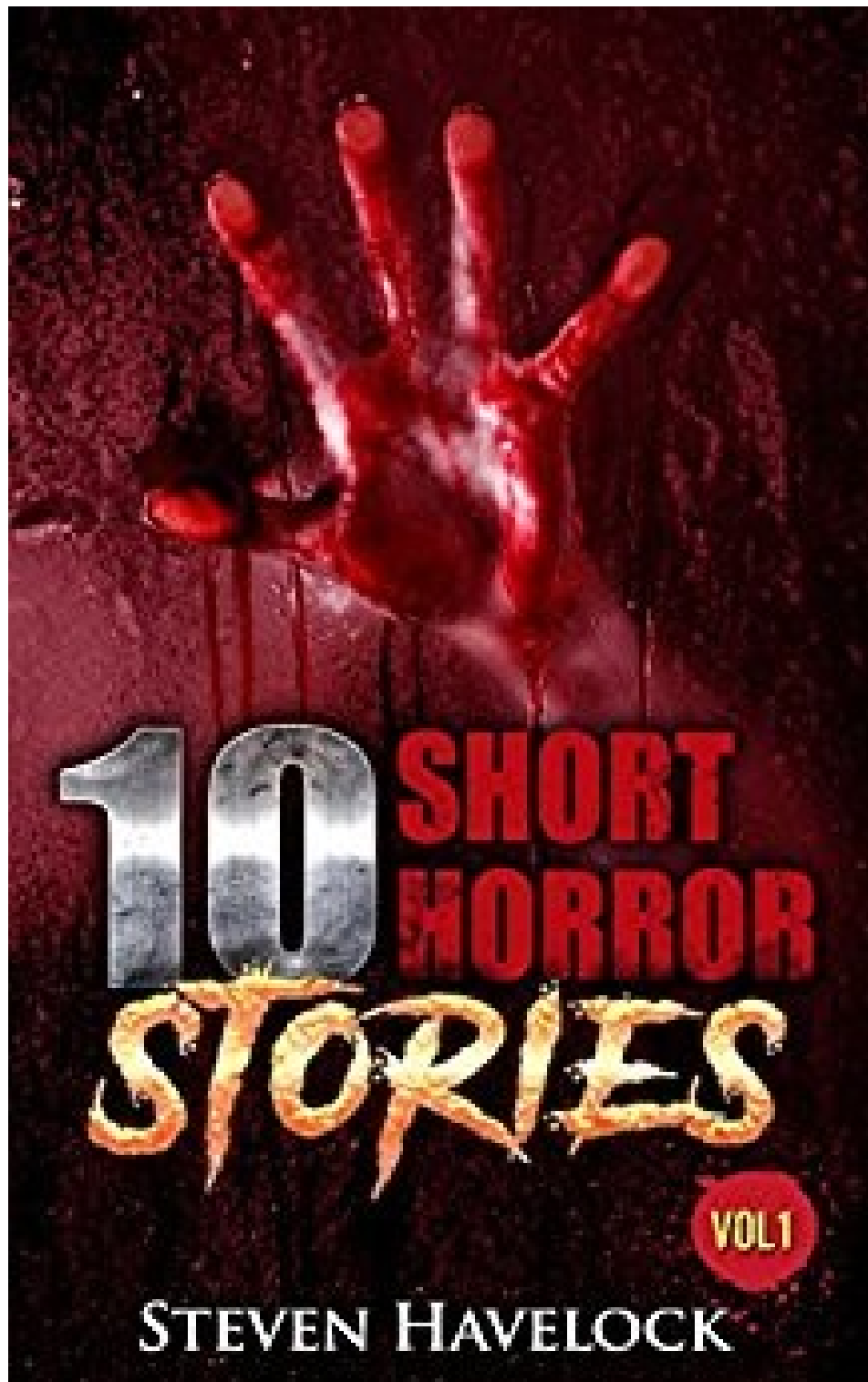
This isn’t going to plan. First she’s late, and then she disrupts the class on the day that I’m being observed of all days.

Jill pulled out a small mirror and stared into it. The wrinkles on her face had disappeared after the last time she had looked at the mirror, just two hours ago. Her hair around the edges, which had been turning white, was dark once again.

Ten years younger. It’s worth it...

THE END

Steven Havelock’s books are available from [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/Steven-Havelock/e/B000APR08Q).



[Return to Contents](#)

SO LONG AND THANKS FOR ALL THE ANIMALS by Steve Laker

The original carvings were found deep in a forest, but there was debate over which were the first. In the space of a week, new inscriptions were discovered several times daily, all in woodland, all identical, but unlike anything recorded previously. Meanwhile, two school friends had uncovered what could be a key.

“How does it switch on, Jay?” Kerry stared at herself, next to Jason as they both looked back from the black glass-like sheet.

“I don’t know, Kay,” Jay replied, as he looked back at Kerry. “It’s nothing obvious that I’m missing, is it?” He handed the pane of glass to her. About A4 in size, the glass was no thicker than a sheet of paper. “What’s it made of, anyway?”

“Well,” Kay said, moving it in and out from her face, “it’s got imperfections.”

“What, your face?”

“Fuck you, wanker. No, I mean, the glass, or whatever it is, it’s not completely smooth. It’s like something from a dark and twisted hall of mirrors. See what I mean?” She handed the mirror back, and Jay looked at himself as he moved it in front of him. “Everyone’s ugly in the back of a spoon.”

Jay turned the sheet over in his hands. “I look the same on both sides,” he said to their reflections, “bumpy. In fact, I’d say I’m quite corrugated.”

“Well,” said Kay, “your forehead often is.”

“Eh?”

“You frown a lot.”

Jay frowned at the glass sheet. “Well,” he said, “no matter how much I wish it to switch on, it won’t. There are no buttons, so there must be some other way.”

“You actually think it’ll switch on? Jay, it’s just a sheet of some old material.”

“I know,” Jay replied, “but it’s this weird stuff, and where we found it. It’s got me wondering.”

“We found it buried in the woods, Jay. Lots of things are buried in woodland, and time and the elements change things. This could just be a part of something plastic, and the material has been melted, or eroded.”

“But it was wrapped up. And it was near those tree carvings, like the ones on the news.”

Tree and stone carvings had been cropping up almost spontaneously in the previous few days. At first it was thought to be the work of pranksters, but it had become too elaborate. Now, the same conspiracy community which once surrounded crop circles had been stirred and the internet was awash with theories.

The carvings weren't any recognisable text, nor were they pictographs which gave any clues to their origin or meaning. They incorporated geometric shapes and patterns, like crop formations, but appeared on tree bark and rocks. Jay and Kay had found the glass-like sheet when they'd been metal detecting. At first, the haul was just a soda can and some tin foil, but the foil was wrapped around the slate.

"Any theories on the news?" Kay asked.

"Only one," Jay said, "a really out-there one."

"Try me."

"Imagine we're in biblical times."

"You wha'?"

"Two thousand years ago, give or take: Imagine we're there, or *then*, if you like."

"Okay."

"Okay." Jay adjusted himself in his chair. "You know I don't believe in God, right? But no-one can deny that the bible might be based on fact, on actual events. Ancient scribes may have recorded actual historical events, but they'd have been limited in the terms they used and what was available to them, in the way they recorded things."

"Yeah," Kay said, "you've said. Imagine if you could've given one of those old guys a smartphone. They could've recorded it all and we'd be able to see what they saw. It'd solve the whole religion problem."

"Well, yeah," Jay agreed, "and if you gave them say, a mobile phone, or a tablet computer, they'd probably think it was some sort of sorcery, or it could be alien technology. And they'd probably write of it as some sort of magic mirror."

"And that's what you think this is?"

"It could be," Jay tried to assert. "It just won't switch on. If it's what I *think* it could be, it's either extinct through pure neglect or technology. Or it could be a technology so far advanced, that we just don't understand it." He held the slate to his face again. "Hmm, never noticed that before," he frowned.

"Show me?" Kay moved next to Jay, and looked at them both in the glassy surface, frowning. "What didn't you notice?"

"The way one of my eyes seems to take just a split fraction of a second to catch up. Only *that* one, the left one, watch." Jay looked at Kay's reflection.

"You're right, it does," she said. "You've got a lazy eye mate."

“I think it’s pretty cool actually,” Jay said, looking from himself to Kay, and back again. “It’s like that one is taking things in more, while the other one concentrates ahead. Then the left one catches up and tells my brain all the other stuff it needs to know.”

“That is pretty cool,” Kay said, “you freak.”

Then something slightly unexpected, but actually entirely plausible happened: The slate crackled and sparked, first an arc of blue lightning, then the sparkle of a glitter dome. Then a graphic appeared on what was now a screen.

“That looks familiar,” Kay said.

“Kind of what I expected,” Jay replied. “Let’s see what the latest news is...”

The latest developments were trending, in news and on social media: Analysis of the designs found on trees and rocks, had revealed them to be neither carved nor burned into any surface.

“Your theory?” Kay wondered.

“That,” Jay said, “the carvings weren’t made from the outside, at least by any method we understand.”

“Meaning how many things?”

“Two, equally crazy ones.”

“Humour me, agent Jay.”

“Okay, Kay. One: It could be that the marks were made by technology we don’t understand, which would suggest alien, either extra-terrestrial or of this earth, as in, government. But we can discount the latter, they wouldn’t put on any show, other than to whip up hysteria. Perhaps as a smokescreen. I dunno. So, aliens: aliens among us? Or visiting ones, leaving us messages, meaning what? Or,” Jay looked at the design on the tablet. “Or it could be, that the ones which look like this on the trees and the rocks. That’s theory two.”

“Which is?”

“That the carvings, inscriptions, or whatever; the words, pictures, designs; they could be made from the inside.”

“How?”

“Nature. I don’t mean colonies of insects, parasites, or fungi. These are carvings on the outside, with no signs of being carved. So the opposite of that, is that they were pulled in from the inside.”

“What the actual?”

“Nature made them.”

“You already said that.”

“The earth made them, Kay.”

“The wha’? The actual planet. Planet earth, put the messages there?”

“It’s a bit like self-harm, isn’t it? So what *this* could be, Kay, is messages in the earth, the trees, the rocks, from the earth, where they’re all a part of the nature of that planet.”

“Saying what? Jay?”

“I don’t know. Maybe telling us to fuck off.”

“Us?”

“Humans.”

“Shit.”

“We are. We’re so un-evolved, when you look at us, and all we could be, with all that’s around us. Those ancient aliens who may or may not have made up the stories in the bible, they were probably a race so technologically advanced because they’d harnessed the natural, sustainable energy from their environment, rather than plundering it of all its resources for their own gain. I mean, we’re only just developing wind, solar and tidal energy technology. We’re *having* to, because we’re running out of coal and oil. But still, perpetual energy sources only serve a small proportion of our needs. And we use less than one per cent of the energy available for free on this planet.

“Those technologically advanced races, who may or may not have visited biblical humans, they were ones who’d become efficient through sufficiency. There are races out there who might have harnessed the natural energy of their parent star, with something like a Dyson Sphere. Look it up.”

“I know what a Dyson sphere is, and I can only begin to imagine what a race might be capable of, once they’ve effectively captured all the energy of their sun with solar arrays. Actually, I can’t begin to imagine the possibilities.”

“Which is exactly,” Jay said, “what those biblical scribes would have found.”

“Your number two theory definitely has legs,” Kay confirmed. “How would the ancient alien tablet fit in though?”

“Only if it *was* that.” Jay pointed at the design on the screen. “*That* being alien technology, like a magic mirror described in the bible.”

“But it’s just showing that same design?” Kay suggested.

“But look,” Jay said. “I’ve got a theory on how we managed to switch it on.”

“How?” Kay looked at the same design as Jay on the screen. “Oh, like that,” she said, as the pattern began to change. “But how?”

“Two heads are better than one, perhaps?”

They didn’t have to speak. It was the act of knowing, and the same like-mindedness which had switched the tablet on before. Perhaps the technology was ancient, advanced, or both, but it wasn’t redundant. It was woken by thought, specifically, the alignment of the thoughts of more than one person.

As Jay and Kay continued to watch the screen, the pattern continued to morph, into more complex and fractal patterns, perpetually zooming in on recursion. Then the whole screen changed, from screen saver to what was apparently an operating system.

“It’s a bit like Linux,” Jay suggested.

“You wha’? *That*,” Kay pointed, “is way more, Jay.”

“It’s the only way I can think to describe it, as being accessible. Look, it seems to know what you want to do.” They both peered into the screen. “It’s three dimensional, but then if you look ahead, you can see bits going off to the side. It’s like travelling down a wormhole.”

And that was the best way the modern-day scribes had to describe what they saw.

“Let’s see where we’re going,” Kay said, as they both watched the screen. “Oh, look. What’s that?”

The wormhole opened onto a scene, apparently from a remote camera, with an overlay of what could be coordinates and time, but in an indecipherable text. The main picture was a live video feed, of a field, with a row of large chimneys in the background.

“I wonder how we look around,” Kay wondered. Then something almost expected happened:

The view on the tablet screen changed, as Kay (and Jay) willed some remote camera, perhaps in the countryside near a power station. Panning the landscape, they saw electricity pylons stretching into the distance, standing like frozen old bow-legged ladies.

Then the pylon nearest the camera started to move, not by tilting, but by lifting, first on one side, then the other. Soon, the pylon began to move forwards, slowly lifting one side ahead of the other. A second pylon did the same, then a third, and quickly, an entire line of electricity pylons was walking through the mud of the ground beneath them, casting off electrical wires as they went. A battalion of iron old ladies, had lifted their skirts, cast off their bindings, and began a bow-legged march away from the power station.

The camera pulled away from the power station, which shrunk into the distance as the viewers were once again plunged into a plughole of some kind, depositing them, through the magic mirror, in the middle of an ocean. As they thought about what might be around them, the camera obligingly showed them.

The view was of an oil rig, in calm blue seas, a steam punk leviathan, but for the red and yellow colour and the skeletal invader's parasitic purpose. But suddenly, it's exhaust flame was silenced, as the oil rig unplugged its umbilicus from the sea bed and the natural elements within its man-made structure took on sentience.

The camera switched, gradually more quickly, around different scenes: Electricity pylons marching across landscapes, and oil rigs, swimming to shore, then rising like retro-futuristic dinosaur machines, striding over the landscape.

"Wake up."

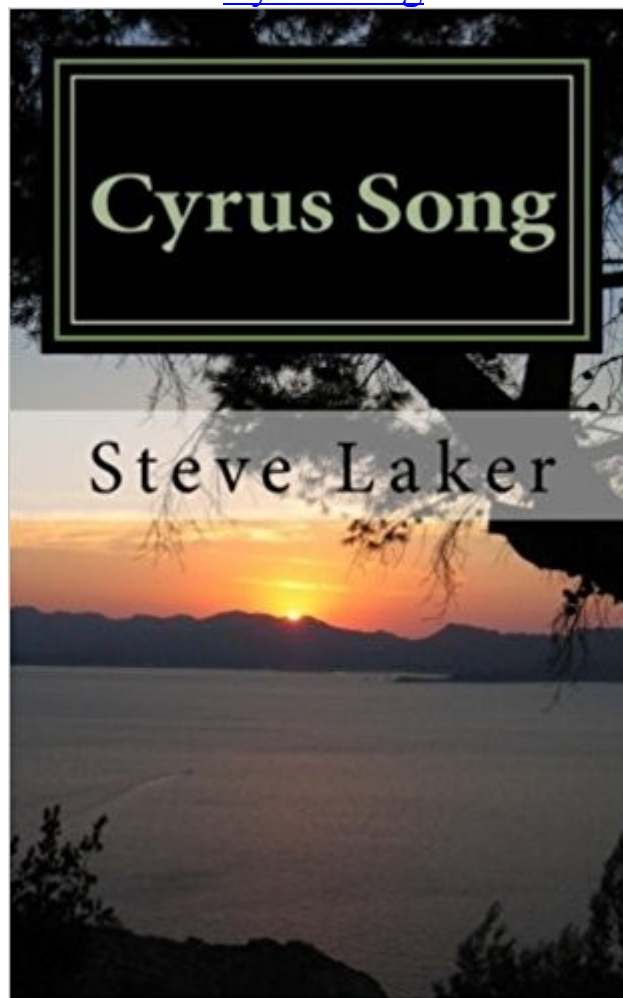
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"Everyone's ugly in the back of a spoon," with kind permission of a talented singer-songwriter friend of mine: [Léanie Kaleido](#).

THE END

Now available from Steve Laker:

[Cyrus Song](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

V. The Aftermath of Gothic Fiction

Meanwhile other hands had not been idle, so that above the dreary plethora of trash like Marquis von Grosse's *Horrid Mysteries* (1796), Mrs. Roche's *Children of the Abbey* (1796), Miss Dacre's *Zofloya*; or, *The Moor* (1806), and the poet Shelley's schoolboy effusions *Zastrozzi* (1810) and *St. Irvyne* (1811) (both imitations of *Zofloya*) there arose many memorable weird works both in English and German. Classic in merit, and markedly different from its fellows because of its foundation in the Oriental tale rather than the Walpolesque Gothic novel, is the celebrated *History of the Caliph Vathek* by the wealthy dilettante William Beckford, first written in the French language but published in an English translation before the appearance of the original. Eastern tales, introduced to European literature early in the eighteenth century through Galland's French translation of the inexhaustibly opulent *Arabian Nights*, had become a reigning fashion; being used both for allegory and for amusement. The sly humour which only the Eastern mind knows how to mix with weirdness had captivated a sophisticated generation, till Bagdad and Damascus names became as freely strown through popular literature as dashing Italian and Spanish ones were soon to be. Beckford, well read in Eastern romance, caught the atmosphere with unusual receptivity; and in his fantastic volume reflected very potently the haughty luxury, sly disillusion, bland cruelty, urbane treachery, and shadowy spectral horror of the Saracen spirit. His seasoning of the ridiculous seldom mars the force of his sinister theme, and the tale marches onward with a phantasmagoric pomp in which the laughter is that of skeletons feasting under Arabesque domes. *Vathek* is a tale of the grandson of the Caliph Haroun, who, tormented by that ambition for super-terrestrial power, pleasure, and learning which animates the average Gothic villain or Byronic hero (essentially cognate types), is lured by an evil genius to seek the subterranean throne of the mighty and fabulous pre-Adamite sultans in the fiery halls of Eblis, the Mahometan Devil. The descriptions of *Vathek*'s palaces and diversions, of his scheming sorceress-mother Carathis and her witch-tower with the fifty one-eyed negresses, of his pilgrimage to the haunted ruins of Istakhar (Persepolis) and of the impish bride Nouronihar whom he treacherously acquired on the way, of Istakhar's primordial towers and terraces in the burning moonlight of the waste, and of the terrible Cyclopean halls of Eblis, where, lured by glittering promises, each victim is compelled to wander in anguish for ever, his right hand upon his blazingly ignited and eternally burning heart, are triumphs of weird colouring which raise the book to a permanent place in English letters. No less notable are the three Episodes of *Vathek*, intended for insertion in the tale as narratives of *Vathek*'s fellow-victims in Eblis' infernal halls, which remained unpublished throughout the author's lifetime and were discovered as recently as 1909 by the scholar Lewis Melville whilst collecting material for his *Life and Letters of William Beckford*. Beckford, however, lacks the essential mysticism which marks the acutest form of the weird; so that his tales have a certain knowing Latin hardness and clearness preclusive of sheer panic fright.

But Beckford remained alone in his devotion to the Orient. Other writers, closer to the Gothic tradition and to European life in general, were content to follow more faithfully in the lead of Walpole. Among the countless producers of terror-literature in these times may be mentioned the Utopian economic theorist William Godwin, who followed his famous but non-supernatural Caleb Williams (1794) with the intendedly weird *St. Leon* (1799), in which the theme of the elixir of life, as developed by the imaginary secret order of "Rosicrucians", is handled with ingeniousness if not with atmospheric convincingness. This element of

Rosicrucianism, fostered by a wave of popular magical interest exemplified in the vogue of the charlatan Cagliostro and the publication of Francis Barrett's *The Magus* (1801), a curious and compendious treatise on occult principles and ceremonies, of which a reprint was made as lately as 1896, figures in Bulwer-Lytton and in many late Gothic novels, especially that remote and enfeebled posterity which straggled far down into the nineteenth century and was represented by George W. M. Reynolds' *Faust and the Demon* and Wagner, the *Wehr-wolf*. Caleb Williams, though non-supernatural, has many authentic touches of terror. It is the tale of a servant persecuted by a master whom he has found guilty of murder, and displays an invention and skill which have kept it alive in a fashion to this day. It was dramatised as *The Iron Chest*, and in that form was almost equally celebrated. Godwin, however, was too much the conscious teacher and prosaic man of thought to create a genuine weird masterpiece.

His daughter, the wife of Shelley, was much more successful; and her inimitable *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is one of the horror-classics of all time. Composed in competition with her husband, Lord Byron, and Dr. John William Polidori in an effort to prove supremacy in horror-making, Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the only one of the rival narratives to be brought to an elaborate completion; and criticism has failed to prove that the best parts are due to Shelley rather than to her. The novel, somewhat tinged but scarcely marred by moral didacticism, tells of the artificial human being moulded from charnel fragments by Victor Frankenstein, a young Swiss medical student. Created by its designer "in the mad pride of intellectuality", the monster possesses full intelligence but owns a hideously loathsome form. It is rejected by mankind, becomes embittered, and at length begins the successive murder of all whom young Frankenstein loves best, friends and family. It demands that Frankenstein create a wife for it; and when the student finally refuses in horror lest the world be populated with such monsters, it departs with a hideous threat 'to be with him on his wedding night'. Upon that night the bride is strangled, and from that time on Frankenstein hunts down the monster, even into the wastes of the Arctic. In the end, whilst seeking shelter on the ship of the man who tells the story, Frankenstein himself is killed by the shocking object of his search and creation of his presumptuous pride. Some of the scenes in *Frankenstein* are unforgettable, as when the newly animated monster enters its creator's room, parts the curtains of his bed, and gazes at him in the yellow moonlight with watery eyes—"if eyes they may be called". Mrs. Shelley wrote other novels, including the fairly notable *Last Man*; but never duplicated the success of her first effort. It has the true touch of cosmic fear, no matter how much the movement may lag in places. Dr. Polidori developed his competing idea as a long short story, "*The Vampyre*"; in which we behold a suave villain of the true Gothic or Byronic type, and encounter some excellent passages of stark fright, including a terrible nocturnal experience in a shunned Grecian wood.

In this same period Sir Walter Scott frequently concerned himself with the weird, weaving it into many of his novels and poems, and sometimes producing such independent bits of narration as "*The Tapestry Chamber*" or "*Wandering Willie's Tale*" in *Redgauntlet*, in the latter of which the force of the spectral and the diabolic is enhanced by a grotesque homeliness of speech and atmosphere. In 1830 Scott published his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, which still forms one of our best compendia of European witch-lore. Washington Irving is another famous figure not unconnected with the weird; for though most of his ghosts are too whimsical and humorous to form genuinely spectral literature, a distinct inclination in this direction is to be noted in many of his productions. "*The German Student*" in *Tales of a Traveller* (1824) is a slyly concise and effective presentation of the old legend of the dead bride, whilst woven into the comic tissue of "*The Money-Diggers*" in the same volume is more than one hint of piratical apparitions in the realms which Captain Kidd once

roamed. Thomas Moore also joined the ranks of the macabre artists in the poem *Alciphron*, which he later elaborated into the prose novel of *The Epicurean* (1827). Though merely relating the adventures of a young Athenian duped by the artifice of cunning Egyptian priests, Moore manages to infuse much genuine horror into his account of subterranean frights and wonders beneath the primordial temples of Memphis. De Quincey more than once revels in grotesque and arabesque terrors, though with a desultoriness and learned pomp which deny him the rank of specialist.

This era likewise saw the rise of William Harrison Ainsworth, whose romantic novels teem with the eerie and the gruesome. Capt. Marryat, besides writing such short tales as “The Werewolf”, made a memorable contribution in *The Phantom Ship* (1839), founded on the legend of the Flying Dutchman, whose spectral and accursed vessel sails for ever near the Cape of Good Hope. Dickens now rises with occasional weird bits like “The Signalman”, a tale of ghostly warning conforming to a very common pattern and touched with a verisimilitude which allies it as much with the coming psychological school as with the dying Gothic school. At this time a wave of interest in spiritualistic charlatanry, mediumism, Hindoo theosophy, and such matters, much like that of the present day, was flourishing; so that the number of weird tales with a “psychic” or pseudo-scientific basis became very considerable. For a number of these the prolific and popular Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton was responsible; and despite the large doses of turgid rhetoric and empty romanticism in his products, his success in the weaving of a certain kind of bizarre charm cannot be denied.

“The House and the Brain”, which hints of Rosicrucianism and at a malign and deathless figure perhaps suggested by Louis XV’s mysterious courtier St. Germain, yet survives as one of the best short haunted-house tales ever written. The novel *Zanoni* (1842) contains similar elements more elaborately handled, and introduces a vast unknown sphere of being pressing on our own world and guarded by a horrible “Dweller of the Threshold” who haunts those who try to enter and fail. Here we have a benign brotherhood kept alive from age to age till finally reduced to a single member, and as a hero an ancient Chaldaean sorcerer surviving in the pristine bloom of youth to perish on the guillotine of the French Revolution. Though full of the conventional spirit of romance, marred by a ponderous network of symbolic and didactic meanings, and left unconvincing through lack of perfect atmospheric realisation of the situations hinging on the spectral world, *Zanoni* is really an excellent performance as a romantic novel; and can be read with genuine interest today by the not too sophisticated reader. It is amusing to note that in describing an attempted initiation into the ancient brotherhood the author cannot escape using the stock Gothic castle of Walpolean lineage.

In *A Strange Story* (1862) Bulwer-Lytton shews a marked improvement in the creation of weird images and moods. The novel, despite enormous length, a highly artificial plot bolstered up by opportune coincidences, and an atmosphere of homiletic pseudo-science designed to please the matter-of-fact and purposeful Victorian reader, is exceedingly effective as a narrative; evoking instantaneous and unflagging interest, and furnishing many potent—if somewhat melodramatic—tableaux and climaxes. Again we have the mysterious user of life’s elixir in the person of the soulless magician Margrave, whose dark exploits stand out with dramatic vividness against the modern background of a quiet English town and of the Australian bush; and again we have shadowy intimations of a vast spectral world of the unknown in the very air about us—this time handled with much greater power and vitality than in *Zanoni*. One of the two great incantation passages, where the hero is driven by a luminous evil spirit to rise at night in his sleep, take a strange Egyptian wand, and evoke nameless presences in the haunted and mausoleum-facing pavilion of a famous Renaissance

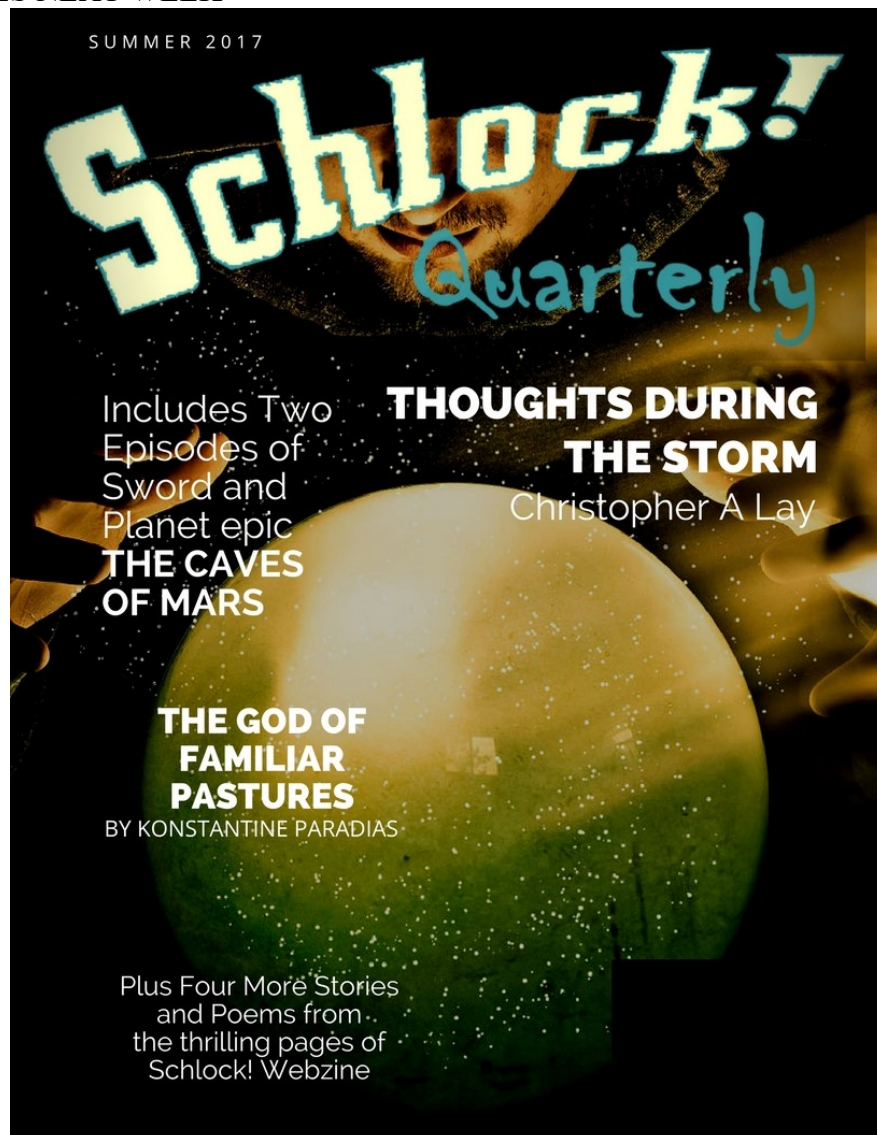
alchemist, truly stands among the major terror scenes of literature. Just enough is suggested, and just little enough is told. Unknown words are twice dictated to the sleep-walker, and as he repeats them the ground trembles, and all the dogs of the countryside begin to bay at half-seen amorphous shadows that stalk athwart the moonlight. When a third set of unknown words is prompted, the sleep-walker's spirit suddenly rebels at uttering them, as if the soul could recognise ultimate abysmal horrors concealed from the mind; and at last an apparition of an absent sweetheart and good angel breaks the malign spell. This fragment well illustrates how far Lord Lytton was capable of progressing beyond his usual pomp and stock romance toward that crystalline essence of artistic fear which belongs to the domain of poetry. In describing certain details of incantations, Lytton was greatly indebted to his amusingly serious occult studies, in the course of which he came in touch with that odd French scholar and cabbalist Alphonse-Louis Constant ("Eliphas Lévi"), who claimed to possess the secrets of ancient magic, and to have evoked the spectre of the old Grecian wizard Apollonius of Tyana, who lived in Nero's time.

The romantic, semi-Gothic, quasi-moral tradition here represented was carried far down the nineteenth century by such authors as Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, Thomas Preskett Prest with his famous *Varney, the Vampyre* (1847), Wilkie Collins, the late Sir H. Rider Haggard (whose *She* is really remarkably good), Sir A. Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, and Robert Louis Stevenson—the latter of whom, despite an atrocious tendency toward jaunty mannerisms, created permanent classics in "*Markheim*", "*The Body-Snatcher*", and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Indeed, we may say that this school still survives; for to it clearly belong such of our contemporary horror-tales as specialise in events rather than atmospheric details, address the intellect rather than the impressionistic imagination, cultivate a luminous glamour rather than a malign tensivity or psychological verisimilitude, and take a definite stand in sympathy with mankind and its welfare. It has its undeniable strength, and because of its "human element" commands a wider audience than does the sheer artistic nightmare. If not quite so potent as the latter, it is because a diluted product can never achieve the intensity of a concentrated essence.

Quite alone both as a novel and as a piece of terror-literature stands the famous *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, with its mad vista of bleak, windswept Yorkshire moors and the violent, distorted lives they foster. Though primarily a tale of life, and of human passions in agony and conflict, its epically cosmic setting affords room for horror of the most spiritual sort. Heathcliff, the modified Byronic villain-hero, is a strange dark waif found in the streets as a small child and speaking only a strange gibberish till adopted by the family he ultimately ruins. That he is in truth a diabolic spirit rather than a human being is more than once suggested, and the unreal is further approached in the experience of the visitor who encounters a plaintive child-ghost at a bough-brushed upper window. Between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw is a tie deeper and more terrible than human love. After her death he twice disturbs her grave, and is haunted by an impalpable presence which can be nothing less than her spirit. The spirit enters his life more and more, and at last he becomes confident of some imminent mystical reunion. He says he feels a strange change approaching, and ceases to take nourishment. At night he either walks abroad or opens the casement by his bed. When he dies the casement is still swinging open to the pouring rain, and a queer smile pervades the stiffened face. They bury him in a grave beside the mound he has haunted for eighteen years, and small shepherd boys say that he yet walks with his Catherine in the churchyard and on the moor when it rains. Their faces, too, are sometimes seen on rainy nights behind that upper casement at *Wuthering Heights*. Miss Brontë's eerie terror is no mere Gothic echo, but a tense expression of man's shuddering reaction to the unknown. In this respect, *Wuthering*

Heights becomes the symbol of a literary transition, and marks the growth of a new and sounder school.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

THE YOUNG WARLORDS by Gavin Chappell

Gerald and Hogback the ogre strode grimly out into the fortress courtyard. Hogback was spattered with fresh blood. As they appeared in daylight, Percy approached them, frowning uncertainly.

‘What did you find in there?’ he asked.

Gerald shuddered, shook his head, and refused to explain. Indicating the prisoners, he said, ‘Hogback, you know what to do.’

Hogback barked orders at the freed slaves guarding the prisoners, using a harsh-sounding language that Percy assumed was Ogrish. With terrifying speed, the ogres hustled the prisoners to a multiple gallows that stood at one end of the yard. In moments, the ogre chieftain was hanging from the first noose, his mighty limbs twitching as he swung helplessly. As the second ogre prisoner was noosed, Percy turned to Gerald.

‘Weren’t they only obeying orders?’ he said ironically.

‘They’re ogres, Percy,’ Gerald said darkly. ‘We can’t show mercy to ogres.’

‘Yeah? What about your mate, Hogback?’ Percy asked. ‘He’s an ogre.’

Gerald didn’t answer but he looked troubled. Percy stared worriedly at his friend. What had Gerald seen inside the fortress keep? Before he could ask, Hogback returned from the execution. Three of the ogres were swinging from the gallows and their ex-slaves were even now dragging another forward.

‘So perish all our enemies, Liberator,’ Hogback rumbled.

Gerald rubbed his face tiredly. He beckoned his own troops to his side. Percy and the others gathered round him. Hogback stood at his side, face impassive, brows beetling, tusks gleaming.

‘Tomorrow we ride north,’ Gerald told them. ‘We’re heading deep into ogre country. Hogback and his men are going to the Mountain of Light, where their king, Cragface, has his base.’

‘What’s this Mountain of Light?’ asked Baylor, scratching beneath his eye-patch.

‘It’s a vast mountain of carbuncles,’ Gerald told him. ‘Cragface has made himself rich by controlling it.’

‘In former days,’ Hogback broke in, ‘the ogres lived in tribes, without a king, cut off from menfolk by towering, impassable mountains. Only one pass led through into the lands of menfolk, and we seldom went that way for we had all we needed amongst our mountains. Then we learnt we could gain piquant viands by trading the glow-gems with menfolk.’

‘War flared between the tribes, with each struggling to control the quarries. Cragface’s tribe, the Xantai Yao, won the tribal war after he seized the Mountain of Light from the priesthood.’

In former times, we worshipped it as a god, but now Cragface guts it to enrich himself. He has enslaved all other tribes and now he rules as a tyrant, his strength based on a vast treasury of carbuncles in his palace. When they will not buy the gems at the prices he demands, he wars with the menfolk.'

Percy was worried by Gerald. He seemed to be taking life all too seriously for a change and Percy didn't like it. It just wasn't like his old friend. As they settled in for the night, posting guards on the fortress walls and finding quarters within the massive buildings, Percy kept an eye on Gerald. His old friend had changed. He said as much to Brian and Norman, sitting with them in the corner of the barracks block that they had chosen as a sleeping place.

'I think he saw something nasty in the outhouse,' said Norman.

'Yeah,' said Brian. 'When he went in that place with the ogre guy. He came out looking... sick.'

Percy looked across the barracks to where Gerald was talking earnestly to Hogback, while Lord Gurak and Lady Candida hovered close by.

'Gerald talks about hating ogres,' he observed, 'and yet he's getting awfully pally with this Hogback.'

Norman shrugged. 'The ogre knows the place. I think he's planning the campaign with Gurak and Lady Candida.' Percy grunted, and Norman shrugged again. 'They know a lot more about fighting a war than we do,' he pointed out.

'I say we just charge across the country slaughtering the bastards,' said Brian with an uncaring laugh.

'A good way to get ourselves killed,' Percy said. 'This just isn't fun anymore. We had a laugh before, wandering about and getting in trouble. But now this is serious. This is war.' He looked closely at them both. 'We could all wind up dead.'

On the far side of the room, Gerald's own death was far from his mind.

'We'll ride down this valley,' he was saying, indicating a crudely drawn map provided by Hogback, 'and attack Cragface's palace from here. Then...'

'What about the high ground?' Lord Gurak asked, taking the map and examining it. 'If we charge in so recklessly, Cragface could send his forces to cut us off by issuing from any of these side valleys.' He pointed at several gorges that led into the main valley, the Valley of the Winds, Hogback had called it.

Gerald bristled. Again, the ageing adventurer challenged his authority. Hadn't he learned his lesson? The black eye was not yet fading from Gurak's face.

'What he says is true,' Hogback growled. 'If Cragface's forces came down behind us, the only way to escape would be across the Subana Levels and over the Heights of Mohapet.'

Gerald shook his head in irritation. 'Where are these places?' he demanded. Hogback showed him on the map; a barren area of gravel and sand that stretched southwards, then high hills with narrow tracks leading over them, coming out some way to the south of Ogres' Gate. Hogback confessed that it was a journey from which few ogres had ever returned. 'Alright then,' Gerald said. 'That's the risk we run if we go straight down the Valley of the Winds, but what if we go through these side valleys? I can see one that will lead us out not far from the Mountain of Light.'

Lady Candida nodded. 'I see it too,' she said in a soft voice. 'It will be hard-going and it will take longer than heading straight down the Valley. But if we keep to this area... Chief Hogback, how densely inhabited is it?'

Hogback shook his head. 'It is deserted,' he said. 'But we will have to bring water. There is none in those bleak valleys.'

'Then we'll go that way,' said Gerald decisively. 'I was hoping to burn a few ogre settlements on the way. But what matters is that we attack Cragface's palace.'

'And if we plunder his treasury,' Lord Gurak said, placing the map in his own backpack, 'we will have no problem repaying Duke Dalimer the money he advanced us to recruit these hirelings.'

The next day they set out from the fortress, the humans mounted on horses, Hogback and his fellow ex-slaves riding the war-bison that they had liberated from the stables. They left the fortress burning, its walls breached in several places. 'So our enemies cannot retake it and cut off our retreat,' Hogback explained. As he rode out of the blazing courtyard, Gerald caught a glimpse of the gallows and the massive ogre bodies that swung limply from it. Crows circled above, most deterred by the presence of the warriors and now by the flames now licking up around the buildings, but some brave enough to swoop down into the smoke and peck at the corpses.

The enlarged free company rode for some miles down the Valley of the Winds, seeing nothing but a few deserted ogre settlements among the rocks. Hogback explained that war had laid waste this area many times over. By the morning of the second day they reached the end of a winding path that led into the crags on the northern side of the valley.

Gerald saw a small notch in the mountain wall above. As they rode up and up through stunted thorn forests and between slopes of scree where mountain goats nibbled at virulent orange lichens, this notch gradually grew larger until it resolved itself into a narrow pass that led between two mighty peaks.

'This is our secret path to the ogre capital,' he explained to Percy, who had complained about feeling "out of the loop" now that Gerald had his fine ogre friends. 'We're going to follow it through the mountains and come out near the Mountain of Light.' He directed everyone to fill their water skins at a small stream that tumbled through the rocks. 'There won't be any water further ahead,' he commented.

Buzzards coasted on the thermals above the cliffs, black dots against the brilliant blue skies. The riders plodded down the narrow pass as the lowering walls of rock mounted on either side. Percy rode beside Brian, who was still clutching the free company's standard, and Norman, who seemed depressed by the whole business. As they proceeded, Percy knew a rising sense of dread. Where were they going? Into a war zone, by all accounts. And they were travelling through increasingly hostile country. If the ogres didn't get them then the lack of water must.

That night they camped beside a muddy pool on the valley floor, and continued riding early in the morning. Percy noticed that now no stream ran down the bottom of the pass, and the rocky terrain around them was bleak and barren. On they rode and the sun beat down. Percy saw more buzzards. They seemed to be following the free company.

Towards the end of the fourth day without water, with supplies running low, they crossed a ridgeline and saw that from here on the pass wound downwards. Percy's mouth was parched, and his water skin was almost empty. He was starving hungry as well, something he'd said so many times before back home on boring old privet-hedged pebble-dashed suburban Planet Earth without ever realising what it really meant.

He hoped that they were heading down into more friendly country. It certainly seemed so as they turned a corner and saw spots of greenery dotted about the rocky gorge ahead. Goats scampered up the rocks, frightened by the sudden appearance of mounted men and ogres. But also moving—loping at a fast pace across the valley towards a couple of stone huts—was a big man; no, an ogre, Percy realised almost at once. Clad in goatskins and little else, he carried a crook. It seemed he was a goatherd.

'Stop him,' Gerald commanded, and four ogre scouts thundered down the valley, their war-bison kicking up clouds of dust. Riding up close, the first scout plunged his lance into the goatherd's back. The fleeing ogre flung up his huge arms, gave a strangled cry, and collapsed dead into the dust.

But the cry, and the noise of the bison, had attracted attention. Two or three ogres broke from the cover of the huts and ran down the pass, shouting, 'Rebels! Rebels!'

'They go to warn Cragface,' Hogback roared. 'They're Xantai Yao! Pursue them!'

'They're just poor people,' Norman exclaimed. 'They can't put up a fight! It's cruel.'

But no one reacted, although Percy heard Norman's words and secretly agreed with them as more ogre bison-riders thundered down the pass. One of the fleeing figures was smaller than the rest, almost human sized. A child? Percy wondered dully as he saw it ridden down. He looked at Gerald who sat his horse with a stern expression on his face. Ogres, he thought.

Hogback's men dragged the dead goatherd and his fellow hut-dwellers at their bison's tails. Hogback gave orders for the corpses to be prepared for cooking.

'You've got to be joking!' Percy said, feeling nauseous as two ogres produced hatchets and began hacking up the corpses. 'This is disgusting!'

Gerald shook his head. 'It makes sense,' he said harshly. 'Supplies are getting low. Fresh meat will do us good.'

That evening, Percy watched in horror as the ogres shared the meat amongst themselves. After a while, the hungrier of the humans accepted the ogres' repeated offers of food.

Percy went with Norman and Brian up the slope to see if he could bring down any goats. The result was wasted efforts, humiliation, and physical pain as they tried to pursue the agile creatures through the deepening twilight.

'Fuck this,' Brian gasped eventually. 'I'm hungrier now than when we started.'

Norman looked back down the valley. The fires of the camp were visible, and occasionally large dark figures could be seen lumbering past them. Gerald was back there, with his new friend Hogback. He'd not been too fussy to eat ogre.

'Should we go back and...?'

'See if they've got any meat left?' Percy completed the sentence with a feeling of resignation. 'Come on, then.'

The next morning, feeling better fed than they had in days, the free company set out again. Buzzards circled the campsite until the riders were gone, before swooping down to peck at the abandoned ogre carcasses. Gerald rode alongside Hogback, deep in thought.

He'd done some pretty grim things since being so mysteriously transported to this world, but eating ogre-meat was scraping the bottom of the proverbial. It had filled a hole, as they say, but it had left him wondering... What was he becoming? Since coming here, with the sworn intent of avenging himself on the inhabitants, he had befriended some and eaten others.

'We are now no more than a day's ride from the Mountain of Light,' Hogback announced.

Gerald looked up from his grim reverie. 'Already?' It seemed surprisingly soon, but then he thought about the journey so far. It also seemed like forever since they'd left the ogre fortress.

Hogback gestured grandly ahead of them as the entire cavalcade rode out of the gorge onto a narrow spur of rock that wound through the early morning haze towards a broad valley, green and fertile. On the far side, diametrically opposite them, was a vast mountain that shone like the sun.

'The Mountain of Light,' he rumbled. 'The sacred peak of my people – and the foundation of King Cragface's unjust rule.'

Gurak's old friend Baylor was staring in amazement clear in his single eye. 'There must be more carbuncles in that mountain than in the rest of the world...' he muttered. 'No free company has ever got this far into ogre country... We're rich!'

‘Not yet,’ Lord Gurak said darkly. ‘We still have to get there. And I think we’ll encounter greater opposition than a few ill-clad goatherds.’

Baylor shrugged. ‘Tasty enough,’ Gerald heard him mutter.

‘What’s that?’ Lady Candida asked suddenly. Gerald followed her pointing finger and saw, faraway, down on the floor of the broad, fertile valley, a long column of riders heading for the mountains south of their own position.

Hogback shaded his eyes and stared at the column for a long time. ‘It’s surely King Cragface’s troops,’ he said. ‘Making for the Valley of the Winds. Where are they going?’

‘Perhaps they heard about us,’ Percy said. ‘Maybe they’re going to hunt us down and kill us for what we’ve done.’

‘They’re going the wrong way to do that,’ said Lady Candida calmly. ‘We would have met them if we’d followed the Valley of the Winds.’

Gerald whooped. ‘Do you know what this means?’ he asked. ‘They’ve left the palace defenceless!’

‘At the worst undermanned,’ Lord Gurak commented.

Gerald gave him a suspicious look. Gurak had been less full of himself since their drunken brawl, but he seemed to be making subtle attempts undermine him. Or was he just being paranoid? God, what was he turning into?

‘Hogback, how do we get down off this mountain?’ he asked. ‘We’re going down there straightaway. We’ll strike while the iron’s hot. While they’re defenceless. When Cragface comes back to his palace he won’t know what’s hit it.’

Under Hogback’s direction, they rode along the spur, then down an unstable slope of scree, and through a devil’s playground of rocks and boulders. At the far end was a stunted forest of thorn bushes. Gerald noticed that the buzzards were following them again.

‘How do we get through that?’ he demanded, indicating the thorn trees.

Hogback gave him a puzzled look. ‘Like this,’ he said, and urged his war-bison forward. Gerald watched as he reached the thorn forest and smashed his way through it.

‘That’s all very well!’ he called, ‘but we’re not all ogres...’ But Hogback was out of earshot.

‘D’oh, Gerald,’ said Percy. ‘Now he’s smashed down those thorns, we can follow.’

Gerald felt embarrassed. ‘Good point,’ he conceded.

The ogres rode through the seemingly impenetrable thorn forest on their thick-skinned bison, penetrating it quite successfully. After them rode the humans. The thorn forest, such as it was, stretched on for several miles, but it gave way before the ogre advance, leaving a wasteland of broken branches through which the humans picked their way on their horses.

Finally the thorns gave way to open fields, to Gerald's surprise. Somehow he didn't expect the ogres to have agriculture, even though he got on pretty well with Hogback. Since he himself couldn't so much as raise a Venus flytrap without it withering and dying for no readily apparent reason, he couldn't believe these brutal morons were able to raise crops. But they seemed to be growing oats or something quite successfully. He supposed that a horde of humans and rebel ogres trampling through it on horse- and bison-back wouldn't help, though. But he really hadn't expected anything so civilised from Hogback's people. Hogback himself was okay, apart from cannibalism and all that kind of thing. Gerald didn't think he was a cannibal, personally; eating ogres wasn't cannibalism, was it? Not if you weren't an ogre. But ogres eating ogres; that was just fucking wrong.

Still, the more ogres dead, the better.

The fields gave way to more farmland, and well-maintained woods. By Gerald's estimate they were getting on for halfway across the broad valley he'd seen from the mountain spur. The Mountain of Light was visible on the horizon, gleaming against the bright blue sky.

'Which way to the king's palace?' Gerald asked Hogback.

Hogback looked down at him from his bison-back. 'That way,' he said. 'We will meet some resistance. My counsel is that we send scouts up ahead.'

Gerald shrugged. 'Yeah, okay,' he said. 'If you think so.'

'You are our leader, Liberator,' Hogback said reprovingly. 'You give the order.'

And Gerald gave the order. It should be his decision whether or not he sent scouts ahead, but he realised that Hogback's advice was probably worth listening to. So a mixed group of ogres and menfolk – as the ogres called Gerald's people – rode ahead through the farmland.

Towards the end of the day, the walls of a palace complex were visible on the horizon, in the foothills of the glittering Mountain of Light.

As they rode through the farmland, riders appeared on the slopes ahead. Ogres on war-bison. Screaming war-cries, they rode towards the free company.

Gerald's pulse quickened as more appeared on either horizon. They rode down in a crescent, a pincer that seemed destined to close pinchingly on Gerald's own warriors. The attacking ogres were rapidly closing around his troops.

'What do we do?' he asked Hogback, but the ogre kicked his war-bison into a charge, thundering suicidally towards the middle of the crescent as it spread out to encircle them. 'What the fuck do we do?' he yelled after him.

'Come on, Gerald!' Percy yelled, riding past him. 'You've heard the Doors. We gotta break on through to the other side!' He glared at Gerald, his eyes red with the dust. 'Or we're fucking dead! No more special English lessons for us, Gerald! No more detentions after school for not doing homework! No more homework...!' He rode on, still shouting.

Gerald shouted orders. The column spread out, meeting the closing crescent head on, refusing to be encircled. Then it was chaos as all strategy collapsed into a confusion of individual combats. Gerald found himself fighting a leering ogre on the back of a massive bison. Blade clashed on blade. The air was electric. Gerald was terrified but exultant. The bison was huge but relatively slow; Gerald's horse a savage little terrier in comparison. Then Gerald found himself past the ogre and his mount, taking time to hack at the bison's back legs, cutting its hamstrings. It collapsed in the dust and Gerald rode back as the ogre fell from the saddle. Shaking his head in bewilderment, the ogre rose – and Gerald's sword bit deep into the warty folds of his neck. He hit the dirt beside his feebly struggling mount while Gerald rode on.

The battlefield was obscured by what looked like thick fog. Gerald realised that it was dust from the pounding hoofs of horses and war-bison. Before he knew what was happening he had ridden out of the fog and was at the edge of a short stretch of fields.

Walls of crude megalithic blocks were visible on the far side, and behind them were buildings constructed in the same way. He had reached the palace complex. A few guards were visible on the walls, but it seemed that most of the garrison remaining after Cragface's mysterious departure were in the battle behind him.

Two of his men galloped past. He recognised them. They were those shaven-headed hillmen with the hand cannon he had noticed, back in Ogres' Gate. They'd not used it yet.

'You still got that cannon?' he shouted. They turned to look at him, and he noticed a family resemblance; he'd guess that they were brothers, or maybe cousins.

'Yes, chief,' said the older one. He was a man in his thirties with a moustache like a seventies porn star.

'Come with me.' Gerald beckoned. 'I've found something for you to use it on.' Exchanging worried glances, they rode after him.

'Set it up here, in these bushes on the edge of the field,' Gerald ordered. 'I'll guard you. Then I want you to break a hole in that wall.'

The two men looked at each other again. 'We got this a long time ago,' the younger one explained. 'A man who owed us money gave it us. We don't use it much. We just keep it because it makes us look tough. It might be dangerous.'

'And we don't have much of the flashpowder left,' added the older man worriedly.

Impatiently, Gerald spat. 'Get it set up,' he told them. 'Bombard that wall, blow me a hole in it, and I'll give you first pickings of the ogre king's treasury.'

'Yes, chief,' said the older man hurriedly. He turned to his companion and together they unloaded the hand cannon from the back of one of their horses. They set it up on a stand, the older cursing and cuffing the younger for his clumsiness. Gerald sat his horse, alternately looking back at the confusion of the battle and across the fields at the walls. Here among the bushes, they were out of sight.

Percy rode up, wild-eyed and blood-stained.

‘There you are!’ he exclaimed. ‘You should be leading us, not hiding in the bushes. Hogback’s leading his ogres...’

Angry at this accusation, Gerald rode out of the bushes towards Percy to explain. There was a boom from behind him as the bombard began. ‘I’m not hiding!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m...’

The rest of his words were blotted out by the ground-shaking thunderclap of an explosion that transformed the bushes into a Roman candle, sending fire and sparks fountaining into the air. Gerald’s horse reared and almost threw him. He struggled to stay mounted.

When he was secure again, he turned and stared at the shell hole that had opened up before him. The smoke was clearing. He could see that the hand cannon had blown itself up. The smoke drifted away completely. To Gerald’s amazement he saw a hole had been blown in the wall itself. The first hit must have been enough to break it down. But the cannon itself had been old and hazardous. The hillmen would never have first pick of the treasury now.

Ogre guards were rushing back and forth like angry ants. Gerald turned back to Percy. ‘Get the men to regroup. We’re going in.’

The morale of the ogre defenders vanished after the unexpected breaching of the wall. As Hogback and Gerald met and began to regroup their forces, the defenders were drawing back. Some were heading towards the palace to stage a last-ditch defence. Others were fleeing towards the slopes of the Mountain of Light. More vanished in the direction of the Valley of the Winds.

The rebel forces rode towards the breach. Defenders pelted them with missiles. Men and ogres fell under the onslaught, but soon the head of the column was breaking through into the complex. For some time, fierce fighting raged in the alleyways between the megalithic palace buildings, but the defenders were divided and demoralised.

Gerald rode into the pillared throne room of the palace followed by Hogback and the others. He surveyed the cold, echoing space with all the arrogance of a conqueror. Cragface’s stone throne stood empty in the centre.

Lord Gurak rode in with Lady Candida trotting behind him.

‘The resistance has subsided,’ he reported. ‘We have control of the palace.’

Hogback ordered his ogres to mount a guard on the walls and to repair the breach. Then he turned to Gerald. ‘From here we can rule the kingdom, Liberator,’ he said. ‘With Cragface’s wealth we can buy the loyalty of the other tribes.’

Gerald didn’t like to think that his friend planned to replace Cragface as ogre tyrant, but he made no comment. ‘Let’s see this treasury, then,’ was all he said.

A search was made and the treasury was located in a vaulted undercroft beneath the throne room itself. It took the efforts of several burly ogres to break open the trapdoor, but when it opened, light sprang out so bright that at first Gerald thought it was another explosion, soundless this time. It was like the appearance of God in some movie; light flooded out,

bleaching the room white, showing up every scar, every wart, every imperfection on the hides of the gathered ogres, the skin of the humans.

Gerald was the first to descend the ladder into the undercroft. Dazzled by the light of the carbuncles piled in heaps all around, he stood for a moment, transfigured by their loveliness. But it was a grim beauty. People had died for these glittering light-gems; ogres and humans. Wars had been fought. Terrible things had been done for their sake.

Still, they were valuable. He would divide them up among his followers soon, as a reward for their help. But he'd keep one for himself.

As Hogback's heavy flat feet flapped down the ladder, Gerald picked up a carbuncle and slipped it into his sock. Though tiny, it was worth a king's ransom, he was sure, so perfect and bright it was. He'd keep that whatever happened.

Hogback reached the bottom of the ladder. Gerald indicated the glittering riches, and said, 'We'll split this up among our followers.'

Hogback turned and shook his head resolutely. 'These gems remain here. This is the foundation of our power. Trade with the menfolk will make us as powerful as Cragface.'

'Trade?' Gerald asked. 'Who with? Duke Dalimer? He's at war with the ogres. And he stands in between you and the rest of the human lands. Or is there another way out of this country except Ogres' Gate?' He wondered if Hogback knew about the Heights of Mohapet.

'That is the only way to leave this land without ascending precipitous mountains. But we'll make peace with the duke, Liberator,' Hogback rumbled reassuringly. 'Re-open the trading channels. He wants carbuncles. There's a demand for them among the menfolk who use them to light their dwellings; we want what he is willing to trade for them.'

'Cragface drove the prices too high, out of greed: he hoarded all these carbuncles. Duke Dalimer had to rely on raiders like your free company to get what he needed, just as Cragface encouraged raids on human lands. But war has impoverished both our peoples. I will negotiate a settlement and trade will flourish again.'

A suspicion crept over Gerald. 'What did the duke trade with the ogres?'

After a short pause Hogback replied. 'Menfolk babes.'

Gerald said nothing but scowled.

'We'll leave the glow-gems under guard,' the ogre added. 'Tomorrow we plan. Tonight we feast.'

That night, ogre slaves waited upon their conquerors. Hogback's ogres and Gerald's men swilled themselves stupid with the fine wines that Cragface had imported from the southern realms of Riparia, stuffed their bellies with choice bison-meat from the king's finest herds. The ogres ate bison as well as riding them, Gerald learned. Their chosen method of slaughter was to drive the creatures into the feasting chamber and, using sharp knives, dismember them still living before the feasters' eyes.

He found this gory cabaret sickening, but he was starving and it didn't stop him from enjoying the exquisite flavour of fresh bison-hump, so soft he could eat it raw. The ogres ate a lot of meat raw at their feasts, he learned from Hogback, but Gerald gave orders for his own men's food to be roasted. He was glad that he'd seen none of the human livestock he had encountered on entering ogre country.

Hogback's revelation in the treasury had left him with a nasty taste in his mouth. He'd known full well that the ogres wanted human babies, some to eat, some to raise as livestock like the ones in the fortress. But he'd thought that only criminals like the Conjuror Kalitkin were so sick as to trade babies with the ogres. Otherwise, he'd thought, the ogres had had to carry out raids, like the one on the farmhouse whose aftermath he had seen the other day.

The news that Duke Dalimer had traded babies for carbuncles had hit Gerald hard. He'd thought that the war with the ogres must have started because the ogres had been raiding human settlements. But it seemed that it was because Cragface was charging too much. Grimly Gerald wondered what the exchange rate was; how many babies to the carbuncle.

Hogback spent the next few days getting the palace organised and planning the oncoming trade negotiations with Duke Dalimer. The palace was in a state of military readiness for attack from rebel tribes or a returning Cragface. Meanwhile, the buzzards feasted on the corpses of the slain, which had been left in the field where they fell.

Despite all this preparation, the eventual assault came as a shock. They were sitting down to eat in the cavernous throne room of the palace when an ogre guard lumbered in, and lurched to a halt on the stone floor.

'Chieftain!' he bellowed. Hogback dropped the ox bone he was gnawing and glared.

'What is it, guard?' he rumbled. 'It had better be good, for you to interrupt our feasting.'

'The forces of Cragface have been sighted, chieftain,' the ogre replied urgently. 'They are camped at the entrance to the Valley of the Winds and they have sent troops riding forward.'

Hogback rose, sending the table flying, spilling food and drink across the stone floor.

'To arms!' he boomed. 'To arms! We'll defend this palace to the last ogre!'

A quarter of an hour later, Gerald was standing on the parapet, a few yards away from the breach made by his men, which had been crudely filled in with rubble. He could just about see the distant camp in the lea of the mountains.

Riding towards them across the plain (which although it was night-time was lit as bright as day by the shining mountain), was a large contingent of ogre bison-riders. A group of human riders trotted through the gate and galloped towards the larger force. They were led by Lord Gurak and under orders to act as skirmishers.

Hogback was down in the courtyard below, with the heavy cavalry of bison-riders, giving them a rousing speech.

Percy joined Gerald. 'We didn't come here to get mixed up in politics,' he said angrily.

Gerald frowned at him. 'What are you talking about?'

'All this,' Percy replied, indicating the incipient battlefield before them. 'We're in the middle of a civil war. We only came here to fight the ogres and to nick their glow-gems.'

'Hogback won't let the gems go,' Gerald replied. 'I told you that, Percy. They're the basis of his power. He'll reward us when he's king.'

'That could take a long time,' said Percy. He gestured towards the distant camp. 'I don't know if you've noticed, Gerald, but we're outnumbered. Cragface is guarding the pass, and he seems to have more ogres than he had when he rode away.'

'So?' Gerald asked contemptuously.

'So I wonder if the other tribes have decided to support Cragface and not Hogback. I wonder if Hogback's ever going to be king,' Percy replied. 'I wonder if we should get out while the going is good.'

Before he could say any more, Hogback joined them on the parapet. Down below, the bison-riders were issuing through the gate.

'It'll be a good fight, ha?' he said boisterously, clapping Gerald on the back and almost knocking the breath out of him. 'We fight Cragface. I'll kill him. This land will be ours. I'll be king of the ogres. You'll both be well rewarded.'

Neither Gerald nor Percy answered.

Down in the plain, the skirmishers engaged the ogre troop despatched by Cragface. It was too far away for the sound of battle to carry but Gerald saw spears and swords glitter in the light of the mountain behind them. Again and again Lord Gurak led attacks on the ogre troops, but the bison-riders rode on undeterred.

They rode straight into the advancing troop sent by Hogback.

Cragface's forces smashed through the rebel line and split the troop in two. The skirmishers came back in on either flank but they were soon beaten off. The rebel ogres tried to rally but to no avail. Hogback watched grimly as out on the plain the tiny figures fought and died, illuminated ghastly by the glimmering light of the mountain.

'Sound the retreat,' he shouted at last.

An ogre down in the courtyard began to blow the signal on his ox-horn. Soon the rebel ogres and the human skirmishers were retreating. Cragface's forces raced after them, cutting them down as they fled.

‘We’ll take advantage of these walls,’ Hogback said darkly. ‘It will be a long siege; but our supplies are many. Maybe the other tribes will come to our aid.’

But as Cragface’s ogres dug in amid the fields, reinforced by troops sent down from the pass, and the surviving rebels shored up the defences and repaired for a long siege, dissension was brewing within the walls. The following evening, after a tense day of awful anticipation, Gerald found himself visited in his chambers by a small, discontented group.

When they entered, he was lying on a couch, on his front since he still found it painful to sit down after all the recent riding, and he rose hurriedly. Lord Gurak was there, his arm in a sling and a bandage on his head. Baylor was with him, and he had also suffered wounds in the skirmish, though not as severe. Lady Candida accompanied them. She had not been in the fighting and she looked her usual reserved self. Not entirely to Gerald’s surprise, Percy, Brian and Norman were there too.

‘We will die here,’ Lady Candida announced. ‘If we remain within these walls, we will die.’

Gerald looked at the others. ‘Do you all feel like this?’ he asked.

‘Gerald, they outnumber us,’ Percy said wearily. ‘Hogback’s hoping the other tribes will join us but I reckon they’re out there, fighting for Cragface. We’re on our own.’

‘And it’s not our fight,’ added Norman.

‘We came here to raid the ogres, not become embroiled in their politics,’ added Lord Gurak. ‘It was convenient to ally ourselves with Hogback. But we came here for carbuncles, if we came here for anything.’

‘I came here to kill ogres,’ said Gerald. ‘I’m doing that.’

‘You’ve made friends with them,’ Percy exclaimed. ‘You’ve spent more time with your big chum Hogback than with the rest of us.’

‘And he won’t share out the carbuncles that we won by fighting for him,’ said Lord Gurak.

‘We owe Duke Dalimer for the money he advanced us to raise troops,’ Lady Candida added. ‘If we don’t get our share, we will be imprisoned as debtors when we return to civilisation. And I had so hope that we would reach Trinovant in time for the season.’ She sighed forlornly. ‘I hoped to find myself a husband.’

Gerald remembered the carbuncle he had slipped into his sock. It was in there now, glowing to itself. He was glad its light didn’t show through his shoe. It was like a carbuncle of guilt.

‘Hogback wants those carbuncles,’ he said. ‘They’re the basis of his power. When he defeats Cragface and takes over, he’ll use them to trade with Duke Dalimer.’ He forbore from saying what that trade would consist of; he didn’t like to think about it. ‘Then we’ll be rewarded.’

Percy shook his head impatiently. ‘Come off it, Gerald,’ he said. ‘Lady Candida’s right. We’ll die if we remain here. We’re not backing a winner in Hogback. He’s gambled and lost. Cragface will starve us out.’

‘What are you suggesting?’ Gerald asked. ‘We run out on him? We’re under siege, you know. What then, go back to the duke and let him lock us up?’

‘That treasury is poorly guarded,’ said Baylor. ‘Hogback is concentrating his forces on the walls...’

‘You’re not saying...’ Gerald began.

‘We steal the carbuncles,’ Percy finished. ‘Come on, Gerald. We were at the thieves’ guild academy. Theft’s not a big deal.’

Gerald considered his doubts about Hogback. What did he owe the ogre? They had been of mutual assistance, but it seemed likely that Hogback was doomed like Percy and the others were saying. He didn’t like the idea of running out on the ogre rebel, though; and anyway, was it even feasible?

‘Hogback won’t forgive treachery, if he finds out what we’re doing,’ he said. ‘And what about the besiegers? Even if we get out of the palace without being stopped by Cragface’s men, how do we get away? They’re controlling the main pass, and the farmland. There’s no way to escape back the way we came, even if we took enough supplies to risk it.’

‘Then we try the other way,’ said Lord Gurak determinedly. ‘Across the Subana Levels and the Heights of Mohapet.’ He produced the map he had taken from Hogback and showed them the route they would have to take; to Gerald it looked like a long and difficult journey, but at least it seemed that the ogre leader was unaware of the route. ‘We have enough men to try a breakout. Then we will have to ride through the mountains until we can escape ogre country. It will be hard...’

‘... but tons better than sitting here waiting for Cragface to break in!’ Percy exclaimed.

‘We’ll do it, then,’ Gerald said at last, with a sigh.

The first part of the operation went well. Lord Gurak, Lady Candida and Baylor left and went to prepare the men to ride out. As they left, Gerald reminded him to keep his preparations from the ogres: they didn’t want Hogback to suspect anything. Then the rest of them made their way to the throne room and the treasury entrance. Luckily, Hogback was out on the walls, directing the defence.

Two ogres stood on guard over the broken hatch. They frowned as Gerald marched up to them, followed by the others.

‘Hogback wants your presence on the wall,’ he snapped.

The two ogres looked at each other, brows beetling. ‘Our orders were to remain here,’ the first one objected.

‘New orders,’ Gerald snapped. ‘We’ll guard this position. Your presence is required on the walls. Hogback’s orders. Check with him.’

‘Don’t like it,’ said the ogre guard doubtfully, but he led his companion from the throne room.

‘We did it!’ said Percy. ‘I thought they were going to argue.’

‘Shut up and get down there,’ Gerald said, pointing at the hatch. ‘Grab as much as you can. We’ve only got so much time before the ogres work out what’s going on.’

They descended into the treasury while Gerald remained on watch. It was just like being back at home, on those lazy Sunday afternoons when him and his mates went trespassing on private property and one of them stayed outside looking out for the cops: ‘keeping dixies’ they called it.

‘Hurry up!’ he hissed urgently. ‘We’ve got to get moving!’

‘We’re going as fast as we can!’ Percy’s muffled voice floated up.

Gerald sighed, and paced up and down. How long were they going to take? They would have to grab as many glow-gems as they could. God knew how many they would need to be able to pay back Duke Dalimer. Even assuming they could get past the lines of besiegers and escape through the Subana Levels. He wished his friends would hurry.

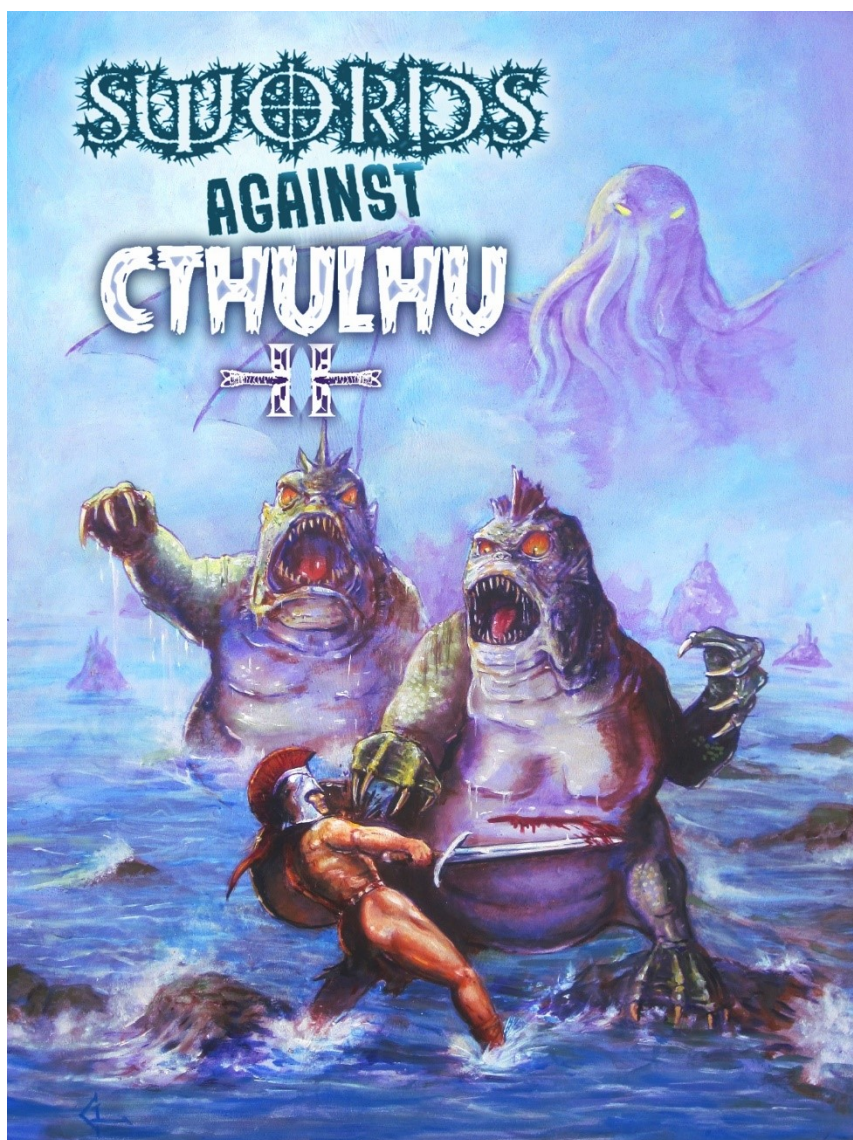
He heard a heavy tread from outside. Cold sweat broke out on his brow. The doors flung open and Hogback swaggered through the doorway, flanked by the two guards, a look of angry confusion on his face.

‘What is going on here?’ he demanded. ‘Liberator: explain! Why did you send the treasury guards away on a pretext?’ His great face twisted with suspicion and he bared his tusks. ‘Do you plan to betray me?’

Gerald took a deep breath. There was only one thing for it. Hogback had proved his superhuman strength time after time, and he had two companions just as strong. Fighting him would be suicide.

Gerald drew his sword.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Thirty-Two

Yamir studied Tu Hit closely for many long moments. The captain of the “Reliant” said nothing. He chose to take in Tu Hit’s appearance silently.

Tu Hit, for his part, stood before Yamir without speaking or raising his head. He had caught but a single glance of the man as he was ushered into Yamir’s cabin for this private interrogation. The crewman who brought Tu Hit here had pushed Tu Hit through the door, then stood outside.

Tu Hit was alone with Yamir.

Yamir was a stocky man, with muscular fingers and grey, tightly curled hair. He wore robes, and sat squarely upon a chair of wood and leather—a luxury thing, that, out among the asteroids. All this Tu Hit had swiftly seen, in that instant before he lowered his eyes.

And he stood before Yamir, silent and waiting to hear what the man would say.

“Who are you?” came the question.

“I am Tu Hit,” he answered, without raising his head. “Pilot of the “Grand Marquis”.”

“And you knew Turhan Mot?”

“Aye.”

“Raise your head and look at me. Let me see your face when you talk.”

“Yes,” Tu Hit answered.

He raised his head. Yamir studied him intently.

“How did you know Turhan Mot?”

“He was captain of the ship, I was pilot,” Tu Hit answered.

“Ah. I see. So you know him well.”

“In his capacity as captain of the ship I piloted, yes.”

“Where is he now?” Yamir asked.

“I do not know,” Tu Hit answered.

“He is not with his ship, though his pilot stays?”

“That is so.”

“And when did he leave his ship?” Yamir asked.

“Turhan Mot left his command, please it him to do so, at Ship’s Clock twelve hundred thirty-six hours...”

Yamir waved an impatient hand. He scowled at Tu Hit.

“Don’t be coy with me, idiot,” he spat.

“Give me plain answers,” Yamir said. “It will be less trouble for me to kill you than to put up with any games.”

Yamir considered the man before him closely. Was he protecting Turhan Mot? Would he lie for Turhan Mot? Where were his loyalties, if he had any at all?

“No,” Yamir decided at last. Tu Hit was not one given naturally to deceit. The only cunning he knew was the cunning of reticence. But that forced the interrogator to be even more cunning, even more precise in his questions. A tedious process, one demanding far too much time and trouble for Yamir. He sometimes preferred the outright liar over those who were scrupulous, but parsimonious, with the truth. The liars are relatively easy to catch in the inconsistency of their lies, but one who tells ‘only the truth, and nothing but the truth’ cannot so tripped up, while also having the indisputable defence that they were only telling the truth, when further cross-examined about the misleading nature of their earlier answers.

“Now think, idiot,” Yamir said, finally, and glaring hard at Tu Hit.

“The man abandoned you. He led us all on this folly, and then, even before the battle is engaged, he flees, making cowards of you all who served under him. He is not your friend. He abandoned you, and he abandoned the “Grand Marquis”. You have no reason to protect him. Just tell me the truth, and plainly, and all will go well for you. Lie to me or try my patience, and you will be dead before a single heartbeat has passed.”

Yamir moved the sleeve of his robe to reveal a laser pistol near his hand.

“Now. When did Turhan Mot leave his ship? Speak. And feel free to speak freely.”

Yamir settled himself into his chair.

Tu Hit had of course already considered all the things that Yamir had spoken of. He’d spent many long and fruitless hours asking himself those very questions, and had long since concluded that his loyalty was to the “Grand Marquis” herself.

He’d been born between the asteroids, the child of two parents who sold him for two cases of real Earth-brewed beer, a rare thing out here, between Jupiter and Mars. After that, he’d spent his formative years, shunted from one trading ship to the next, earning his keep with menial chores, until he found relief from the endless beatings and drudgery by joining up with a band of Scroungers he met at one of the more remote outposts among the asteroids.

At first the lawlessness was exhilarating to him, but in time he lost his taste for it. And it was then that he had joined up with the “Grand Marquis”, first as a flight deck mechanic and then,

finally, the ship's pilot. His loyalty, he had decided long ago, was to the ship. The "Grand Marquis" had given him the only real loyalty he had ever known. It gave him shelter and fed him, expecting only that he do his job and do it well. Every other master he had ever known had been arbitrary in handing out both rewards and punishments. But the ship, the "Grand Marquis" herself, had never been but fair to him, giving back exactly that which had been promised.

"With permission, I shall so speak," Tu Hit said.

Yamir responded with an impatient gesture.

"To his credit, Turhan Mot did seek to engage, at beginning. But he was confounded by a madman who attacked. This madman..."

"Madman?" Yamir smiled.

"Of his own crew?" he asked.

"Oh, no. They attacked us. I should have said two madmen, but the one, the small one, seemed most deadly. It was he who led this insane attack. The other seemed... I expect he was but following the smaller man.

"Even as the great Turhan Mot was sending our own fleet of fighter ships to battle against the "Bellerophon", these two madmen flew in and landed their ships upon our flight deck."

Yamir leaned forward in his chair.

"They flew against Turhan Mot's own fleet?" he demanded, astonished.

"Aye... that was why we did not know how to respond... it was absurd..."

"Absurd, indeed. Even ridiculous," Yamir agreed. "You are quite right. Only madmen would try such an idiotic, such a suicidal thing."

"And in the seconds we hesitated," Tu Hit offered, "They'd flown past our guns and landed upon our flight deck."

"These ships they flew. Tell me about them. What were they?"

"They were small interplanetary transport ships. Two of them."

"And Turhan Mot did not know these men?"

"Tu Hit begs to answer he believes Turhan Mot did have the knowing of this one man, if not the other."

"Tell us," Yamir said. "Tell us all you saw."

“They flew in on their ships. So small they were and so outrageous their attack that we hardly understood what we were seeing. And then they landed on our flight deck, destroying all. They killed the flight crews, and destroyed the ships that had not yet taken off.

“And then they killed their way to the bridge, where the great Turhan Mot was commanding his forces...”

“These men. Describe them,” Yamir demanded.

“The one was taller than the other, and by several inches. He wore a great beard upon his face. The other was smaller. Perhaps he was six feet tall. He had no beard. He killed like a machine kills.”

“And their ships,” Yamir asked. Did you not read their numbers?”

“Yes, yes, of course. We recorded them,” Tu Hit answered.

Yamir gave a gesture. “A pity we can’t recover those numbers from the wreckage of the “Grand Marquis”, he said. “But perhaps you could remember them?”

“Not wholly,” Tu Hit replied. “But the one ship, the smaller ship of the two, was of an ‘O’ series.

“‘O’?” Yamir replied. “Yes?”

“It was ‘O’ dash eight... one... Tu Hit faltered.

“Thank you,” Yamir said, blandly. Yes. He recognized the number. O8-111A. The ship belonging to that man who had thwarted Turhan Mot before, at the Interplanetary Station 3. Carter Ward. Yamir’s face let out no clue of his feelings. Inwardly, he smiled.

“Continue with your story,” he said to Tu Hit.

Tu Hit complied.

“The two men brought explosives,” he said. “And they blasted the hatch to the bridge. And from there, the great Turhan Mot and his second in command, Mokem Bet, made his retreat in an escape pod...”

Yamir waved a hand.

Tu Hit stopped speaking.

“And did you see Turhan Mot after that?” Yamir asked.

“No,” Tu Hit answered.

“Then you have told me enough for now. Go to the door, and have them take you to the brig. I might have more questions to ask of you later.”

Tu Hit did as Yamir bade him, and Yamir was alone to consider his impressions. Turhan Mot's previously inexplicable absence from the battlefield was, finally, explained. But though his absence was explained, his cowardice was not.

For even if it were a murderous madman come after him, what kind of commander is it who abandons his crew and his ship?

Well, there it was. Horst Dal would not be getting back the debt Turhan Mot owed him, a debt he promised to repay with a very tangible bonus, after the sack and capture of Callisto.

This was news that, undoubtedly, Turhan Mot would not take the trouble, or the courtesy, to convey to Horst Dal himself. It was then and therefore up to Yamir himself to inform Horst Dal of this very unpleasant turn.

And he was at the moment of commanding the pilot of the "Reliant" to direct all thrusters toward Astra Palace, that he, Yamir, could convey the news of this rout and of Turhan Mot's cowardice privately, from his own mouth to Horst Dal's ear, when he was called by his crew on the bridge.

"Oh captain," came the call, "We grieve it to intrude upon our captain in his cabin, but we have word that he must hear."

"And what is it?" Yamir asked of the speaker on his desk that stood near at hand.

"We have observed four drones that follow us, and surveil us, from a distance of one thousand miles."

Yamir frowned. "Is this so?" he asked.

"We have scanned them closely for the last two minutes and fourteen seconds. We have only confirmed these observations since."

"And these little friends must have been sent our way by the "Bellerophon", if I do not miss my guess," Yamir thought to himself.

"Continue course. Make no change," he answered, through the speaker. "I shall be at the bridge in three minutes."

"Aye, my commander," came the reply.

And, punctual as he always was, three minutes later, Yamir was standing at the bridge of the "Reliant" studying the screens that showed the four drones as pixels of light in four widely ranging positions.

"There, there, there and there," his lieutenant said, pointing each out on a separate screen, showing locations directly behind the "Reliant", as well as to the ship's rearward starboard quarter, below and above the horizon, and the rearward port quarter, similarly arranged.

"They have guided the drones to these positions, each remote from the others, that we might not guess that they share a common purpose."

“I see...” Yamir said.

They were now more than a million miles from Jupiter. Even at this distance, faint sparks against the sable sky, near the gleaming, tiny jewel that was Jupiter, gave evidence of the battle that, though clearly lost for the Scroungers, still raged on.

“Your orders, sir?”

“Do not destroy them. I want you to send each of them a probe. ‘The’ probe, I should say. Send each one the probe.”

“Aye, my commander,” came the reply.

‘The Probe’ was a tiny device developed by Yamir’s own crew that, when it had landed upon its target, could burrow into it, seek out its electronic systems, including, of course, communications and navigational systems, and take complete control of them. Yamir could direct where the drones went, in any number of false trails, while continuously sending equally false updates to his enemies.

All without notice.

It was somewhere around four hundred Scroungers who made the first wave of the ones who marched through the rail tunnel to storm Callisto Base 1. Behind that first wave came a second, another four or five hundred strong. And behind those first two came yet another wave of desperate Scroungers, desperate because their mother ship, the “Grand Marquis” was gone, and they had no hope for themselves, except to capture Callisto.

Colonel Bridgemont kept up an unstoping communication with all his bases throughout the domed city. He took in updates every minute on the condition of the neighbourhoods that were collapsing under the seismic shocks of battle, which proved to be as devastating as any earthquake, all while rallying his own officers, facing a force in the Scroungers four times greater, or more, than their own.

From his desk, placed hastily upon a platform above the tracks, one which gave him a dramatic view of the transparent rail tunnel, and the distant Space Port, far beyond, he could clearly see the Scroungers as they surged, like a poison through a capillary, toward Callisto Base 1.

The tracks were swollen with their numbers. Bridgemont calculated those numbers.

“Two hundred. Four hundred.... all the way back. They go all the way back to the Space Port. We’re looking at maybe twelve hundred of those bastards...”

He turned his head to take quick stock of his own forces.

Two hundred. That was all he could muster. Two hundred men and women, some of them no older than eighteen Earth years.

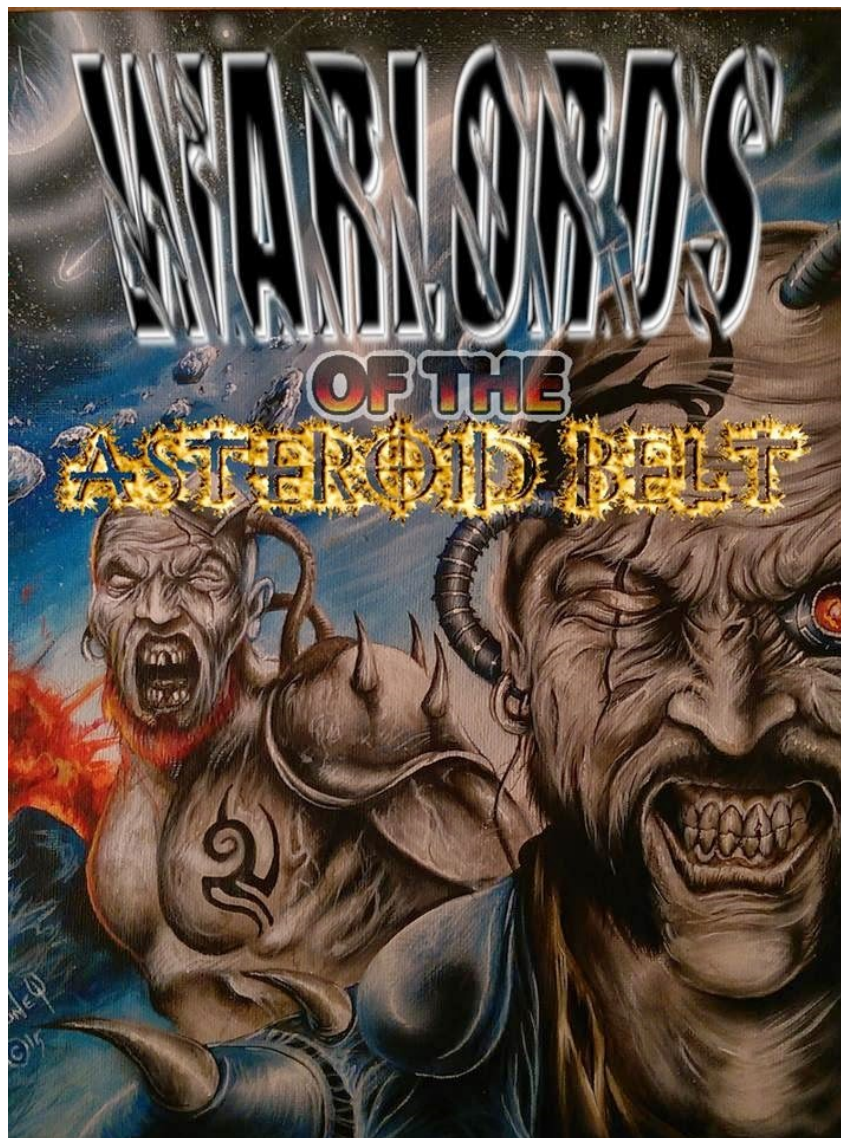
“Colonel Bridgemont! They’re here!” came the cry, with a huge pounding on the tentative barricade they had mustered together emphasizing the point. The barricade collapsed. Twenty Scroungers leaped through, followed by another twenty.

Not even time for an inspiring speech. Couldn’t give the man even that much.

“Kill as many as you can!” Colonel Bridgemont shouted out, loudly as he could.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Carter Ward’s earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).



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[Return to Contents](#)

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 18

At break of day the colonists regained in silence the entrance of the cavern, to which they gave the name of "Dakkar Grotto," in memory of Captain Nemo. It was now low-water, and they passed without difficulty under the arcade, washed on the right by the sea.

The canoe was left here, carefully protected from the waves. As additional precaution, Pencroft, Neb, and Ayrton drew it up on a little beach which bordered one of the sides of the grotto, in a spot where it could run no risk of harm.

The storm had ceased during the night. The last low mutterings of the thunder died away in the west. Rain fell no longer, but the sky was yet obscured by clouds. On the whole, this month of October, the first of the southern spring, was not ushered in by satisfactory tokens, and the wind had a tendency to shift from one point of the compass to another, which rendered it impossible to count upon settled weather.

Cyrus Harding and his companions, on leaving Dakkar Grotto, had taken the road to the corral. On their way Neb and Herbert were careful to preserve the wire which had been laid down by the captain between the corral and the grotto, and which might at a future time be of service.

The colonists spoke but little on the road. The various incidents of the night of October 15th had left a profound impression on their minds. The unknown being whose influence had so effectually protected them, the man whom their imagination had endowed with supernatural powers, Captain Nemo, was no more. His "Nautilus" and he were buried in the depths of the abyss. To each one of them their existence seemed even more isolated than before. They had been accustomed to count upon the intervention of that power which existed no longer, and Gideon Spilett, and even Cyrus Harding, could not escape this impression. Thus they maintained a profound silence during their journey to the corral.

Towards nine in the morning the colonists arrived at Granite House.

It had been agreed that the construction of the vessel should be actively pushed forward, and Cyrus Harding more than ever devoted his time and labour to this object. It was impossible to divine what future lay before them. Evidently the advantage to the colonists would be great of having at their disposal a substantial vessel, capable of keeping the sea even in heavy weather, and large enough to attempt, in case of need, a voyage of some duration. Even if, when their vessel should be completed, the colonists should not resolve to leave Lincoln Island as yet, in order to gain either one of the Polynesian Archipelagos of the Pacific or the shores of New Zealand, they might at least, sooner or later, proceed to Tabor Island, to leave there the notice relating to Ayrton. This was a precaution rendered indispensable by the possibility of the Scotch yacht reappearing in those seas, and it was of the highest importance that nothing should be neglected on this point.

The works were then resumed. Cyrus Harding, Pencroft, and Ayrton, assisted by Neb, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert, except when unavoidably called off by other necessary occupations,

worked without cessation. It was important that the new vessel should be ready in five months—that is to say, by the beginning of March—if they wished to visit Tabor Island before the equinoctial gales rendered the voyage impracticable. Therefore the carpenters lost not a moment. Moreover, it was unnecessary to manufacture rigging, that of the “Speedy” having been saved entire, so that the hull only of the vessel needed to be constructed.

The end of the year 1868 found them occupied by these important labours, to the exclusion of almost all others. At the expiration of two months and a half the ribs had been set up and the first planks adjusted. It was already evident that the plans made by Cyrus Harding were admirable, and that the vessel would behave well at sea.

Pencroft brought to the task a devouring energy, and would even grumble when one or the other abandoned the carpenter’s axe for the gun of the hunter. It was nevertheless necessary to keep up the stores of Granite House, in view of the approaching winter. But this did not satisfy Pencroft. The brave, honest sailor was not content when the workmen were not at the dockyard. When this happened he grumbled vigorously, and, by way of venting his feelings, did the work of six men.

The weather was very unfavourable during the whole of the summer season. For some days the heat was overpowering, and the atmosphere, saturated with electricity, was only cleared by violent storms. It was rarely that the distant growling of the thunder could not be heard, like a low but incessant murmur, such as is produced in the equatorial regions of the globe.

The 1st of January 1869, was signalized by a storm of extreme violence, and the thunder burst several times over the island. Large trees were struck by the electric fluid and shattered, and among others one of those gigantic nettle-trees which had shaded the poultry-yard at the southern extremity of the lake. Had this meteor any relation to the phenomena going on in the bowels of the earth? Was there any connection between the commotion of the atmosphere and that of the interior of the earth? Cyrus Harding was inclined to think that such was the case, for the development of these storms was attended by the renewal of volcanic symptoms.

It was on the 3rd of January that Herbert, having ascended at daybreak to the plateau of Prospect Heights to harness one of the onagers, perceived an enormous hat-shaped cloud rolling from the summit of the volcano.

Herbert immediately apprised the colonists, who at once joined him in watching the summit of Mount Franklin.

“Ah!” exclaimed Pencroft, “those are not vapours this time! It seems to me that the giant is not content with breathing; he must smoke!”

This figure of speech employed by the sailor exactly expressed the changes going on at the mouth of the volcano. Already for three months had the crater emitted vapours more or less dense, but which were as yet produced only by an internal ebullition of mineral substances. But now the vapours were replaced by a thick smoke, rising in the form of a greyish column, more than three hundred feet in width at its base, and which spread like an immense mushroom to a height of from seven to eight hundred feet above the summit of the mountain.

“The fire is in the chimney,” observed Gideon Spilett.

“And we can’t put it out!” replied Herbert.

“The volcano ought to be swept,” observed Neb, who spoke as if perfectly serious.

“Well said, Neb!” cried Pencroft, with a shout of laughter; “and you’ll undertake the job, no doubt?”

Cyrus Harding attentively observed the dense smoke emitted by Mount Franklin, and even listened, as if expecting to hear some distant muttering. Then, turning towards his companions, from whom he had gone somewhat apart, he said,—

“The truth is, my friends, we must not conceal from ourselves that an important change is going forward. The volcanic substances are no longer in a state of ebullition, they have caught fire, and we are undoubtedly menaced by an approaching eruption.”

“Well, captain,” said Pencroft, “we shall witness the eruption; and if it is a good one, we’ll applaud it. I don’t see that we need concern ourselves further about the matter.”

“It may be so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “for the ancient track of the lava is still open; and thanks to this, the crater has hitherto overflowed towards the north. And yet—”

“And yet, as we can derive no advantage from an eruption, it might be better it should not take place,” said the reporter.

“Who knows?” answered the sailor. “Perhaps there may be some valuable substance in this volcano, which it will spout forth, and which we may turn to good account!”

Cyrus Harding shook his head with the air of a man who augured no good from the phenomenon whose development had been so sudden. He did not regard so lightly as Pencroft the results of an eruption. If the lava, in consequence of the position of the crater, did not directly menace the wooded and cultivated parts of the island, other complications might present themselves. In fact, eruptions are not unfrequently accompanied by earthquakes; and an island of the nature of Lincoln Island, formed of substances so varied, basalt on one side, granite on the other, lava on the north, rich soil on the south, substances which consequently could not be firmly attached to each other, would be exposed to the risk of disintegration. Although, therefore, the spreading of the volcanic matter might not constitute a serious danger, any movement of the terrestrial structure which should shake the island might entail the gravest consequences.

“It seems to me,” said Ayrton, who had reclined so as to place his ear to the ground, “it seems to me that I can hear a dull, rumbling sound, like that of a wagon loaded with bars of iron.”

The colonists listened with the greatest attention, and were convinced that Ayrton was not mistaken. The rumbling was mingled with a subterranean roar, which formed a sort of *rinforzando*, and died slowly away, as if some violent storm had passed through the profundities of the globe. But no explosion properly so termed, could be heard. It might therefore be concluded that the vapours and smoke found a free passage through the central shaft; and that the safety-valve being sufficiently large, no convulsion would be produced, no explosion was to be apprehended.

“Well, then!” said Pencroft, “are we not going back to work? Let Mount Franklin smoke, groan, bellow, or spout forth fire and flame as much as it pleases, that is no reason why we should be idle! Come, Ayrton, Neb, Herbert, Captain Harding, Mr. Spilett, every one of us must turn to at our work to-day! We are going to place the keelson, and a dozen pair of hands would not be too many. Before two months I want our new ‘Bonadventure’—for we shall keep the old name, shall we not?—to float on the waters of Port Balloon! Therefore there is not an hour to lose!”

All the colonists, their services thus requisitioned by Pencroft, descended to the dockyard, and proceeded to place the keelson, a thick mass of wood which forms the lower portion of a ship and unites firmly the timbers of the hull. It was an arduous undertaking, in which all took part.

They continued their labours during the whole of this day, the 3rd of January, without thinking further of the volcano, which could not, besides, be seen from the shore of Granite House. But once or twice, large shadows, veiling the sun, which described its diurnal arc through an extremely clear sky, indicated that a thick cloud of smoke passed between its disc and the island. The wind, blowing on the shore, carried all these vapours to the westward. Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett remarked these sombre appearances, and from time to time discussed the evident progress of the volcanic phenomena, but their work went on without interruption. It was, besides, of the first importance from every point of view, that the vessel should be finished with the least possible delay. In presence of the eventualities which might arise, the safety of the colonists would be to a great extent secured by their ship. Who could tell that it might not prove someday their only refuge?

In the evening, after supper, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert again ascended the plateau of Prospect Heights. It was already dark, and the obscurity would permit them to ascertain if flames or incandescent matter thrown up by the volcano were mingled with the vapor and smoke accumulated at the mouth of the crater.

“The crater is on fire!” said Herbert, who, more active than his companion, first reached the plateau.

Mount Franklin, distant about six miles, now appeared like a gigantic torch, around the summit of which turned fuliginous flames. So much smoke, and possibly scoriae and cinders were mingled with them, that their light gleamed but faintly amid the gloom of the night. But a kind of lurid brilliancy spread over the island, against which stood out confusedly the wooded masses of the heights. Immense whirlwinds of vapor obscured the sky, through which glimmered a few stars.

“The change is rapid!” said the engineer.

“That is not surprising,” answered the reporter. “The reawakening of the volcano already dates back some time. You may remember, Cyrus, that the first vapours appeared about the time we searched the sides of the mountain to discover Captain Nemo’s retreat. It was, if I mistake not, about the 15th of October.”

“Yes,” replied Herbert, “two months and a half ago!”

“The subterranean fires have therefore been smouldering for ten weeks,” resumed Gideon Spilett, “and it is not to be wondered at that they now break out with such violence!”

“Do not you feel a certain vibration of the soil?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“Yes,” replied Gideon Spilett, “but there is a great difference between that and an earthquake.”

“I do not affirm that we are menaced with an earthquake,” answered Cyrus Harding, “may God preserve us from that! No; these vibrations are due to the effervescence of the central fire. The crust of the earth is simply the shell of a boiler, and you know that such a shell, under the pressure of steam, vibrates like a sonorous plate. It is this effect which is being produced at this moment.”

“What magnificent flames!” exclaimed Herbert.

At this instant a kind of bouquet of flames shot forth from the crater, the brilliancy of which was visible even through the vapours. Thousands of luminous sheets and barbed tongues of fire were cast in various directions. Some, extending beyond the dome of smoke, dissipated it, leaving behind an incandescent powder. This was accompanied by successive explosions, resembling the discharge of a battery of machine-guns.

Cyrus Harding, the reporter, and Herbert, after spending an hour on the plateau of Prospect Heights, again descended to the beach, and returned to Granite House. The engineer was thoughtful and preoccupied, so much so, indeed, that Gideon Spilett inquired if he apprehended any immediate danger, of which the eruption might directly or indirectly be the cause.

“Yes, and no,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“Nevertheless,” continued the reporter, “would not the greatest misfortune which could happen to us be an earthquake which would overturn the island? Now, I do not suppose that this is to be feared, since the vapours and lava have found a free outlet.”

“True,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and I do not fear an earthquake in the sense in which the term is commonly applied to convulsions of the soil provoked by the expansion of subterranean gases. But other causes may produce great disasters.”

“How so, my dear Cyrus?”

“I am not certain. I must consider. I must visit the mountain. In a few days I shall learn more on this point.”

Gideon Spilett said no more, and soon, in spite of the explosions of the volcano, whose intensity increased, and which were repeated by the echoes of the island, the inhabitants of Granite House were sleeping soundly.

Three days passed by—the 4th, 5th, and 6th of January. The construction of the vessel was diligently continued, and without offering further explanations the engineer pushed forward the work with all his energy. Mount Franklin was now hooded by a sombre cloud of sinister

aspect, and, amid the flames, vomiting forth incandescent rocks, some of which fell back into the crater itself. This caused Pencroft, who would only look at the matter in the light of a joke, to exclaim,—

“Ah! the giant is playing at cup and ball; he is a conjurer.”

In fact, the substances thrown up fell back again in to the abyss, and it did not seem that the lava, though swollen by the internal pressure, had yet risen to the orifice of the crater. At any rate, the opening on the northeast, which was partly visible, poured out no torrent upon the northern slope of the mountain.

Nevertheless, however pressing was the construction of the vessel, other duties demanded the presence of the colonists on various portions of the island. Before everything it was necessary to go to the corral, where the flocks of musmons and goats were enclosed, and replenish the provision of forage for those animals. It was accordingly arranged that Ayrton should proceed thither the next day, the 7th of January; and as he was sufficient for the task, to which he was accustomed, Pencroft and the rest were somewhat surprised on hearing the engineer say to Ayrton—

“As you are going to-morrow to the corral I will accompany you.”

“But, Captain Harding,” exclaimed the sailor, “our working days will not be many, and if you go also we shall be two pair of hands short!”

“We shall return to-morrow,” replied Cyrus Harding, “but it is necessary that I should go to the corral. I must learn how the eruption is progressing.”

“The eruption! always the eruption!” answered Pencroft, with an air of discontent. “An important thing, truly, this eruption! I trouble myself very little about it.”

Whatever might be the sailor’s opinion, the expedition projected by the engineer was settled for the next day. Herbert wished to accompany Cyrus Harding, but he would not vex Pencroft by his absence.

The next day, at dawn, Cyrus Harding and Ayrton, mounting the cart drawn by two onagers, took the road to the corral and set off at a round trot.

Above the forest were passing large clouds, to which the crater of Mount Franklin incessantly added fuliginous matter. These clouds, which rolled heavily in the air, were evidently composed of heterogeneous substances. It was not alone from the volcano that they derived their strange opacity and weight. Scoriae, in a state of dust, like powdered pumice-stone, and greyish ashes as small as the finest feculae, were held in suspension in the midst of their thick folds. These ashes are so fine that they have been observed in the air for whole months. After the eruption of 1783 in Iceland for upwards of a year the atmosphere was thus charged with volcanic dust through which the rays of the sun were only with difficulty discernible.

But more often this pulverized matter falls, and this happened on the present occasion. Cyrus Harding and Ayrton had scarcely reached the corral when a sort of black snow like fine gunpowder fell, and instantly changed the appearance of the soil. Trees, meadows, all

disappeared beneath a covering several inches in depth. But, very fortunately, the wind blew from the northeast, and the greater part of the cloud dissolved itself over the sea.

“This is very singular, Captain Harding,” said Ayrton.

“It is very serious,” replied the engineer. “This powdered pumice-stone, all this mineral dust, proves how grave is the convulsion going forward in the lower depths of the volcano.”

“But can nothing be done?”

“Nothing, except to note the progress of the phenomenon. Do you, therefore, Ayrton, occupy yourself with the necessary work at the corral. In the meantime I will ascend just beyond the source of Red Creek and examine the condition of the mountain upon its northern aspect. Then—”

“Well, Captain Harding?”

“Then we will pay a visit to Dakkar Grotto. I wish to inspect it. At any rate I will come back for you in two hours.”

Ayrton then proceeded to enter the corral, and, while awaiting the engineer’s return, busied himself with the musmons and goats which seemed to feel a certain uneasiness in presence of these first signs of an eruption.

Meanwhile Cyrus Harding ascended the crest of the eastern spur, passed Red Creek, and arrived at the spot where he and his companions had discovered a sulphurous spring at the time of their first exploration.

How changed was everything! Instead of a single column of smoke he counted thirteen, forced through the soil as if violently propelled by some piston. It was evident that the crust of the earth was subjected in this part of the globe to a frightful pressure. The atmosphere was saturated with gases and carbonic acid, mingled with aqueous vapours. Cyrus Harding felt the volcanic tufa with which the plain was strewn, and which was but pulverized cinders hardened into solid blocks by time, tremble beneath him, but he could discover no traces of fresh lava.

The engineer became more assured of this when he observed all the northern part of Mount Franklin. Pillars of smoke and flame escaped from the crater; a hail of scoriae fell on the ground; but no current of lava burst from the mouth of the volcano, which proved that the volcanic matter had not yet attained the level of the superior orifice of the central shaft.

“But I would prefer that it were so,” said Cyrus Harding to himself. “At any rate, I should then know that the lava had followed its accustomed track. Who can say that it may not take a new course? But the danger does not consist in that! Captain Nemo foresaw it clearly! No, the danger does not lie there!”

Cyrus Harding advanced towards the enormous causeway whose prolongation enclosed the narrow Shark Gulf. He could now sufficiently examine on this side the ancient channels of the lava. There was no doubt in his mind that the most recent eruption had occurred at a far-distant epoch.

He then returned by the same way, listening attentively to the subterranean mutterings which rolled like long-continued thunder, interrupted by deafening explosions. At nine in the morning he reached the corral.

Ayrton awaited him.

“The animals are cared for, Captain Harding,” said Ayrton.

“Good, Ayrton.”

“They seem uneasy, Captain Harding.”

“Yes, instinct speaks through them, and instinct is never deceived.”

“Are you ready?”

“Take a lamp, Ayrton,” answered the engineer; “we will start at once.”

Ayrton did as desired. The onagers, unharnessed, roamed in the corral. The gate was secured on the outside, and Cyrus Harding, preceding Ayrton, took the narrow path which led westward to the shore.

The soil they walked upon was choked with the pulverized matter fallen from the cloud. No quadruped appeared in the woods. Even the birds had fled. Sometimes a passing breeze raised the covering of ashes, and the two colonists, enveloped in a whirlwind of dust, lost sight of each other. They were then careful to cover their eyes and mouths with handkerchiefs, for they ran the risk of being blinded and suffocated.

It was impossible for Cyrus Harding and Ayrton, with these impediments, to make rapid progress. Moreover, the atmosphere was close, as if the oxygen had been partly burned up, and had become unfit for respiration. At every hundred paces they were obliged to stop to take breath. It was therefore past ten o’clock when the engineer and his companion reached the crest of the enormous mass of rocks of basalt and porphyry which composed the northwest coast of the island.

Ayrton and Cyrus Harding commenced the descent of this abrupt declivity, following almost step for step the difficult path which, during that stormy night, had led them to Dakkar Grotto. In open day the descent was less perilous, and, besides, the bed of ashes which covered the polished surface of the rock enabled them to make their footing more secure.

The ridge at the end of the shore, about forty feet in height, was soon reached. Cyrus Harding recollected that this elevation gradually sloped towards the level of the sea. Although the tide was at present low, no beach could be seen, and the waves, thickened by the volcanic dust, beat upon the basaltic rocks.

Cyrus Harding and Ayrton found without difficulty the entrance to Dakkar Grotto, and paused for a moment at the last rock before it.

“The iron boat should be there,” said the engineer.

“It is here, Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, drawing towards him the fragile craft, which was protected by the arch of the vault.

“On board, Ayrton!”

The two colonists stepped into the boat. A slight undulation of the waves carried it farther under the low arch of the crypt, and there Ayrton, with the aid of flint and steel, lighted the lamp. He then took the oars, and the lamp having been placed in the bow of the boat, so that its rays fell before them, Cyrus Harding took the helm and steered through the shades of the grotto.

The “Nautilus” was there no longer to illuminate the cavern with its electric light. Possibly it might not yet be extinguished, but no ray escaped from the depths of the abyss in which reposed all that was mortal of Captain Nemo.

The light afforded by the lamp, although feeble, nevertheless enabled the engineer to advance slowly, following the wall of the cavern. A deathlike silence reigned under the vaulted roof, or at least in the anterior portion, for soon Cyrus Harding distinctly heard the rumbling which proceeded from the bowels of the mountain.

“That comes from the volcano,” he said.

Besides these sounds, the presence of chemical combinations was soon betrayed by their powerful odour, and the engineer and his companion were almost suffocated by sulphurous vapours.

“This is what Captain Nemo feared,” murmured Cyrus Harding, changing countenance. “We must go to the end, notwithstanding.”

“Forward!” replied Ayrton, bending to his oars and directing the boat towards the head of the cavern.

Twenty-five minutes after entering the mouth of the grotto the boat reached the extreme end.

Cyrus Harding then, standing up, cast the light of the lamp upon the walls of the cavern which separated it from the central shaft of the volcano. What was the thickness of this wall? It might be ten feet or a hundred feet—it was impossible to say. But the subterranean sounds were too perceptible to allow of the supposition that it was of any great thickness.

The engineer, after having explored the wall at a certain height horizontally, fastened the lamp to the end of an oar, and again surveyed the basaltic wall at a greater elevation.

There, through scarcely visible clefts and joinings, escaped a pungent vapor, which infected the atmosphere of the cavern. The wall was broken by large cracks, some of which extended to within two or three feet of the water’s edge.

Cyrus Harding thought for a brief space. Then he said in a low voice,—

“Yes! the captain was right! The danger lies there, and a terrible danger!”

Ayrton said not a word, but, upon a sign from Cyrus Harding, resumed the oars, and half an hour later the engineer and he reached the entrance of Dakkar Grotto.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

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