

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 11, ISSUE 19
18TH JUNE 2017

THE HORROR OF THE FLY PEOPLE

**BY NEAL
PRIVETT
JANICE
SCREAMED.
"YOU'RE
CRAZY!"**

WHEN MONEY CHIMES

**BY GK
MURPHY
THERE ARE NO
FRIENDS IN
BUSINESS,
FREDERICK...**

THE LAST RESORT BY GAVIN CHAPPELL

HELLGATE

**BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 11, Issue 19
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This Edition

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EDITORIAL

This week a mad scientist's daughter and her bad boy rock'n'roll boyfriend face The Horror of the Fly People. A blackmailing City trader sees hell breaking loose. Rebels against the Galactic Empire learn the history of the Last Resort. And a hacker tries to commit suicide after unleashing the Antichrist.

An explorer is stranded on an island inhabited by gigantic birds. Dr Heidegger experiments with water from the Fountain of Youth. Illara evades the Scroungers in space against a gorgeous backdrop of Jovian moons, Emily and Jeffrey's lessons are interrupted when Callisto is put on a war alert, while Carter Ward and Dimara are hell bent on the destruction of the enemy fleet. We also have the first shocking installment in **Tales of the Dead**, the book that inspired Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and their Romantic chums to set their seal on modern horror. Meanwhile, a new mystery troubles the castaways on the Mysterious Island. And Olaf the Varangian is appointed governor of the jail of the Blind Caesar.

—Gavin Chappell

Please note that the Schlock! eBook editions have now been discontinued following an earnest, week-long debate between Schlock! Publications and Kindle Direct Publishing, regarding creative differences. PDFs of previous editions will be available for free in the Archive. Instructions on how to download PDFs to Kindle or iPad are available from <http://www.bythom.com/pdffaq.htm>

A few copies of this limited edition collection of Gary Murphy stories are still available from [Summer of Schlock!](#)

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THE HORROR OF THE FLY PEOPLE by Neal Privett

Janice Kent sat in the living room and listened intently to her father mixing chemicals in his study, which doubled as a laboratory. Glass jars and test tubes clinked together and fizzled down the hall as she sat there. The young woman did not claim to know much about her father's work. All she knew was that he was engaged in some top-secret assignment from the military. Her father, Dr. Simon Kent, made sure to keep all vestiges of his work hidden from his only daughter. Everything remained constantly locked behind the big wooden door of the study. And that is the way the good doctor wanted it.

"What you don't know can't hurt you, Janice," her father always said when she enquired as to the nature of his never-ending experimentation. Her pressing always seemed to make the soft spoken, middle aged scientist nervous. He acted as if he feared some sort of reprisal from some unknown enemy. Perhaps it was the government. Maybe the FBI would descend upon the house if his secrets were somehow divulged. So Janice stopped asking. But that didn't mean she stopped being curious. There was something strange going on in that laboratory... something inexplicable behind that door. Her father was doing something potentially dangerous for the federal government. Something big. And she would find out what it was.

The loud roar of a motorcycle ripped Janice from her deep reverie. She glanced out the front window to see her boyfriend roll up on his Indian. Chuck Peterson stopped in front of her house and switched off the engine, pausing to fish inside his leather jacket until he found a pack of smokes. He pulled a cig out of the pack with his teeth and lit up with his flaring Zippo, peering from behind his sunglasses at the window shades being pulled down ceremoniously in unison on both sides of Janice's street.

Janice watched from her window and laughed. She knew what those silly fools were thinking. What's a dirty greaser doing in front of the house belonging to the most prominent scientist in California? What kind of woman was his daughter anyway?

Chuck was trouble. He was a hell-bent youth with no direction and no future, or at least that's what they said. The neighbours. The townsfolk. The 9 to 5, church on Sunday, family automobile-kind of people who never dared to think beyond their neatly manicured front lawns. It was the modern age, atomic and fast. This was 1958, not 1858. But that didn't seem to matter to most people.

Janice was enrolled in college, had a clear path mapped out to success and happiness. But she loved Chuck. Her rebel. Her rock and roll grease-monkey. All he wanted to do was smoke cigs, listen to the jukebox, and work on his motorcycle. He said that he wanted to marry her. But she knew better than to think that her father would ever give his consent. They could elope, but that was not the way Janice wanted to do things.

Chuck oozed from his bike and strolled up to the house, winking at the old lady next door who watched him from her front window. The elderly spy studied him with all the tenacity of an offended cat... ready to pounce and draw blood. He sucked the last drag from the cigarette and flipped it into her yard, where it lay smouldering.

Janice met him out on the front porch and threw her soft arms around him. "Hi, baby," she purred in that crazy love voice he really dug. Chuck's lips tasted like axle grease and tobacco, stale coffee, broken dreams, and highway dust. And Janice loved it. She sucked it all in with

her tongue and sighed as her heart quivered deep in her breast and their bodies melted together like they were made of molasses, or something sweeter.

Suddenly a black automobile pulled up behind Chuck's Indian. Two serious men in suits and one in military uniform bounced from the automobile, their eyes hidden behind pilot sunglasses. They raced up the steps and passed the two lovers with no acknowledgement of their presence. They rang the doorbell, then let themselves inside the house without waiting for an invitation.

"Well, how do you like that," Janice muttered.

Chuck pushed her back and studied her closely. "What's goin' on, baby?"

Janice shrugged and opened the front door to listen in. Before she could react, the two men in suits stormed back out, almost knocking her over. This time they carried a canister with them. They moved quickly down the front steps and melted into the car as if they were a physical part of it. Then they pulled away and vanished down the street.

Janice stood there, completely mystified. Her father stepped out onto the porch and took one look at Chuck before he frowned. "Oh... hello, Charles," he said dourly.

"Hello... Doctor Kent," Chuck smiled, exposing his yellowed teeth.

Kent turned to the girl. "I have business this afternoon, Janice."

"What's going on, Dad? Who were those goons?"

"Government men, dear. Nothing to worry about. I am to meet with them later. We are going to perform an experiment, and if all goes well... we won't have to worry about money ever again."

Chuck grinned, in his irritating way of feigning innocence, as the scientist turned to glare at him. "Young man... I would appreciate your not appearing at my residence looking like a relic from the La Brea tar pit."

"Yes, sir." Chuck was still grinning sardonically.

Dr. Kent hugged his daughter and vanished back inside. Janice shook her head sadly. "There goes diligence and dedication. Back to work in the lab again. I won't see him for two more days. I just hope he remembers to eat." She thought for a moment, then punched Chuck in the arm. "You know, Dad's right. It is about time for an oil change and a bath, love," Janice laughed.

Dr. Simon Kent chose a subterranean laboratory, far below the university science department for his official unveiling. The dedicated scientist and his potential sponsors met in a mostly unused lab where old equipment was temporarily stored.

It was late evening. Classes were over for the day and the only body roaming the quiet halls was old Mr. Fudderman, the night watchman; exceedingly ancient and faithful to his duties. Dr. Kent had the necessary equipment moved down there by student workers who were well paid, so he did not worry about their loose lips around campus. Even if they did talk, he could pass this secret demonstration off as a departmental meeting regarding government funds. So Kent was not worried. About anything... least of all his experiment.

The government agents, the military attaches, and the money men took the elevator down three floors underground to witness the end result of a whole year of experimentation, failures, and more experimentation. They came to see what government dollars would buy.

The elevator door opened. Kent led the solemn, business-like congregation down the hall, to the darkened lab: where science was about to leave the realm of normal possibilities and enter the far-flung realm of the fantastic.

Kent flipped the switch and light infiltrated every corner of the lab, but the atmosphere still seemed dim and gloomy. The scientist walked over to a table and stopped in front of a lone petri dish. He reached into his lab coat and removed a syringe, holding it up to the light. The liquid inside was glowing, a chartreuse green.

"This is what you are paying for, General," Kent said with a confident smile.

General Ronald Douglas nodded. "Excellent... excellent, Doctor. Let's see the formula work."

Kent was impressed at the who's who list of very important men that now stood before him. General Douglas of the U.S. Marine Corps. Captain James Riley of the United States Army. Doctors Silas Marney and Fritz Weinerhorne. Frank Scott of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. All of them were there to see the results of Kent's hard work. All of them waited impatiently, their hearts beating frantically in their highly decorated chests. "Gentlemen, this is the product of over fifteen hard months of losing myself in the lab... of experimenting... of unmentionable failures... and finally, the moment of triumph... as you will see momentarily."

"If this formula does what you say it will," the General said. "This will be the day that Fascism dies in the world."

"It works," Kent said. "I used the formula day before yesterday."

The General almost jumped out of his uniform. "You did? What was the result?"

Kent removed a vial from his coat. A fly buzzed fearfully inside. "See for yourself."

The scientist squirted the green liquid into the petri dish and ceremoniously held the vial over it. The strange liquid bubbled in anticipation of the coming sacrifice.

"My God," the General said. "The formula is... alive!"

A weird light appeared in Dr. Kent's eyes. "Witness, gentlemen... the birth of a fly man!" He pulled the cork from the vial and shook the fly over the petri dish. The frightened insect

plunged into the green liquid and sank. The formula accepted it hungrily and began to bubble and fizz.

“Now watch,” Kent said defiantly.

The petri dish began to shake violently as the contents flowed over the sides and covered the lab table in quivering green foam. The audience shook with stunned disbelief as a form appeared amid the bubbling liquid... a form that grew larger and larger by the second. It writhed and churned in agony and doubled, then tripled, in size. It continued to grow and grow... larger and larger before their very eyes. Whatever it was, it began to buzz and moan in a human-like voice that eerily resembled the cries of a new-born baby, much to the horror of the general and the others.

“What... in God’s holy name...?” the Captain moaned.

“This has nothing to do with God,” Kent said triumphantly. “We are now beyond the pale of exact science, gentlemen! I give you... the fly man... the world’s first indestructible soldier. The saviour of democracy around the globe!”

All of a sudden the table splintered beneath the weight of the thing. It rose, hunched over... with slavering jaws that dripped foam. It loomed above the men on thin, tube-like legs; a giant killer fly... but it was anthropomorphic. Insect... yet man. The eyes were huge and round, great bulbous receptacles of light and image that sent violent chills up and down every spine in the room. Except Kent’s.

“I created one of them day before yesterday, in an abandoned warehouse on the edge of town. I got the same results,” Kent said.

The General moved close to Kent, never pulling his eyes from the weird beast standing before them, a good head taller than the tallest man in the room. “What... what did you do with it?”

“I eradicated it,” Kent said. “I only wanted to make sure that the formula worked before I presented it to you gentlemen today.”

The thing lifted its head and roared... and every man in the lab jumped back. The beast’s face began with the eyes and ended with savage mandibles capable of horrible rending and tearing. It raised its hands... appendages tipped with razor sharp claws. The onlookers gasped as it sliced the air.

“Eyes that can see a solid mile away,” Kent said proudly. “Claws that can cut through the strongest metal. Speed that makes a cheetah seem like a turtle. And you know the best part?”

The General spoke, his eyes locked in horror at the menacing thing standing tall and unfettered before him. “What, Dr. Kent... what’s the best part?”

“Acidic saliva,” Kent laughed.

The beast spat. Its foamy spittle landed on the face of the General and bubbled. The lab blew apart into pure chaos. The General clawed at his face and wailed in extreme shock and agony.

The foam clung to the man's face like glue. Great pools of bubbly gore formed on the floor beneath his well shined shoes.

The General clutched at his face and fell, moaning and writhing in a pool of blood as the life oozed out of him. The others did not stay to see the finale. The hall was clogged with the mad rush of men, their brains raging white hot with unbridled fear. They raced to the elevator and the Captain began pounding on the button, but the bell merely rang. The door did not open.

"My God! Hurry!"

"It won't open... we're trapped down here..."

There was a commotion and the beast exploded out of the laboratory. It lunged down the hall... its bone thin, barbed insect legs propelling it forward at sixty miles an hour. The fly-creature was on top of the panic-stricken men before they could react. The beast flung two of them against the wall, cracking their skulls. The bodies fell to the floor with a sickening thud and lay there in motionless heaps. Then the fly-creature grabbed the Captain and pulled him close to its mouth. It ripped open his throat with the jagged mandibles and from out of its bowels came a nauseating foam that flowed from into the neck wound of the Captain. The light left the Captain's eyes as his torso began to convulse and expand from the effects of the exchanged bodily fluid. Suddenly, his sides and chest exploded and reddish, well digested flesh fell to the floor, ready to eat.

The fly-creature feasted.

The remaining scientist and officially the last man standing, Weinerhorne, backed up to the cold wall and slowly slid to the floor, blubbering and crying in German. The slurping sounds from the fly's feast sent the doctor into a cataleptic state. All the man could do was stare off into space and mumble to himself.

Kent emerged from the lab down the hall. "I am very sorry, doctor... for all of this. I discovered the other day... to my chagrin, I assure you... that it would be more profitable to me to keep this formula for myself and sell it to the highest bidder, rather than fall prey to misguided notions of patriotism and hand over my hard work for a mere pittance."

The brain-dead zombie before him nodded absentmindedly.

Kent laughed. He reached down and patted Weinerhorne's head. "Good boy." He turned to the fly. "Finish him and come with me."

Blood spurted from the scientist's head and splattered on the wall as the creature crushed it in his mandibles. "The world awaits," Kent mused.

The elevator door finally opened.

On the way out of the university science building, Kent made a long-distance call to person or persons unknown. Then he led his creation away into the night. They pushed through the woods behind the college and emerged on the main street that led through the heart of town.

Clinging to the shadows and taking advantage of the lateness of the hour, Kent and his creation strolled right into the business district and stopped in front of the jewellery store.

Man and monster stood before the window. Kent smiled at the diamonds and pearls on display. The fly-creature growled, his great armoured chest heaving... rising and falling with every monstrous breath. "I created you... you will serve me," Kent said. "Bring me those diamonds."

The creature groaned and ripped into the door, hurling wood and glass into the air behind it. There was a great crash and the alarm sounded. A moment later the night was filled with sirens. But rather than run, Kent laughed and waited until his beast emerged from the shattered storefront with two clawfuls of diamonds and stringed pearls that dangled and gleamed like beacons in the darkness.

As if on cue, three patrol cars came to a screeching halt in front of Kent and the creature. The officers emerged, with guns drawn, and shielded themselves behind the open car doors. One of them yelled, "Don't move... put your hands above your heads."

"Don't be absurd," Kent jeered.

Kent stepped behind his creation and called out to the officers as a rain of bullets hit the beast and bounced off his armoured skin harmlessly. "Go ahead and shoot, you fools! My creation is like a tank!"

One of the officers rushed the thing. It caught the man up under his abdomen with its claw and sent him flailing into the air amidst a gory shower of intestines and blood. Another officer moved around the patrol car and began firing point blank into the beast, but the bullets did no damage. The thing's armoured hide was thick and impenetrable... the barbed hide of a super-fly.

The beast leaped across the sidewalk and grabbed the helpless officer in a tight embrace of death, squeezing until the ribs and the spine cracked and splintered inside his dying body. Spouts of blood spewed from the officer's mouth and when the fly released him, he fell lifelessly to the pavement.

The remaining police continued to fire on the creature. The bullets bounced from its hide. The fly began to shake and stretch and something strange and new began to form from its shoulders. Appendages of some kind began to grow from its flesh and within seconds a fresh, wet pair of wings appeared. There was a great buzzing and the beast wheeled around to clutch its master. The police moved closer, increasing their fire.

The fly pulled Kent close and took to the air. The police stood there, frozen in awe at the sight of the gigantic fly-man sailing across the late-night sky with its master in tow. They watched speechlessly until they were gone.

The police sergeant holstered his gun and moved alongside another awe-struck officer. His voice choked in his throat, "I don't believe it!"

"I... I don't, either, sir."

“I think I’m puttin’ in for retirement.”

The sound of incessant buzzing still filled their ears.

Dr. Kent stood outside the abandoned warehouse on the edge of town. There was no one within earshot for a good solid mile. He motioned for his creation to follow him. The interior was pitch black and littered with debris. Kent lit a match and led the thing through the first couple of rooms, empty and haunted in their abandonment. The thing stepped over a broken pipe, moved around some dilapidated crates... into a far room where the doctor placed an empty plate on a dusty table. He walked to a rickety bookshelf and removed a jar of clear liquid. He poured the contents onto the plate.

He gestured at the plate. “Eat.”

The fly man pounced on the sticky sweet solution and quickly sucked it into his mouth. Kent watched it eat, and when it was finished he pointed at a filthy mattress in the corner. “This is where you will stay... until I need you. I will come back in the morning to check on you.”

The fly shuffled over to its bed. The rusty springs squeaked and protested under its weight. The doctor waited until his creation was still, then he vanished into the gutted heart of the warehouse and out the doorway.

A mournful buzzing sound came from the thing’s mouth and echoed throughout the empty building.

Janice was sitting in the darkened living room when Kent arrived. He found his daughter on the couch, clad in her housecoat and slippers. She frowned in the soft glow of the lamp and studied her father intently. “Where have you been, Dad? It’s three o’ clock in the morning. I heard there were some murders down at the college... did you go there tonight?”

Kent smiled effortlessly. “No, dear. I’ve been out at the army base, meeting with General Douglas about my... work.”

Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes and she rushed over to her father, throwing her arms around him. “They said old Mr. Fudderman was mopping the hall and found the bodies... torn to shreds by something...”

“Well, that’s... that’s terrible,” Kent said. “Do the police have any clues as to who is responsible?”

“Not yet. I was so worried about you, Dad. I thought you might be one of the... the...”

Dr. Kent caressed his daughter’s dark hair. “It’s alright, Janice. Soon we will have everything we want. Maybe we will move to another city... another country, even. We will be rich beyond our wildest dreams.”

Janice pushed away from her father and wiped the tears from her eyes. "What do you mean, Dad? I don't want to be rich... I just want you. My father. I want happiness... I want to get married."

Anger rocketed through Kent's mind and his long, stone cut face grew red. "Married? To that Neanderthal? That greaser hood? Surely you jest, daughter!"

Janice stepped back. "I love him, Dad. We are getting married. I had hope for your... approval."

"You most assuredly do not have it," Kent shouted. "No daughter of mine is marrying a motorcycle gang reject! I have bigger and better plans for you..."

Janice stood there, shocked and hurt. "Goodnight, Dad..."

She vanished into her bedroom and closed the door. Kent stood there, seething and staring out of the front window at the forlorn night.

Just before dawn Janice picked up the telephone and dialled Chuck's number. He answered sleepily. "Hello?"

"Let's go, baby. Let's get out of town."

"You mean it? You wanna elope with me?"

"I mean it. Come get me."

"I'll be right there!"

Chuck hung up the telephone and slid into his dirty white t-shirt. He threw on his leather jacket and walked to the mirror hanging on the wall of his cheap, rented room in the cheap, rented part of town. He took the pomade from his dresser and dipped a handful out, smearing it over his long, thick hair. He took the comb from his back pocket and slowly sculpted his hair into a pompadour. When the grease dried, it would be bulletproof... and ultra-cool. "Chuckie, old boy... you dig okay!"

The motorcycle's engine roared to life and Chuck shot off into the dawn like a bullet... like a cowboy that had just won the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. The future was going to be as bright as the sun that would shortly rise. Brighter even. Janice and Chuck forever...

He pulled up in front of her house and shut off the engine. He raced stealthily up the hilly yard to her bedroom window in the back and knocked gently on the glass. Janice brushed back the curtain and lifted the window. She handed her suitcase to Chuck, then crawled out.

"Hey... you're wearin' blue jeans," Chuck laughed.

"Hard to ride a motorcycle in a dress," she replied.

They rushed down the hill. A few seconds later, they were gone. Chuck's bike was a time machine, with the lever pressed all the way forward into the future. There was nobody to stop them.

The sun was rising by the time they made it to the outskirts of town. Chuck pulled up in the old manufacturing district, a part of town where there was nothing but abandoned factories and warehouses... the relics of a past prosperity. The residences and businesses of Ridgewood were far behind them, clear across town. Up ahead was a series of old warehouses crumbling with age and neglect. Chuck inched his bike on down the road a little farther and came to a stop.

"What's wrong?"

Chuck grunted. "There's somebody in that old warehouse over there." He pointed to a crumbling three storey brick structure with a phantom light in the bottom level windows. Chuck laughed. "Let's go check it out, baby. Maybe it's a ghost!"

Janice shivered. "What? No! What if it's some deranged killer or something?"

"I'll be right there to protect you, doll." Chuck grinned spritely. "Hey... maybe it's two people rollin' in the hay!"

Janice laughed. "Well, I definitely don't wanna go in there if that's the case."

"Aw, c'mon... we can scare the holy hell outta 'em!"

Janice started to protest some more, but Chuck cut his motor off and pushed his bike further down the dusty road. He stopped and put down the kickstand. "Let's go!"

Janice groaned. "We shouldn't be doing this. We should just get out of town like we planned."

"Just a few fast kicks, baby... then we split, okay?"

Janice nodded. "Okay." She latched onto Chuck and they moved slowly towards the warehouse, melding together in the early morning darkness as if they were one animal. Chuck smiled. "I dig your hands round my waist like that, doll."

"Stop that, you cretin!" Janice punched him in the ribs.

The front door was missing, having long been detached and carted off by an unknown looter. The kids moved through the opening and stopped. Ahead was the light, shining from another room, fanning out towards the centre of the old building. Janice grabbed onto Chuck's arm. He instinctively placed it around her. "It's okay, doll."

They inched forward, keeping close to the wall. At first, they heard only crickets and other night sounds. But as they moved nearer to the light, they could hear voices... voices locked in a heated conversation.

Chuck pulled Janice into the shadows. They listened intently for a moment before moving again. A man's angry voice drifted in from an adjoining room. Janice stiffened at the sound and melted further into the darkness behind her boyfriend. She started to whisper something, but Chuck put his hand over her mouth.

They moved closer. Something was going on in the very next room. Scant shafts of light illuminated the dirty concrete floor, which was littered with rotten building timbers, bits of shattered glass, broken concrete blocks. Chuck navigated these obstacles in a nervous attempt to step lightly.

The man in the next room shouted again and the kids could make out his words now. The man was irritated and his voice echoed from the rafters above. "That is not the agreement!"

Another voice met his head on. "Well, that is the best deal I can give at this point."

"Damn you!"

Janice leaned forward. "That's my father's voice!"

The night was broken with the sound of a scuffle... of glass breaking, of flesh striking flesh. Then there was the unmistakable sound of a savage gunshot in the night and a body hitting the concrete floor with a dull thud.

Janice jerked away from Chuck and screamed. Before Chuck knew what was happening he was following close behind her, headed for the front exit. There were shouts and a commotion in the rooms behind them and all of a sudden frantic footsteps were everywhere.

They were being followed.

Chuck pushed ahead of Janice and took her by the hand. They ran for their lives, out the front of the warehouse, where Chuck's motorcycle waited. He was about to swing his leg over the cycle and pull Janice behind him when a shot rang out and gas began to gush from the hole in the tank.

"Hands up... don't move!" The voice was foreign... Russian, maybe. Two men in suits raced over to the pair and shoved a gun in Chuck's face.

Chuck reached for the firmament. "It's cool... don't shoot us, Dad..."

The other goon grabbed Chuck from the bike and shoved both of them back towards the warehouse. Janice cried out, "What do you want? Where are you taking us?"

"Shut up!" The man with the gun shoved her forward. Chuck exploded with fury and took a swing at him. Even though the man was older, he was definitely no novice in a fistfight. He ducked out of the trajectory of Chuck's meaty fist and counteracted by bringing the butt of his pistol down on the boy's forehead. The greaser collapsed to the ground. Janice helped him up.

"Now move!"

Janice helped Chuck walk and the group moved across the weedy lot to the waiting warehouse. They moved through the front rooms to the only lit section of the place, where a lone lamp sat on a simple table and created shadows that danced all over the walls and floor.

Janice screamed in horror.

Lying comatose on a filthy mattress was the most gruesome sight she had ever witnessed. All of a sudden, the room was filled with an infernal buzzing sound and the creature's eyes filled with light. It sat up slowly on the makeshift bed and turned its massive head to stare blankly at the kids.

But the terror in her stomach from this unholy monster vanished like smoke, when her eyes became adjusted to the half-light. A crumpled figure appeared to the right of her, lying face down on the floor. She recognized the white lab coat immediately. "Dad!"

The girl rushed over to the body and fell to her knees. Chuck started to go to her, but the man with the gun motioned for him to get back. Janice rolled her father over on his back and sat there, cradling his head in her lap. She stroked his hair and cried over and over, "Dad... Dad..."

The good Dr. Kent was most definitely dead. A crimson stain on his chest grew larger by the second. Janice leered at her captors. "What have you done?"

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vladimir Portchcov. This is my associate, Igor Rasvinsky."

Chuck snarled. "What do you bastards want?"

"We have what we want... your late father's formula. As far as what we desire from you two... well, unfortunately you have seen too much to live."

The shaved headed brute known as Igor... over six feet of pure Russian brawn and muscle, stepped forward and whispered something in the gunman's ear. Vladimir smiled and nodded. "My associate has a fantastic idea. You..." he waved the gun at Chuck. "Sit down in that chair over there." Igor grabbed Chuck's arm and pulled him towards a rickety wooden chair.

"So this was what my father was doing... creating monsters for the Reds..."

Vladimir cackled. "True... true, my dear. Your father was a traitor. He sold his country out for a mere pittance."

Janice hid her face in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably. Chuck tried to go to her but the gun swung in his direction again and he remained seated. Vladimir continued. "Your father created a formula... a means to make a race of super soldiers... an army of fly-men that was capable of conquering the world." He pointed to the fly-creature on the bed. "Look at him! A perfect killing machine. Imagine an army of these beasts unleashed upon the nations..."

Janice screamed. "You're crazy!"

The Russian's voice grew louder and more frantic. Sweat rolled down his face. His eyes glowed with the light of the megalomaniac... the crazed disciple, drunk with a brutal and primitive religion. The religion of power! "Is that crazy, my dear? Feast your eyes on him! That is the product of pure, perfect science... the results of your father's genius!"

"My father's genius," Janice sneered. "And you killed him!"

"Yes... it is most unfortunate. Your father would not listen to reason. He wanted more money. He wanted to send you to an expensive college back east... and he would not barter for his invention."

"Oh, Dad..."

Vladimir grinned. "You Americans. You are so... sentimental."

Chuck yelled. "Leave her alone, you sons of bitches!"

"Ah yes," Vladimir laughed. "I almost forgot. Igor..."

Igor produced a syringe from a black bag on the table and moved towards Chuck, who rose defiantly. Vladimir hit him with his gun again and the boy collapsed back into the chair. Igor quickly removed his jacket and grabbed his arm, plunging the needle into his flesh. Janice noted the glowing green liquid in the syringe just before it vanished into her boyfriend's body.

Igor stepped back, holding the spent needle upwards. He grinned, as Vladimir moved beside him. "Let's test Dr. Kent's formula before we carry it back to Moscow."

Chuck threw his head back and screamed in agony as the formula ran rampant in his veins. The green liquid pulsed violently throughout his body, carried along the vast and unending highway of his bloodstream. His muscles began to shake and bulge and the greaser fell to the floor. He rolled back and forth in a chemically induced seizure as the serum went to work. The transformation was horrible and Janice fainted at the very sight of her boyfriend mutating into a gigantic fly monster.

Chuck rolled over onto his knees and held on for dear life as his features... his body changed from human to something more than human... but less than mortal. His arms stretched to the breaking point and he howled in pain. His face melted away and the spiny, mandibled visage of the conqueror fly was left in its stead. His spine rippled and rolled back and forth and protruded from his flesh. And a pair of clear vein-lined wings ripped from his back and fluttered in the air.

Vladimir slapped his knee in jubilation. "Excellent! Our superiors will be well pleased, Igor!"

Chuck, now a ravenous killer-fly... bolted from his chair and grappled the gun wielding Vladimir. The man pumped five shots into the fly man's abdomen, but there was no effect. Chuck lifted the Russian into the air, holding him tightly around the throat. Igor shook himself from his spellbound shock and rammed his bent elbow into the fly's shoulders. There was a crunch and Igor screamed in pain as he fell to the floor, clutching his crooked, and very broken, arm.

Chuck squeezed his claw and Vladimir's head toppled from his neck, amidst a red shower of spewing blood. The head hit the ground and bounced over to Igor. The giant of a man instantly transformed into a snivelling child and he screamed in terror as he stared full into the dead face of his former partner. Vladimir's eyes blinked and the mouth moved as if it were trying to impart final words, but there were no intact vocal cords. The light left the eyes in Vladimir's disembodied head and it was finished.

Igor tried to crawl away, but Chuck pounced on him and lifted him effortlessly above him, pulling him closer. Igor screamed as he saw multiple hellish images of himself in the fly's bulbous eyes.

Chuck drove his mandibles deep into the terrified human's chest and began pumping instinctively into him the digestive juices of a hungry mutant fly. Igor's body began to convulse and great ripples of foaming flesh popped up all over him. The fly tossed his first kill away as the body split open and the red foamy meat pulsed and popped. Then the thing leaned down and calmly began to feed. Janice awoke and as soon as her eyes focused enough to see the horrible ceremony before her, she jumped up and ran for the door, screaming to wake the devil.

Dr. Kent's original fly creature jerked around as soon as it heard the scream, and roared to vibrant life. The beast no longer had a commander, so it looked around, vainly searching for someone to serve. It glanced down and saw its dead master lying nearby.

There were others... mutilated remains of humans being consumed by... a thing like it. A brother? No... not a brother... an enemy... a rival...

Janice tripped over a broken cinder block and tumbled to the floor. The girl... beautiful... tasty... a prize to be taken. Kent's creature turned its attention away from Chuck and eyed her hungrily.

Chuck, the fly that was once a young man, turned his attention to the girl as well. He... it... rose with eyes flashing and its mandibles clicking. It rushed towards Janice... buzzing and ready to kill. But there was still some remnant of memory, a semblance of humanity, in Chuck's possessed mind. He quit his kill... and as he looked at the frightened girl lying on the floor, something happened inside him. Some faint wisp of memory haunted him and he found an unexplainable urge to protect this human female.

The other fly beast lumbered past him. Chuck didn't know why, but he had to stop the other monster from harming this girl. He lashed out suddenly and knocked Kent's beast flat. The thing hit the floor hard and almost immediately, bounced back to its clawed feet with the fly's cruel instinct to destroy rampaging through its brain...

The two monsters of science clashed and the air became choked with an angry buzzing drone that made Janice cover her ears and hide her eyes from the horrible struggle before her. The two creatures circled one another, their wings flapping wildly in the air as they sized one another up and zoomed in for the kill. Mandibles and claws ripped black fur lined flesh that was impenetrable to all except the razor clawed savagery of another fly.

flew closer... planning to swoop down and catch her should she fall from the scientific anomaly's grasp. The beast turned to see Chuck gaining on it. It veered a sharp hard right and sailed downward, in the direction of an old run-down factory. It placed Janice safely onto the roof. She grunted as she landed and scurried to take cover behind the chimney stack.

Then the other fly-creature circled back around to take Chuck out. It lowered its great head and came in at 90 miles per hour; a screeching, kamikaze bug-horror of death from above. Chuck felt the wind leave him as it tackled his frame and took him straight down on a hard, fast b-line for the ground. It was going to crush him to death, to pummel him to gory mush upon impact.

Chuck was disoriented; the night sky, already lightening with the first rays of the rising sun, was sailing by at unheralded speed. The ground came rushing up to meet them, and in the last few seconds of his life, Chuck managed to do one thing... he focused his wandering insect brain on one image: Janice... and he knew that he had to do one final good thing... to save her. In a short life led selfishly, errantly... wantonly, he had finally found something pure and good... something that didn't involve grease and violence. He brought the claw of his right arm up swiftly and drove the razor edge right into the fly-man's eye. There was a wild convulsion, and the thing let go of Chuck, grasping at the yellow ooze dripping from its decimated compound orb. Chuck could feel a thousand tiny receptors wailing in pain.

In the last instant just before impact, Chuck pulled away from the fly-man. His wings worked hard to catapult him like a rocket back up into the sky. Beneath him, he heard the nauseating splat of the thing as it collided with the waiting earth at top speed. The results were deadly... when Chuck looked down, he saw entrails and gallons of yellowish-blood splattered across the field below.

He circled back around and came to a stop on the rooftop of the old factory. Janice lay there against the chimney, staring at him with fear in her eyes. "Chuck?"

Chuck buzzed and nodded. He moved closer to her, but stopped when she drew away. "Chuck... I..."

Chuck stood there, with the rising sun behind him. A healing light dawned on the world and banished the phantoms of the previous night. Janice couldn't take her eyes off him. Something was happening. A change was taking place. The awful face of the fly began to shiver and quake and in a few short seconds, there was only Chuck there, and the promise of a brand-new day.

Janice ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. "Darling... I can't believe it..."

Chuck held the only thing that ever mattered close to him and closer still. He knew at that exact moment that he would never, never let her go. They made their way carefully down the creaking fire escape and walked arm in arm to the road, where Chuck's Indian still waited.

Chuck sighed. "What a night, huh?"

"A night of horror," Janice said.

They stopped in front of the bike and locked their lips into a sticky sweet, passionate kiss. Chuck pushed Janice back and stared into her eyes. "I love you, doll."

Then something came crashing from out of nowhere, knocking Chuck into unconsciousness...

Chuck floated in a nether-world of nightmares where insect men ate children alive, munching on their intestines as they shrieked and clawed at the air. He drowned in dreams polluted by the buzzing horror that would never end.

... then it was daylight and he awoke in a hospital bed.

Chuck was lying in a bed fitted with white sheets, in a white, disinfected room. He glanced down at his arm and saw that there were several tubes protruding from his flesh, hooked into machines. He tried to sit up, but a harsh pain shot through his body and he gave up.

His stomach felt funny. He reached down and rubbed it.

"Good morning." He recognized the soft voice and smiled as Janice sat down easily on the bedside. "How do you feel, love?"

"Better now that you're here," he said, and meant it. They had been through a horrible experience and Chuck knew that it had made their bond even stronger than it had been before. And now, there was no one to protest their engagement.

"That creature wasn't dead," Janice said. "It attacked you just after you transformed back. It was about to get me, too... when it finally collapsed. I fainted and when I awoke, we were riding in the back of the ambulance."

He tried to sit up again, but stopped. "I'm glad you're okay, darling. I... I'm going to buy you a ring when I get out of here... we're goin to have a great wedding, I promise..."

Janice smiled and stroked his hair. "Relax, love... get better first."

"I love you, Janice... sweetheart..."

"I love you, too..."

Sharp, unexplainable pain shot through Chuck's stomach. "Ahg... what the..."

"What is it?"

"I don't know... my stomach..." Chuck lurched forward and pulled himself into a foetal position. He started to gag and cough, but nothing came up. Waves of unchecked agony rolled through his very centre. Janice made him lie back and jerked the cover away. Chuck's belly was pulsating, throbbing spastically. He cried out and tried to massage his stomach as it rippled and pulsated.

"Oh my God," Janice said. "I'm calling the nurse..."

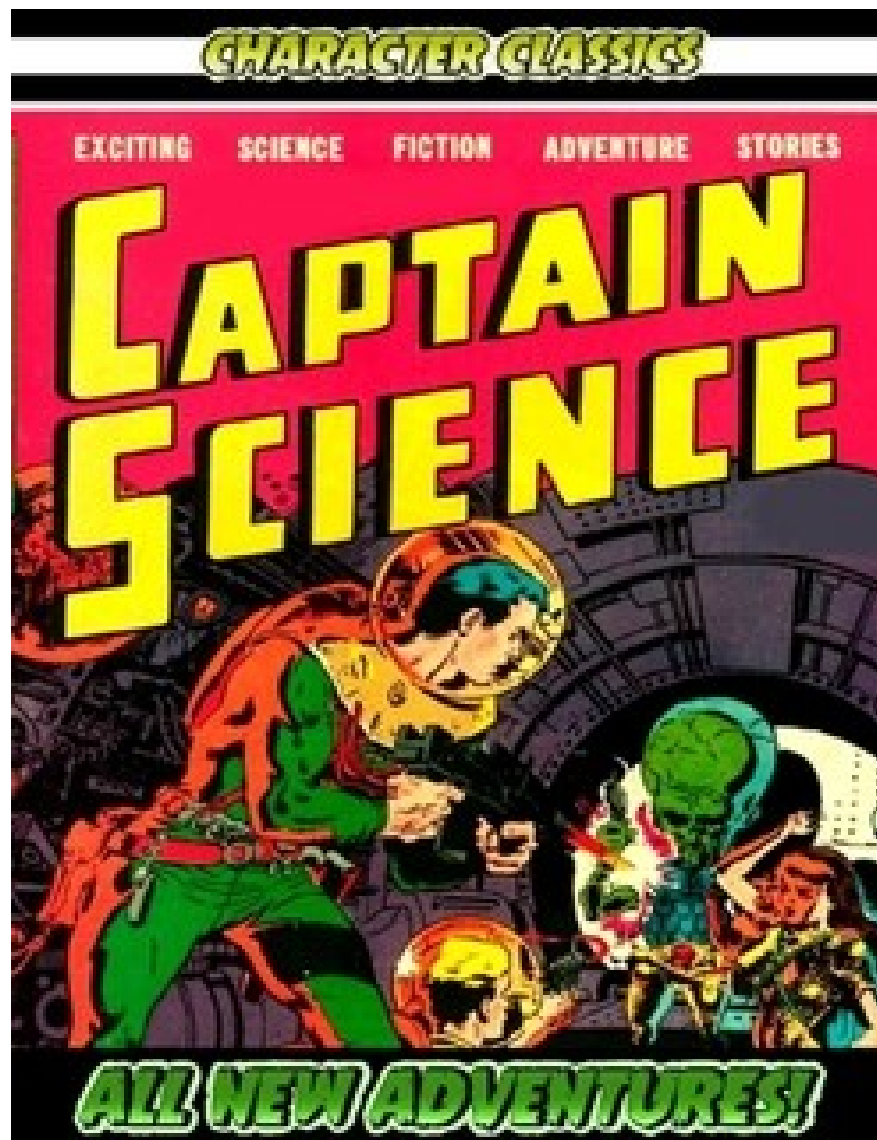
The flesh burst apart from Chuck's stomach and he let out a blood-chilling scream. The blood and entrails oozed freely onto the sheets and right in the centre of the gore was a writhing nest of new-born mutant maggots...

Chuck's children cried and begged for nourishment with short, buzzing-like noises. Their small white heads peered over the ripped edges of the fleshy crater in the centre of his body. The doctor and nurses ran into the room to find Chuck, lying motionless... his blank eyes staring up at the ceiling. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny fly larvae spilled onto the bed and floor, crawling in search of blood nectar.

Janice ceased to be a woman at that exact moment; the horror of the fly creatures made her mind crack and falter. She became like a wild animal, with white-hot brands of panic searing the already strained membranes of her brain until her sanity was all but burned away. She collapsed to the floor and screamed until someone brought her a sedative and she drifted off into blackness with the cursed buzz of the fly ever ringing in her ears.

THE END

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WHEN MONEY CHIMES by GK Murphy

“So,” Joseph Staines barked into the telephone receiver as his anger mounted, “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you the entire morning, and only now, well into the afternoon, you decide to switch your fucking phone on!”

Frederick Rice couldn’t have stressed his apologies enough. “I’m sorry, buddy. But working on Wall Street as a trader and a major investor for Brice and Company can be quite taxing, and I barely have enough time in the day to so much as shit or piss, never mind speak on the phone to you. I’m sorry—okay—I’m sorry!”

In his penthouse in Leicester Square in London, Staines paced the lounge floor as Maria, a local hooker, snorted line after line of cocaine which formed short white streaks on the black-tinted glass coffee-table in the middle of the room. She was completely naked, except for bright red lipstick and the faux fox-fur casually draped over her shoulders, whilst the pretty, blonde twenty-something was as drunk as a skunk due to a heavy drinking session with her rich client, thirty-five-year-old bachelor Joseph Staines.

But just money wasn’t enough for thin, rakish singleton Joseph, since he forever craved and worked towards surmounting more and more, day by day, hour by hour, because more was always better, and indeed, better than the dribs and drabs his interactive brokers in New York and Japan brought in day in day out, hour by hour. He wanted more. Joseph Staines would kill for more.

“Listen,” Joseph told Frederick over the phone, “I invested a good two mill this morning in crude, followed by one mill into the hawkish Fed, and by all standards it was a pitifully woeful overall experience since my broker now informs me overnight banking yields were not forthcoming and the entire three million pounds sterling has been squandered!”

“Shit, man,” Frederick said, “I feel for you. But it’s not like you’ll miss it, my friend. After all, only last Tuesday I heard you bought out a subsidiary of that famous Chinese toymaker for thirty million, and stocks in that firm just went sky-high yesterday and rocketed through the goddamned roof!”

“Oh, I know, I know... but as my father used to say... and even on his death bed before he slipped away... ‘Son, always treat every penny as a prisoner!’”

Frederick chuckled, “Strange thing to say on your deathbed. Unrelenting to the very end, I’d say, eh Joseph? As far as I know Joseph Staines, he sticks by that philosophy. I wish my old dad gave me those words of advice. How old were you at the time?”

“Eleven, so what? Stop changing the subject. I need you to gather stock information, withdraw at least five or six mill from my HSBC account, and invest, invest, invest until I get a winner, then invest more in the same stock until I switch on my broker app and see stimulus in the investment itself, as well as in my fucking bank account!”

Stumped, Frederick said, “No one is yielding right now, my friend. The big money isn’t buying stocks or shares. The money lies in buying brands, companies and property, or splashing out on a new invention of some sort, which to be honest just isn’t happening. I suggest, though, you check out the tech market... Germany and Japan.”

“I tried them this morning. They fucking suck.”

Behind him, Joseph turned to look around as Marie summoned him to come hither. He waved her off, annoyed with his call being disturbed. Chicks like Marie were ten a penny on the market, and having her here now dumfounded him somewhat, since the hooker was a not very cost-effective addict snorting all his coke.

Marie said, “Come over here to Marie, darling. I want to do beautiful things to you. Please, Joseph, please...” and she juggled her tits playfully.

Frederick said, “Have you got a chick there with you, you sly old devil?”

“Never mind, doesn’t matter... you have my thoughts, so go adapt and generate seismic income, and in return I don’t tell your wife about the seven-year-old girl in Tunisia last summer...”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the phone. Frederick finally said, “You wouldn’t dare. Joseph... that would be my ruination... surely not...”

Joseph giggled maliciously. “I want fifty-five income deposited by midnight, or else I send the wolves out looking for you. It won’t be pretty, Frederick.”

“You bastard...”

“I want the money, fifty-five million pounds sterling, or else you know what. And you know I’m a man of his word, and respect the power money can buy daily. Don’t make me do it, Frederick.”

Frederick assured him, “You’ll get it somehow. You’ll get it even if I have to pay it myself...” He paused and cleared his throat, adding, “and I thought you were my friend. One of my best friends, in fact... I would never have guessed... of all people...”

“There are no friends in business, Frederick—of all people, you and I should subscribe to that theory.”

After a pause, the man at Wall Street said, “I suppose that theory proves it is right every time. Shit, I’m stunned...” He paused again, as Joseph looked at the receiver and grinned like a greedy, hungry Cheshire cat, “You do realize something, Joseph? One day, your love of money will kill you. And when it comes like the Grim Reaper to your penthouse door, you will not expect or recognize it.” The line went dead as Frederick hung up and went back to work.

Frederick was gone. A friend was lost and greed was to blame.

Joseph turned to Marie. “Where is your purse, bitch?” He noticed the small black purse on the leather settee, moved in and snatched it up. He opened it and extracted a thick wad of notes, quickly taking them and lining his wallet one ten-pound note after another until it bulged and he glowed with glee.

But he noticed something scary. Marie was lying there on the lounge floor of the towering London penthouse, naked, unconscious and bleeding profusely from her nose and mouth. “Shit...” Joseph said, heading into all-out panic. He began to storm around like a headless chicken running from the chopper, “Please... please... my reputation is on the line... don’t do this to me...”

On his watch, a beautiful young woman was presumably deceased in his home and all he could do was think of his tarnished reputation. So much for that Oxford education, that time dedicated to monetary values ... all for sweet nothing at the end of the day and in an atmosphere where he might even go to prison for the murder of a prostitute. The scandal of it would ruin him. Fuck prison—prison would be a piece of piss—keeping in mind he had enough millions to endure a soft cell.

Then, Hell broke loose...

He stared at the walls of the lounge as they moved nearer and nearer. But the walls were not ordinary penthouse walls—not the ones he knew and peppered with modern cult artwork and modern classics. The walls were now made of pound notes, plastered from corner to corner, floor to ceiling. He surveyed the place in disbelief, looked around in fear and tried to cry out, but the horror was enough to choke him and put him in perpetual silent panic-mode.

There was nothing he could do to hinder the shifting paper-strewn walls closing in, and he knew—this was it, just like Frederick said, the Grim Reaper, in a disguise he never expected the Reaper to adopt to see out all those poor, money-loving, doomed individuals for their greed and worship of quick profit—attaining more and more dollar bills and pound notes. There was a lesson here for everyone. The love of money was a love cursed and bedraggled with agony and pain.

He ran to the vast window and looked outside across the skyline for perhaps the final time. But the City had turned into money. The tall buildings which littered the landscape had turned to cash, as well as every one of the tenements and houses, now constructed of paper, killer British pounds, only these notes grew much bigger as they rapidly moved like phantoms or god-like creatures towards his spot in the City.

For once, he hated money. It took this incident—this predicament—for Joseph Staines to loathe and detest all that he once loved and worshipped in the Temple of Profit and Wealth. If he could have reversed matters, he certainly would have now—he would have worked for nothing, donated money to the poor, to charities... yes indeed he would have been a better and more giving and generous person.

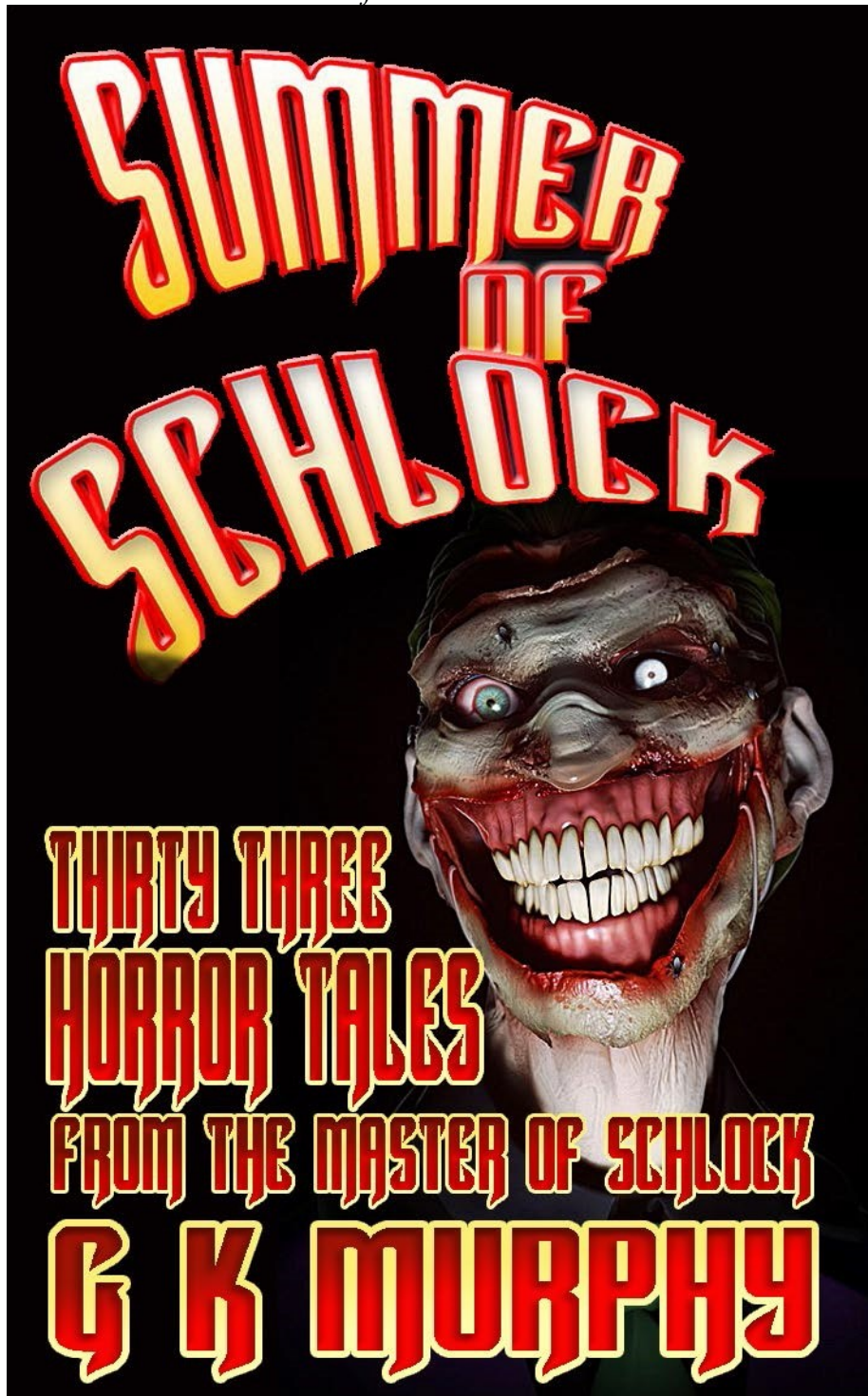
Money would be the death of many, of course. This included Joseph Staines whose life and soul was hopelessly devoted to monetary gain and a healthy profit margin.

At Wall Street in New York, when he heard the news, a surprised Frederick would laugh into his Nero coffee cup and lament the man he once believed was a solid, good friend and business colleague.

As he drained the polystyrene cup, he shrugged and muttered with a sly smile. “Money does make the world go round...” and headed towards the crowded Exchange arena, going back to work.

THE END

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THE LAST RESORT by Gavin Chappell

‘Quickly!’ Gerald panted.

Percy followed him at a run through windswept darkness and searing clouds of grit, scrambling high up into the sandhills. They reached the top of a sandy defile where Gerald halted, looking back down.

Percy followed his gaze. The people on the beach still danced round the fire while others kept watch on the massive rocket ship that lay stranded in the shallows.

‘They didn’t notice us.’ He squeezed seawater from his blue jumpsuit. ‘Get moving. We’ve got to find out what’s happened to those jettisoned fuel pods.’ Without the pods, they’d never get off this dismal planet.

A few minutes’ march across the sandhills and Percy saw several derelict structures standing proud against the night sky. As the wind howled and the two youths crunched their way through the drifts of sand, he saw that they had come to the rusted old ruins of a fairground. Metal structures in faded primary colours, reds, yellows, blues, towered above them in the starlight as they crept closer. Sand half buried them and lichen bearded them. It was a long time since these fairground rides and attractions had functioned.

‘You remember what the guy on the beach called this planet,’ Percy whispered, awed. ‘The Last Resort.’

‘Never mind that,’ Gerald told him impatiently. ‘We’ve got to find some way to locate the fuel pods.’ They picked their way through the rusting, sand-drowned old structures. ‘What was our flight path? Did we fly over this area?’

‘All I remember is we flew across the sea,’ Percy said as the wind moaned eerily amongst the metal structures. ‘Most of this planet seems to be ocean, with just a few sandy islands like this one. If it wasn’t for the constant wind, I can see why it might have been a popular resort once.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve got no idea why we crashed here.’

Gerald grunted. ‘A fault in our guidance computers, they said. Doesn’t matter. What matters is it also made us jettison our fuel pods, and unless we can get them back—or replacements—we won’t be able to warn the rebel fleet that the Imperials are on their way.’

‘Replacements!’ said Percy sardonically.

They came out into a plaza, whose bright, colourful paves were half covered by drifts of sand. Rundown old shops surrounded it, their windows broken, the over-priced novelty tat they’d doubtless been selling long gone. Looted by the Halcyons, Percy guessed, the locals who had wanted to plunder the *Venus* when it crashed.

Behind the shops was an administration building, a functional tower block seemingly at odds with the festive architecture they’d encountered so far. They investigated it, but got no further than the lobby, where shattered glass from the glass doors lay in shards mixed with sand and grit, and the ammonia stench of human urine hung heavy in the air. Maybe this was the lair of the natives. Certainly, there was no sign of jettisoned fuel pods.

A broken metal girder, hanging off the side of the administration building, clanged monotonously against the wall as it was blown in the wind. The notes tolled out like the peal of some great bell.

‘Looks like there’s no one here,’ Gerald said.

Beyond it was a walled compound with a large rusty door with a small, discreet sign, barely legible with rust, saying: Private—Funfair Staff Only. A trail of caterpillar tracks, half obscured by the drifts of windblown sand, led straight up to it.

‘I think Halcyons live in that place,’ Percy said, indicating the administration building with his thumb. ‘But what’s this?’ He reached forward and tried the door. It was locked.

‘Seized up,’ Gerald suggested. Percy bent closer.

He looked up significantly after examining the lock. ‘Not seized up,’ he said. ‘This lock is still working. And there are lights on inside this building.’

‘Out of the way then!’ Gerald ordered, pushing Percy to one side and producing his blaster. He fired at the door.

It blew open. Inside was a hallway, lit by flickering oil lamps that hung from the riveted ceiling by chains. Muddy tracks led down the passage towards an intersection. The whole place had the look of some kind of scientific establishment.

‘No, doesn’t look like we’ll find the fuel pods here,’ Percy said. ‘They’re probably floating out to sea.’

‘Maybe we’ll find replacements.’ Gerald stepped in out of the wind. ‘Something’s going on here.’

The hush within was quite a relief. Going through a doorway they came into a small office. On the far side was a window, covered by grime and cobwebs. Gerald approached it and rubbed away the filth. Percy joined him and together they peered out into a wide shaft. Down below was a wide flat area in the middle of which stood a partly dismantled spacecraft. On the far side was a large globular tank from which hung several hoses. One was attached to the spacecraft’s hull.

‘Now this looks promising,’ Percy said excitedly. ‘Maybe we stand a chance of getting off-planet now.’

A voice wheezed from behind them. ‘Stay where you are!’

Going for his blaster, Percy swung round. He saw a tall, wild-eyed old man with long white hair and a matted beard, with a young girl at his side. Seeing Percy’s hand move, the young girl produced a plasma pistol and shot the blaster out of his fingers. Gerald drew his own blaster. The young girl swung round to cover him.

‘Wreckers!’ she spat. ‘Come to scavenge Uncle’s supplies! Ha! We’ll escape this planet now! We’ll leave you all behind—now we’ve got the catalyst!’

‘Drop the gun,’ Gerald commanded. ‘Percy, pick up your blaster.’

As Percy moved to comply, the girl swung round and fired off a burst. In return, Gerald loosed off a warning shot that scorched the ceiling above her head.

The old man, who had been standing stock still, stirred now.

‘These aren’t wreckers, Andrade,’ he breathed. ‘They’re off-worlders. Look at their clothes, listen to the funny way they talk. At last! Off-worlders, come to help us escape.’

Gerald and Percy exchanged glances. ‘We’re really looking to escape ourselves,’ Gerald said. ‘We’ve got urgent business beyond this star system.’

‘Your ship was wrecked?’ asked Andrade.

Percy nodded. ‘Our guidance computer developed a fault. Well, not a fault. The pilots ran diagnostics and they showed no sign of any fault. But we drifted off course and crashed.’

The old man nodded. ‘That was how we came here, Andrade and I and my sister and her husband. We survived the crash, but Andrade’s parents died defending us from the Reverend and his wreckers. Come with me.’

He turned and led them from the room and into a larger chamber further down the corridor, lit by guttering oil lamps. Here Andrade produced cracked old plastic chairs and some rough spirit from a flask before inviting them to drink and sit down. Percy took a sip from the beaker, then put it down discreetly on a packing crate table.

Rubbing the tears from his eyes he said, ‘Who is the Reverend? And who are the wreckers? And what is the place? They called it the Last Resort.’

Andrade sipped at her drink without showing any ill effects. As she spoke, Percy told himself that she must have a gut made of tin to stomach that stuff.

‘Halcyon, once a beautiful planet of sandy beaches and rolling turquoise seas, was developed as a resort for space travellers. They came from near and far, throughout the worlds of the Circassian Trading Agreement. This system, Baius Minor, was a major centre before the focus of interplanetary trade moved to the Gamma Sarmisegethuza system. Then Planet Kherson went into terminal recession and the traders moved on to Obakin.

‘Without staff to maintain it, weather control broke down on Halcyon and the winds laid it waste. The inhabitants scratched a desperate living among the sandhills. Then one man learnt how to adapt the old space traffic control system to lure passing ships off-course, so they would crash on the planet and could be looted. That man was the Reverend. He had served as a temple priest in the holiday wedding zone and had the technical knowledge to corrupt the systems and use them to the benefit of his flock.’

The old man added, 'My family were on our way to a new life in another system after the failure of my spacecraft-building line on Kherson. We were driven off course before crash-landing on this planet. For years I have laboured to build a small craft capable of taking myself and my niece off-planet. Now, using the fuel pods Andrade found on the shore, we will be able to escape! I wish there was enough room in the craft for more than two, but we need room for enough fuel to take us to Gamma Sarmisegethuza.'

'Fuel pods?' Percy sat up. 'You found fuel pods on the shore?'

Gerald looked at Andrade, impressed. 'If you found fuel pods on the shore and carried them back here,' he said, 'you're stronger than you look.'

She gave him a withering look. 'I brought them here with my halftrack,' she said. 'I didn't carry them by hand. They're in the stores.'

'Hey, those must be our fuel pods!' Percy said. 'We've been looking for them. We need them back. We've got to get beyond this star system and our ship crashed here. I suppose it was the Reverend who did it. During the crash, our fuel pods were jettisoned. We need them.'

'But I need them too,' said Andrade's uncle, who had introduced himself as Karbuncle. He waved his hands around. 'This facility includes a disused antimatter generator plant. I've been trying to synthesise antimatter for years. The spacecraft I cobbled together is designed to use matter/antimatter fuel. But I needed a catalyst: I needed antimatter to begin the reaction.'

'I hoped to salvage some from one of the wrecked ships, but the Reverend and his wreckers always got there before me. They squandered the fuel to power the beam on the space traffic control tower so they could bring ships from further and further away as the system grew less and less populated and fewer ships passed by.'

'You want our fuel pods,' Percy said slowly, 'so you can get off this planet? Hey, if you help us, we can take you off the planet ourselves. We've got a ship.'

'And you'll take us to Gamma Sarmisegethuza?' Andrade asked. 'I thought you said you've got urgent business on the other side of this star system.'

Percy and Gerald looked at each other. 'We've got to warn the rebel space fleet that the Imperials are coming for them,' Gerald explained. 'If we don't do that, they could be taken by surprise. It might mean the end of the rebellion.'

'What rebellion?' Andrade asked suspiciously. 'Against the Circassians?'

'No,' said Percy impatiently. 'Against the Imperials.'

'You're rebelling against the entire Galactic Empire?' Uncle Karbuncle gaped. 'And you'd take us off planet in your ship—straight into a war?' He shook his head. 'You may be out of your minds, but my niece and I are not. We'll use the antimatter to begin creating fuel for our craft in this old generator plant, and once we have enough, we will depart.'

'What about us?' Percy complained.

The old man shook his head. 'We owe you nothing. All my niece and I want to do is get away from this planet and back into civilised space where we have a chance to prosper. We're not interested in war, or rebellion. In fact, it would be quite against our interests. How can we profit from war?'

Gerald rose to his feet, angry, but Andrade pointed her plasma pistol at him and he sat down again, muttering.

'Is that all you're interested in, profit?' Percy snapped. 'This galaxy is ruled by a woman who will happily destroy entire stars to prove a point. What if she turned her attention to the Circassian worlds? How would you profit if she destroyed Gamma Sarmisegethuza?'

He told them how the Empress had crushed the Terran nationalist rebellion against the Septizodians by destroying the Sun, how in turn it had inspired the Septizodians to throw their lot in with the Terrans and begin a war of rebellion against the Empire. How they had come to these worlds to seize control of the antimatter generating plants to fuel their ships in the ongoing voyage to Galactic Centre.

Uncle Karbuncle listened carefully. 'You have a fleet? You need fuel? And the Circassians—you couldn't defeat them.'

Gerald said, 'We need fuel. The Circassians are covertly supporting us but they don't have the balls to come out and admit it yet. Anyway, we have to warn the fleet that the Pheringian Freebooters are on their way. We must get off this planet and go to the rendezvous point.'

'So the Circassians are joining the rebellion,' said the old man thoughtfully. 'But will they provide you with the fuel you need?'

Percy looked at Gerald. 'I hope so,' he said. 'The only way we can find out is if we get off this planet. There's plenty of room for you two on the ship. You want to get off the planet...'

'... but not into the middle of a war,' Uncle Karbuncle reminded him. 'Now I wonder if it might not be to our better advantage if we remained here.'

'Uncle!' Andrade exclaimed. 'We've been waiting for this moment for years. I can't even remember a day when I was not living on this planet in the hope of leaving it to return to the universe you described in your stories. Honestly, I don't understand you. All we need to do is produce enough matter/antimatter fuel. We have the resources. Now we even have antimatter to begin the process...'

Uncle Karbuncle gave her a wintry smile. 'Let me use my wits, child,' he said. He turned back to Percy and Gerald. 'I only need some of your fuel to begin the process, of course. Sadly, it will be more than you will require to get to your rendezvous point.'

He raised his hand as Percy and Gerald both began talking at once. 'But if you let me begin fuel production, in return I will rebuild the plant entirely. I will even employ the wreckers, if they are willing, give them something better to occupy their time. And I will supply your rebel fleet. In return, you will ensure that this planet is rebuilt, weather control is begun

again—and of course, with the wreckers properly employed, they will no longer misuse space traffic control.’

‘Okay,’ said Percy slowly. ‘But we’d better run it past the other guys first.’

A quarter of an hour later, they were standing amid the sandhills, looking down on the beach where the wreckers watched over the crashed *Venus* that sprawled in the shallows like the toppled tower of some castle of the Titans.

There had been developments since their departure. As they watched, the wreckers waded through the water towards the crashed ship while the Reverend stood atop a dune, his robes fluttering madly in the storm, waving them on with his broad-brimmed hat while he bellowed half-heard encouragement. As the wreckers swarmed up onto the rocket ship’s fuselage, the Terrans under Mad Jackal opened fire on them with pulse rifles.

‘Oh no!’ said Uncle Karbuncle despairingly. ‘What has the Reverend done?’ He turned to Percy. ‘They’re not bad people, you know, just easily led. Without the Reverend, they would be better...’ The wreckers were fighting the Terrans on the rocket ship’s hull now, and already bodies were bobbing in the shallows.

‘We’d better do something,’ Gerald muttered.

Percy pointed at the Reverend. ‘Take him prisoner,’ he said and led them down the sandhill in a sprint.

Gerald ran at his side while Andrade followed, helping her uncle down the flank of the dune. As they crept closer, they heard the Reverend’s words. The man had immense presence, a great booming voice.

‘Kill them all! They’re off-worlders! They’d happily rob us! Plunder them! Take their riches! Steal... Oh.’ He broke off abruptly when Percy rammed his blaster muzzle in the Reverend’s back.

The Reverend turned, looking disconcerted behind black glasses. ‘Who are you, lad?’ he roared. ‘Take that gun away from my ribs... Who’s this? Another?’ Gerald joined Percy, his gun aimed at the Reverend. ‘Who are you, lads?’

As the fight between wreckers and Terrans boiled on in the shallows, Uncle Karbuncle limped panting with Andrade’s aid to join them.

‘They’re with me, Reverend,’ he wheezed.

The Reverend looked scornful. ‘You! Old man, I’ve had words with you before. I tolerate you, because my Halcyons have a soft spot for the mad old man and his little girl. Cross me again and I’ll have you staked out beneath the low water mark and left for the crustaceans.’

‘You’re a sadist and a fool, Reverend,’ Uncle Karbuncle panted as Andrade kept her own gun trained on the sneering holy man. ‘This planet could be rebuilt, if there was enough money.’

‘The money’s gone,’ the Reverend sneered. ‘Our only visitors are barbarians like these.’

‘Bring him,’ Uncle Karbuncle ordered. They took the Reverend by his arms and hustled him complaining down to the shore by the guttering fires. Here Uncle Karbuncle shouted to the wreckers:

‘Leave them be! These off-worlders are not here to harm us but to help. They will return this world to the paradise it lost.’

‘Stop shooting, you guys!’ Percy shouted.

Slowly the fight on the hull subsided. One of the wreckers shouted, ‘How will they do that?’

Uncle Karbuncle began to explain but the Reverend interrupted. ‘They come to plunder! Fight back!’ The wreckers muttered angrily.

‘Shut it,’ Percy told the Reverend, but he paid no attention.

‘Plunder what?’ someone else shouted. ‘We have nothing.’

‘Fight back!’ the Reverend insisted. ‘Fight...!’

Abruptly, gunfire rang out. Dragged from Percy and Gerald’s hands by his own weight, the Reverend fell with a thump to the sand, a neat hole drilled in his brow. Uncle Karbuncle turned around in horror.

Andrade holstered her plasma gun.

‘What are you doing?’ Uncle Karbuncle wailed. ‘There’s to be no more killing!’

‘That man was behind all this,’ Andrade said. ‘I’d have killed him before if it wasn’t for you. There’s no reasoning with these Halcyons.’

‘But the Halcyons...!’ Uncle Karbuncle said. ‘You’ve turned them against us.’

The wreckers waded out of the water to inspect the Reverend’s fallen corpse. One of them touched his cooling cheek with a cautious hand, then rose and looked in awe at Andrade.

‘Tell us how you will return this world to paradise,’ the wrecker demanded. He stirred the Reverend’s body with his foot. ‘He always said it was impossible. That we must lead virtuous lives in this vale of tears in hope of a better afterlife. And yet it was he who led us to plunder crashed spacecraft.’

‘Listen to me...’ said Uncle Karbuncle as the rest of the Halcyons gathered round him.

Percy drew away, and Gerald followed him. On the edge of the beach they were greeted by their fellow rebel Mad Jackal, who had waded ashore.

‘What’s going on here?’ he asked. ‘One moment they were trying to kill us, then they withdrew. What did you say?’

‘It wasn’t them,’ said Andrade proudly, who had also followed Percy. ‘It was my uncle. He’s going to build us a new life here.’

‘With our help,’ Percy pointed out. ‘They’ve got an old antimatter generating plant. All Uncle Karbuncle needs is some of our antimatter fuel and he can begin generating more. We’ll have enough for the whole fleet.’

‘You found the fuel pods?’ Mad Jackal asked.

‘I found the fuel pods,’ Andrade confirmed. Mad Jackal bowed to her out of respect.

‘So now we have the Halcyons of this forsaken world on our side,’ said the commander, sprawling in the command chair aboard the *Venus*. ‘A handful of synthiprotein from our stores and they were eating out of our hands. But you really believe they are capable of generating fuel for our fleet?’

‘Yes,’ said Gerald, ‘and in the meantime, they’re going to prepare our ship for launching. When enough fuel has been created for our needs, we will be able to reach the rendezvous point. Then, with all that fuel, who knows?’

‘We could go to meet the Pheringians, ambush them as they hyperjump here,’ said the co-pilot. ‘You see, the Imperial forces will not be able to make it to this sector of space in one hyperjump, but instead will be making a series of jumps.’

She showed them a star chart that detailed all the sectors of the galaxy between here and the centre. ‘If we can plot out where and when they will be once we have the fleet refuelled,’ she added, ‘we could fly out to meet them.’

It took several days for the antimatter generating plant to produce enough fuel to compensate for that used by Uncle Karbuncle as a catalyst, in which time those Halcyons not labouring in the plant worked together to create a launching gantry as best they could from the rusting remnants of old fairground rides. Once this was done, the *Venus* was dragged from the shallows and placed end on beside the gantry. Finally, Uncle Karbuncle reappeared from his plant, driving a halftrack that was the best way to get across the sands of the atoll. In the truck compartment, he carried the jettisoned fuel pods.

It had been pleasant to have a relatively stress free few days working with the ex-wreckers. Several of the Halcyons and a few of the Terrans had died during the fight for the rocket ship, and they were all buried in the sands on the first night. Uncle Karbuncle gave an inspiring oration, promising great advances for the planet. Even Andrade seemed moved.

And now they were almost ready to take off. The co-pilot supervised the installation of the fuel pods. Percy watched quietly from the sandhills, Andrade at his side.

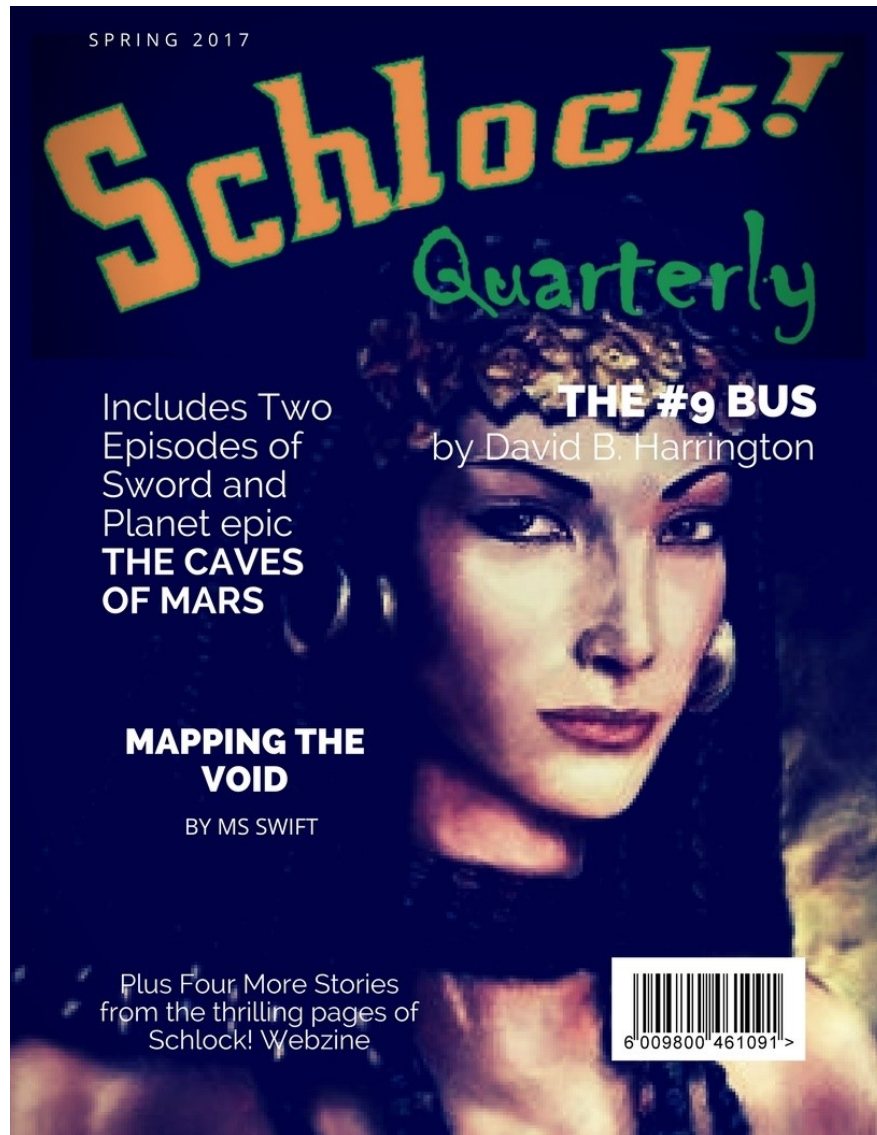
‘You’ll be leaving soon,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ Percy grunted awkwardly. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Come back some day,’ she murmured, then turned and quickly walked away.

He stood staring after her in surprise, thinking about his future.

THE END



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HELLGATE by Steven Havelock

Zac stood on the bridge, ready to throw himself from the top.

Two Weeks previously

Email from alanward@newscience.org.uk

Dear Jennifer,

If you are reading this then I'm already dead. This is a failsafe email designed to be sent out if I don't log in for ten days.

They've finally done it, despite my objections and criticism of the dangers. They did it anyway.

The gates to hell have been opened and the Antichrist is on his way here! I know this sounds unbelievable but it is absolutely true.

Just then a message appeared across Zac's screen and a loud beeping sounded.

INTRUDER ALERT!! INTRUDER ALERT!! INTRUDER ALERT!!

Holy shit!

Zac pulled the plug on his computer. The machine died with a low whine.

One month previously

Zac was a hacker, not the best in the world but competent.

I've done it! I've broken into a top-secret government scientific research site! Just wait until the rest of the Earth Storm crew here about this!

Zac had hacked into the research facility and added himself to the facilities email contact list, of one of its most famous scientists.

One year previously

BEEEP!! BEEEP!! BEEEP!!

Zac opened his eyes and looked at the luminous green digital clock on the bedside table next to him.

Oh my God! Is that the time? I'm late!

Zac jumped out of bed, slipped on his shirt and jeans and was out of the door without so much as a drink of tea, never mind breakfast.

Five minutes later he was at the local mental health centre to have his injection of Risperidone.

On the buttocks, like always; slightly humiliating, but it did the trick.

The injection stopped the nightmares and psychotic delusions, if only for a short time. Without the meds, he'd been suicidal and psychotic as hell. He'd thought the secret service was after him. And yet he had committed no crime except that of a low-level hacker.

They surely can't be after me for hacking into my ex-girlfriend's computer. I erased all my tracks.

His ex was a sore point and he didn't discuss it with anyone; not his friends and not his family—not that he had any family that he was on speaking terms with. He'd hacked into her computer and found out she had been cheating on him with a guy who worked at the local bank.

He had been livid when he found out and then he'd done it, hacked into his girlfriend's uni database and changed her degree from a first to a third, but it hadn't abated his rage. Next, he'd hacked into her driving file at the DVLA and given her 12 points on her license. She was no longer able to drive.

A smile spread across his normally serious face. *Revenge is sweet.*

Then the police found him standing on the bridge, ready to throw himself from the top.

Suicide!!

It was a way out of the total nightmare his life had become. The nightmares were fresh and visceral, like nothing he had experienced ever before. So terrifying that he could barely think of them.

Fear!! Utter and total fear!! The kind of fear you get when you realise you are about to die.

The police had taken him to the local mental hospital and there he had spent several months slowly coming to terms with his demons.

I haven't had a pleasant life, he thought. My mother died of cancer when I was eight and my dad had to give up work to look after me.

I know my dad always resented giving up work to look after her. Maybe that's why he took the belt to me and made my life a misery. I endured the regular beatings until I was old enough to get out and run away...

He had found himself homeless and on the streets.

No place for a young 15-year-old boy to be.

He had met many people from all walks of life, from teachers who had cracked with the stress from their jobs, to lazy layabout bums who just sat and drank their worries away, day after day.

Many of the homeless he'd seen around him had succumbed to the lure of illicit and illegal drugs, to wash away their cares and pain.

I'm smarter than that.

He avoided taking the drugs, seeing what they'd done to their regular users, the women becoming working girls and the men burglars and muggers, most with criminal records longer than their arms.

Eventually... Eventually his case worker had managed to get him a flat.

For once I'm safe... safe and happy.

He had always had a keen interest in computers and computer games.

Now, I have my own place and my own computer!

His father had never let him play computer games and he remembered the pain he had felt when he'd seen the games in the shops or on the TV ads.

Eventually, he had the one thing he had wanted for so long; his own place and a computer and some of the best games he could have ever hoped to play. He spent night after night on the computer, playing games to his heart's content.

Just one problem, he thought. I'm never content. I play night after night and day after day and yet never get bored.

Then he'd come across a game that would change his life in a big way. The game was called 'Hack.IT'; a game which taught people how to hack.

Six months down the line and he was an experienced, if new, hacker.

Then the nightmares started. Nightmares about demons and the Antichrist .
I've never told anyone of my nightmares... never... until now...

The occupational therapist's name was Megan and he was hooked on her from the first moment he saw her. Her kind, compassionate manner touched something in Zac.

All I've ever known after my mum's death is aggression and violence.

Slowly over the weeks he was in hospital Megan's manner seduced him so totally and that he would do anything for her... anything... even tell her his deepest and personal fears.

"Mankind is blinkered and opening the door to hell, once that door is opened humanity is doomed!" he'd said to her one Wednesday afternoon in a private appointment.

Little did he know, she was recording everything he told her and writing it down in his medical notes. And then he'd told her something he had never told anyone else.

He'd told her about his hacking.

She hadn't reacted, but later when he hacked into the mental health centre's computers, he read she'd written he was 'a dangerous risk' to companies and government organisations due to his psychotic delusions of a secret society trying to bring the Antichrist to this world.

Email from alanward@newscience.org.uk

Dear Jennifer,

This is the second failsafe email my computer has been programmed to send out.

The scientists have finally done the unthinkable. If you receive this email please spread the message as far and wide as possible.

The countdown timer has begun. They have opened the gate to hell and the Antichrist is on his way.

If you are receiving this message then I am already dead. So don't try to look for me. I will be as brief as possible. The Antichrist's arrival on Earth is going to be around September 2017.

YOU MUST GET THE MESSAGE OUT!!

Close down the doorway to hell before it's too late!!

Present Day

Zac and the other two members of *Earth Storm* parked in the particle collider's car park. They entered through a side entrance and headed for the toilets. Once there, they changed into white scientific overalls they had brought with them in their sports bags.

"There's no going back!" said Zac to the other two.

Lisa, the youngest, looked deathly pale and frightened as hell. Then there was Marcus, a well-built dark-haired male who spent as much time on the rugby field as on his computer.

They had already studied the schematics of the building and knew exactly the location of the control room to the 'Hell Gate' as they had termed it.

Then they were there. At the main control room for the Hell Gate. As they entered, three scientists turned around in surprise which quickly turned to fear as Zac and his group pulled out guns.

I hope to hell they can't tell that they're replicas, thought Zac.

Within seconds the scientists who didn't offer any resistance were tied up hands and feet by cable ties.

Zac saw the countdown timer on the computer screen on the far wall. They walked over and looked at the controls, which looked like complete gobbledygook. There were numbers next to more numbers which were next to more numbers.

"What the hell do we do now?" asked Marcus, just as stumped as Zac and Lisa.

Then the unthinkable happened. The facility's alarm sounded.

"Oh my God!" said Lisa, white and terrified with fright. "They know we're here!"

Marcus noticed something. "That piece of shit has got a mobile behind his back!"

Zac did the unthinkable.

There's no way to disable the hell gate.

"We got to get out of here now!" Zac screamed.

One corner of the facility had CCTV screens, and he saw several people in black suits with guns heading their way. Zac turned and fled, not looking to see if the others were following.

That was one week ago. Lisa and Marcus hadn't made it out alive. Zac had just reached their car in time, and, not waiting for the others, had sped away. He was grateful that Lisa had had the brains and sense to use a cloned license plate on their car.

Zac stood on the bridge looking down at his death. He glanced at the countdown timer on his watch. 1:35 until the arrived.

How could we have been so stupid? Three young kids thinking they could beat some of the best and smartest people in the world.

A police car down below. Don't they realise their lives in approximately one minute are about to change forever? That they will have to kneel and bow to the Antichrist or face death?

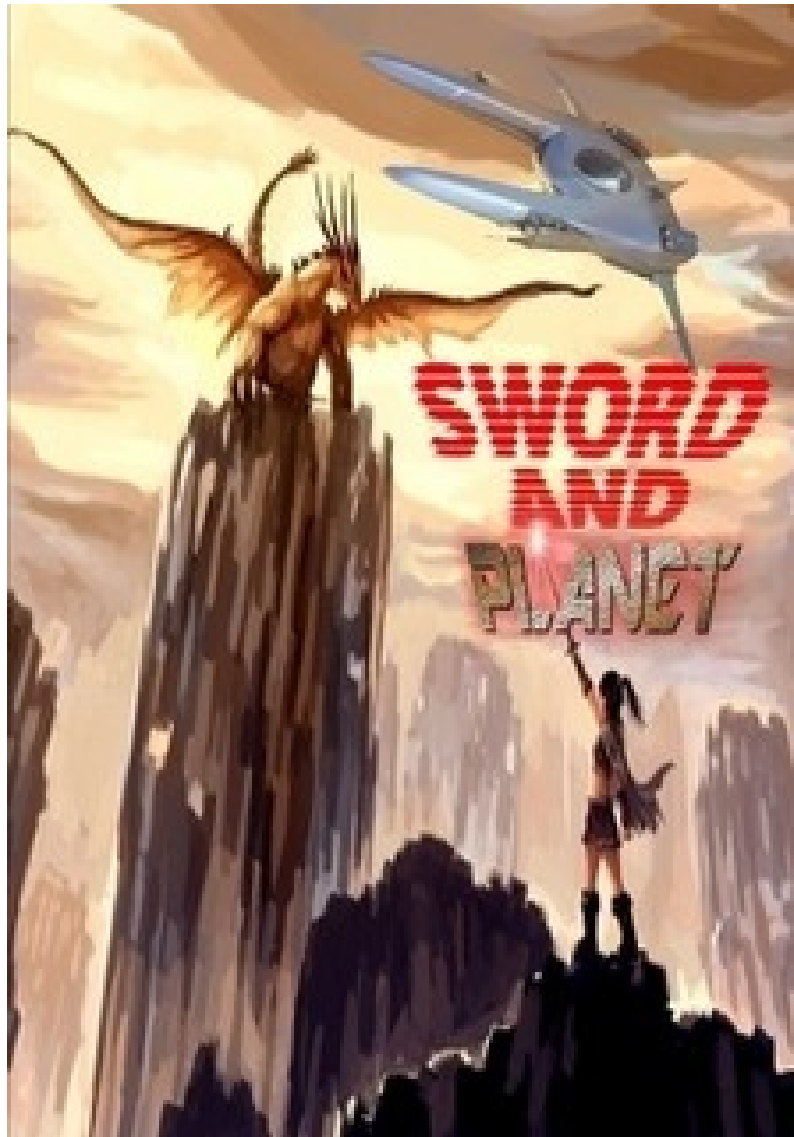
He saw the seconds tick by, 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

He stepped forward.

THE END.

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ÆPYORNIS ISLAND by HG Wells

The man with the scarred face leant over the table and looked at my bundle.

“Orchids?” he asked.

“A few,” I said.

“Cypripediums,” he said.

“Chiefly,” said I.

“Anything new? I thought not. I did these islands twenty-five—twenty-seven years ago. If you find anything new here—well, it’s brand new. I didn’t leave much.”

“I’m not a collector,” said I.

“I was young then,” he went on. “Lord! how I used to fly round.” He seemed to take my measure. “I was in the East Indies two years, and in Brazil seven. Then I went to Madagascar.”

“I know a few explorers by name,” I said, anticipating a yarn. “Whom did you collect for?”

“Dawson’s. I wonder if you’ve heard the name of Butcher ever?”

“Butcher—Butcher?” The name seemed vaguely present in my memory; then I recalled Butcher v. Dawson. “Why!” said I, “you are the man who sued them for four years’ salary—got cast away on a desert island...”

“Your servant,” said the man with the scar, bowing. “Funny case, wasn’t it? Here was me, making a little fortune on that island, doing nothing for it neither, and them quite unable to give me notice. It often used to amuse me thinking over it while I was there. I did calculations of it—big—all over the blessed atoll in ornamental figuring.”

“How did it happen?” said I. “I don’t rightly remember the case.”

“Well... You’ve heard of the Æpyornis?”

“Rather. Andrews was telling me of a new species he was working on only a month or so ago. Just before I sailed. They’ve got a thigh bone, it seems, nearly a yard long. Monster the thing must have been!”

“I believe you,” said the man with the scar. “It was a monster. Sinbad’s roc was just a legend of ‘em. But when did they find these bones?”

“Three or four years ago—’91, I fancy. Why?”

“Why? Because I found them—Lord!—it’s nearly twenty years ago. If Dawson’s hadn’t been silly about that salary they might have made a perfect ring in ‘em... I couldn’t help the infernal boat going adrift.”

He paused. "I suppose it's the same place. A kind of swamp about ninety miles north of Antananarivo. Do you happen to know? You have to go to it along the coast by boats. You don't happen to remember, perhaps?" "I don't. I fancy Andrews said something about a swamp."

"It must be the same. It's on the east coast. And somehow there's something in the water that keeps things from decaying. Like creosote it smells. It reminded me of Trinidad. Did they get any more eggs? Some of the eggs I found were a foot-and-a-half long. The swamp goes circling round, you know, and cuts off this bit. It's mostly salt, too. Well... What a time I had of it! I found the things quite by accident. We went for eggs, me and two native chaps, in one of those rum canoes all tied together, and found the bones at the same time. We had a tent and provisions for four days, and we pitched on one of the firmer places. To think of it brings that odd tarry smell back even now. It's funny work. You go probing into the mud with iron rods, you know. Usually the egg gets smashed. I wonder how long it is since these *Æpyornises* really lived. The missionaries say the natives have legends about when they were alive, but I never heard any such stories myself.¹ But certainly those eggs we got were as fresh as if they had been new laid. Fresh! Carrying them down to the boat one of my nigger chaps dropped one on a rock and it smashed. How I lammed into the beggar! But sweet it was, as if it was new laid, not even smelly, and its mother dead these four hundred years, perhaps. Said a centipede had bit him. However, I'm getting off the straight with the story. It had taken us all day to dig into the slush and get these eggs out unbroken, and we were all covered with beastly black mud, and naturally I was cross. So far as I knew they were the only eggs that have ever been got out not even cracked. I went afterwards to see the ones they have at the Natural History Museum in London; all of them were cracked and just stuck together like a mosaic, and bits missing. Mine were perfect, and I meant to blow them when I got back. Naturally I was annoyed at the silly duffer dropping three hours' work just on account of a centipede. I hit him about rather."

The man with the scar took out a clay pipe. I placed my pouch before him. He filled up absent-mindedly.

"How about the others? Did you get those home? I don't remember—"

"That's the queer part of the story. I had three others. Perfectly fresh eggs. Well, we put 'em in the boat, and then I went up to the tent to make some coffee, leaving my two heathens down by the beach—the one fooling about with his sting and the other helping him. It never occurred to me that the beggars would take advantage of the peculiar position I was in to pick a quarrel. But I suppose the centipede poison and the kicking I had given him had upset the one—he was always a cantankerous sort—and he persuaded the other.

"I remember I was sitting and smoking and boiling up the water over a spirit-lamp business I used to take on these expeditions. Incidentally I was admiring the swamp under the sunset. All black and blood-red it was, in streaks—a beautiful sight. And up beyond the land rose grey and hazy to the hills, and the sky behind them red, like a furnace mouth. And fifty yards behind the back of me was these blessed heathen—quite regardless of the tranquil air of things—plotting to cut off with the boat and leave me all alone with three days' provisions

¹ No European is known to have seen a live *Æpyornis*, with the doubtful exception of MacAndrew, who visited Madagascar in 1745. —H. G. W.

and a canvas tent, and nothing to drink whatsoever beyond a little keg of water. I heard a kind of yelp behind me, and there they were in this canoe affair—it wasn't properly a boat—and, perhaps, twenty yards from land. I realised what was up in a moment. My gun was in the tent, and, besides, I had no bullets—only duck shot. They knew that. But I had a little revolver in my pocket, and I pulled that out as I ran down to the beach.

“‘Come back!’ says I, flourishing it.

“They jabbered something at me, and the man that broke the egg jeered. I aimed at the other—because he was unwounded and had the paddle, and I missed. They laughed. However, I wasn't beat. I knew I had to keep cool, and I tried him again and made him jump with the whang of it. He didn't laugh that time. The third time I got his head, and over he went, and the paddle with him. It was a precious lucky shot for a revolver. I reckon it was fifty yards. He went right under. I don't know if he was shot, or simply stunned and drowned. Then I began to shout to the other chap to come back, but he huddled up in the canoe and refused to answer. So I fired out my revolver at him and never got near him. “I felt a precious fool, I can tell you. There I was on this rotten, black beach, flat swamp all behind me, and the flat sea, cold after the sun set, and just this black canoe drifting steadily out to sea. I tell you I damned Dawsons and Jamrachs and Museums and all the rest of it just to rights. I bawled to this nigger to come back, until my voice went up into a scream.

“There was nothing for it but to swim after him and take my luck with the sharks. So I opened my clasp-knife and put it in my mouth, and took off my clothes and waded in. As soon as I was in the water I lost sight of the canoe, but I aimed, as I judged, to head it off. I hoped the man in it was too bad to navigate it, and that it would keep on drifting in the same direction. Presently it came up over the horizon again to the south-westward about. The afterglow of sunset was well over now and the dim of night creeping up. The stars were coming through the blue. I swum like a champion, though my legs and arms were soon aching.

“However, I came up to him by the time the stars were fairly out. As it got darker I began to see all manner of glowing things in the water—phosphorescence, you know. At times it made me giddy. I hardly knew which was stars and which was phosphorescence, and whether I was swimming on my head or my heels. The canoe was as black as sin, and the ripple under the bows like liquid fire. I was naturally chary of clambering up into it. I was anxious to see what he was up to first. He seemed to be lying cuddled up in a lump in the bows, and the stern was all out of water. The thing kept turning round slowly as it drifted—kind of waltzing, don't you know. I went to the stern and pulled it down, expecting him to wake up. Then I began to clamber in with my knife in my hand, and ready for a rush. But he never stirred. So there I sat in the stern of the little canoe, drifting away over the calm phosphorescent sea, and with all the host of the stars above me, waiting for something to happen.

“After a long time I called him by name, but he never answered. I was too tired to take any risks by going along to him. So we sat there. I fancy I dozed once or twice. When the dawn came I saw he was as dead as a doornail and all puffed up and purple. My three eggs and the bones were lying in the middle of the canoe, and the keg of water and some coffee and biscuits wrapped in a Cape Argus by his feet, and a tin of methylated spirit underneath him. There was no paddle, nor, in fact, anything except the spirit-tin that I could use as one, so I settled to drift until I was picked up. I held an inquest on him, brought in a verdict against some snake, scorpion, or centipede unknown, and sent him overboard.

“After that I had a drink of water and a few biscuits, and took a look round. I suppose a man low down as I was don’t see very far; leastways, Madagascar was clean out of sight, and any trace of land at all. I saw a sail going south-westward—looked like a schooner but her hull never came up. Presently the sun got high in the sky and began to beat down upon me. Lord! it pretty near made my brains boil. I tried dipping my head in the sea, but after a while my eye fell on the Cape Argus, and I lay down flat in the canoe and spread this over me. Wonderful things these newspapers! I never read one through thoroughly before, but it’s odd what you get up to when you’re alone, as I was. I suppose I read that blessed old Cape Argus twenty times. The pitch in the canoe simply reeked with the heat and rose up into big blisters.

“I drifted ten days,” said the man with the scar. “It’s a little thing in the telling, isn’t it? Every day was like the last. Except in the morning and the evening I never kept a look-out even—the blaze was so infernal. I didn’t see a sail after the first three days, and those I saw took no notice of me. About the sixth night a ship went by scarcely half a mile away from me, with all its lights ablaze and its ports open, looking like a big firefly. There was music aboard. I stood up and shouted and screamed at it. The second day I broached one of the *Æpyornis* eggs, scraped the shell away at the end bit by bit, and tried it, and I was glad to find it was good enough to eat. A bit flavoury—not bad, I mean—but with something of the taste of a duck’s egg. There was a kind of circular patch, about six inches across, on one side of the yoke, and with streaks of blood and a white mark like a ladder in it that I thought queer, but I did not understand what this meant at the time, and I wasn’t inclined to be particular. The egg lasted me three days, with biscuits and a drink of water. I chewed coffee berries too—invigorating stuff. The second egg I opened about the eighth day, and it scared me.” The man with the scar paused. “Yes,” he said, “developing.”

“I daresay you find it hard to believe. I did, with the thing before me. There the egg had been, sunk in that cold black mud, perhaps three hundred years. But there was no mistaking it. There was the—what is it?—embryo, with its big head and curved back, and its heart beating under its throat, and the yolk shrivelled up and great membranes spreading inside of the shell and all over the yolk. Here was I hatching out the eggs of the biggest of all extinct birds, in a little canoe in the midst of the Indian Ocean. If old Dawson had known that! It was worth four years’ salary. What do you think?

“However, I had to eat that precious thing up, every bit of it, before I sighted the reef, and some of the mouthfuls were beastly unpleasant. I left the third one alone. I held it up to the light, but the shell was too thick for me to get any notion of what might be happening inside; and though I fancied I heard blood pulsing, it might have been the rustle in my own ears, like what you listen to in a seashell.

“Then came the atoll. Came out of the sunrise, as it were, suddenly, close up to me. I drifted straight towards it until I was about half a mile from shore, not more, and then the current took a turn, and I had to paddle as hard as I could with my hands and bits of the *Æpyornis* shell to make the place. However, I got there. It was just a common atoll about four miles round, with a few trees growing and a spring in one place, and the lagoon full of parrot-fish. I took the egg ashore and put it in a good place, well above the tide lines and in the sun, to give it all the chance I could, and pulled the canoe up safe, and loafed about prospecting. It’s rum how dull an atoll is. As soon as I had found a spring all the interest seemed to vanish. When I was a kid I thought nothing could be finer or more adventurous than the Robinson Crusoe business, but that place was as monotonous as a book of sermons. I went round finding

eatable things and generally thinking; but I tell you I was bored to death before the first day was out. It shows my luck—the very day I landed the weather changed. A thunderstorm went by to the north and flicked its wing over the island, and in the night there came a drencher and a howling wind slap over us. It wouldn't have taken much, you know, to upset that canoe.

“I was sleeping under the canoe, and the egg was luckily among the sand higher up the beach, and the first thing I remember was a sound like a hundred pebbles hitting the boat at once, and a rush of water over my body. I'd been dreaming of Antananarivo, and I sat up and holloaed to Intoshi to ask her what the devil was up, and clawed out at the chair where the matches used to be. Then I remembered where I was. There were phosphorescent waves rolling up as if they meant to eat me, and all the rest of the night as black as pitch. The air was simply yelling. The clouds seemed down on your head almost, and the rain fell as if heaven was sinking and they were baling out the waters above the firmament. One great roller came writhing at me, like a fiery serpent, and I bolted. Then I thought of the canoe, and ran down to it as the water went hissing back again; but the thing had gone. I wondered about the egg then, and felt my way to it. It was all right and well out of reach of the maddest waves, so I sat down beside it and cuddled it for company. Lord! what a night that was!

“The storm was over before the morning. There wasn't a rag of cloud left in the sky when the dawn came, and all along the beach there were bits of plank scattered—which was the disarticulated skeleton, so to speak, of my canoe. However, that gave me something to do, for, taking advantage of two of the trees being together, I rigged up a kind of storm-shelter with these vestiges. And that day the egg hatched.

“Hatched, sir, when my head was pillowed on it and I was asleep. I heard a whack and felt a jar and sat up, and there was the end of the egg pecked out and a rum little brown head looking out at me. ‘Lord!’ I said, ‘you're welcome’; and with a little difficulty he came out.

“He was a nice friendly little chap at first, about the size of a small hen—very much like most other young birds, only bigger. His plumage was a dirty brown to begin with, with a sort of grey scab that fell off it very soon, and scarcely feathers—a kind of downy hair. I can hardly express how pleased I was to see him. I tell you, Robinson Crusoe don't make near enough of his loneliness. But here was interesting company. He looked at me and winked his eye from the front backwards, like a hen, and gave a chirp and began to peck about at once, as though being hatched three hundred years too late was just nothing. ‘Glad to see you, Man Friday!’ says I, for I had naturally settled he was to be called Man Friday if ever he was hatched, as soon as ever I found the egg in the canoe had developed. I was a bit anxious about his feed, so I gave him a lump of raw parrot-fish at once. He took it, and opened his beak for more. I was glad of that for, under the circumstances, if he'd been at all fanciful, I should have had to eat him after all.

“You'd be surprised what an interesting bird that *Æpyornis* chick was. He followed me about from the very beginning. He used to stand by me and watch while I fished in the lagoon, and go shares in anything I caught. And he was sensible, too. There were nasty green warty things, like pickled gherkins, used to lie about on the beach, and he tried one of these and it upset him. He never even looked at any of them again. “And he grew. You could almost see him grow. And as I was never much of a society man, his quiet, friendly ways suited me to a T. For nearly two years we were as happy as we could be on that island. I had no business worries, for I knew my salary was mounting up at Dawsons'. We would see a sail now and

then, but nothing ever came near us. I amused myself, too, by decorating the island with designs worked in sea-urchins and fancy shells of various kinds. I put ÆPYRONIS ISLAND all round the place very nearly, in big letters, like what you see done with coloured stones at railway stations in the old country, and mathematical calculations and drawings of various sorts. And I used to lie watching the blessed bird stalking round and growing, growing; and think how I could make a living out of him by showing him about if I ever got taken off. After his first moult he began to get handsome, with a crest and a blue wattle, and a lot of green feathers at the behind of him. And then I used to puzzle whether Dawsons had any right to claim him or not. Stormy weather and in the rainy season we lay snug under the shelter I had made out of the old canoe, and I used to tell him lies about my friends at home. And after a storm we would go round the island together to see if there was any drift. It was a kind of idyll, you might say. If only I had had some tobacco it would have been simply just like heaven.

“It was about the end of the second year our little paradise went wrong. Friday was then about fourteen feet high to the bill of him, with a big, broad head like the end of a pickaxe, and two huge brown eyes with yellow rims, set together like a man’s—not out of sight of each other like a hen’s. His plumage was fine—none of the half-mourning style of your ostrich—more like a cassowary as far as colour and texture go. And then it was he began to cock his comb at me and give himself airs, and show signs of a nasty temper...

“At last came a time when my fishing had been rather unlucky, and he began to hang about me in a queer, meditative way. I thought he might have been eating sea-cucumbers or something, but it was really just discontent on his part. I was hungry too, and when at last I landed a fish I wanted it for myself. Tempers were short that morning on both sides. He pecked at it and grabbed it, and I gave him a whack on the head to make him leave go. And at that he went for me. Lord! ...

“He gave me this in the face.” The man indicated his scar. “Then he kicked me. It was like a carthorse. I got up, and seeing he hadn’t finished, I started off full tilt with my arms doubled up over my face. But he ran on those gawky legs of his faster than a racehorse, and kept landing out at me with sledgehammer kicks, and bringing his pickaxe down on the back of my head. I made for the lagoon, and went in up to my neck. He stopped at the water, for he hated getting his feet wet, and began to make a shindy, something like a peacock’s, only hoarser. He started strutting up and down the beach. I’ll admit I felt small to see this blessed fossil lording it there. And my head and face were all bleeding, and—well, my body just one jelly of bruises.

“I decided to swim across the lagoon and leave him alone for a bit, until the affair blew over. I shinned up the tallest palm-tree, and sat there thinking of it all. I don’t suppose I ever felt so hurt by anything before or since. It was the brutal ingratitude of the creature. I’d been more than a brother to him. I’d hatched him, educated him. A great gawky, out-of-date bird! And me a human being—heir of the ages and all that.

“I thought after a time he’d begin to see things in that light himself, and feel a little sorry for his behaviour. I thought if I was to catch some nice little bits of fish, perhaps, and go to him presently in a casual kind of way, and offer them to him, he might do the sensible thing. It took me some time to learn how unforgiving and cantankerous an extinct bird can be. Malice!

“I won’t tell you all the little devices I tried to get that bird round again, I simply can’t. It makes my cheek burn with shame even now to think of the snubs and buffets I had from this infernal curiosity. I tried violence. I chucked lumps of coral at him from a safe distance, but he only swallowed them. I shied my open knife at him and almost lost it, though it was too big for him to swallow. I tried starving him out and struck fishing, but he took to picking along the beach at low water after worms, and rubbed along on that. Half my time I spent up to my neck in the lagoon, and the rest up the palm-trees. One of them was scarcely high enough, and when he caught me up it he had a regular Bank Holiday with the calves of my legs. It got unbearable. I don’t know if you have ever tried sleeping up a palm-tree. It gave me the most horrible nightmares. Think of the shame of it, too! Here was this extinct animal mooning about my island like a sulky duke, and me not allowed to rest the sole of my foot on the place. I used to cry with weariness and vexation. I told him straight that I didn’t mean to be chased about a desert island by any damned anachronisms. I told him to go and peck a navigator of his own age. But he only snapped his beak at me. Great ugly bird, all legs and neck!

“I shouldn’t like to say how long that went on altogether. I’d have killed him sooner if I’d known how. However, I hit on a way of settling him at last. It is a South American dodge. I joined all my fishing-lines together with stems of seaweed and things, and made a stoutish string, perhaps twelve yards in length or more, and I fastened two lumps of coral rock to the ends of this. It took me some time to do, because every now and then I had to go into the lagoon or up a tree as the fancy took me. This I whirled rapidly round my head, and then let it go at him. The first time I missed, but the next time the string caught his legs beautifully, and wrapped round them again and again. Over he went. I threw it standing waist-deep in the lagoon, and as soon as he went down I was out of the water and sawing at his neck with my knife ...

“I don’t like to think of that even now. I felt like a murderer while I did it, though my anger was hot against him. When I stood over him and saw him bleeding on the white sand, and his beautiful great legs and neck writhing in his last agony ... Pah!

“With that tragedy loneliness came upon me like a curse. Good Lord! you can’t imagine how I missed that bird. I sat by his corpse and sorrowed over him, and shivered as I looked round the desolate, silent reef. I thought of what a jolly little bird he had been when he was hatched, and of a thousand pleasant tricks he had played before he went wrong. I thought if I’d only wounded him I might have nursed him round into a better understanding. If I’d had any means of digging into the coral rock I’d have buried him. I felt exactly as if he was human. As it was, I couldn’t think of eating him, so I put him in the lagoon, and the little fishes picked him clean. I didn’t even save the feathers. Then one day a chap cruising about in a yacht had a fancy to see if my atoll still existed.

“He didn’t come a moment too soon, for I was about sick enough of the desolation of it, and only hesitating whether I should walk out into the sea and finish up the business that way, or fall back on the green things...

“I sold the bones to a man named Winslow—a dealer near the British Museum, and he says he sold them to old Havers. It seems Havers didn’t understand they were extra-large, and it was only after his death they attracted attention. They called ‘em *Æpyornis*—what was it?”

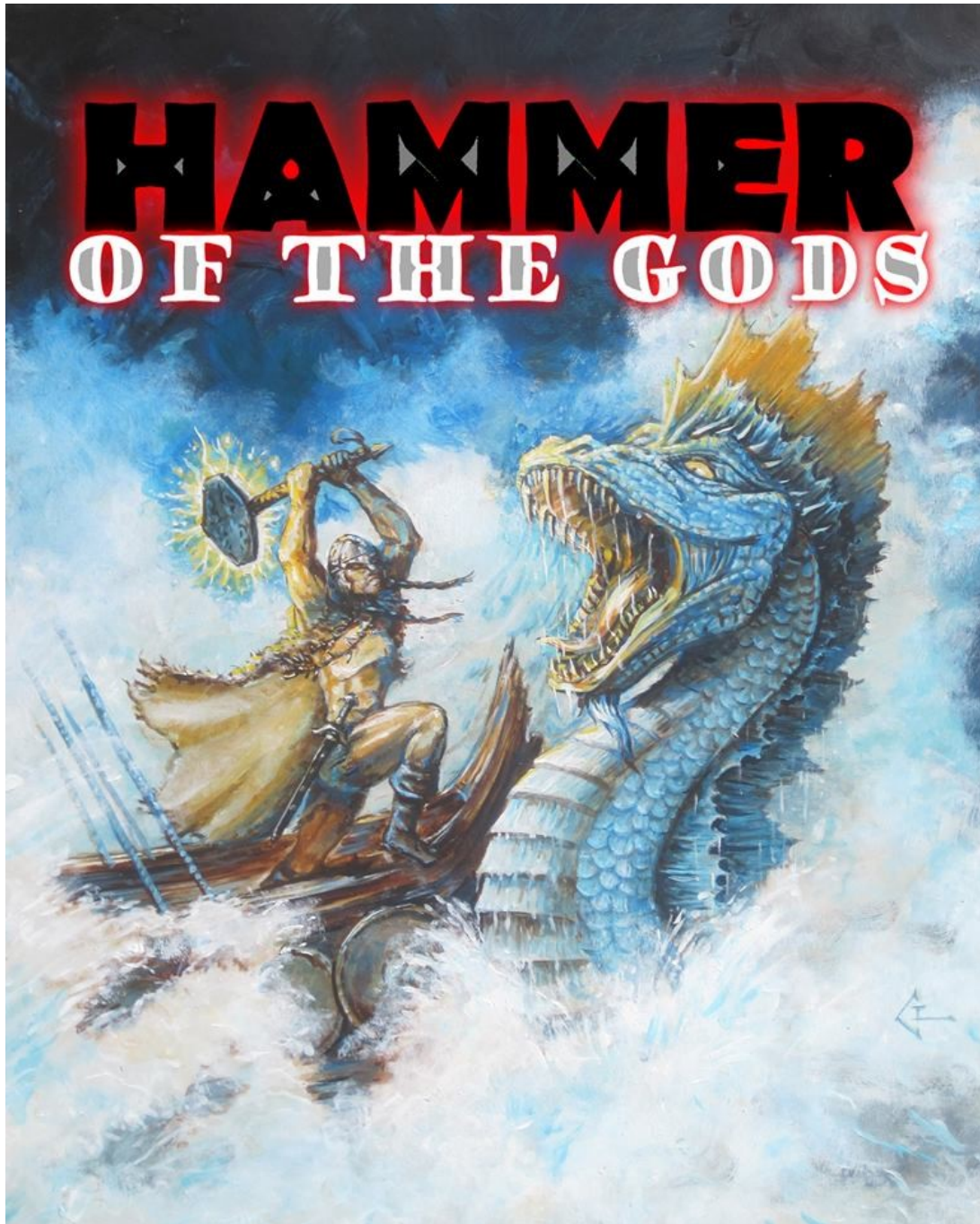
“Æpyornis vastus,” said I. “It’s funny, the very thing was mentioned to me by a friend of mine. When they found an Æpyornis, with a thigh a yard long, they thought they had reached the top of the scale, and called him Æpyornis maximus. Then someone turned up another thigh-bone four feet six or more, and that they called Æpyornis Titan. Then your vastus was found after old Havers died, in his collection, and then a vastissimus turned up.”

“Winslow was telling me as much,” said the man with the scar. “If they get any more Æpyornises, he reckons some scientific swell will go and burst a blood-vessel. But it was a queer thing to happen to a man; wasn’t it—altogether?”

THE END

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many other realms lie beyond...*



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DR HEIDEGGER'S EXPERIMENT by Nathaniel Hawthorne

That very singular man, old Dr. Heidegger, once invited four venerable friends to meet him in his study. There were three white-bearded gentlemen, Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, and Mr. Gascoigne, and a withered gentlewoman, whose name was the Widow Wycherly. They were all melancholy old creatures, who had been unfortunate in life, and whose greatest misfortune it was, that they were not long ago in their graves. Mr. Medbourne, in the vigour of his age, had been a prosperous merchant, but had lost his all by a frantic speculation, and was now little better than a mendicant. Colonel Killigrew had wasted his best years, and his health and substance, in the pursuit of sinful pleasures, which had given birth to a brood of pains, such as the gout, and divers other torments of soul and body. Mr. Gascoigne was a ruined politician, a man of evil fame, or at least had been so, till time had buried him from the knowledge of the present generation, and made him obscure instead of infamous. As for the Widow Wycherly, tradition tells us that she was a great beauty in her day; but, for a long while past, she had lived in deep seclusion, on account of certain scandalous stories, which had prejudiced the gentry of the town against her. It is a circumstance worth mentioning, that each of these three old gentlemen, Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, and Mr. Gascoigne, were early lovers of the Widow Wycherly, and had once been on the point of cutting each other's throats for her sake. And, before proceeding farther, I will merely hint, that Dr. Heidegger and all his four guests were sometimes thought to be a little beside themselves; as is not unfrequently the case with old people, when worried either by present troubles or woeful recollections.

'My dear old friends,' said Dr. Heidegger, motioning them to be seated, 'I am desirous of your assistance in one of those little experiments with which I amuse myself here in my study.'

If all stories were true. Dr. Heidegger's study must have been a very curious place. It was a dim, old-fashioned chamber, festooned with cobwebs, and besprinkled with antique dust. Around the walls stood several oaken bookcases, the lower shelves of which were filled with rows of gigantic folios, and black-letter quartos, and the upper with little parchment covered duodecimos. Over the central bookcase was a bronze bust of Hippocrates, with which, according to some authorities, Dr. Heidegger was accustomed to hold consultations, in all difficult cases of his practice. In the obscurest corner of the room stood a tall and narrow oaken closet, with its door ajar, within which doubtfully appeared a skeleton. Between two of the bookcases hung a looking-glass, presenting its high and dusty plate within a tarnished gilt frame. Among many wonderful stories related of this mirror, it was fabled that the spirits of all the doctor's deceased patients dwelt within its verge, and would stare him in the face whenever he looked thitherward. The opposite side of the chamber was ornamented with the full-length portrait of a young lady, arrayed in the faded magnificence of silk, satin, and brocade, and with a visage as faded as her dress. Above half a century ago, Dr. Heidegger had been on the point of marriage with this young lady; but, being affected with some slight disorder, she had swallowed one of her lover's prescriptions, and died on the bridal evening. The greatest curiosity of the study remains to be mentioned; it was a ponderous folio volume, bound in black leather, with massive silver clasps. There were no letters on the back, and nobody could tell the title of the book. But it was well known to be a book of magic; and once, when a chambermaid had lifted it, merely to brush away the dust, the skeleton had rattled in its closet, the picture of the young lady had stepped one foot upon the floor, and several ghastly faces had peeped forth from the mirror; while the brazen head of Hippocrates frowned, and said— 'Forbear!'

Such was Dr. Heidegger's study. On the summer afternoon of our tale, a small round table, as black as ebony, stood in the centre of the room, sustaining a cut-glass vase, of beautiful form and elaborate workmanship. The sunshine came through the window, between the heavy festoons of two faded damask curtains, and fell directly across this vase; so that a mild splendour was reflected from it on the ashen visages of the five old people who sat around. Four champagne glasses were also on the table.

'My dear old friends,' repeated Dr. Heidegger, 'may I reckon on your aid in performing an exceedingly curious experiment?'

Now Dr. Heidegger was a very strange old gentleman, whose eccentricity had become the nucleus for a thousand fantastic stories. Some of these fables, to my shame be it spoken, might possibly be traced back to mine own veracious self; and if any passages of the present tale should startle the reader's faith, I must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction-monger.

When the doctor's four guests heard him talk of his proposed experiment, they anticipated nothing more wonderful than the murder of a mouse in an air-pump, or the examination of a cobweb by the microscope, or some similar nonsense, with which he was constantly in the habit of pestering his intimates. But without waiting for a reply, Dr. Heidegger hobbled across the chamber, and returned with the same ponderous folio, bound in black leather, which common report affirmed to be a book of magic. Undoing the silver clasps, he opened the volume, and took from among its black-letter pages a rose, or what was once a rose, though now the green leaves and crimson petals had assumed one brownish hue, and the ancient flower seemed ready to crumble to dust in the doctor's hands.

'This rose,' said Dr. Heidegger, with a sigh, 'this same withered and crumbling flower, blossomed five-and-fifty years ago. It was given me by Sylvia Ward, whose portrait hangs yonder; and I meant to wear it in my bosom at our wedding. Five-and-fifty years it has been treasured between the leaves of this old volume. Now, would you deem it possible that this rose of half a century could ever bloom again?'

'Nonsense!' said the Widow Wycherly, with a peevish toss of her head. 'You might as well ask whether an old woman's wrinkled face could ever bloom again.'

'See!' answered Dr. Heidegger.

He uncovered the vase, and threw the faded rose into the water which it contained. At first, it lay lightly on the surface of the fluid, appearing to imbibe none of its moisture. Soon, however, a singular change began to be visible. The crushed and dried petals stirred, and assumed a deepening tinge of crimson, as if the flower were reviving from a death-like slumber; the slender stalk and twigs of foliage became green; and there was the rose of half a century, looking as fresh as when Sylvia Ward had first given it to her lover. It was scarcely full-blown; for some of its delicate red leaves curled modestly around its moist bosom, within which two or three dew-drops were sparkling.

'That is certainly a very pretty deception,' said the doctor's friends; carelessly, however, for they had witnessed greater miracles at a conjurer's show: 'pray how was it effected?'

‘Did you never hear of the “Fountain of Youth?”’ asked Dr. Heidegger, ‘which Ponce De Leon, the Spanish adventurer, went in search of, two or three centuries ago?’

‘But did Ponce De Leon ever find it?’ said the Widow Wycherly.

‘No,’ answered Dr. Heidegger, ‘for he never sought it in the right place. The famous Fountain of Youth, if I am rightly informed, is situated in the southern part of the Floridian peninsula, not far from Lake Macaco. Its source is overshadowed by several gigantic magnolias, which, though numberless centuries old, have been kept as fresh as violets, by the virtues of this wonderful water. An acquaintance of mine, knowing my curiosity in such matters, has sent me what you see in the vase.’

‘Ahem!’ said Colonel Killigrew, who believed not a word of the doctor’s story: ‘and what may be the effect of this fluid on the human frame?’

‘You shall judge for yourself, my dear colonel,’ replied Dr. Heidegger; ‘and all of you, my respected friends, are welcome to so much of this admirable fluid, as may restore to you the bloom of youth. For my own part, having had much trouble in growing old, I am in no hurry to grow young again. With your permission, therefore, I will merely watch the progress of the experiment.’

While he spoke. Dr. Heidegger had been filling the four champagne glasses with the water of the Fountain of Youth. It was apparently impregnated with an effervescent gas, for little bubbles were continually ascending from the depths of the glasses, and bursting in silvery spray at the surface. As the liquor diffused a pleasant perfume, the old people doubted not that it possessed cordial and comfortable properties; and, though utter sceptics as to its rejuvenescent power, they were inclined to swallow it at once. But Dr. Heidegger besought them to stay a moment.

‘Before you drink, my respectable old friends,’ said he, ‘it would be well that, with the experience of a life-time to direct you, you should draw up a few general rules for your guidance, in, passing a second time through the perils of youth. Think what a sin and shame it would be, if, with your peculiar advantages, you should not become patterns of virtue and wisdom to all the young people of the age!’

The doctor’s four venerable friends made him no answer, except by a feeble and tremulous laugh; so very ridiculous was the idea, that, knowing how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error, they should ever go astray again.

‘Drink, then,’ said the doctor, bowing: ‘I rejoice that I have so well selected the subjects of my experiment.’

With palsied hands, they raised the glasses to their lips. The liquor, if it really possessed such virtues as Dr. Heidegger imputed to it, could not have been bestowed on four human beings who needed it more woefully. They looked as if they had never known what youth or pleasure was, but had been the offspring of Nature’s dotage, and always the grey, decrepit, sapless, miserable creatures, who now sat stooping round the doctor’s table, without life enough in their souls or bodies to be animated even by the prospect of growing young again. They drank off the water, and replaced their glasses on the table.

Assuredly there was an almost immediate improvement in the aspect of the party, not unlike what might have been produced by a glass of generous wine, together with a sudden glow of cheerful sunshine, brightening over all their visages at once. There was a healthful suffusion on their cheeks, instead of the ashen hue that had made them look so corpse-like. They gazed at one another, and fancied that some magic power had really begun to smooth away the deep and sad inscriptions which Father Time had been so long engraving on their brows. The Widow Wycherly adjusted her cap, for she felt almost like a woman again.

‘Give us more of this wondrous water!’ cried they, eagerly. ‘We are younger—but we are still too old! Quick!—give us more!’

‘Patience, patience!’ quoth Dr. Heidegger, who sat watching the experiment, with philosophic coolness. ‘You have been a long time growing old. Surely, you might be content to grow young in half an hour! But the water is at your service.’

Again he filled their glasses with the liquor of youth, enough of which still remained in the vase to turn half the old people in the city to the age of their own grandchildren. While the bubbles were yet sparkling on the brim, the doctor’s four guests snatched their glasses from the table, and swallowed the contents at a single gulp. Was it delusion! Even while the draught was passing down their throats, it seemed to have wrought a change on their whole systems. Their eyes grew clear and bright; a dark shade deepened among their silvery locks; they sat around the table, three gentlemen, of middle age, and a woman, hardly beyond her buxom prime.

‘My dear widow, you are charming!’ cried Colonel Killigrew, whose eyes had been fixed upon her face, while the shadows of age were flitting from it like darkness from the crimson daybreak.

The fair widow knew, of old, that Colonel Killigrew’s compliments were not always measured by sober truth; so she started up and ran to the mirror, still dreading that the ugly visage of an old woman would meet her gaze. Meanwhile, the three gentlemen behaved in such a manner, as proved that the water of the Fountain of Youth possessed some intoxicating qualities; unless, indeed, their exhilaration of spirits were merely a lightsome dizziness, caused by the sudden removal of the weight of years. Mr. Gascoigne’s mind seemed to run on political topics, but whether relating to the past, present, or future, could not easily be determined, since the same ideas and phrases have been in vogue these fifty years. Now he rattled forth full-throated sentences about patriotism, national glory, and the people’s right; now he muttered some perilous stuff or other, in a sly and doubtful whisper, so cautiously that even his own conscience could scarcely catch the secret; and now, again, he spoke in measured accents, and a deeply deferential tone, as if a royal ear were listening to his well-turned periods. Colonel Killigrew all this time had been trolling forth a jolly bottle-song, and ringing his glass in symphony with the chorus, while his eyes wandered toward the buxom figure of the Widow Wycherly. On the other side of the table, Mr. Medbourne was involved in a calculation of dollars and cents, with which was strangely intermingled a project for supplying the East Indies with ice, by harnessing a team of whales to the polar icebergs.

As for the Widow Wycherly, she stood before the mirror, curtsying and simpering to her own image, and greeting it as the friend whom she loved better than all the world beside. She thrust her face close to the glass, to see whether some long-remembered wrinkle or crow’s-foot had indeed vanished. She examined whether the snow had so entirely melted from her

hair, that the venerable cap could be safely thrown aside. At last, turning briskly away, she came with a sort of dancing step to the table.

‘My dear old doctor,’ cried she, ‘pray favour me with another glass!’

‘Certainly, my dear madam, certainly!’ replied the complaisant doctor; ‘see! I have already filled the glasses.’

There, in fact, stood the four glasses, brim-full of this wonderful water, the delicate spray of which, as it effervesced from the surface, resembled the tremulous glitter of diamonds. It was now so nearly sunset, that the chamber had grown duskier than ever; but a mild and moon-like splendour gleamed from within the vase, and rested alike on the four guests, and on the doctor’s venerable figure. He sat in a high-backed, elaborately-carved, oaken arm-chair, with a grey dignity of aspect that might have well befitted that very Father Time, whose power had never been disputed, save by this fortunate company. Even while quaffing the third draught of the Fountain of Youth, they were almost awed by the expression of his mysterious visage.

But, the next moment, the exhilarating gush of young life shot through their veins. They were now in the happy prime of youth. Age, with its miserable train of cares, and sorrows, and diseases, was remembered only as the trouble of a dream, from which they had joyously awoken. The fresh gloss of the soul, so early lost, and without which the world’s successive scenes had been but a gallery of faded pictures, again threw its enchantment over all their prospects. They felt like new-created beings, in a new-created universe.

‘We are young! We are young!’ they cried, exultingly.

Youth, like the extremity of age, had effaced the strongly marked characteristics of middle life, and mutually assimilated them all. They were a group of merry youngsters, almost maddened with the exuberant frolicsomeness of their years. The most singular effect of their gaiety was an impulse to mock the infirmity and decrepitude of which they had so lately been the victims. They laughed loudly at their old-fashioned attire, the wide-skirted coats and flapped waistcoats of the young men, and the ancient cap and gown of the blooming girl. One limped across the floor, like a gouty grandfather; one set a pair of spectacles astride of his nose, and pretended to pore over the blackletter pages of the book of magic; a third seated himself in an arm-chair, and strove to imitate the venerable dignity of Dr. Heidegger. Then all shouted mirthfully, and leaped about the room. The Widow Wycherly—if so fresh a damsel could be called a widow—tripped up to the doctor’s chair, with a mischievous merriment in her rosy face.

‘Doctor, you dear old soul,’ cried she, ‘get up and dance with me!’ And then the four young people laughed louder than ever, to think what a queer figure the poor old doctor would cut.

‘Pray excuse me,’ answered the doctor, quietly. ‘I am old and rheumatic, and my dancing days were over long ago. But either of these gay young gentlemen will be glad of so pretty a partner.’

‘Dance with me, Clara!’ cried Colonel Killigrew.

‘No, no, I will be her partner!’ shouted Mr. Gascoigne.

She promised me her hand, fifty years ago!’ exclaimed Mr. Medbourne.

They all gathered round her. One caught both her hands in his passionate grasp—another threw his arm about her waist—the third buried his hand among the glossy curls that clustered beneath the widow’s cap. Blushing, panting, struggling, chiding, laughing, her warm breath fanning each of their faces by turns, she strove to disengage herself, yet still remained in their triple embrace. Never was there a livelier picture of youthful rivalry, with bewitching beauty for the prize. Yet, by a strange deception, owing to the duskiness of the chamber, and the antique dresses which they still wore, the tall mirror is said to have reflected the figures of the three old, grey, withered grandsires, ridiculously contending for the skinny ugliness of a shrivelled granddam.

But they were young: their burning passions proved them so. Inflamed to madness by the coquetry of the girl-widow, who neither granted nor quite withheld her favours, the three rivals began to interchange threatening glances. Still keeping hold of the fair prize, they grappled fiercely at one another’s throats. As they struggled to and fro, the table was overturned, and the vase dashed into a thousand fragments. The precious Water of Youth flowed in a bright stream across the floor, moistening the wings of a butterfly, which, grown old in the decline of summer, had alighted there to die. The insect fluttered lightly through the chamber, and settled on the snowy head of Dr. Heidegger.

‘Come, come, gentlemen!—come, Madam Wycherly,’ exclaimed the doctor, ‘I really must protest against this riot.’

They stood still, and shivered; for it seemed as if grey Time were calling them back from their sunny youth, far down into the chill and darksome vale of years. They looked at old Dr. Heidegger, who sat in his carved arm-chair, holding the rose of half a century, which he had rescued from among the fragments of the shattered vase. At the motion of his hand, the four rioters resumed their seats; the more readily, because their violent exertions had wearied them, youthful though they were.

‘My poor Sylvia’s rose!’ ejaculated Dr. Heidegger, holding it in the light of the sunset clouds: ‘it appears to be fading again.’

And so it was. Even while the party were looking at it, the flower continued to shrivel up, till it became as dry and fragile as when the doctor had first thrown it into the vase. He shook off the few drops of moisture which clung to its petals.

‘I love it as well thus, as in its dewy freshness,’ observed he, pressing the withered rose to his withered lips. While he spoke, the butterfly fluttered down from the doctor’s snowy head, and fell upon the floor.

His guests shivered again. A strange chillness, whether of the body or spirit they could not tell, was creeping gradually over them all. They gazed at one another, and fancied that each fleeting moment snatched away a charm, and left a deepening furrow where none had been before. Was it an illusion? Had the changes of a life-time been crowded into so brief a space, and were they now four aged people, sitting with their old friend, Dr. Heidegger?

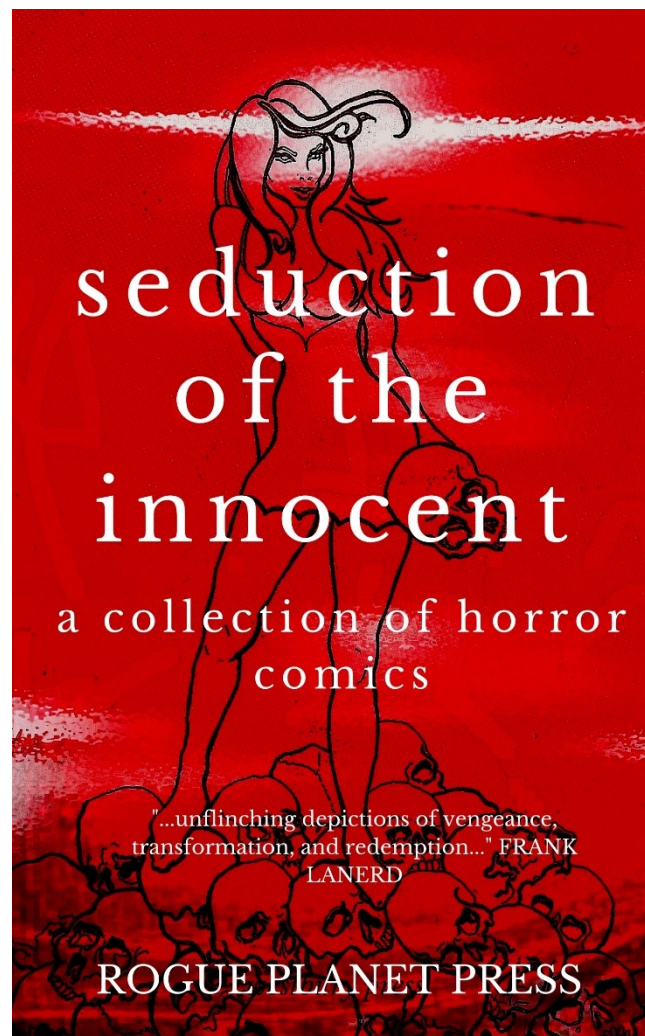
‘Are we grown old again, so soon!’ cried they, dolefully.

In truth, they had. The Water of Youth possessed merely a virtue more transient than that of wine. The delirium which it created had effervesced away. Yes! they were old again. With a shuddering impulse, that showed her a woman still, the widow clasped her skinny hands before her face, and wished that the coffin-lid were over it, since it could be no longer beautiful.

‘Yes, friends, ye are old again,’ said Dr. Heidegger; ‘and lo! the Water of Youth is all lavished on the ground. Well—I bemoan it not; for if the fountain gushed at my very doorstep, I would not stoop to bathe my lips in it—no, though its delirium were for years instead of moments. Such is the lesson ye have taught me!’

But the doctor’s four friends had taught no such lesson to themselves. They resolved forthwith to make a pilgrimage to Florida, and quaff at morning, noon, and night, from the Fountain of Youth.

THE END



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Twelve

Laser blasts followed hard on Illara's tail as she sent 'Izzy' into a tight spin to avoid the two ships that pursued her. Scroungers.

One ship carrying a complement of six crewmen. It was a small ship, built for long trips and swift attacks. It was armed with half a dozen laser cannons and but only one of the far more expensive plasma cannons. Ammunition for the plasma cannons was costly, but a well-aimed shot was deadly. The laser cannons were plentiful and cheap, but required a constant barrage to do any real damage.

The second ship was larger. It carried a crew of twelve, and an array of cannons. These cannons included both the laser and plasma cannons that the first ship bragged, but also a small quantum cannon, a most deadly device which disentangled the subatomic particles of the atoms composing the target.

'Izzy' carried all these weapons and a bit more.

Electromagnetic pulses proved, after much fruitless fussing, to be the preferred weapon in space combat.

Explosive devices, when they hit their target, only sent out furious shards of unstoppable burning metal, spinning out in every direction at supersonic speeds.

Like meteors, those shards cut everything without distinction—fabric and metal and flesh, foe and friend alike and indiscriminately. Explosive weapons only made a battlefield in space an absurdly unliveable place.

But electromagnetic pulses did not create such debris. They simply killed all the electronics of the target—a ship, a base, a colony. In seconds, the crew of the ship is battling sub-zero temperatures working in complete darkness. Such a crew is almost always quick to surrender without trouble.

And because electromagnetic pulses were the first weapon chosen for resolving conflicts in deep space, defences against EMPs were common. Illara had loaded 'Izzy's' systems with a dozen.

And it was because the defences were so common that the other weapons, the laser cannon, the various plasma guns, and the quantum weapons were so often brought into play.

As they were now.

Illara dove toward the rapidly approaching surface of Io. She spun her ship in a tight but random corkscrew path that made drawing a good aim on her nearly impossible. Surrounding Io was the vast globe of Jupiter, roiling and churning, sending vast waves of radiation, further confounding her trail.

Illara had made the most of her patrols of the inner moons. As she flew past Io, she had often asked herself what she would do, if she were attacked by this or that many ships. For one ship, she had a plan. For two ships attacking her, she had another plan. And so on.

And she rehearsed her responses to those attacks in her mind many times, as she flew past Europa, Ganymede and Io.

So now she knew to keep her ship between her attackers and Jupiter. Jupiter emits huge waves of radiation. Their monitors would lose her in those waves.

And they almost did. Their visiscreens were washed with static this close to Jupiter.

But they did have a visual. The gunners and the pilot could make out a persistent point against the background of Io, sulphuric volcanoes and plumes of pink and red gases shooting two hundred miles above the golden, frozen deserts of Io.

‘Izzy’s’ smart paint and configuration were just good enough to confound, but not erase, any trace of ‘Izzy’s’ presence. These Scroungers were good at their game. That there was any question at all was good enough reason to attack. Both ships fired their plasma cannons.

The plasma cannons have wide spread. When concentrated upon a single spot, the plasma charge is most powerful. As the spread is widened, the power decreases. The effect of the plasma gun varies widely, depending upon the type of plasma charge.

The plasmas fired by the Scroungers at Illara were charged with a highly electrified pulse which caused solid materials to sublime to gas. Should any of these bursts strike Illara’s ship, ‘Izzy’, or Illara, it, and she would cease to exist.

“Whoah, doggies!” Illara shouted, startled, when she recognized the purplish blast of light that shot past her canopy.

“Let’s get outta here, Izzie!”

She ceased her tight, corkscrewing course. It had forced her to decrease her speed. She accelerated. The two ships pursuing her, more certain of their target, also accelerated.

Io loomed huge before Illara, a brilliant, burning golden yellow sphere. Beyond Io, the fury of Jupiter, its ancient storms boiling larger than many whole planets. Another purple blast from a plasma cannon surges past her canopy.

“Damn!”

On the left, coming up over the horizon, was the volcano Tvashtar. It was still erupting, as it had been doing now for the past Jovian year. The volcano spewed a vast cone of sulphur that towered two hundred miles above the frozen yellow plains, and showered constantly down upon them.

A dozen observation posts, mostly of machines, had been built, surrounding the volcano and its vast plume.

Illara had one advantage her pursuers did not. She was familiar with the neighbourhood. She knew the landscape. She knew the region. So she plunged directly on, straight downward toward Io at a nerve-wracking speed. The mouths of dozens of volcanoes opened up before her, blackened pits crusted with vermillion and white. And between the volcanoes, active, dormant and dead, vast icy plains unscarred the craters.

Illara aimed ‘Izzy’ at Tvashtar. If she could only avoid those plasma blasts for another four seconds.

Emily and Jeffrey both happened to be at their school—their ‘Education Centre’ as it was called—when the sirens starting wailing. They and their educators all knew, in theory, what those sirens meant. But now, hearing them without any preliminaries—no announcements declaring ‘This is a Test’—everyone who heard them responded with bewilderment and uncertainty.

Emily was shocked to see her educators wallowing in a sea of babbling confusion. Even frightened a bit, for a moment. Then her fright gave way to annoyance. She was annoyed with these adults for letting themselves be so confused.

The sirens kept howling and the discipline of the Education Centre broke down. Students and educators left their classes and wandered in the halls, asking of everyone who passed, ‘What’s going on?’

Emily kept her head and sought out her brother, Jeffrey who was taking an engineering course two halls over. Jeffrey had also kept his head, and the two quickly found each other.

“Where should we go?” Emily asked her brother.

“They’re gonna do a count on us here,” Jeffrey answered. “So we should maybe stay here for that.”

“I dunno,” Emily said, with a dubious glance at the Education Centre’s Assistant Administrator. He had come out of his office, looking every bit as confused as everyone else.

Moments later, three men wearing the uniforms of Jovian Security came into the offices housing the Education Centre and other such municipal services.

They sought out the Administrator, who had not yet come out of his office. After they knocked loud and hard at his door, they admitted themselves, after a hurried introduction, and conferred with him for several moments.

“Educators, students, may I have your attention?” he said, after his quick conference with the three men.

Many of the older students had already taken advantage of the confusion and left on their own, leaving perhaps two-thirds of the original number left. Those who did remain stared at the Administrator and the three men wearing the uniform of Jovian Security.

“These men will direct us to the sub-levels where we will remain during the turbulence...”

“What is happening?”

“Are we attacked?”

“Is it a war?”

“Uh...” the Administrator looked helplessly toward the three men in uniform.

One of them stepped forward from the other two. He was a corporal. The others were privates.

“Yes, we are the subject of a hostile aggression. My orders are to escort you all to a place of safety.

A long, rolling sound slowly approached, growing louder as it drew near. Emily felt the ground shifting under her feet. Several children screeched.

“Please follow us,” the corporal said.

Several of the educators made a futile attempt to organize their charges for this retreat to safety, but they quickly realized that already a third of their students had gone.

Another slow-rolling swelling of the ground, followed by a distant tumbling.

The corporal led the pack of some one hundred and twenty students, educators and administrators, with the two privates following from the rear. The administrators kept pace with the corporal, while the educators followed up behind, to ensure that no one got lost on the way.

“I don’t like this,” Emily said as they made their way down the halls and stairways with the others.

“What?” asked Jeffrey. “What don’t you like?”

“We should be with mom and dad.”

“Yeah, but we’re here.”

“Well, we’re all in the same building. We just got to go over doors, and we’ll be in the Living Pods.”

“That’s easy to say. Do you know how far that is?”

Emily shrugged.

“I dunno,” she said.

“But all we have to do is go out through the main door, and walk down the street, and there’s our door at the end of the block.”

“No,” Jeffrey said. “We’re going to stay with these guys.”

In the brief time they had been attending classes on Callisto, Jeffrey and Emily had drawn close to no one. They could not talk about themselves or their past, for their father was wanted by Secretary Benson, of Earth, who would put him to death. Their names were Talbot now, not Sherman, and they must be perfectly practiced in thinking of themselves as Talbot. They could not afford to make even a single mistake.

They could speak of themselves only in the vaguest terms... they were from Mars... their father was working on a paper... he came here to do research... might stay on for a year... after that, they didn’t know...

Jeffrey managed the stress of their new situation better than Emily did, but the adjustments were not easy. He was of a mind to stay with his classmates, simply to avoid bringing unwanted attention to his family.

Emily, though, wanted only to be with her mother, and her father. When Jeffrey grabbed her wrist to drag her along, she relinquished, and trotted alongside him. But her apparently easy acquiescence to Jeffrey’s command to stay with the group was only a sham. The instant Jeffrey’s attention lapsed, when he let go of her wrist, she slipped silently away, through the huddled crowd, to a hallway that would lead her back to the main entrance of the Education Centre.

Once she found that, she knew should be able to find her way back home, to her parents.

Jeffrey’s loss of attention to his sister was only momentary. Realizing he had let go of her wrist, he immediately reached for her again, only to realize that she was gone.

“Emily!” he called, his voice rising. “Emily!”

He stepped away from the group, only to be accosted by one of his educators.

“Stay with the group, young man,” the educator said, blocking Jeffrey.

“My sister,” Jeffrey began to explain.

“She’s probably with the group,” the educator said, in that tone that made it clear he was not about to listen to anything Jeffrey might say. “Now get on with you. Stay with the group.” He put his hands on his hips in what he might have intended to be an intimidating posture, but which only annoyed Jeffrey.

Jeffrey was, after all, the boy who not long ago had stared down Turhan Mot himself, as the space pirate aimed a laser pistol at Jeffrey’s head. The sight of this officious educator thrusting out his chest and placing his hands upon his narrow hips in an attempt at bravado may have impressed another boy, but not Jeffrey.

His sister was missing, and that was all Jeffrey was concerned about. He simply ducked past the educator, and ran back the way he had come, against the press of the crowd hurrying down the confined hallway as the sirens continued to blare and the floors swelled with the reverberations of a distant conflict.

The educator, already nearly overwhelmed with chaotic responsibilities raining hard down upon him, let the instance of Jeffrey's insubordination go. He had far too many other matters pressing on him from every direction to worry about one boy.

Jeffrey came to the long hall Emily had fled into, just in time to see her darting around the corner at the far end of it. He left the hallway crowded with students and educators, and followed Emily. By the time he had run to the end of the hall, Emily had vanished down another.

But Jeffrey knew his sister, knew how she thought, and he made no trouble guessing which way she had run. Knowing that she was trying to make her way back to their apartment where she would find her parents, Jeffrey took the route that would bring him toward her path.

So they both came to the main entrance of the Education Centre at almost the same time. The lobby was empty. The reception desk, abandoned. There was Emily, next to the doorway, leaning against the wide windows that composed the exterior walls of the Education Centre. Hanging plants were strung from the ceiling and walls.

Outside, the street was vacant, with the exceptions of a few furtive shadows running under the platforms of the Skycabs, seeking shelter. Almost everyone, of the crowds that that congregated to celebrate the arrival and the offloading of the "Bellerophon" had already disappeared into the basements below Callisto Base 1.

Jeffrey walked up to Emily.

"You shouldn't have run away," he said.

Emily said nothing. She was staring up into the sky, plainly visible through the geodesic dome that covered the colony.

There was the shining beacon that was the "Bellerophon". At this distance, it appeared tiny, only as long as Emily's little finger. The "Bellerophon" was just beginning to move slowly from its docking orbit above Callisto Base 1. It was surrounded by dozens of pinpoints of light. These were the ships of the fleet of fighter craft that accompanied the "Bellerophon", commanded by Colonel Westland and Lieutenant Hardy. The points of light flew about the "Bellerophon" in tight ellipses, creating a vast defensive web.

That sight gave Jeffrey some comfort, and he began to explain what they were seeing to Emily. Emily said nothing as he spoke. Then when he finished, she pointed off toward Jupiter, which lay hard upon the horizon of Callisto.

From that direction, there came a vast emanation of lights, which Jeffrey instantly recognized to be a fleet of ships. How many there were, he could not tell, but it seemed to him that the approaching fleet was larger than the fleet defending the "Bellerophon".

These were the fighter craft of Turhan Mot, a fleet of eighty small, fleet and deadly ships, which the pirate had launched, and was still launching against Callisto and the “Bellerophon”.

Among them Jeffrey and Emily saw two larger ships, the “Grand Marquis” and the “Reliant”. One of them was shaped rather like the “Bellerophon” and every bit as big. From this ship, visible in black silhouette against the raging red storms of Jupiter, came the mass of lights which were the fighter ships Turhan Mot was deploying against the “Bellerophon”.

The other ship, too distant for Jeffrey or Emily to make out its shape, was also large—not nearly as large or long as the “Bellerophon”, but there was something in its presence that was ominous, filling Jeffrey with dread.

“What are they?” Emily asked.

“I... don’t know,” Jeffrey said. “Maybe they’re Scroungers... Turhan Mot...”

“We should go,” Emily said, grasping her brother’s hand in her own and pulling him toward the door.

Jeffrey gave the matter a moment’s thought. He glanced backward toward the empty and darkened halls. Finally, he gave in.

“Okay,” he said.

Emily pushed open the glass door, and they stepped into the empty street outside.

“Whadda we got, Dimara?” Ward asked her. She stood on the bridge of the O8-111A, next to Ward, observing the gathering forces through the visiscreens. Jupiter, its moons, the “Grand Marquis”, the “Reliant”, shown clearly while dozens of pinpricks of light, each of them a ship, moved swiftly across the screens.

“Dimara confirms the presence of numerous hostile ships,” she said with her always calm and unemotional voice.

“In number, they are two large transport ships...”

“That ‘Grand Marquis’ of Turhan Mot?”

“Quite so,” Dimara replied. “And a second transport. This is new to Dimara.”

“Me, too, babe. So Turhan Mot brought some friends to the party.”

“As it would appear.”

“And the others?”

“Dimara has observed several small independent ships, forty in number. These ships have made courses toward Io, Ganymede and Europa. It would appear they intend a large-scale attack on all these bases.

“In addition to these, the transport ship, presumably the “Grand Marquis”, is now deploying a large battery of small fighter ships. Dimara counts sixty currently in flight, with another two ships launched every minute.”

“Hell,” Ward cursed.

He gave himself several quick moments to calculate. Then he gave Lieutenant Hardy a quick subspace call.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” Ward said.

“Yeah?” Hardy replied. “Over.”

“You guys got their numbers, yet? Over.”

“We see two large transports, then a lot of... looks like fighter ships and...”

Ward cut him off.

“Whatcha got is two transports, one of them the “Grand Marquis”, we’re thinkin’. Then you got forty small deep space ships. Looks like they’re goin’ for the colonies. Io, Ganymede, Europa. Then you got at least sixty...”

“Seventy,” Dimara interjected.

“Seventy. You got at least seventy small fighter craft, deployed from the “Grand Marquis”. Those guys are coming right at us. Over.”

“Thanks,” Hardy answered. “Over.”

“Catch ya when it all shakes out. Over,” Ward finished.

“Okay, babe,” Ward said to Dimara. “We’re gonna pay a visit to an old buddy.”

Dimara turned her gaze to Ward and raised an eyebrow in a silent question.

“Mokem Bet,” Ward said. “If that’s the “Grand Marquis”, Mokem Bet is prob’ly on it. And Turhan Mot, too.”

Ward turned the nose of the O8-111A toward the oncoming fleet. He accelerated.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, space monkey?”

It was Mud, speaking through subspace.

“Just gonna see some old friends,” Ward replied. “And cut their throats for ‘em.”

“Well, you selfish fuck. You were just gonna go and leave me out of the fun?”

“Come on, then,” Ward answered, grinning. “I don’t have time to waste on you lazy shits, sittin’ around waiting for the party to come to you.”

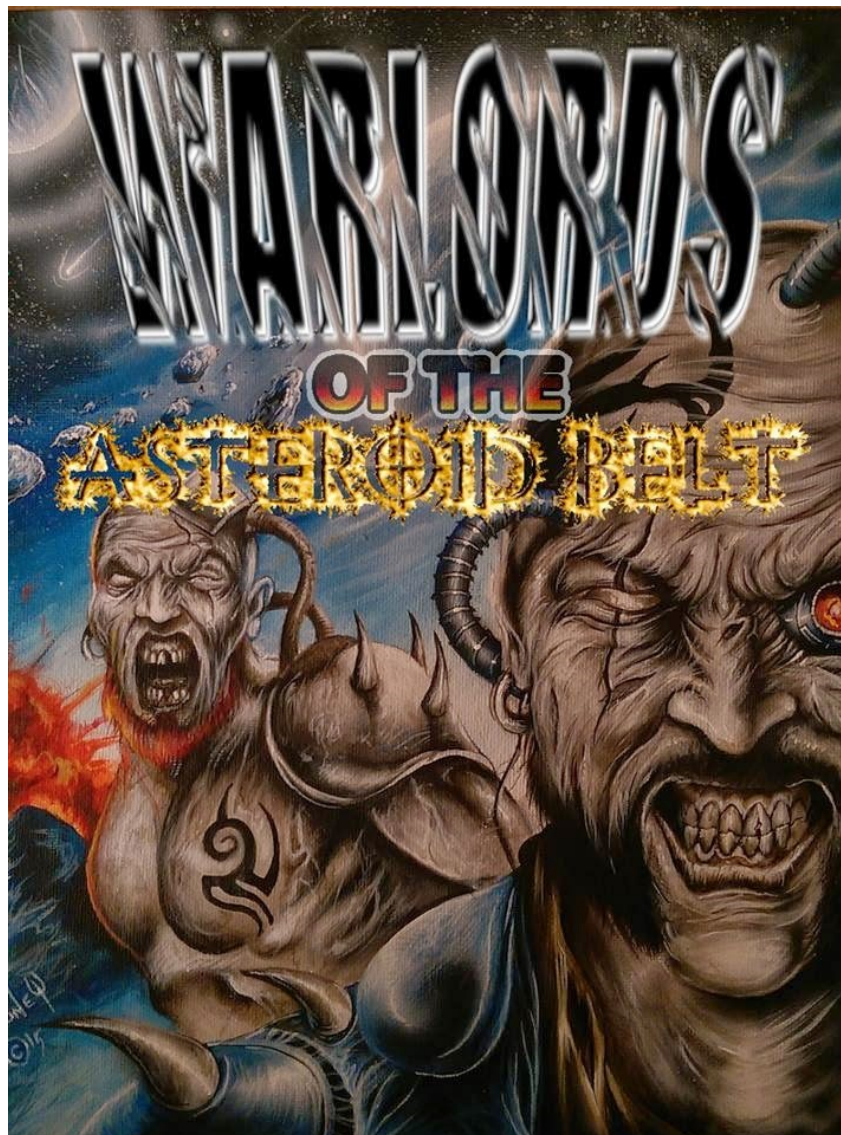
“Right behind you, bucko. Now let’s get this party goin’!”

And the O8-111A and Mud’s ship, the “Charon” (of roughly the same build as the O8-111A, but slightly larger) broke away from the armada of ships protecting Callisto Base 1.

With engines roaring, they sailed directly at the oncoming fleet.

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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TALES OF THE DEAD: THE FAMILY PORTRAITS by Johann August Apel

Part One

*"No longer shall you gaze on't; lest your fancy
May think anon, it moves. ———
The fixture of her eye has motion in't."*

Winter's Tale.

Night had insensibly superseded day, when Ferdinand's carriage continued its slow course through the forest; the postilion uttering a thousand complaints on the badness of the roads, and Ferdinand employing the leisure which the tedious progress of his carriage allowed, with reflections to which the purpose of his journey gave rise.

As was usual with young men of rank, he had visited several universities; and after having travelled over the principal parts of Europe, he was now returning to his native country to take possession of the property of his father, who had died in his absence.

Ferdinand was an only son, and the last branch of the ancient family of Meltheim: it was on this account that his mother was the more anxious that he should form a brilliant alliance, to which both his birth and fortune entitled him; she frequently repeated that Clotilde of Hainthal was of all others the person she should be most rejoiced to have as a daughter-in-law, and who should give to the world an heir to the name and estates of Meltheim. In the first instance, she merely named her amongst other distinguished females whom she recommended to her son's attention: but after a short period she spoke of none but her: and at length declared, rather positively, that all her happiness depended on the completion of this alliance, and hoped her son would approve her choice.

Ferdinand, however, never thought of this union but with regret; and the urgent remonstrances which his mother ceased not to make on the subject, only contributed to render Clotilde, who was an entire stranger to him, less amiable in his eyes: he determined at last to take a journey to the capital, whither Mr. Hainthal and his daughter were attracted by the carnival. He wished at least to know the lady, ere he consented to listen to his mother's entreaties; and secretly flattered himself that he should find some more cogent reasons for opposing this union than mere caprice, which was the appellation the old lady gave to his repugnance.

Whilst travelling alone in his carriage, as night approached, the solitary forest, his imagination drew a picture of his early life, which happy recollections rendered still happier. It seemed, that the future presented no charms for him to equal the past; and the greater pleasure he took in retracing what no longer existed, the less wish he felt to bestow a thought on that futurity to which, contrary to his inclinations, he seemed destined. Thus, notwithstanding the slowness with which his carriage proceeded over the rugged ground, he found that he was too rapidly approaching the termination of his journey.

The postilion at length began to console himself; for one half of the journey was accomplished, and the remainder presented only good roads: Ferdinand, however, gave orders to his groom to stop at the approaching village, determining to pass the night there.

The road through the village which led to the inn was bordered by gardens, and the sound of different musical instruments led Ferdinand to suppose that the villagers were celebrating some rural fête. He already anticipated the pleasure of joining them, and hoped that this recreation would dissipate his melancholy thoughts. But on listening more attentively, he remarked that the music did not resemble that usually heard at inns; and the great light he perceived at the window of a pretty house from whence came the sounds that had arrested his attention, did not permit him to doubt that a more select party than are accustomed to reside in the country at that unfavourable season, were amusing themselves in performing a concert.

The carriage now stopped at the door of a small inn of mean appearance. Ferdinand, who counted on much inconvenience and few comforts, asked who was the lord of the village. They informed him that he occupied a château situated in an adjoining hamlet. Our traveller said no more, but was obliged to content himself with the best apartment the landlord could give him. To divert his thoughts, he determined to walk in the village, and directed his steps towards the spot where he had heard the music; to this the harmonious sounds readily guided him: he approached softly, and found himself close to the house where the concert was performing. A young girl, sitting at the door, was playing with a little dog, who began to bark. Ferdinand, drawn from his reverie by this singular accompaniment, begged the little girl to inform him who lived in that house. "It is my father," she replied, smiling; "come in, sir." And saying this, she slowly went up the steps.

Ferdinand hesitated for an instant whether to accept this unceremonious invitation. But the master of the house came down, saying to him in a friendly tone: "Our music, sir, has probably been the only attraction to this spot; no matter, it is the pastor's abode, and to it you are heartily welcome. My neighbours and I," continued he, whilst leading Ferdinand in, "meet alternately at each other's houses once a week, to form a little concert; and to-day it is my turn. Will you take a part in the performance, or only listen to it? Sit down in this apartment. Are you accustomed to hear better music than that performed simply by amateurs? or do you prefer an assemblage where they pass their time in conversation? If you like the latter, go into the adjoining room, where you will find my wife surrounded by a young circle: here is our musical party, there is their conversazióni." Saying this, he opened the door, made a gentle inclination of the head to Ferdinand, and seated himself before his desk. Our traveller would fain have made apologies; but the performers in an instant resumed the piece he had interrupted. At the same time the pastor's wife, a young and pretty woman, entreated Ferdinand, in the most gracious manner possible, entirely to follow his own inclinations, whether they led him to remain with the musicians, or to join the circle assembled in the other apartment. Ferdinand, after uttering some common-place terms of politeness, followed her into the adjoining room.

The chairs formed a semicircle round the sofa, and were occupied by several women and by some men. They all rose on Ferdinand's entering, and appeared a little disconcerted at the interruption. In the middle of the circle was a low chair, on which sat, with her back to the door, a young and sprightly female, who, seeing everyone rise, changed her position, and at sight of a stranger blushed and appeared embarrassed. Ferdinand entreated the company not to interrupt the conversation. They accordingly reseated themselves, and the mistress of the house invited the new guest to take a seat on the sofa by two elderly ladies, and drew her chair near him. "The music," she said to him, "drew you amongst us, and yet in this apartment we have none; I hear it nevertheless with pleasure myself: but I cannot participate in my husband's enthusiasm for simple quartets and symphonies; several of my friends are of the same way of thinking with me, which is the reason that, while our husbands are occupied

with their favourite science, we here enjoy social converse, which sometimes, however, becomes too loud for our virtuoso neighbours. To-day, I give a long-promised tea-drinking. Everyone is to relate a story of ghosts, or something of a similar nature. You see that my auditors are more numerous than the band of musicians.”

“Permit me, madam,” replied Ferdinand, “to add to the number of your auditors; although I have not much talent in explaining the marvellous.”

“That will not be any hindrance to you here,” answered a very pretty brunette; “for it is agreed amongst us that no one shall search for any explanation, even though it bears the stamp of truth, as explanations would take away all pleasure from ghost stories.”

“I shall benefit by your instructions,” answered Ferdinand: “but without doubt I interrupt a very interesting recital;—dare I entreat—?”

The young lady with flaxen hair, who rose from the little seat, blushed anew; but the mistress of the house drew her by the arm, and laughing, conducted her to the middle of the circle. “Come, child,” said she, “don’t make any grimace; reseal yourself, and relate your story. This gentleman will also give us his.”

“Do you promise to give us one, sir?” said the young lady to Ferdinand. He replied by a low bow. She then reseated herself in the place destined for the narrator, and thus began:

“One of my youthful friends, named Juliana, passed every summer with her family at her father’s estate. The château was situated in a romantic country; high mountains formed a circle in the distance; forests of oaks and fine groves surrounded it. It was an ancient edifice, and had descended through a long line of ancestry to Juliana’s father; for which reason, instead of making any alterations, he was only anxious to preserve it in the same state they had left it to him.

“Among the number of antiquities most prized by him was the family picture gallery; a vaulted room, dark, high, and of gothic architecture, where hung the portraits of his forefathers, as large as the natural size, covering the walls, which were blackened by age. Conformable to an immemorial custom, they ate in this room: and Juliana has often told me, that she could not overcome, especially at supper-time, a degree of fear and repugnance; and that she had frequently feigned indisposition, to avoid entering this formidable apartment. Among the portraits there was one of a female, who, it would seem, did not belong to the family; for Juliana’s father could neither tell whom it represented, nor how it had become ranged amongst his ancestry: but as to all appearance it had retained its station for ages, my friend’s father was unwilling to remove it.

“Juliana never looked at this portrait without an involuntary shuddering: and she has told me, that from her earliest infancy she has felt this secret terror, without being able to define the cause. Her father treated this sentiment as puerile, and compelled her sometimes to remain alone in that room. But as Juliana grew up, the terror this singular portrait occasioned, increased; and she frequently supplicated her father, with tears in her eyes, not to leave her alone in that apartment— ‘That portrait,’ she would say, ‘regards me not gloomily or terribly, but with looks full of a mild melancholy. It appears anxious to draw me to it, and as if the lips were about to open and speak to me.—That picture will certainly cause my death.’

“Juliana’s father at length relinquished all hope of conquering his daughter’s fears. One night at supper, the terror she felt had thrown her into convulsions, for she fancied she saw the picture move its lips; and the physician enjoined her father in future to remove from her view all similar causes of fear. In consequence, the terrifying portrait was removed from the gallery, and it was placed over the door of an uninhabited room in the attic story.

“Juliana, after this removal, passed two years without experiencing any alarms. Her complexion resumed its brilliancy, which surprised everyone; for her continual fears had rendered her pale and wan: but the portrait and the fears it produced had alike disappeared, and Juliana—”

“Well,” cried the mistress of the house, smiling, when she perceived that the narrator appeared to hesitate, “confess it, my dear child; Juliana found an admirer of her beauty;—was it not so?”

“‘Tis even so,” resumed the young lady, blushing deeply; “she was affianced: and her intended husband coming to see her the day previous to that fixed on for her marriage, she conducted him over the château, and from the attic rooms was shewing him the beautiful prospect which extended to the distant mountains. On a sudden she found herself, without being aware of it, in the room where the unfortunate portrait was placed. And it was natural that a stranger, surprised at seeing it there alone, should ask who it represented. To look at it, recognise it, utter a piercing shriek, and run towards the door, were but the work of an instant with poor Juliana. But whether in effect owing to the violence with which she opened the door the picture was shaken, or whether the moment was arrived in which its baneful influence was to be exercised over Juliana, I know not; but at the moment this unfortunate girl was striving to get out of the room and avoid her destiny, the portrait fell; and Juliana, thrown down by her fears, and overpowered by the heavy weight of the picture, never rose more.”—

A long silence followed this recital, which was only interrupted by the exclamations of surprise and interest excited for the unfortunate Juliana. Ferdinand alone appeared untouched by the general emotions. At length, one of the ladies sitting near him broke the silence by saying, “This story is literally true; I knew the family where the fatal portrait caused the death of a charming young girl: I have also seen the picture; it has, as the young lady truly observed, an indescribable air of goodness which penetrates the heart, so that I could not bear to look on it long; and yet, as you say, its look is so full of tender melancholy, and has such infinite attractions, that it appears that the eyes move and have life.”

“In general,” resumed the mistress of the house, at the same time shuddering, “I don’t like portraits, and I would not have any in the rooms I occupy. They say that they become pale when the original expires; and the more faithful the likeness, the more they remind me of those waxen figures I cannot look at without aversion.”

“That is the reason,” replied the young person who had related the history, “that I prefer those portraits where the individual is represented occupied in some employment, as then the figure is entirely independent of those who look at it; whereas in a simple portrait the eyes are inanimately fixed on everything that passes. Such portraits appear to me as contrary to the laws of illusion as painted statues.”

“I participate in your opinion,” replied Ferdinand; “for the remembrance of a terrible impression produced on my mind when young, by a portrait of that sort, will never be effaced.”

“O! pray relate it to us,” said the young lady with flaxen hair, who had not as yet quitted the low chair; “you are obliged according to promise to take my place.” She instantly arose, and jokingly forced Ferdinand to change seats with her.

“This history,” said he, “will resemble a little too much the one you have just related; permit me therefore—”

“That does not signify,” resumed the mistress of the house, “one is never weary with recitals of this kind; and the greater repugnance I feel in looking at these horrible portraits, the greater is the pleasure I take in listening to histories of their eyes or feet being seen to move.”

“But seriously,” replied Ferdinand, who would fain have retracted his promise, “my history is too horrible for so fine an evening. I confess to you that I cannot think of it without shuddering, although several years have elapsed since it happened.”

“So much the better, so much the better!” cried nearly all present; “how you excite our curiosity! and its having happened to yourself will afford double pleasure, as we cannot entertain any doubt of the fact.”

“It did not happen personally to me,” answered Ferdinand, who reflected that he had gone too far, “but to one of my friends, on whose word I have as firm a reliance as if I had been myself a witness to it.”

They reiterated their entreaties; and Ferdinand began in these words:— “One day, when I was arguing with the friend of whom I am about to make mention, on apparitions and omens, he told me the following story:—

“I had been invited,” said he, “by one of my college companions, to pass my vacations with him at an estate of his father’s. The spring was that year unusually late, owing to a long and severe winter, and appeared in consequence more gay and agreeable, which gave additional charms to our projected pleasures. We arrived at his father’s in the pleasant month of April, animated by all the gaiety the season inspired.

“As my companion and I were accustomed to live together at the university, he had recommended to his family, in his letters, so to arrange matters that we might live together at his father’s also: we in consequence occupied two adjoining rooms, from whence we enjoyed a view of the garden and a fine country, bounded in the distance by forests and vineyards. In a few days I found myself so completely at home in the house, and so familiarised with its inhabitants, that nobody, whether of the family or among the domesticks, made any difference between my friend and myself. His younger brothers, who were absent from me in the day, often passed the night in my room, or in that of their elder brother. Their sister, a charming girl about twelve years of age, lovely and blooming as a newly blown rose, gave me the appellation of brother, and fancied that under this title she was privileged to shew me all her favourite haunts in the garden, to gratify my wishes at table, and to furnish my apartment with all that was requisite. Her cares and attention will never be effaced from my recollection; they will long outlive the scenes of horror that château never ceases to recall to

my recollection. From the first of my arrival, I had remarked a huge portrait affixed to the wall of an antechamber through which I was obliged to pass to go to my room; but, too much occupied by the new objects which on all sides attracted my attention, I had not particularly examined it. Meanwhile I could not avoid observing that, though the two younger brothers of my friend were so much attached to me, that they would never permit me to go at night into my room without them, yet they always evinced an unaccountable dread in crossing the hall where this picture hung. They clung to me, and embraced me that I might take them in my arms; and whichever I was compelled to take by the hand, invariably covered his face, in order that he might not see the least trace of the portrait.

“Being aware that the generality of children are afraid of colossal figures, or even of those of a natural height, I endeavoured to give my two young friends courage. However, on more attentively considering the portrait which caused them so much dread, I could not avoid feeling a degree of fear myself. The picture represented a knight in the costume of a very remote period; a full grey mantle descended from his shoulders to his knees; one of his feet placed in the foreground, appeared as if it was starting from the canvass; his countenance had an expression which petrified me with fear. I had never before seen anything at all like it in nature. It was a frightful mixture of the stillness of death, with the remains of a violent and baneful passion, which not even death itself was able to overcome. One would have thought the artist had copied the terrible features of one risen from the grave, in order to paint this terrific portrait. I was seized with a terror little less than the children, whenever I wished to contemplate this picture. Its aspect was disagreeable to my friend, but did not cause him any terror: his sister was the only one who could look at this hideous figure with a smiling countenance; and said to me with a compassionate air, when I discovered my aversion to it, ‘That man is not wicked, but he is certainly very unhappy.’ My friend told me that the picture represented the founder of his race, and that his father attached uncommon value to it; it had, in all probability, hung there from time immemorial, and it would not be possible to remove it from this chamber without destroying the regularity of its appearance.

“Meanwhile, the term of our vacation was speedily drawing to its close, and time insensibly wore away in the pleasures of the country. The old count, who remarked our reluctance to quit him, his amiable family, his château, and the fine country that surrounded it, applied himself with kind and unremitting care, to make the day preceding our departure a continual succession of rustic diversions: each succeeded the other without the slightest appearance of art; they seemed of necessity to follow each other. The delight that illumined the eyes of my friend’s sister when she perceived her father’s satisfaction; the joy that was painted in Emily’s countenance (which was the name of this charming girl) when she surprised even her father by her arrangements, which outstripped his projects, led me to discover the entire confidence that existed between the father and daughter, and the active part Emily had taken in directing the order which reigned in that day’s festivities.

“Night arrived; the company in the gardens dispersed; but my amiable companions never quitted my side. The two young boys skipped gaily before us, chasing the may-bug, and shaking the shrubs to make them come out. The dew arose, and aided by the light of the moon formed silver spangles on the flowers and grass. Emily hung on my arm; and an affectionate sister conducted me, as if to take leave, to all the groves and places I had been accustomed to visit with her, or with the family. On arriving at the door of the château, I was obliged to repeat the promise I had made to her father, of passing some weeks in the autumn with him. ‘That season,’ said she, ‘is equally beautiful with the spring!’ With what pleasure did I promise to decline all other engagements for this. Emily retired to her apartment, and,

according to custom, I went up to mine, accompanied by my two little boys: they ran gaily up the stairs; and in crossing the range of apartments but faintly lighted, to my no small surprise their boisterous mirth was not interrupted by the terrible portrait.

“For my own part, my head and heart were full of the intended journey, and of the agreeable manner in which my time had passed at the count’s château. The images of those happy days crowded on my recollection; my imagination, at that time possessing all the vivacity of youth, was so much agitated, that I could not enjoy the sleep which already overpowered my friend. Emily’s image, so interesting by her sprightly grace, by her pure affection for me, was present to my mind like an amiable phantom shining in beauty. I placed myself at the window, to take another look at the country I had so frequently ranged with her, and traced our steps again probably for the last time. I remembered each spot illumined by the pale light the moon afforded. The nightingale was singing in the groves where we had delighted to repose; the little river on which while gaily singing we often sailed, rolled murmuringly her silver waves.

“Absorbed in a profound reverie, I mentally exclaimed: With the flowers of spring, this soft pure peaceful affection will probably fade; and as frequently the after seasons blight the blossoms and destroy the promised fruit, so possibly may the approaching autumn envelop in cold reserve that heart which, at the present moment, appears only to expand with mine!

“Saddened by these reflections, I withdrew from the window, and overcome by a painful agitation I traversed the adjoining rooms; and on a sudden found myself before the portrait of my friend’s ancestor. The moon’s beams darted on it in the most singular manner possible, insomuch as to give the appearance of a horrible moving spectre; and the reflexion of the light gave to it the appearance of a real substance about to quit the darkness by which it was surrounded. The inanimation of its features appeared to give place to the most profound melancholy; the sad and glazed look of the eyes appeared the only hindrance to its uttering its grief.

“My knees tremblingly knocked against each other, and with an unsteady step I regained my chamber: the window still remained open; I reseated myself at it, in order that the freshness of the night air, and the aspect of the beautiful surrounding country, might dissipate the terror I had experienced. My wandering eyes fixed on a long vista of ancient linden trees, which extended from my window to the ruins of an old tower, which had often been the scene of our pleasures and rural fêtes. The remembrance of the hideous portrait had vanished; when on a sudden there appeared to me a thick fog issuing from the ruined tower, which advancing through the vista of lindens came towards me.

“I regarded this cloud with an anxious curiosity: it approached; but again it was concealed by the thickly-spreading branches of the trees.

“On a sudden I perceived, in a spot of the avenue less dark than the rest, the same figure represented in the formidable picture, enveloped in the grey mantle I so well knew. It advanced towards the château, as if hesitating: no noise was heard of its footsteps on the pavement; it passed before my window without looking up, and gained a back door which led to the apartments in the colonnade of the château.

“Seized with trembling apprehension, I darted towards my bed, and saw with pleasure that the two children were fast asleep on either side. The noise I made awoke them; they started,

but in an instant were asleep again. The agitation I had endured took from me the power of sleep, and I turned to awake one of the children to talk with me: but no powers can depict the horrors I endured when I saw the frightful figure at the side of the child's bed.

"I was petrified with horror, and dared neither move nor shut my eyes. I beheld the spectre stoop towards the child and softly kiss his forehead: he then went round the bed, and kissed the forehead of the other boy.

"I lost all recollection at that moment; and the following morning, when the children awoke me with their caresses, I was willing to consider the whole as a dream.

"Meanwhile, the moment for our departure was at hand. We once again breakfasted all together in a grove of lilacs and flowers. 'I advise you to take a little more care of yourself,' said the old count in the midst of other conversation; 'for I last night saw you walking rather late in the garden, in a dress ill-suited to the damp air; and I was fearful such imprudence would expose you to cold and fever. Young people are apt to fancy they are invulnerable; but I repeat to you, Take advice from a friend.'

"In truth,' I answered, 'I believe readily that I have been attacked by a violent fever, for never before was I so harassed by terrifying visions: I can now conceive how dreams afford to a heated imagination subjects for the most extraordinary stories of apparitions.'

"What would you tell me?" demanded the count in a manner not wholly devoid of agitation. I related to him all that I had seen the preceding night; and to my great surprise he appeared to me in no way astonished, but extremely affected.

"You say,' added he in a trembling voice, 'that the phantom kissed the two children's foreheads?' I answered him, that it was even so. He then exclaimed, in accents of the deepest despair, 'Oh heavens! they must then both die!'"—

Till now the company had listened without the slightest noise or interruption to Ferdinand: but as he pronounced the last words, the greater part of his audience trembled; and the young lady who had previously occupied the chair on which he sat, uttered a piercing shriek.

"Imagine," continued Ferdinand, "how astonished my friend must have been at this unexpected exclamation. The vision of the night had caused him excess of agitation; but the melancholy voice of the count pierced his heart, and seemed to annihilate his being, by the terrifying conviction of the existence of the spiritual world, and the secret horrors with which this idea was accompanied. It was not then a dream, a chimera, the fruit of an over-heated imagination! but a mysterious and infallible messenger, which, dispatched from the world of spirits, had passed close to him, had placed itself by his couch, and by its fatal kiss had dropped the germ of death in the bosom of the two children.

"He vainly entreated the count to explain this extraordinary event. Equally fruitless were his son's endeavours to obtain from the count the development of this mystery, which apparently concerned the whole family. 'You are as yet too young,' replied the count: 'too soon, alas! for your peace of mind, will you be informed of these terrible circumstances which you now think mysterious.'

“Just as they came to announce to my friend that all was ready, he recollected that during the recital the count had sent away Emily and her two younger brothers. Deeply agitated, he took leave of the count and the two young children who came towards him, and who would scarcely permit themselves to be separated from him. Emily, who had placed herself at a window, made a sign of adieu. Three days afterwards the young count received news of the death of his two younger brothers. They were both taken off in the same night.

“You see,” continued Ferdinand, in a gayer tone, in order to counteract the impression of sadness and melancholy his story had produced on the company; “You see my history is very far from affording any natural explication of the wonders it contains; explanations which only tend to shock one’s reason: it does not even make you entirely acquainted with the mysterious person, which one has a right to expect in all marvellous recitals. But I could learn nothing more; and the old count dying without revealing the mystery to his son, I see no other means of terminating the history of the portrait, which is undoubtedly by no means devoid of interest, than by inventing according to one’s fancy a *dénouement* which shall explain all.”

“That does not appear at all necessary to me,” said a young man: “this history, like the one that preceded it, is in reality finished, and gives all the satisfaction one has any right to expect from recitals of this species.”

“I should not agree with you,” replied Ferdinand, “if I was capable of explaining the mysterious connection between the portrait and the death of the two children in the same night, or the terror of Juliana at sight of the other portrait, and her death, consequently caused by it. I am, however, not the less obliged to you for the entire satisfaction you evince.”

“But,” resumed the young man, “what benefit would your imagination receive, if the connections of which you speak were known to you?”

“Very great benefit, without doubt,” replied Ferdinand; “for imagination requires the completion of the objects it represents, as much as the judgment requires correctness and accuracy in its ideas.”

The mistress of the house, not being partial to these metaphysical disputes, took part with Ferdinand: “We ladies,” said she, “are always curious; therefore don’t wonder that we complain when a story has no termination. It appears to me like seeing the last scene of Mozart’s *Don Juan* without having witnessed the preceding ones; and I am sure no one would be the better satisfied, although the last scene should possess infinite merit.”

The young man remained silent, perhaps less through conviction than politeness. Several persons were preparing to retire; and Ferdinand, who had vainly searched with all his eyes for the young lady with flaxen hair, was already at the door, when an elderly gentleman, whom he remembered to have seen in the music-room, asked him whether the friend concerning whom he had related the story was not called Count Meltheim?

“That is his name,” answered Ferdinand a little drily; “how did you guess it?—are you acquainted with his family?”

“You have advanced nothing but the simple truth,” resumed the unknown. “Where is the count at this moment?”

“He is on his travels,” replied Ferdinand. “But I am astonished—”

“Do you correspond with him?” demanded the unknown.

“I do,” answered Ferdinand. “But I don’t understand—”

“Well then,” continued the old man, “tell him that Emily still continues to think of him, and that he must return as speedily as possible, if he takes any interest in a secret that very particularly concerns her family.”

On this the old man stepped into his carriage, and had vanished from Ferdinand’s sight ere he had recovered from his surprise. He looked around him in vain for someone who might inform him of the name of the unknown: everyone was gone; and he was on the point of risking being considered indiscreet, by asking for information of the pastor who had so courteously treated him, when they fastened the door of the house, and he was compelled to return in sadness to his inn, and leave his researches till the morning.

The frightful scenes of the night preceding Ferdinand’s departure from the château of his friend’s father, had tended to weaken the remembrance of Emily; and the distraction which his journey so immediately after had produced, had not contributed to recall it with any force: but all at once the recollection of Emily darted across his mind with fresh vigour, aided by the recital of the previous evening and the old man’s conversation: it presented itself even with greater vivacity and strength than at the period of its birth. Ferdinand now fancied that he could trace Emily in the pretty girl with flaxen hair. The more he reflected on her figure, her eyes, the sound of her voice, the grace with which she moved; the more striking the resemblance appeared to him. The piercing shriek that had escaped her, when he mentioned the old count’s explication of the phantom’s appearance; her sudden disappearance at the termination of the recital; her connection with Ferdinand’s family, (for the young lady, in her history of Juliana, had recounted the fatal accident which actually befell Ferdinand’s sister,) all gave a degree of certainty to his suppositions.

He passed the night in forming projects and plans, in resolving doubts and difficulties; and Ferdinand impatiently waited for the day which was to enlighten him. He went to the pastor’s, whom he found in the midst of his quires of music; and by giving a natural turn to the conversation, he seized the opportunity of enquiring concerning the persons with whom he had passed the preceding evening.

He unfortunately, however, could not get satisfactory answers to his questions concerning the young lady with flaxen hair, and the mysterious old gentleman; for the pastor had been so absorbed in his music, that he had not paid attention to many persons who had visited him: and though Ferdinand in the most minute manner possible described their dress and other particulars, it was impossible to make the pastor comprehend the individuals whose names he was so anxious to learn. “It is unfortunate,” said the pastor, “that my wife should be out; she would have given you all the information you desire. But according to your description, it strikes me the young person with flaxen hair must be Mademoiselle de Hainthal;—but—”

“Mademoiselle de Hainthal!” reiterated Ferdinand, somewhat abruptly.

“I think so,” replied the clergyman. “Are you acquainted with the young lady?”

“I know her family,” answered Ferdinand; “but from her features bearing so strong a resemblance to the family, I thought it might have been the young countess of Wartburg, who was so much like her brother.”

“That is very possible,” said the pastor. “You knew then the unfortunate count Wartburg?”

“Unfortunate!” exclaimed Ferdinand, greatly surprised.

“You don’t then know anything,” continued the pastor, “of the deplorable event that has recently taken place at the château of Wartburg. The young count, who had probably in his travels seen some beautifully laid-out gardens, was anxious to embellish the lovely country which surrounds his château; and as the ruins of an old tower seemed to be an obstacle to his plans, he ordered them to be pulled down. His gardener in vain represented to him, that seen from one of the wings of the château they presented, at the termination of a majestic and ancient avenue of linden trees, a magnificent coup d’œil, and that they would also give a more romantic appearance to the new parts they were about to form. An old servant, grown grey in the service of his forefathers, supplicated him with tears in his eyes to spare the venerable remains of past ages. They even told him of an ancient tradition, preserved in the neighbourhood, which declared, that the existence of the house of Wartburg was by supernatural means linked with the preservation of that tower.

“The count, who was a well-informed man, paid no attention to these sayings; indeed they possibly made him the more firmly adhere to his resolution. The workmen were put to their task: the walls, which were constructed of huge masses of rock, for a long while resisted the united efforts of tools and gunpowder; the architect of this place appeared to have built it for eternity.

“At length perseverance and labour brought it down. A piece of the rock separating from the rest, precipitated itself into an opening which had been concealed for ages by rubbish and loose sticks, and fell into a deep cavern. An immense subterranean vault was discovered by the rays of the setting sun, supported by enormous pillars:—but ere they proceeded in their researches, they went to inform the young count of the discovery they had made.

“He came; and being curious to see this dark abode, descended into it with two servants. The first thing they discovered were chains covered with rust, which being fixed in the rock, plainly shewed the use formerly made of the cavern. On another side was a corpse, dressed in female attire of centuries past, which had surprisingly resisted the ravages of time: close to it was extended a human skeleton almost destroyed.

“The two servants related that the young count, on seeing the body, cried in an accent of extreme horror, ‘Great God! it is she then whose portrait killed my intended wife.’ Saying which, he fell senseless by the body. The shake which his fall occasioned reduced the skeleton to dust.

“They bore the count to his château, where the care of the physicians restored him to life; but he did not recover his senses. It is probable that this tragical event was caused by the confined and unwholesome air of the cavern. A very few days after, the count died in a state of total derangement.

“It is singular enough, that the termination of his life should coincide with the destruction of the ruined tower, and there no longer exists any male branch of that family. The deeds relative to the succession, ratified and sealed by the emperor Otho, are still amongst the archives of his house. Their contents have as yet only been transmitted verbally from father to son, as an hereditary secret, which will now, however, be made known. It is also true, that the affianced bride of the count was killed by the portrait’s falling on her.”

“I yesterday heard that fatal history recited by the lady with flaxen hair,” replied Ferdinand.

“It is very possible that young person is the countess Emily,” replied the pastor; “for she was the bosom-friend of the unfortunate bride.”

“Does not then the countess Emily live at the castle of Wartburg?” asked Ferdinand.

“Since her brother’s death,” answered the clergyman, “she has lived with a relation of her mother’s at the château of Libinfelt, a short distance from hence. For as they yet know not with certainty to whom the castle of Wartburg will belong, she prudently lives retired.”

Ferdinand had learnt sufficient to make him abandon the projected journey to the capital. He thanked the pastor for the instructions he had given him, and was conducted to the château where Emily now resided.

It was still broad day when he arrived. The whole journey he was thinking of the amiable figure which he had recognised too late the preceding evening. He recalled to his idea her every word, the sound of her voice, her actions; and what his memory failed to represent, his imagination depicted with all the vivacity of youth, and all the fire of rekindled affection. He already addressed secret reproaches to Emily for not recognising him; as if he had himself remembered her; and in order to ascertain whether his features were entirely effaced from the recollection of her whom he adored, he caused himself to be announced as a stranger, who was anxious to see her on family matters.

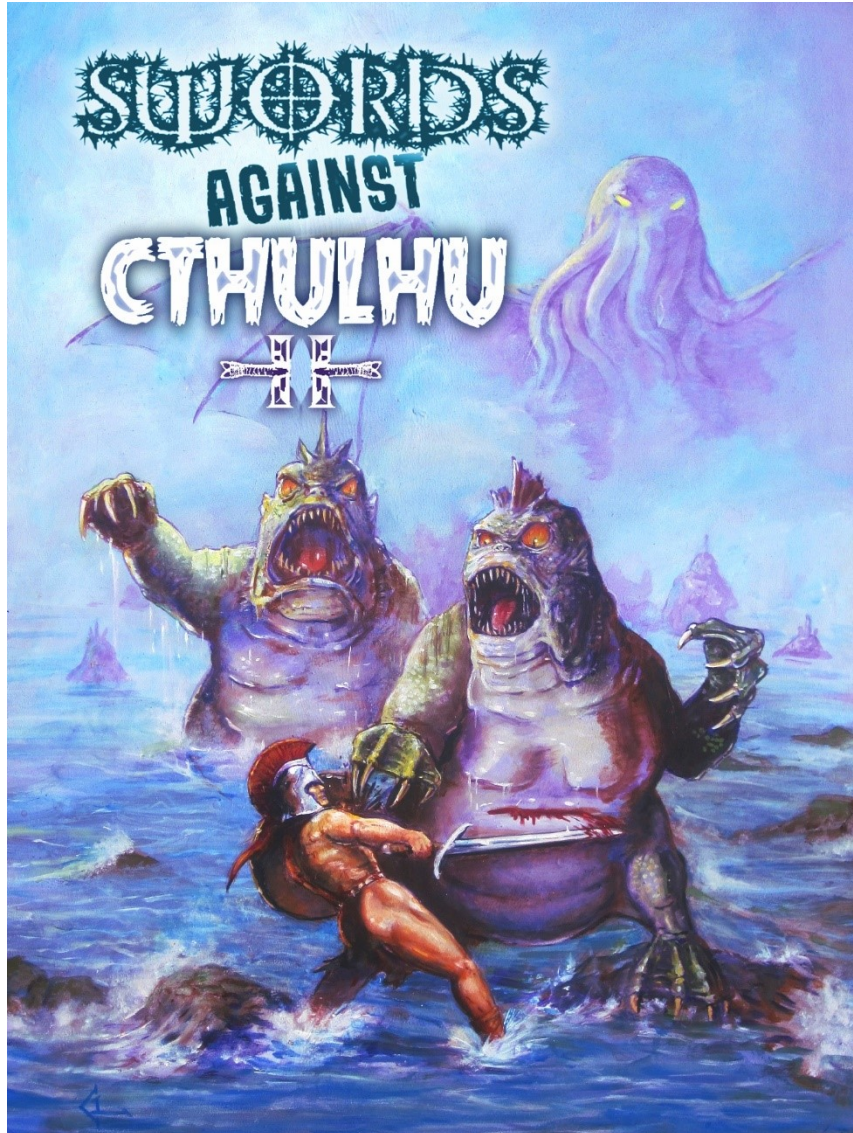
While waiting impatiently in the room into which they had conducted him, he discovered among the portraits with which it was decorated, that of the young lady whose features had the over-night charmed him anew: he was contemplating it with rapture when the door opened and Emily entered. She instantly recognised Ferdinand; and in the sweetest accents accosted him as the friend of her youth.

Surprise rendered Ferdinand incapable of answering suitably to so gracious a reception: it was not the charming person with flaxen hair; it was not a figure corresponding with his imagination, which at this moment presented itself to his view. But it was Emily, shining in every possible beauty, far beyond what Ferdinand had expected: he recollected notwithstanding each feature which had already charmed him, but now clothed in every perfection which nature bestows on her most favoured objects. Ferdinand was lost in thought for some moments: he dared not make mention of his love, and still less did he dare speak of the portrait, and the other wonders of the castle of Wartburg. Emily spoke only of the happiness she had experienced in her earlier days, and slightly mentioned her brother’s death.

As the evening advanced, the young female with flaxen hair came in with the old stranger. Emily presented them both to Ferdinand, as the baron of Hainthal and his daughter Clotilde. They remembered instantly the stranger whom they had seen the preceding evening. Clotilde

rallied him on his wish to be incognito; and he found himself on a sudden, by a short train of natural events, in the company of the person whom his mother intended for his wife; the object of his affection whom he had just discovered; and the interesting stranger who had promised him an explanation relative to the mysterious portraits.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part Two: Abandoned

Chapter 18

“Poor man!” said Herbert, who had rushed to the door, but returned, having seen Ayrton slide down the rope on the lift and disappear in the darkness.

“He will come back,” said Cyrus Harding.

“Come, now, captain,” exclaimed Pencroft, “what does that mean? What! wasn’t it Ayrton who threw that bottle into the sea? Who was it then?”

Certainly, if ever a question was necessary to be made, it was that one!

“It was he,” answered Neb, “only the unhappy man was half-mad.”

“Yes!” said Herbert, “and he was no longer conscious of what he was doing.”

“It can only be explained in that way, my friends,” replied Harding quickly, “and I understand now how Ayrton was able to point out exactly the situation of Tabor Island, since the events which had preceded his being left on the island had made it known to him.”

“However,” observed Pencroft, “if he was not yet a brute when he wrote that document, and if he threw it into the sea seven or eight years ago, how is it that the paper has not been injured by damp?”

“That proves,” answered Cyrus Harding, “that Ayrton was deprived of intelligence at a more recent time than he thinks.”

“Of course it must be so,” replied Pencroft, “without that the fact would be unaccountable.”

“Unaccountable indeed,” answered the engineer, who did not appear desirous to prolong the conversation.

“But has Ayrton told the truth?” asked the sailor.

“Yes,” replied the reporter. “The story which he has told is true in every point. I remember quite well the account in the newspapers of the yacht expedition undertaken by Lord Glenarvan, and its result.”

“Ayrton has told the truth,” added Harding. “Do not doubt it, Pencroft, for it was painful to him. People tell the truth when they accuse themselves like that!”

The next day—the 21st of December—the colonists descended to the beach, and having climbed the plateau they found nothing of Ayrton. He had reached his house in the corral during the night and the settlers judged it best not to agitate him by their presence. Time would doubtless perform what sympathy had been unable to accomplish.

Herbert, Pencroft, and Neb resumed their ordinary occupations. On this day the same work brought Harding and the reporter to the workshop at the Chimneys.

“Do you know, my dear Cyrus,” said Gideon Spilett, “that the explanation you gave yesterday on the subject of the bottle has not satisfied me at all! How can it be supposed that the unfortunate man was able to write that document and throw the bottle into the sea without having the slightest recollection of it?”

“Nor was it he who threw it in, my dear Spilett.”

“You think then—”

“I think nothing, I know nothing!” interrupted Cyrus Harding. “I am content to rank this incident among those which I have not been able to explain to this day!”

“Indeed, Cyrus,” said Spilett, “these things are incredible! Your rescue, the case stranded on the sand, Top’s adventure, and lastly this bottle... Shall we never have the answer to these enigmas?”

“Yes!” replied the engineer quickly, “yes, even if I have to penetrate into the bowels of this island!”

“Chance will perhaps give us the key to this mystery!”

“Chance! Spilett! I do not believe in chance, any more than I believe in mysteries in this world. There is a reason for everything unaccountable which has happened here, and that reason I shall discover. But in the meantime we must work and observe.”

The month of January arrived. The year 1867 commenced. The summer occupations were assiduously continued. During the days which followed, Herbert and Spilett having gone in the direction of the corral, ascertained that Ayrton had taken possession of the habitation which had been prepared for him. He busied himself with the numerous flock confided to his care, and spared his companions the trouble of coming every two or three days to visit the corral. Nevertheless, in order not to leave Ayrton in solitude for too long a time, the settlers often paid him a visit.

It was not unimportant either, in consequence of some suspicions entertained by the engineer and Gideon Spilett, that this part of the island should be subject to a surveillance of some sort, and that Ayrton, if any incident occurred unexpectedly, should not neglect to inform the inhabitants of Granite House of it.

Nevertheless it might happen that something would occur which it would be necessary to bring rapidly to the engineer’s knowledge. Independently of facts bearing on the mystery of Lincoln Island, many others might happen, which would call for the prompt interference of the colonists,—such as the sighting of a vessel, a wreck on the western coast, the possible arrival of pirates, etc.

Therefore Cyrus Harding resolved to put the corral in instantaneous communication with Granite House.

It was on the 10th of January that he made known his project to his companions.

“Why! how are you going to manage that, captain?” asked Pencroft. “Do you by chance happen to think of establishing a telegraph?”

“Exactly so,” answered the engineer.

“Electric?” cried Herbert.

“Electric,” replied Cyrus Harding. “We have all the necessary materials for making a battery, and the most difficult thing will be to stretch the wires, but by means of a drawplate I think we shall manage it.”

“Well, after that,” returned the sailor, “I shall never despair of seeing ourselves some day rolling along on a railway!”

They then set to work, beginning with the most difficult thing, for, if they failed in that, it would be useless to manufacture the battery and other accessories.

The iron of Lincoln Island, as has been said, was of excellent quality, and consequently very fit for being drawn out. Harding commenced by manufacturing a drawplate, that is to say, a plate of steel, pierced with conical holes of different sizes, which would successively bring the wire to the wished-for tenacity. This piece of steel, after having been tempered, was fixed in as firm a way as possible in a solid framework planted in the ground, only a few feet from the great fall, the motive power of which the engineer intended to utilize. In fact as the fulling-mill was there, although not then in use, its beam moved with extreme power would serve to stretch out the wire by rolling it round itself. It was a delicate operation, and required much care. The iron, prepared previously in long thin rods, the ends of which were sharpened with the file, having been introduced into the largest hole of the drawplate, was drawn out by the beam which wound it round itself, to a length of twenty-five or thirty feet, then unrolled, and the same operation was performed successively through the holes of a less size. Finally, the engineer obtained wires from forty to fifty feet long, which could be easily fastened together and stretched over the distance of five miles, which separated the corral from the bounds of Granite House.

It did not take more than a few days to perform this work, and indeed as soon as the machine had been commenced, Cyrus Harding left his companions to follow the trade of wiredrawers, and occupied himself with manufacturing his battery.

It was necessary to obtain a battery with a constant current. It is known that the elements of modern batteries are generally composed of retort coal, zinc, and copper. Copper was absolutely wanting to the engineer, who, notwithstanding all his researches, had never been able to find any trace of it in Lincoln Island, and was therefore obliged to do without it. Retort coal, that is to say, the hard graphite which is found in the retorts of gas manufactories, after the coal has been dehydrogenized, could have been obtained, but it would have been necessary to establish a special apparatus, involving great labor. As to zinc, it may be remembered that the case found at Flotsam Point was lined with this metal, which could not be better utilized than for this purpose.

Cyrus Harding, after mature consideration, decided to manufacture a very simple battery, resembling as nearly as possible that invented by Becquerel in 1820, and in which zinc only is employed. The other substances, azotic acid and potash, were all at his disposal.

The way in which the battery was composed was as follows, and the results were to be attained by the reaction of acid and potash on each other. A number of glass bottles were made and filled with azotic acid. The engineer corked them by means of a stopper through which passed a glass tube, bored at its lower extremity, and intended to be plunged into the acid by means of a clay stopper secured by a rag. Into this tube, through its upper extremity, he poured a solution of potash, previously obtained by burning and reducing to ashes various plants, and in this way the acid and potash could act on each other through the clay.

Cyrus Harding then took two slips of zinc, one of which was plunged into azotic acid, the other into a solution of potash. A current was immediately produced, which was transmitted from the slip of zinc in the bottle to that in the tube, and the two slips having been connected by a metallic wire the slip in the tube became the positive pole, and that in the bottle the negative pole of the apparatus. Each bottle, therefore, produced as many currents as united would be sufficient to produce all the phenomena of the electric telegraph. Such was the ingenious and very simple apparatus constructed by Cyrus Harding, an apparatus which would allow them to establish a telegraphic communication between Granite House and the corral.

On the 6th of February was commenced the planting along the road to the corral, of posts furnished with glass insulators, and intended to support the wire. A few days after, the wire was extended, ready to produce the electric current at a rate of twenty thousand miles a second.

Two batteries had been manufactured, one for Granite House, the other for the corral; for if it was necessary the corral should be able to communicate with Granite House it might also be useful that Granite House should be able to communicate with the corral.

As to the receiver and manipulator, they were very simple. At the two stations the wire was wound round a magnet, that is to say, round a piece of soft iron surrounded with a wire. The communication was thus established between the two poles; the current, starting from the positive pole, traversed the wire, passed through the magnet which was temporarily magnetized, and returned through the earth to the negative pole. If the current was interrupted, the magnet immediately became unmagnetized. It was sufficient to place a plate of soft iron before the magnet, which, attracted during the passage of the current, would fall back when the current was interrupted. This movement of the plate thus obtained, Harding could easily fasten to it a needle arranged on a dial, bearing the letters of the alphabet, and in this way communicate from one station to the other.

All was completely arranged by the 12th of February. On this day, Harding, having sent the current through the wire, asked if all was going on well at the corral, and received in a few moments a satisfactory reply from Ayrton. Pencroft was wild with joy, and every morning and evening he sent a telegram to the corral, which always received an answer.

This mode of communication presented two very real advantages: firstly, because it enabled them to ascertain that Ayrton was at the corral; and secondly, that he was thus not left completely isolated. Besides, Cyrus Harding never allowed a week to pass without going to

see him, and Ayrton came from time to time to Granite House, where he always found a cordial welcome.

The fine season passed away in the midst of the usual work. The resources of the colony, particularly in vegetables and corn, increased from day to day, and the plants brought from Tabor Island had succeeded perfectly.

The plateau of Prospect Heights presented an encouraging aspect. The fourth harvest had been admirable and it may be supposed that no one thought of counting whether the four hundred thousand millions of grains duly appeared in the crop. However, Pencroft had thought of doing so, but Cyrus Harding having told him that even if he managed to count three hundred grains a minute, or nine thousand an hour, it would take him nearly five thousand five-hundred years to finish his task, the honest sailor considered it best to give up the idea.

The weather was splendid, the temperature very warm in the day time, but in the evening the sea-breezes tempered the heat of the atmosphere and procured cool nights for the inhabitants of Granite House. There were, however, a few storms, which, although they were not of long duration, swept over Lincoln Island with extraordinary fury. The lightning blazed and the thunder continued to roll for some hours.

At this period the little colony was extremely prosperous.

The tenants of the poultry-yard swarmed, and they lived on the surplus, but it became necessary to reduce the population to a more moderate number. The pigs had already produced young, and it may be understood that their care for these animals absorbed a great part of Neb and Pencroft's time. The onagers, who had two pretty colts, were most often mounted by Gideon Spilett and Herbert, who had become an excellent rider under the reporter's instruction, and they also harnessed them to the cart either for carrying wood and coal to Granite House, or different mineral productions required by the engineer.

Several expeditions were made about this time into the depths of the Far West Forests. The explorers could venture there without having anything to fear from the heat, for the sun's rays scarcely penetrated through the thick foliage spreading above their heads. They thus visited all the left bank of the Mercy, along which ran the road from the corral to the mouth of Falls River.

But in these excursions the settlers took care to be well armed, for they met with savage wild boars, with which they often had a tussle. They also, during this season, made fierce war against the jaguars. Gideon Spilett had vowed a special hatred against them, and his pupil Herbert seconded him well. Armed as they were, they no longer feared to meet one of those beasts. Herbert's courage was superb, and the reporter's sang-froid astonishing. Already twenty magnificent skins ornamented the dining-room of Granite House, and if this continued, the jaguar race would soon be extinct in the island, the object aimed at by the hunters.

The engineer sometimes took part in the expeditions made to the unknown parts of the island, which he surveyed with great attention. It was for other traces than those of animals that he searched the thickets of the vast forest, but nothing suspicious ever appeared. Neither Top nor Jup, who accompanied him, ever betrayed by their behavior that there was anything strange

there, and yet more than once again the dog barked at the mouth of the well, which the engineer had before explored without result.

At this time Gideon Spilett, aided by Herbert, took several views of the most picturesque parts of the island, by means of the photographic apparatus found in the cases, and of which they had not as yet made any use.

This apparatus, provided with a powerful object-glass, was very complete. Substances necessary for the photographic reproduction, collodion for preparing the glass plate, nitrate of silver to render it sensitive, hyposulfate of soda to fix the prints obtained, chloride of ammonium in which to soak the paper destined to give the positive proof, acetate of soda and chloride of gold in which to immerse the paper, nothing was wanting. Even the papers were there, all prepared, and before laying in the printing-frame upon the negatives, it was sufficient to soak them for a few minutes in the solution of nitrate of silver.

The reporter and his assistant became in a short time very skilful operators, and they obtained fine views of the country, such as the island, taken from Prospect Heights with Mount Franklin in the distance, the mouth of the Mercy, so picturesquely framed in high rocks, the glade and the corral, with the spurs of the mountain in the background, the curious development of Claw Cape, Flotsam Point, etc.

Nor did the photographers forget to take the portraits of all the inhabitants of the island, leaving out no one.

“It multiplies us,” said Pencroft.

And the sailor was enchanted to see his own countenance, faithfully reproduced, ornamenting the walls of Granite House, and he stopped as willingly before this exhibition as he would have done before the richest shop-windows in Broadway.

But it must be acknowledged that the most successful portrait was incontestably that of Master Jup. Master Jup had sat with a gravity not to be described, and his portrait was lifelike!

“He looks as if he was just going to grin!” exclaimed Pencroft.

And if Master Jup had not been satisfied, he would have been very difficult to please; but he was quite contented and contemplated his own countenance with a sentimental air which expressed some small amount of conceit.

The summer heat ended with the month of March. The weather was sometimes rainy, but still warm. The month of March, which corresponds to the September of northern latitudes, was not so fine as might have been hoped. Perhaps it announced an early and rigorous winter.

It might have been supposed one morning—the 21st—that the first snow had already made its appearance. In fact Herbert looking early from one of the windows of Granite House, exclaimed,—

“Hallo! the islet is covered with snow!”

“Snow at this time?” answered the reporter, joining the boy.

Their companions were soon beside them, but could only ascertain one thing, that not only the islet but all the beach below Granite House was covered with one uniform sheet of white.

“It must be snow!” said Pencroft.

“Or rather it’s very like it!” replied Neb.

“But the thermometer marks fifty-eight degrees!” observed Gideon Spilett.

Cyrus Harding gazed at the sheet of white without saying anything, for he really did not know how to explain this phenomenon, at this time of year and in such a temperature.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Pencroft, “all our plants will be frozen!”

And the sailor was about to descend, when he was preceded by the nimble Jup, who slid down to the sand.

But the orang had not touched the ground, when the snowy sheet arose and dispersed in the air in such innumerable flakes that the light of the sun was obscured for some minutes.

“Birds!” cried Herbert.

They were indeed swarms of sea-birds, with dazzling white plumage. They had perched by thousands on the islet and on the shore, and they disappeared in the distance, leaving the colonists amazed as if they had been present at some transformation scene, in which summer succeeded winter at the touch of a fairy’s wand. Unfortunately the change had been so sudden, that neither the reporter nor the lad had been able to bring down one of these birds, of which they could not recognize the species.

A few days after came the 26th of March, the day on which, two years before, the castaways from the air had been thrown upon Lincoln Island.

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter II: The Blind Cæsar

Irene turned upon the eunuch as a she-lion turns upon some hunter that disturbs it from its prey. Noting the anger in her eyes, he fell back and prostrated himself. Thereupon she spoke to me as though his entry had interrupted her words.

“Those are the orders, Captain Olaf. See that you forget none of them. Even if this proud eunuch, who dares to appear before me unannounced, bids you to do so, I shall hold you to account. To-day I leave the city for a while for the Baths whither I am sent. You must not accompany me because of the duty I have laid upon you here. When I return, be sure I’ll summon you,” and, knowing that Stauracius could not see her from where he lay, for a moment she let her splendid eyes meet my own. In them there was a message I could not mistake.

“The Augusta shall be obeyed,” I answered, saluting. “May the Augusta return in health and glory and more beautiful than—”

“Iduna the Fair!” she broke in. “Captain, you are dismissed.”

Again I saluted, retreating from the presence backwards and staying to bow at each third step, as was the custom. The process was somewhat long, and as I reached the door I heard her say to Stauracius,

“Hearken, you dog. If ever you dare to break in upon me thus again, you shall lose two things—your office and your head. What! May I not give secret orders to my trusted officer and not be spied upon by you? Now, cease your grovellings and lead in these Persians, as you have been bribed to do.”

Passing through the silk-clad, bejewelled Persians who waited in an antechamber with their slaves and gifts, I gained the great terrace of the palace which looked upon the sea. Here I found Martina leaning on the parapet.

“Have you more of the Augusta’s pearls about you, Olaf?” she asked mockingly, speaking over her shoulder.

“Not I, Martina,” I answered, halting beside her.

“Indeed. I could have sworn otherwise, for they are perfumed, and I seemed to catch their odour. When did you begin to use the royal scent upon that yellow beard of yours, Olaf? If any of us women did so, it would mean blows and exile; but perchance a captain of the guard may be forgiven.”

“I use no scents, girl, as you know well. Yet it is true that these rooms reek of them, and they cling to armour.”

“Yes, and still more to hair. Well, what gift had my mistress for you to-day?”

“A commission to guard certain prisoners, Martina.”

“Ah! Have you read it yet? When you do, I think you’ll find that it names you Governor of the jail, which is a high office, carrying much pay and place. You are in good favour, Olaf, and I hope that when you come to greatness you will not forget Martina. It was I who put it into a certain mind to give you this commission as the only man that could be trusted in the Court.”

“I do not forget a friend, Martina,” I answered.

“That is your reputation, Olaf. Oh! what a road is opening to your feet. Yet I doubt you’ll not walk it, being too honest; or, if you do, that it will lead you—not to glory, but a grave.”

“Mayhap, Martina, and to speak truth, a grave is the only quiet place in Constantinople. Mayhap, too, it hides the only real glory.”

“That’s what we Christians say. It would be strange if you, who are not a Christian, alone should believe and keep the saying. Oh!” She went on with passion, “we are but shams and liars, whom God must hate. Well, I go to make ready for this journey to the Baths.”

“How long do you stay there?” I asked.

“The course of waters takes a month. Less than that time does not serve to clear the Augusta’s skin and restore her shape to the lines of youth which it begins to need, though doubtless you do not think so. You were named to come as her officer of the Person; but, Olaf, this other business rose up of a new governor for the jail in which the Cæsars and Nobilissimi are confined. I saw a chance for you in it, who, although you have served all these years, have had no real advancement, and mentioned your name, at which the Augusta leapt. To tell the truth, Olaf, I was not sure that you would wish to be captain of the guard at the Baths. Was I right or was I wrong?”

“I think you were right, Martina. Baths are idle places where folk drift into trouble, and I follow duty. Martina—may I say it to you? —you are a good woman and a kind. I pray that those gods of yours whom you worship may bless you.”

“You pray in vain, Olaf, for that they will never do. Indeed, I think that they have cursed me.”

Then suddenly she burst into tears, and, turning, went away.

I, too, went away somewhat bewildered, for much had happened to me that morning which I found it hard to understand. Why had the Augusta kissed me? I took it that this was some kind of imperial jest. It was known that I kept aloof from women, and she may have desired to see what I should do when an Augusta kissed me, and then to make a mock of me. I had heard that she had done as much with others.

Well, let that be, since Stauracius, who always feared lest a new favourite should slip between him and power, had settled the matter for me, for which I blessed Stauracius, although at the moment, being but a man, I had cursed him. And now why did Martina—the

little, dark Martina with the kind face and the watchful, beady eyes, like to those of a robin in our northern lands—speak as she had done, and then burst into tears?

A doubt struck me, but I, who was never vain, pushed it aside. I did not understand, and of what use was it to try to interpret the meaning of the moods of women? My business was war, or, at the moment, the service that has to do with war, not women. Wars had brought me to the rank I held, though, strangely enough, of those wars I can recall nothing now; they have vanished from my vision. To wars also I looked to advance me in the future, who was no courtier, but a soldier, whom circumstances had brought to Court. Well, thanks to Martina, as she said, or to some caprice of the Empress, I had a new commission that was of more worth to me than her random kisses, and I would go to read it.

Read it I did in the little private room upon the palace wall which was mine as captain of the Augusta's guard, though, being written in Greek, I found this difficult. Martina had spoken truly. I was made the Governor of the State prison, with all authority, including that of life and death should emergency arise. Moreover, this governorship gave me the rank of a general, with a general's pay, also such pickings as I chose to take. In short, from captain of the guard, suddenly I had become a great man in Constantinople, one with whom even Stauracius and others like him would have to reckon, especially as his signature appeared upon the commission beneath that of the Empress.

Whilst I was wondering what I should do next, a trumpet blew upon the ramparts, and a Northman of my company entered, saluted and said that I was summoned. I went out, and there before me stood a dazzling band that bowed humbly to me, whom yesterday they would have passed without notice. Their captain, a smooth-faced Greek, came forward, and, addressing me as "General," said the imperial orders were that he was to escort me to the State jail.

"For what purpose?" I asked, since it came to my mind that Irene might have changed her fancy and issued another kind of commission.

"As its General and Governor, Illustrious," he replied.

"Then I will lead," I answered, "do you follow behind me."

Thus that vision ends.

In the next I see myself dwelling in some stately apartments that formed the antechambers to the great prison. This prison, which was situated not far from the Forum of Constantine, covered a large area of ground, which included a garden where the prisoners were allowed to walk. It was surrounded by a double wall, with an outer and an inner moat, the outer dry, and the inner filled with water. There were double gates also, and by them guard-towers. Moreover, I see a little yard, with posts in it, where prisoners were scourged, and a small and horrible room, furnished with a kind of wooden bed, to which they were bound for the punishment of the putting out of their eyes and the slitting of their tongues. In front of this room was a block where those condemned to death were sometimes executed.

There were many prisoners, not common felons, but people who had been taken for reasons of State or sometimes of religion. Perhaps in all they numbered a hundred men, and with

them a few women, who had a quarter to themselves. Besides the jailers, three-score guards were stationed there night and day, and of all of these I was in command.

Before I had held my office three days I found that Irene had appointed me to it with good reason. It happened thus. The most of the prisoners were allowed to receive presents of food and other things sent to them by their friends. All these presents were supposed to be inspected by the officer in charge of the prison. This rule, which had been much neglected, I enforced again, with the result that I made some strange discoveries.

Thus, on the third day, there came a magnificent offering of figs for the Cæsars and Nobilissimi, the brothers-in-law of Irene and the uncles of the young Emperor Constantine, her son. These figs were being carried past me formally, when something about the appearance of one of them excited my suspicion. I took it and offered it to the jailer who carried the basket. He looked frightened, shook his head, and said,

“General, I touch no fruit.”

“Indeed,” I answered. “That is strange, since I thought that I saw you eating of it yesterday.”

“Aye, General,” he replied; “the truth is that I ate too much.”

Making no answer, I went to the window, and threw the fig to a long-tailed, tame monkey which was chained to a post in the yard without. It caught it and ate greedily.

“Do not go away, friend,” I said to the jailer, who was trying to depart while my back was turned. “I have questions that I would ask you.”

So I spoke to him about other matters, and all the while watched the monkey.

Soon I saw that it was ill at ease. It began to tear at its stomach and to whimper like a child. Then it foamed at the mouth, was seized with convulsions, and within a quarter of an hour by the water-clock was dead.

“It would seem that those figs are poisoned, friend,” I said, “and therefore it is fortunate for you that you ate too much fruit yesterday. Now, man, what do you know of this matter?”

“Nothing, sir,” he answered, falling on his knees. “I swear to you by Christ, nothing. Only I doubted. The fruits were brought by a woman whom I thought that once I had seen in the household of the Augustus Constantine, and I knew—” and he paused.

“Well, what did you know, man? It would be best to tell me quickly, who have power here.”

“I knew, sir, what all the world knows, that Constantine would be rid of his uncles, whom he fears, though they are maimed. No more, I swear it, no more.”

“Perhaps before the Augusta returns you may remember something more,” I said. “Therefore, I will not judge your case at present. Ho! guard, come hither.”

As he heard the soldiers stirring without in answer to my summons, the man, who was unarmed, looked about his desperately; then he sprang at the fruit, and, seizing a fig, strove to

thrust it into his mouth. But I was too quick for him, and within a few seconds the soldiers had him fast.

“Shut this man in a safe dungeon,” I said. “Treat and feed him well, but search him. See also that he does himself no harm and that none speak with him. Then forget all this business.”

“What charge must be entered in the book, General?” asked the officer, saluting.

“A charge of stealing figs that belonged to the Cæsar Nicephorus and his royal brethren,” I answered, and looked through the window.

He followed my glance, saw the poor monkey lying dead, and started.

“All shall be done,” he said, and the man was led away.

When he had gone, I sent for the physician of the jail, whom I knew to be trustworthy, since I had appointed him myself. Without telling him anything, I bade him examine and preserve the figs, and also dissect the body of the monkey to discover why it died.

He bowed and went away with the fruit. A while later he returned, and showed me an open fig. In the heart of it was a pinch of white powder.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The deadliest poison that is known, General. See, the stalk has been drawn out, the powder blown in through a straw, and then the stalk replaced.”

“Ah!” I said, “that is clever, but not quite clever enough. They have mixed the stalks. I noted that the purple fig had the stalk of a green fig, and that is why I tried it on the monkey.”

“You observe well, General.”

“Yes, Physician, I observe. I learned that when, as a lad, I hunted game in the far North. Also I learned to keep silent, since noise frightens game. Do you as much.”

“Have no fear,” he answered; and went about his business with the dead monkey.

When he had gone I thought a while. Then I rose, and went to the chapel of the prison, or, rather, to a place whence I could see those in the chapel without being seen. This chapel was situated in a gloomy crypt, lighted only with oil lamps that hung from the massive pillars and arches. The day was the Sabbath of the Christians, and when I entered the little secret hollow in the walls, the sacrament was being administered to certain of the prisoners.

Truly it was a sad sight, for the ministering priest was none other than the Cæsar Nicephorus, the eldest of the Emperor’s uncles, who had been first ordained in order that he might be unfit to sit upon the throne, and afterwards blinded, as I have told. He was a tall, pale man, with an uncertain mouth and a little pointed chin, apparently between forty and fifty years of age, and his face was made dreadful by two red hollows where the eyes should have been. Yet, notwithstanding this disfigurement, and his tonsured crown, and the brodered priest’s robes which hung upon him awkwardly, as he stumbled through the words of his office, to this poor

victim there still seemed to cling some air of royal birth and bearing. Being blind, he could not see to administer the Element, and therefore his hand was guided by one of his imperial brethren, who also had been made a priest. The tongue of this priest had been slit, but now and again he gibbered some direction into the ear of Nicephorus. By the altar, watching all, sat a stern-faced monk, the confessor of the Cæsars and of the Nobilissimi, who was put there to spy upon them.

I followed the rite to its end, observing these unhappy prisoners seeking from the mystery of their faith the only consolation that remained to them. Many of them were men innocent of any crime, save that of adherence to some fallen cause, political or religious; victims were they, not sinners, to be released by death alone. I remember that, as the meaning of the scene came home to me, I recalled the words of Irene, who had said that she believed this world to be a hell, and found weight in them. At length, able to bear no more, I left my hiding-place and went into the garden behind the chapel. Here, at least, were natural things. Here flowers, tended by the prisoners, bloomed as they might have done in some less accursed spot. Here the free birds sang and nested in the trees, for what to them were the high surrounding walls?

I sat myself down upon a seat in the shade. Presently, as I had expected, Nicephorus, the priest-Cæsar, and his four brethren came into the garden. Two of them led the blind man by the hand, and the other two clung close to him, for all these unfortunates loved each other dearly. The four with the split tongues gabbled in his ears. Now and again, when he could catch or guess at the meaning of a word, he answered the speaker gently; or the others, seeing that he had not understood them aright, painfully tried to explain the error. Oh! it was a piteous thing to see and hear. My gorge rose against the young brute of an Emperor and his councillors who, for ambition's sake, had wrought this horrible crime. Little did I know then that ere long their fate would be his own, and that a mother's hand would deal it out to him.

They caught sight of me seated beneath the tree, and chattered like startled starlings, till at length Nicephorus understood.

"What say you, dear brothers?" he asked, "that the new governor of the prison is seated yonder? Well, why should we fear him? He has been here but a little while, yet he has shown himself very kind to us. Moreover, he is a man of the North, no treacherous Greek, and the men of the North are brave and upright. Once, when I was a free prince, I had some of them in my service, and I loved them well. Our nephew, the Emperor, offered a large sum to a Northman to blind or murder me, but he would not do it, and was dismissed from the service of the Empire because he spoke his mind and prayed his heathen gods to bring a like fate upon Constantine himself. Lead me to this governor; I would talk with him."

So they brought Nicephorus to me, though doubtfully, and when he was near I rose from my seat and saluted him. Thereon they all gabbled again with their split tongues, till at length he understood and flushed with pleasure.

"General Olaf," he said to me, "I thank you for your courtesy to a poor prisoner, forgotten by God and cruelly oppressed by man. General Olaf, the promise is of little worth, but, if ever it should be in my power, I will remember this kindness, which pleases me more than did the shouting of the legions in the short day of my prosperity."

“Sir,” I answered, “whatever happens I shall remember your words, which are more to me than any honours kings can bestow. Now, sir, I will ask your royal brethren to fall back, as I wish to speak with you.”

Nicephorus made a sign with his hand, and the four half-dumb men, all of whom resembled him strangely, especially in the weakness of their mouths and chins, obeyed. Bowing to me in a stately fashion, they withdrew, leaving us alone.

“Sir,” I said, “I would warn you that you have enemies whom you may not suspect, for my duty here wherewith I was charged by the Augusta is not to oppress but to protect you and your imperial brothers.”

Then I told him the story of the poisoned figs.

When he had heard it, the tears welled from his hollow eyes and ran down his pale cheeks.

“Constantine, my brother Leo’s son, has done this,” he said, “for never will he rest until all of us are in the grave.”

“He is cruel because he fears you, O Nicephorus, and it is said that your ambition has given him cause to fear.”

“Once, General, that was true,” the prince replied. “Once, foolishly, I did aspire to rule; but it is long ago. Now they have made a priest of me, and I seek peace only. Can I and my brethren help it if, mutilated though we are, some still wish to use us against the Emperor? I tell you that Irene herself is at the back of them. She would set us on high that afterwards she may throw us down and crush us.”

“I am her servant, Prince, and may not listen to such talk, who know only that she seeks to protect you from your enemies, and for that reason has placed me here, it seems not in vain. If you would continue to live, I warn you and your brethren to fly from plots and to be careful of what you eat and drink.”

“I do not desire to live, General,” he answered. “Oh! that I might die. Would that I might die.”

“Death is not difficult to find, Prince,” I replied, and left him.

These may seem hard words, but, be it remembered, I was no Christian then, but a heathen man. To see one who had been great and fallen from his greatness, one whom Fortune had deserted utterly, whining at Fate like a fretful child, and yet afraid to seek his freedom, moved me to contempt as well as to pity. Therefore, I spoke the words.

Yet all the rest of that day they weighed upon my mind, for I knew well how I should have interpreted them were I in this poor Cæsar’s place. So heavily did they weigh that, during the following night, an impulse drew me from my bed and caused me to visit the cells in which these princes were imprisoned. Four of them were dark and silent, but in that of Nicephorus burned a light. I listened at the door, and through the key-place heard that the prisoner within was praying, and sobbing as he prayed.

Then I went away; but when I reached the end of the long passage something drew me back again. It was as though a hand I could not see were guiding me. I returned to the door of the cell, and now through it heard choking sounds. Quickly I shot the bolts and unlocked it with my master-key. This was what I saw within:

To a bar of the window-place was fastened such a rope as monks wear for a girdle; at the end of the rope was a noose, and in that noose the head of Nicephorus. There he hung, struggling. His hands had gripped the rope above his head, for though he had sought Death, at the last he tried to escape him. Of such stuff was Nicephorus made. Yet it was too late, or would have been, for as I entered the place his hands slipped from the thin cord, which tightened round his throat, choking him.

My sword was at my side. Drawing it, with a blow I cut the rope and caught him in my arms. Already he was swooning, but I poured water over his face, and, as his neck remained unbroken, he recovered his breath and senses.

“What play is this, Prince?” I asked.

“One that you taught me, General,” he answered painfully. “You said that death could be found. I went to seek him, but at the last I feared. Oh! I tell you that when I thrust away that stool, my blind eyes were opened, and I saw the fires of hell and the hands of devils grasping at my soul to plunge it into them. Blessings be on you who have saved me from those fires,” and seizing my hand he kissed it.

“Do not thank me,” I said, “but thank the God you worship, for I think that He must have put it into my mind to visit you to-night. Now swear to me by that God that you will attempt such a deed no more, for if you will not swear then you must be fettered.”

Then he swore so fervently by his Christ that I was sure he would never break the oath. After he had sworn I told him how I could not rest because of the strange fears which oppressed me.

“Oh!” he said, “without doubt it was God who sent His angel to you that I might be saved from the most dreadful of all sins. Without doubt it was God, Who knows you, although you do not know Him.”

After this he fell upon his knees, and, having untied the cut rope from the window bars, I left him.

Now I tell this story because it has to do with my own, for it was these words of the Prince that first turned me to the study of the Christian Faith. Indeed, had they never been spoken, I believe that I should have lived and died a heathen man. Hitherto I had judged of that Faith by the works of those who practised it in Constantinople, and found it wanting. Now, however, I was sure that some Power from above us had guided me to the chamber of Nicephorus in time to save his life, me, who, had he died, in a sense would have been guilty of his blood. For had he not been driven to the deed by my bitter, mocking words? It may be said that this would have mattered little; that he might as well have died by his own hand as be taken to Athens, there to perish with his brethren, whether naturally or by murder I do not know. But who can judge of such secret things? Without doubt the sufferings of Nicephorus

had a purpose, as have all our sufferings. He was kept alive for reasons known to his Maker though not to man.

Here I will add that of this unhappy Cæsar and his brethren I remember little more. Dimly I seem to recollect that during my period of office some attack was made upon the prison by those who would have put the prince to death, but that I discovered the plot through the jailer who had introduced the poisoned figs, and defeated it with ease, thereby gaining much credit with Irene and her ministers. If so, of this plot history says nothing. All it tells of these princes is that afterwards a mob haled them to the Cathedral of St. Sophia and there proclaimed Nicephorus emperor. But they were taken again, and at last shipped to Athens, where they vanished from the sight of men.

God rest their tortured souls, for they were more sinned against than sinning.

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

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