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Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 18
11TH JUNE 2017**

THE TARANTULA

**BY NEAL PRIVETT
— AMERICAN
ZOMBIE...**

DEAR MONA

**BY CT BEESLEY—
AFTER THAT I
KILLED HIM...**

**NOBODY LOVES ME
ANYMORE
BY GARY MURPHY**

**GERIATRIA
BY IAN FLETCHER**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is Strange Body of George Pugsly Stuart, Jr by Guy S Ricketts.

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EDITORIAL

This week, an American discovers voodoo horrors in the rum-drenched night of a Caribbean island. An assassination attempt hits a sensitive spot. A cursed priest discovers a secret about his lost love, Mona. A middle-aged man is puzzled by the attentions shown to him by a beautiful young woman. And an elderly man loses the plot in a near future dystopia.

Battle is brewing on Callisto. Dr Silence encounters a victim of the higher space, in the last outing of this ghost detective. The settlers on Lincoln Island meet a traitor. And an older Olaf joins the Varangian Guard of the Empress of Byzantium.

—Gavin Chappell

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THE TARANTULA by Neal Privett

The moon was full again.

It hovered above the midnight waves and melted over Robert Agar's drink-addled mind like warm butter over lobster tail. The night was beautiful out there beneath the stars. And mysterious, too. Nobody knew what mad little secrets the islands held in the silver lunar rays...and nobody knew where Robert was tonight. He had boarded a flight out of town without telling a soul and now he was happily lost in that cool blue dream of palm trees and rum drinks with tiny paper umbrellas. Lying on his back in the sand, he vowed never to re-emerge back into that lousy 9 to 5 world ever again.

The island was resplendent in its velvet darkness; the night air was filled with living things, all moon worshippers...birds calling in the jungle and monkeys chattering excitedly in the treetops. Voices of lovers on the beach farther down laughing and splashing in the sea. La Luna ruled over everything here.

Robert rose from the soft powdery sand and raised his glass to the gleaming moon that swam like a goddess above the rolling waves. "To you," he toasted.

Finally, he was happy...lost in a gentle mambo-haunted paradise...slave to no one. Riding a rum-laced wave to some blue dreamy place. Robert...the beach bum. The rum hound.

Dig it.

Yes.

Some shadows passed suddenly in front of the night tide rolling in. He rubbed the fog from his eyes and turned to see a line of locals dressed in long cloaks that flowed behind them in the breeze. They looked almost like giant bats, marching down the beach. A couple of them carried torches.

Robert watched them pass for a few moments then struggled clumsily to his feet. He stood there wobbling in the salty breeze until he regained his balance again.

He brushed the white powdery sand from his open red flowered Acapulco shirt...his back...his chest...his legs. He tried to piece thoughts together. The ones that hadn't been drowned in rum already, that is. He watched the last stranger vanish down the long beach and decided on a crazy whim to follow them. If there was a party happening on the island...he wanted to be there. Maybe there would be gals doing the limbo, drinking mixed drinks, and howling at the moon. And judging from the weird capes on the folks that just fluttered past...it must be a costume party. By God, Robert thought to himself. I've gotta make that scene.

Robert stumbled down the beach with his head spinning. Time ceased to exist; there was only the moon, the stars...both of which swirled above him in time to the drum beat in his head. He stopped and listened.

Waitamminute, he said. The drums weren't in his mind...they were coming from someplace else. Someplace in the jungle. The soft green jungle night.

Agar staggered down a trail that snaked through the tropical vegetation. He tripped and fell flat on his face once, but he picked himself back up and kept moving. The faint glow of a fire reached out with beckoning orange fingers from behind a wall of palms. The distant sound of drums swayed on the island air.

The rum soaked wayfarer spat sand from his mouth and parted the palm leaves, stepping into the lush coolness with a crooked grin on his intoxicated face. He barrelled down the secluded pathway, en route to some cool blue paradise.

An adventurous buzz radiated through Agar. A kind of gentle madness danced on his brain. This was so cool he couldn't believe it. Crashing a local native rock and roll party. Dig that.

He followed the exotic rhythm of the drums. It was like a Martin Denny record at midnight. The drums pulsated somewhere under the moon. Someone was madly slapping the skins from across the distance and it drew him closer. Like a moth to a flame.

The trail cut through the tropical undergrowth for about a quarter mile. The drums grew louder and louder the farther Agar walked. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and pushed his way through the leaves and grass until he finally came to an abrupt stop. There was a clearing beyond the trail. Ahead, he could see the flickering ghosts of the bonfire flames as they danced with the music. His blood turned to ice water and his mind squirmed inside his skull in a feeble attempt to comprehend what he was seeing. This wasn't a party.

It was some kind of cult ritual.

The drums were pulsating now at a fevered beat. They almost had a life of their own. But it wasn't just music...it was a call to the night-spirits. A chill ran up Agar's spine, despite the heat.

The drums controlled everything. Shadows and fire.

Figures whirled and gyrated around the bonfires. Someone tossed another block of wood. Sparks of flame showered the howling revellers. Agar couldn't pull his eyes away from the scene.

He recognized the same men who had marched past him on the beach a little while ago. Their cowls were down now and he was aghast to find that their faces were painted like skulls. Their spectral visages almost glowed in the light of the fire. Most of them danced around the blaze. They tossed their heads back and waved their arms skyward in wild ecstasy. The drums suddenly grew louder...and faster. The dancers spun out of control and went wild. They threw themselves on the ground and screamed as if some invisible horror was ripping their flesh with unseen talons.

And then they stopped.

A tall robed figure emerged from the green wall of vegetation beyond the fire; its face obscured by a large black hood. The dancers waited, bodies prostrate on the ground. Even the drums had gone silent. The silent figure entered the human circle and raised its arms to the sky. A unanimous gasp left the true believers and they all scrambled to their knees.

Robert crouched down behind some palmettos. A strange chill danced on the back of his neck and he shivered. The rum was beginning to wear off a bit and the initial thrill of following these strange cats was gone. This wasn't the kind of party he wanted to crash. Where was the conga line? The girls? The hooch?

The leader pulled the hood from his head and the blood raced through Robert's brain. The man was painted more elaborately than the others. He wore skull make-up, but there was more colour in his face...an almost yellowish tinge that melded with the white and black of the faux bone disguise. And on the tall man's forehead was something else...a red splotch. Robert squinted and tried to make the design out from his hiding place.

It was a tarantula.

The drums started up again and the natives slapped them incessantly...beating out a frenzied call out to unknown worlds. Robert watched in stone silence as the newly arrived leader clenched his fists.

He screamed, "Hermanos de la Tarántula ... Nos reunimos aquí esta noche para dar la bienvenida a una nueva alma a nuestro redil de los condenados ... traer la sangre nueva ..."

Robert tried to translate... "Damn," he whispered. Half remembered visions of high school Spanish class came back to him. "Hermanos: brothers...Tarántula...sangre: that's blood..."

The tall reaper-like figure continued, "Veneno del Tarántula es muerte, hermanos ... y también es vida. Bebemos de la copa de la muerte ... y al hacerlo nos salvamos de aquella larga noche oscura de la mortalidad y de la condenación ... Bebemos formar la copa de la vida ... y el sabor de la sangre de los vivos ... y al hacerlo, conquistamos la muerte ..." The crowd rose to its feet and began to sway with the drum beat again. His voice melded with the rhythm and became one. Robert knew that he was hearing something supernatural... something forbidden to the ears of outsiders.

"Veneno del Tarántula es muerte, hermanos ... y también es vida. Bebemos de la copa de la muerte ... y al hacerlo nos salvamos de aquella larga noche oscura de la mortalidad y de la condenación ... Bebemos formar la copa de la vida ... y el sabor de la sangre de los vivos ... y al hacerlo, conquistamos la muerte ..."

Someone brought two wooden cups. The leader accepted them then held them high. He uttered strange words over them and took a long drink of whatever was in there. Then he passed the cup around and everyone drank from it. There was a collective sigh from the gathering and Robert wondered what it was they drank.

It was like some old horror flick on Shock Theatre. Agar wanted to return to the hotel, but when the leader of the group...or coven...began to speak again, the loud bellowing voice echoed across the night like thunder and Robert found his feet glue to the sand. He was too petrified to move. All of a sudden, Robert was an interloper...spying on some weird and ancient ceremony that he wasn't supposed to see and he wished that he had never left the beach.

The robed, skull-faced leader then lifted the second cup high and uttered similar mumbo-jumbo over it. But this time he did not drink. Robert saw, to his horror, that the second cup was empty. It had to be filled first...then he understood what the cult leader meant when he said sangre.

There was a commotion beyond the wall of palms and tall grass. Then came a scream that shattered the night. Robert sank farther down behind his cover. His mind was generating white hot flashes of panic. What in the holy hell is this?

The woman looked to be around twenty. Two robed goons dragged her into the circle. She kicked and fought the entire way. The leader grabbed her by the hair and smiled. His death-head visage beamed in the flickering firelight and Robert knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was looking at the most evil bastard he had ever seen.

Agar rose slowly. His heart raced so fast that he was afraid it would explode. He knew that he had to make a decision. And that glaring fact scared him to death.

The sudden gleam of a sharp blade in the cult leader's outstretched hand made the decision for him. He exploded out of the tropical night, howling like a maniac, and descended swiftly upon the shocked revellers, who were completely caught off guard. They stood there, speechless, as Robert grabbed the beautiful sacrificial victim by the wrist and pulled her away. Agar and the girl raced down the path, through the trees, and back to the beach.

The drum beat changed all of a sudden, and Robert knew that they were signalling to others about the rescue and resultant blasphemy against their primitive god. It would only be a matter of moments before Robert and the girl were pursued.

Robert pulled the girl up the beach. They ran into the moonlit darkness, melting into the sand and the surf. Robert glanced back several times, but no one was pursuing them. His hotel waited up ahead. They halted in sight of their sanctuary and struggled for air. Agar held his knees and fought off the dizziness that overtook him. The girl brushed dark hair from her eyes and tried to feign a smile. She was petrified, and her voice quaked with the rusty fear that comes from a near death experience.

"Muchas Gracias," she said.

Agar pulled her along and headed for what he prayed was the safety of his hotel room. He knew one damn thing. His vacation was now officially over. He was catching the next plane out of there.

Agar took the frightened girl to his room on the third floor, locked and bolted the door and headed straight for the mini-bar. "Sweet mother of God," he groaned. "I need a drink."

The girl sat on his bed; a lovely, but terrified, island angel. She held some dark secret that Robert could only guess at. He tossed some ice into a glass and drowned it with bourbon. He sat on the bed beside her. He took a couple of nervous drinks before finally speaking. "What the hell was that?"

“A sacrifice...to the Tarantula God.”

“The which?”

“Arana Padre...the great spider father... Xiaola...he watches over the islands and protects us. I was to be his bride tonight...”

“Bride? They were going to kill you, sweetheart.”

“My blood was to feed the Great Father and we would all live in peace...”

Robert sighed and shook his head. “Man, somebody sold you a real bill of goods, didn’t they?”

The girl gave Robert a perplexed look. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head in disgust. “Nada.” He reached for the telephone. “We should call the police.”

The girl grabbed his wrist. She was wide-eyed with fear. “No! The police cannot help.”

Agar hung the phone back on the receiver. “Oh...right. The police are in on it...”

The girl nodded. “Many...of the members of our sect are policemen...”

Robert continued to wrack his brain. He talked on, unaware of the fur covered creature gliding across the floor. It appeared suddenly from behind the chest of drawers and scurried on long spindly legs towards Robert’s naked foot. It glared through eight monstrous eyes and its fangs were ripe for the attack and dripping with venom. “Well,” Robert asked the girl. “...where do you live? Is there somebody we can call?”

She shook her head and turned away. Robert was just about to say something else when he glanced down and screamed like a banshee on fire. “Holy mother of God!” He leaped upwards like a frightened cat and brought his foot down with a definitive floor shaking thud!

Agar lifted his foot and moaned with disgust and shock at the green ooze that dripped slowly from his heel. For a second, Agar’s mind was numbed to everything but the sickening putrescence that splatted upon the floor in graphic slow motion. He looked at his foot, then down at the floor.

One extremely mangled tarantula lay dead at the foot of his bed.

The horrified girl rose from the bed slowly. She had fallen into some kind of trance. Her lips quivered and tried in vain to formulate words but she was in complete shock and had lost the ability to speak. All she could do was stare in disbelief at the dead tarantula and shiver uncontrollably.

Robert rose from the bed and backed away, a sudden chill ripping through him like a sudden gust of wind blowing through a graveyard. The girl had been temporarily rendered a mental

vegetable. She was now lost in the throes of paralysis...all because of a squashed tarantula. Robert was dumbfounded.

Her eyes diverted from the tarantula back to Robert. She opened her mouth. This time, instead of silence, a gut wrenching scream erupted from the depths of her throat. Robert's spine tingled. He felt a presence appear behind him.

The stars exploded in his head as Agar hit the floor. The room swirled and went black. Robert could still hear the girl's screams as he lost consciousness.

Standing above Agar's prostrate body was the cult leader, a rounded club in his outstretched hand. His painted skull-face grinned devilishly in the soft lamplight of the hotel room. The tall, dark man continued to grin as he reached over and grabbed the defenceless girl by her long hair then patiently and methodically slit her throat.

Robert opened his eyes slowly. At first there was darkness, but things came into focus quickly. The hotel was gone. So was the girl. He was lying on his back...on some kind of altar. It felt cold and smooth against his bare back. Some kind of local stone.

He winced at the throbbing pain in his skull. His brain swam like a fish in dark water. The drums were pulsating again. He tried to lean up, but the pain in his head and neck wouldn't permit it.

The deep bellowing voice was instantly familiar, but the sight of the skull-face leering down at him still caused a savage surge of fear to rush through his heart. The painted face glowed in the firelight and was so hideous that Robert turned his head away rather than look at it.

"We finally have you," the tall, mysterious cloaked figure said with a smile.

"Congratulations," Robert smirked as he turned again to face his captor. "What now?"

The tall man said nothing. He stood there and smiled instead.

"Why not let me go? You can't possibly get away with this. I'm a tourist, for God's sake. If I come up missing..."

The leader of the tarantula cult laughed. "You have seen too much. You know more than any outsider should." He reached into a cloth sack. "And what is more, my friend, you have killed the sacred spider. You have killed our father. Our protector..."

The skull-faced man held the dead tarantula close to Robert's face...so close that some of the fluids dripped onto his chin. Robert gagged and turned away in disgust. "Xiaola must be avenged."

The drums grew louder and the sweltering night began to spin out of control as the tall skull-faced man began to chant. He held the battered spider over Robert's body and spoke words that no sane man should ever hear.

By some strange act of cosmic mercy, Robert's eyes rolled back into his head and he lost consciousness again.

Or perhaps it wasn't mercy...

There was a surging rush of sound and sensation. When Robert opened his eyes, he was in the middle of a party. People were everywhere. Men in porkpie hats and flowery Acapulco shirts spilled alcohol all over themselves and women in island dresses shook their hips and kicked up sand. Laughter was everywhere. It was the farthest corner removed from the dark night world Robert Agar had just come from.

The question was: how did he get here?

Everyone moved and gyrated drunkenly by the beach to the music of a live Calypso band. The music was of the islands and tinged with American jazz. The steel drums painted the scene like Van Gogh with a molasses drenched brush. The saxophone wailed and the singer, in his pork pie hat, jumped up and down as he sang.

Robert was disoriented, bewildered. He moved through the crowd in a confused attempt to find his way back to the room. The music was so loud that it assaulted his brain...pushing thoughts together and rendering them useless. The dancing bodies collided into his and filled his ears with distorted laughs and unintelligible words.

The waves rolled gently in the distance. There was no one there and he needed to clear his head. Try to figure out just what the hell had happened to him.

Robert headed towards the beach. All of a sudden someone fell into his arms. She hung there for a moment, staring into Robert's eyes. Then she smiled. "Wow. Look at your eyes! What have you been drinking?"

Robert helped the woman to her feet.

"Thank you," she said. "Sorry to almost knock you down. It's a little wild out here with the band, isn't it?" Her voice was musical. She laughed and rubbed his chest. "Whoops...your shirt is all wet. Blame it on my drink." Robert glanced down. His Acapulco shirt hung open and blew gently in the breeze. There were specks of blood on his flesh. "What did you do," the woman asked. "Cut yourself shaving?"

Robert stared at her like a creature from another dimension. Words did not come. He turned to go to the beach and she grabbed his arm. "Can I come to the beach with you? This party is starting to get on my nerves."

Robert nodded and she took his arm in hers. They walked down the beach in silence. The idle chit chat came like rain. "So where are you from?"

Robert had to think. To remember. "California...I think..."

“Whoa,” the woman cackled. “You must really be tying one on. I’m from St. Louis. My name’s Jeannie. What’s yours?”

“Robert.”

Agar smiled and tried to be friendly. His head pounded mercilessly and all he wanted to do was find some cool lonesome place to hide. Something terrible had happened to him. What...he couldn’t say. Visions started to come back to him as he walked: faces...a girl...a grinning skull with a knife...

The woman continued, “These crazy kids and their rock and roll...I wish Elvis had never been born...”

“Elvis is the king, baby...,” Robert said angrily as a degree of clarity returned to him. But a wave of panic bled all over Robert as he glanced up and saw the moon rising over the flat expanse of the ocean. His heart began to beat uncontrollably and somewhere deep in the jungle of his brain he heard the drums once again. Those damnable drums...

The moon was pure silver. Razor sharp and cool. It rose slowly, but surely, over the warm dark waters. Somehow Robert was drawn to it, more so than ever before. The light bathed him in an eerie glow and its rays penetrated every inch of his body. He felt the moonlight caress his flesh...invade his insides. Slice into his mind. He stopped and looked at his hands.

The drums in his head grew louder.

Something ancient and primitive spoke to him then.... from out of the night. He stared at his hands in complete awe that quickly turned to a feeling of unbridled horror. Long black shafts of fur began to grow out of his flesh. The thick, spindly hair shot from the backs of his hands and his fingers began to melt away into long sharp claws. Robert whispered, “What in the name of God?”

The nightmare didn’t end there.

His face. Robert’s cheekbones began to shift. He felt his entire face begin to rearrange itself. Great ripples of pain rolled through his head and he could hear the bone crunching and shifting beneath the skin. He cried out in pain and fell to his knees.

Robert Agar screamed. Not a scream, really. More like a bloodcurdling wail...one ounce confusion and three ounces terror. Add lime. Shake, don’t stir. “What’s happening to me?”

His flesh pulled apart to release great tufts of black fur. His eyes blurred momentarily and burning flashes exploded inside them. And a moment later...he saw more clearly than he had ever imagined possible. Eight simultaneous images of the beach and the screaming, horrified woman, assaulted his senses. He covered his eyes and buried his head in the sand. Waves of pain rushed over his body as the spine and bones stretched and grew longer.

The drums inside his head were beating at a fever pitch now.

The agony ceased all of a sudden and it was replaced by something else. A ravenous hunger...that hurt almost as much as the awful transformation that had changed Robert into

an unparalleled thing of horror. Robert leaped up from the sand and with little effort he crossed a hundred yards of beach in mere seconds. He chased the screaming woman down and pounced upon her, knocking her face down into the rolling brine. A rattling, insect din escaped his throat.

The foam rolled around their struggling bodies as Robert, in his new incarnation, buried his fangs deep into the back of her neck. It was a horrible thing he was doing, but he couldn't stop himself. Strangely enough, he didn't want to stop.

The blood that gushed into his mouth was sweeter than anything he had ever tasted.

Robert awoke, reclining in a chair with the warm sunlight hitting him square in the face. He glanced around in confusion for a moment and realized that he was beside the hotel pool, beneath the shade of a large palm tree. The waiter's voice made him jump.

"Another drink, sir?"

Robert thought for a moment. "A sangria."

"Coming right up, sir." The waiter blew away and returned a moment later with a tall, chilled glass, bursting with wine and fruit. "Robert reached into his shirt pocket and produced a few bills. He handed them to the man, who smiled and nodded.

Agar sipped his drink and groaned. "Oh, man...what a dream."

The ocean stretched out to infinity before him. And miles of the whitest sand he had ever seen rolled away on both sides. He was alive...and on vacation. It was time he acted like it. Someone had slipped him some bad liquor...or maybe even a pill of some sort. But he was alright now. Nothing but crazy dreams. Too much sun. Bad seafood. Nothing more.

The waiter returned with a newspaper. "Paper, sir?"

"Yes, please. In English." Robert tossed the man a coin and sat his drink down on the small bamboo table beside his chair. He stretched the paper open and studied the front page. The headlines screamed, "Aztec Mummy Stolen from Local Museum." Robert mulled it over for a moment. Who the hell would want to steal a mummy? And what for? He shrugged and continued reading.

The headline on the bottom of the page screamed out to Robert and caused his blood to run cold. "Police investigating murder of tourist at the Palm Resort hotel."

Robert stared in shock at the newsprint that screamed bloody murder before his eyes. He continued to read. "Woman's drained and mutilated remains discovered early yesterday on the beach near Consuelo's Key. So far, no clues have been unearthed, other than the fact that enough tarantula venom to kill five human beings was injected into her body..."

Robert took another deep sip of his drink and escaped to the cool solitude of his room.

The drums woke him later.

It was already dark and the soft thunder of the waves crashing outside his door greeted him. But the peaceful sound quickly faded away when he recognized the native pulse of the island. And he knew something else: he had to go where those drums were playing. He didn't know why. He just knew that he was being summoned and that he had to answer the call. There was no choice.

Robert rose, but hesitated when he saw the web that hung in silky strands all around his bed. He stared in disbelief. There were no spiders in sight, but something had made a gigantic web over him. Uncanny.

He sniffed his wrinkled Acapulco shirt. He hadn't changed it in days. But he quickly removed it when he saw the bloodstains. He hopped up and tossed the wadded-up shirt into his bag. He put on another short sleeve shirt with *tiki* idols all over it and left it unbuttoned. He put on a pair of old jeans and ran his fingers through his hair. The mirror offered a strange image back to him when he stared at his reflection. His sideburns were longer...blackier. And his hair rose higher into a widow's peak that looked almost vampirish. And his eyebrows now met in the centre.

"I look like a lycanthropic rockabilly singer," Robert remarked to the mirror. He grimaced as he noticed tiny bits of cobweb hanging behind his ears and off the tip of his chin. He rubbed them away and raced out the door into the night.

Something inside him made him follow the drums. He walked down the beach, took a beaten path into the jungle and followed it until he came to a clearing a half mile in. The breath caught in his throat when he saw the tarantula cult waiting up ahead. Shadowy figures, all. They congregated around a large bonfire that was piled high with dry wood. The drums grew louder and lulled Robert Agar into a dream-like state. He stopped before the skull-faced leader and waited there for the strange man to speak.

Skull make up adorned the faces of those present, and the savage memory of the previous ceremonial night came reeling back to Robert when he drew closer. The cultists crowded around him. They chanted and gyrated. They raked his hair and flesh with their fingertips and moaned in ecstasy. All Robert could do was stand there in a semi-paralysis.

"You have been transformed into something else...something outside of the mortal realm. You are now our servant and you will complete all tasks I give to you. Yes?"

Robert nodded.

"Tonight is the full moon again...and you must eat. This is the blood you shall drink..." The tall man handed a photograph to Robert. The zombified American took the photograph without looking at it. The cult leader spoke again. "This detective is on to us. He will not stop his investigation until he finds us. That woman you killed will be our undoing. You must prevent that. Go and kill this man...tonight."

The cult let loose with a unanimous sigh as the drums grew faster. Robert nodded and turned to go. The crowd parted to let him pass. As he walked down the jungle path, the pain returned to him and the night was filled with his screams. When the cult heard, they responded with howls of pleasure.

Robert underwent his horrible transformation under the moon's rays. It was no longer Robert that emerged from the trees onto the night beach...it was seven feet of black furred, eight eyed terror. The man-tarantula raced down the beach with superhuman speed. Somehow it knew the destination.

It reached the bungalow and wasted no time. The creature broke down the front door and found its prey lying in bed. But the doomed one was not alone. Robert stalked across the tiny kitchen floor and burst into the bedroom of Lt. Manuel Rodriguez. The detective tried to reach his gun on the nightstand, but the tarantula was faster. It sank its sharp fangs into Manuel's arm and stood there watching the man's flesh bloat and bubble from the poison it had injected into him. Manuel's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed onto the bed. The woman fell from the covers and backed herself against the wall. She screamed her head off, covering her eyes as if this wasn't happening. Robert moved closer...the venom dripping from his fangs like honey. He flexed his furry clawed hands and revelled in the eight, telescopic images of the brown skinned beauty howling in agony as he bit into her...

Robert came to the following morning...walking on the beach, dazed and confused. He walked for several hundred yards until he came to a tiny stone church that looked as if it had been built back in the 1700s. He walked the white gravel lined path until he came to the door and he collapsed on the front step.

He awoke with a priest hovering over him. The man wore a long black robe and dabbed a cool wet rag on his fevered forehead. "My son," the man said. "Are you alright? You collapsed at my door."

The room came slowly into focus. Robert groaned, "Father...I'm in trouble..."

"Yes, my son...tell me...what have you done?"

"I have become something..."

"What have you become, my son?"

Robert thought for a moment. "A demon."

Robert sat on a cot in a stone cell. He smiled when the priest unlocked the door and entered. The padre brought him a tray with a loaf of bread and some soup. "Our fare is simple here, but I hope it will nourish you."

"Thank you, father," Robert said. "You don't know what this means to me. I must be locked up until the moon is gone."

The old man laughed. "I do not understand how this will help...but if it will ease your mind, my son..."

"I will kill, Father."

The padre hesitated in thought for a moment. "Then I shall pray that you will kill no longer." The priest smiled and bowed. "Goodnight then, my son. I will come to release you at dawn."

"Goodnight, father." The old priest locked the heavy wooden door again and stopped when Robert called out to him. "Please don't come back down here, Father...not tonight...no matter what you hear."

The padre looked at him curiously, then nodded and vanished back up the ancient stone steps. Robert was left alone with his thoughts and fears as the sun went down behind the tropical canopy. "Pray for me, Father."

The dreaded moon appeared much too soon and its sharp rays cut through Robert's addled mind as he stared through the iron bars of the primitive cell's window. Agar moaned with pain as the transformation took hold and his tortured body began to change once again.

The aged bars were no match for the strength and fury of the tarantula. It bent and ripped the iron from the mission wall and reduced the stone into powder. The thing rushed from its internment and into the moon drenched foliage, drinking in every sweet drop of its newfound freedom. The beast growled in anger as it headed towards the source of its misery.

Robert's mind struggled and gained a foothold inside the tarantula's skull. His man-soul fought tooth and nail against the monster's soul inside him. With every step, the beast warred against the horror possessing him. It was being summoned once again...the drums wafted on the fragrant tropical air. But this time, Robert...the spider-thing...had no intention of taking any orders. Robert...the man...was appalled at what he had done in the guise of the tarantula. And tonight he was going to square all accounts.

Robert followed the sound of the drums in the distance and found his prey in the flickering light of the bonfire. Robert...the lycanthrope... emerged from the palm studded darkness and stepped into the lunar bathed clearing where the spider people danced to the primitive music of their evil drums.

The cultists stopped dancing and screamed when they saw Robert burst into their midst. There was something different about him this time...something wrong. The tarantula man rushed through the milling crowd of twisted devotees, grabbing one after another and snapping their necks with his steel-like claws.

One man rushed at him with a machete, but Robert caught his hand and snapped the arm off at the shoulder, wrenching it free. The man screamed in agony as Robert severed his limb, but the shirtless cult member's misery was doused when the tarantula sank its fangs into his throat and drank deep before tossing the moistureless hull away.

The creature lumbered across the clearing and grabbed another victim...this one a woman. It tore the garment from her chest and ripped into the flesh, severing the chest bone in a matter of seconds and tasting her still beating heart as it died inside her.

Robert tossed the lifeless female away and stopped when a very tall, thin figure appeared in his path. It was their leader. The man stood like a monolith in his black flowing cloak and skull make up...resembling the haunted spectre of Death himself. The tall man raised his hands stoically and shouted above the panicked din of his followers as they scrambled about in the orange firelit semi-darkness. "You! Rebellious servant of Xiaola...you have blasphemed against our great god for the final time..."

The leader's eyes began to light up with a demon's fire and the air began to stir about the jungle clearing. Robert felt his pulse quicken and his spider's brain squirm under the power of some unseen force.

And it hurt.

The drums blasted the wind...only nobody was playing them now. The drummers had all fled. Robert fell to his knees and tried to stifle the vice-like pressure on his mind. The leader of the spider people raised his hands higher. The long black sleeves of his robe slid down his arms and revealed withered brown skin in the light of the flickering fire.

Robert sank further down to the ground. The tarantula man wailed in agony as the mysterious leader tightened the pressure on his head. All eight eyes swirled over with fog. He felt his skull begin to buckle and crack. In another moment, Robert Agar would be dead.

The leader laughed maniacally. His tall body became encased by a strange glowing aura and Robert knew that he was looking at a creature afire with the flaming light of ancient, vengeful gods. The tarantula-creature buckled under the might of ancient magic and closed its eyes for the last time.

Then something happened.

From out of the jungle stepped the priest from the old mission. He came at the cult leader with an outstretched crucifix. The old man screamed with a fire brighter than anything the forces of darkness could muster. "Creatura noctis ... redire unde venerant redire inferno damnari ...Creatura noctis ... redire unde venerant redire inferno damnari ..."

The leader of the spider cult staggered and fell back a few steps. Robert raised his head and glanced up to see his tormentor actually scared for the first time. The leader took a step towards the priest, but the old padre shoved the cross at him, sending the tall man reeling in repulsion.

The tall man turned his dark magic towards the padre now and this gave Robert the impetus to rise from the ground. It was apparent to Robert now...even with this throbbing arachnid mind...that these two foes knew one another before. Perhaps even in a former life. Their fight was an old one and he was witnessing the ultimate rematch.

The padre's cross began to glow and a shaft of blue light shot from its silver design, striking the cult leader in the face. He fell to the ground and writhed for a moment before leaping

back up. When he stood again, Robert gasped to see the makeup gone from his face. Illuminated by the firelight, were the features of an ancient thing...which should have died centuries before. Robert knew right away that he was gazing at the visage of the Aztec mummy that had been reported stolen. Somehow, by some awful twist of fate...perhaps even by the hands of the spider cult...the mummy had been resurrected to continue its reign of evil over the islands and possibly even worlds beyond.

Another punishing blue flame shot from the priest's outstretched crucifix. The night was filled with the padre's triumphant voice; "Vete, araña rey! We meet again...for the last time!"

"You could not defeat me when you came with the Spanish four-hundred years ago, old man...and you will not defeat me this night!" The Aztec mummy raised its hand defiantly and by some unseen force, the old priest was knocked flat. He landed in the sand and rolled. And he did not get up.

The tarantula-thing rose and charged the living mummy. Robert lowered his head and tackled the cult leader, hitting him with every ounce of force he could muster. The two brawling night-creatures crashed headlong into the sand. Robert raised his claw to deliver the death-blow...but the mummy sent him hurtling across the clearing as if he had been pummelled by an invisible hammer. The tarantula landed and rolled back on his feet. It charged again.

Robert Agar...the tarantula-man... grappled desperately with the Aztec mummy, the evil ruler of an ancient sect of Indians that worshipped the tarantula with blood sacrifices. Robert got his claws around the fiend's throat and squeezed until the bone and mummified flesh began to splinter and flake away. In less than a moment, the mummy's head rolled to the ground and the body, no longer with a centre of intelligence to guide it, toppled harmlessly.

Robert stood over his kill with the venom foaming around the edges of his monstrous mouth. He knew not why...but he felt a sudden need to help the old priest. Robert reached over and lifted the old man up.

"Dios mío," the padre said with a smile. "I believe that I am finally getting too old for this." He glanced down at the lifeless mummy, crossing himself. "This time may he remain truly dead."

All of a sudden, the headless corpse sprang to life and knocked the old priest down. The tarantula man grabbed the mummy, but the undead beast caught the tarantula on the chin and sent him reeling again. The leader of the spider people drove his hand into Robert's chest like a spike and skewered his heart.

But the padre was ready. He drove the crucifix deep into the dried-out chest cavity of the mummy...right where the evil Aztec emperor's heart once beat. There was a great flash of blue light and the Aztec mummy exploded into dust, a threat no more.

The night returned to peaceful silence once again. The fire crackled and burned. The locals had long fled the scene. Far in the distance, a night bird called to a lost spirit somewhere. Maybe it called for Robert.

The padre helped the tarantula up and stood there as the supernatural creature limped away, oblivious to everything but the life that was quickly draining from its tortured body. The

padre followed behind with a heavy heart. “You saved me, my son. But you could not save yourself. How ironic life can be.”

The tarantula moved slowly and steadily down the jungle path, towards the waiting ocean. The moon waxed above, beckoning to the gentle tides. It was a beautiful night. The last night on earth for Robert Agar, who found himself in a nocturnal world of demons and spirits that he could not control. Until the very end.

The priest followed Robert all the way to the beach and stood there in the moonlight, watching the creature limp towards the water. “May you find the peace you were looking for. You warred against the devil and you won. Go to your rest, my son and may the angels accept you in their blissful midnight midst.”

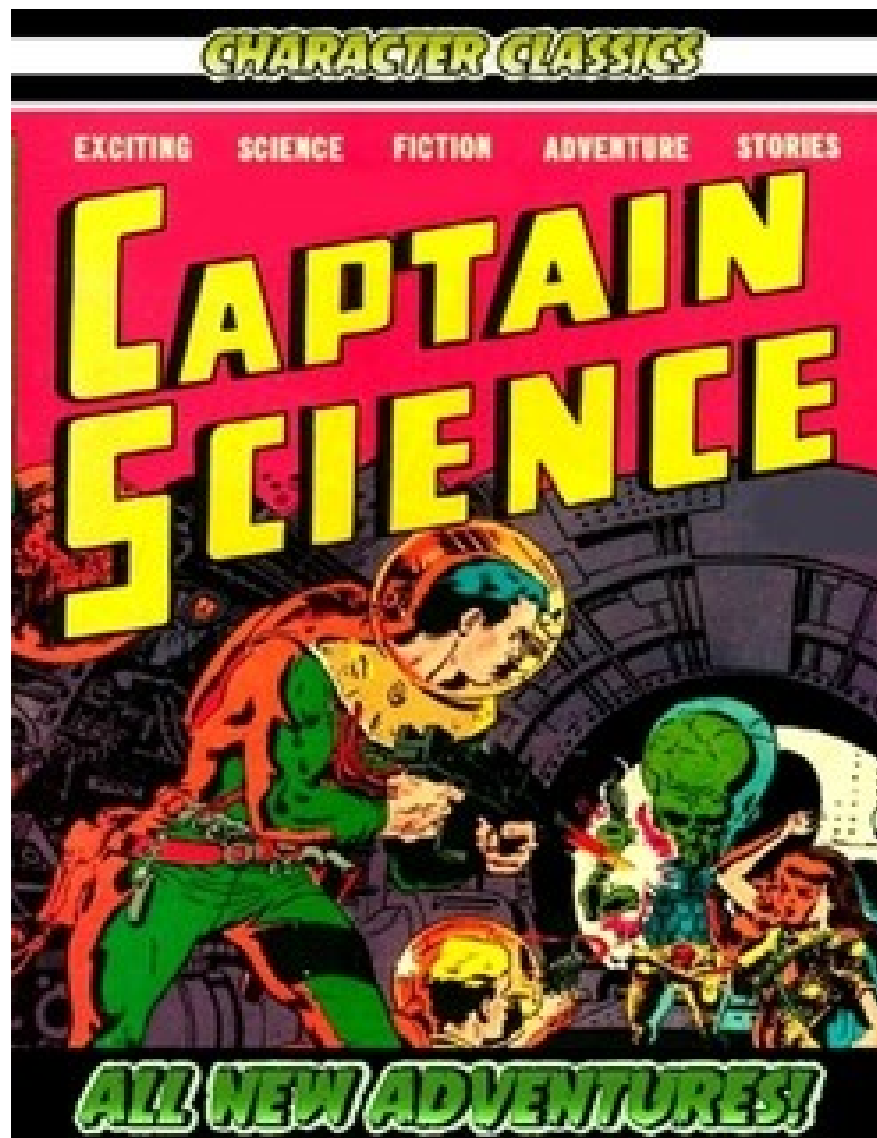
The tarantula man staggered, nearly collapsing to the sand, but Robert found the strength to keep the bulky arachnid frame moving. It was better this way. There would never be a moment’s peace in this life as he was now. Better to sink to the bottom of the ocean and lose this monstrosity he had become in the green depths, away from the eyes of mankind.

Robert saw eight moons wavering in space as he sank beneath the foam and greeted the darkness.

The ageless padre smiled sadly. “Requiesce in pace.”

THE END

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NOBODY LOVES ME ANYMORE by GK Murphy

The newly elected President of the USA was a quiet man. Like most businessman, however, he constantly thrived on adrenalin, sought the opening to strike a lucrative deal, and this factor he had whilst most politicians who in all honesty compared to him were mostly boring old basket cases and lacked the essential verve and vibrancy demanded by the American people and world at large.

He was different and this was clear from the moment he entered the White House.

Of course, he was Donald Trump.

Tonight, he'd taken the flight which deposited him in New York so that he could partake in sharing some sushi and cheeseburgers with old friend and work colleague, spokesman Sean Spicer, which would happen at Trump Towers.

There had been assassination attempts on the President's life recently.

This was no fucking joke.

For years, it seemed—and this man proved no different—whilst newly inaugurated Donald Trump found his feet, like so many before him, he was having serious bother acquiring the trust of the American people who lacked that certain important ingredient that enabled them to acquire complete faith in the new Leader of the Free World and Commander in Chief, as now and then Mr Trump back-peddled on former, impassioned promises which mostly concerned the has-been Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act and how to repeal and replace it, and of course that old bummer, constructing a huge Mexican border wall. The latter was a resolute promise he made, and one which he wished more than anything was something he'd never brought about into the public domain. Currently, it looked like there would never be a border wall as there was too much other important stuff to contend with and sort out before that crazy shit!

For starters, there was that North Korean young lad with the hilarious haircut. In fact, it was this little chubby guy causing a shitload of trouble, simply for blowing things up for no apparent reason, other than promoting his country's hatred of the Free West, as he portrayed deepened attention seeking on a grand scale. At some stage, this fellow had to be dealt with...

Ah, get the British to deal with it. The British were soft and gullible enough to join in and agree to a bombing mission—using British artillery and planes. Screw how it affected Britain...and NATO could pay for it. Why should the USA pay for everything? Let foreigners use their powers to wipe out a dictatorship and make the world a more peaceful place!

Where was the Churchill spirit, after all?

Britain used to rule the waves, didn't they?

But there was the turmoil in the Middle East, too. There was global, vast terrorism on a massive scale, and now it seemed too many young people were becoming radicalized as they

turned their attention to making homemade bombs and killing westerners in public places. The world, yes, was in a rough state.

But Donald Trump was the big boss now.

This blond haired, tiny-handed, sour-faced 70-year-old curmudgeon would deal with all this shit, but most of all, his main priority was to inevitably turn the world and popular opinion around and Make America Great Again!

So far, though, Trump was shaming America.

He was playing Cowboys and Indians.

“Yeah,” he muttered as he reclined in the huge leather chair situated in the apartment lounge, “Let the British bomb and nuke Iran and Syria...it might take the heat off us for a while. Theresa May is easy prey, she’ll agree to it...and good old Boris will back me up, he always does!”

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Trump pressed a secretive little button next to his desk and the door opened, just then as Sean Spicer entered.

“Oh hi, Sean...!”

“Good evening, Mr President. I thought I’d stop by before continuing to Broadway. The missus and I have seats booked for the new Harry Potter play...” Slyly, he chuckled as he added, “...just one more fucking Brit phenomena we must find a way to devalue. After all, it’s Forever America right, right, and it’s down to us on this side of the Atlantic to pioneer and block others’ innovation, isn’t it, as we ourselves take the most credit for the majority of progressive technology and peace-keeping philosophy?”

“Yeah, Sean, we’re not as bad as we’re painted. Tell me...what is the fake news saying today?” Trump produced his cell-phone. “Pardon me, I need to tweet. I won’t be a second.”

Chagrined, Sean walked across to the huge windows to admire the monumental New York skyline. It was certainly a magnificent view.

“Oh, as usual, the New York Times is full of bullshit, but really—as you’ll agree, sir—they are no different to the rest of the tabloids and attention seekers peddling Alternative Facts. Personally, I think they’re just jealous of us gifted, imperial ones, or pissed-off they can’t be in charge of the damned country. Demigods or Democrats, I ask you, which is worse?” Spicer said, brushing his right breast with his hand.

But looking across this skyline, Sean noticed something ‘glimmer’ in a window opposite in another tower, and by the aid of attuned vision, noticed to his horror he was observing a sniper, and that active glimmer was reflecting off a rifle-sights, glinting in the glorious New York sunlight. Automatically, Sean turned to warn the President.

“Donald...” he shouted, running across the room, “...Duck!”

Angrily, Donald looked up at the charging Republican heading his way. Mr Trump despised fools and hated jokers.

If anything, he told the fucking jokes around this joint!

“Duck...? Donald Duck...?” President Trump yelled, “I hate people saying that!”

As Sean Spicer tried to shield his boss, the bullet struck him in the back between the shoulder blades. He collapsed into Donald Trump’s lap, blood oozing everywhere—and quite frankly—causing a mess.

Suddenly, outside, the weather took a turn for the worse as rain pelted the huge windows. This made the President change his mind and decide to head back to sunny Washington. He dialled a number and someone picked-up. “Sean’s had it, I’m afraid. I think he’s been shot by a sniper. He died serving his country. We should be proud. In the meantime, get me a maid...there’s damned blood everywhere and I’m entertaining guests here on Friday!”

Flabbergasted, a voice at the other end said, “What, are you saying Mr Spicer is dead, sir?”

“Don’t act so surprised,” Mr Trump enthused, “It might have been me. Get me a car—I’m heading to the JFK Airport, get Air Force One ready—I’m on it like a car bonnet!”

Before anyone knew it, Trump was in the back of the car, alongside Jacob Lines, his bodyguard hired for the evening.

“Do you carry a pistol, sonny?” Trump enquired, and held out his hand to hold the weapon Lines’ presented for the President to peruse, as the rain outside intensified. “Wow, this is some well-oiled piece of kit. Have you fired it? Have you shot anyone? Have you ever killed anybody with this thing? It’s truly amazing Obama tried for more stringent gun control. Everybody should possess one of these killing machines!” and he laughed heartily.

“Terrible weather we’re having, sir...” Jacob, a big man, commented, and added as a joke, “Still, I suppose it’s not so bad for those of us with the first name Daffy or Donald!” and laughed heartily.

Infuriated, the President’s face turned a darker, bloodier shade of orange as he yelled, “DONALD...DAFFY...? YOU THINK YOU’RE GODDAMNED FUNNY!”

Immediately, the President pointed the gun at Jacob Lines’ chest and discharged three rounds, filling his upper body with bullets. Suddenly, the black vehicle pulled to a breaking halt. The tinted partition window abruptly lowered and Trump’s personal chauffeur Charles peered into the back with an air of horror and panic, just as Donald brandished the still-smoking gun and pointed it at him. “Just continue driving, asshole...I’d like you to stop off at the City Slaughterhouse along the way. This joker is getting fed to the pigs!”

He looked to the left side of the back seat where there was a sealed-box—a brown-paper-wrapped package, with Mr Trump’s name on it. It also read FOR YOUR EYES ONLY...

“By the way,” the President said, “What is in this ridiculous parcel?”

Charles shrugged, “I guess you ought to open it and see!”

“Do your job and drive, Charles. To the Slaughterhouse...this dead guy stinks!”

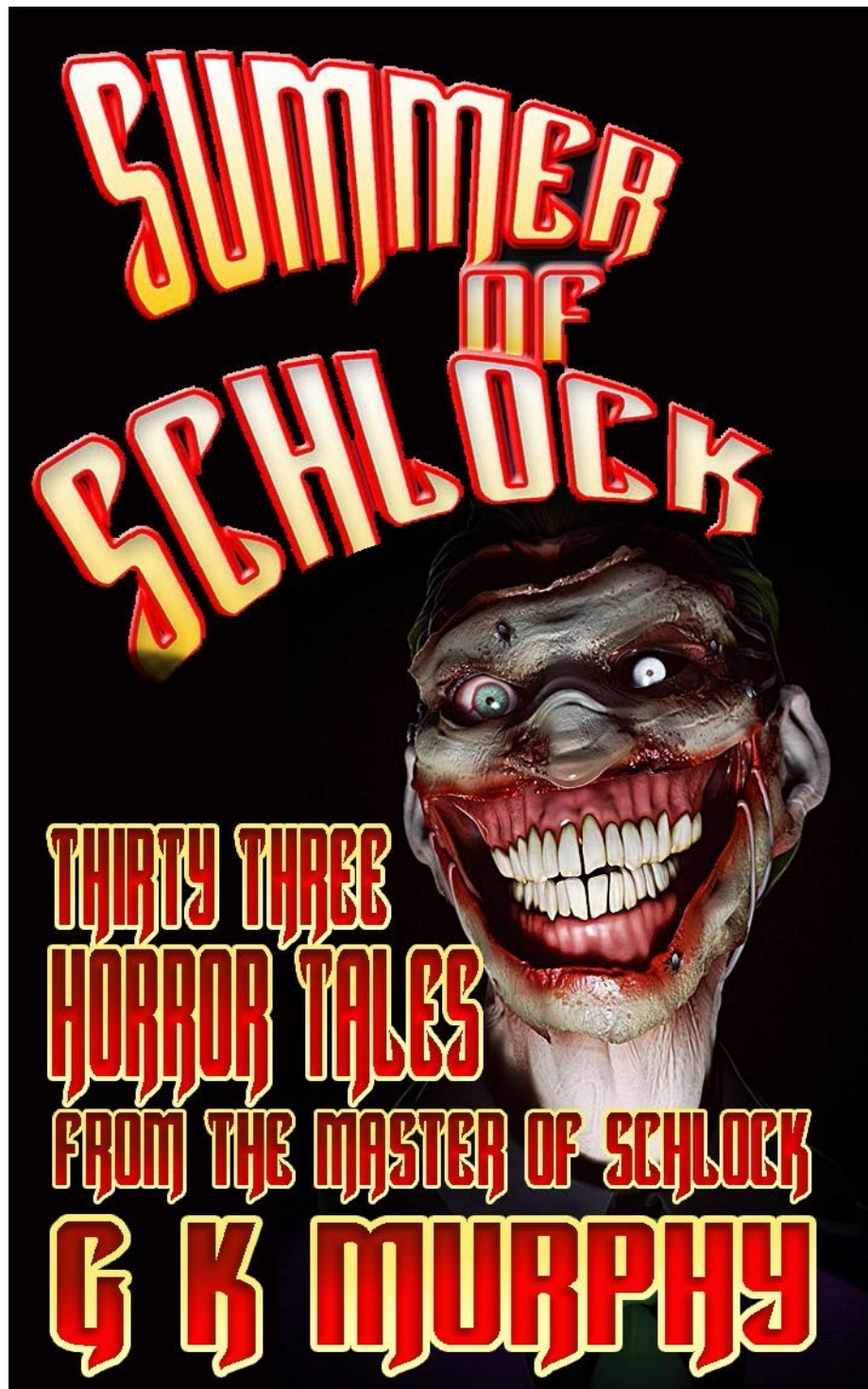
Trump writhed at the packaging of the cube-like box until, finally, he paused. At first it horrified him to see what it was that was in there. Then suddenly, he was completely ecstatic and elated when he held the goods inside up for all to witness, as he hurriedly tapped on the partition window to get Charles’ take on the matter.

“See...?” Mr Trump said, as he beamed like a child, “...I told you—I told everybody—things would work out in the end!”

There, in POTUS Donald J Trump’s hands, was the North Korean leader’s severed head.

THE END

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DEAR MONA by CT Beesley

The Friday after St. Mathew's Day,

Dear Mona,

I can hear the usual jingle of a cowbell as I sit and bask in late summer sun, resting my back against the bench we built years ago, still here—itsself leaning against the old oak: no doubt another guilty courting couple's legacy. Or was that our planting? I forget. Of course, I'm really sitting in the shade.

I'm taking off my collar with my right hand as I write with my left, for it's suppressing me more today. The gargoyles stare at me, some spouting water, others plainly grotesque. The ones draining water from my church are, I'm sure, attempting to splash my feet with water, God willing.

Why was I chosen, why me?

When I remember that night my stomach contracts: the storm raging outside; a heavy, thunderous downpour pounding at our stains as the external temperature started to bite us as it came down with snow. I recall each raindrop wanting to break in, willing to enter uninvited and submit to the warmth of the nave and vaporize. That night I became part of the landscape, carved into and condemned to this church for eternity, and one of those beastly statues.

Looking back I can see your face contorted and covered with a paper-white façade, staring at me aghast whilst that thing clung to me. I'd heard on my travels and whilst taking sabbatical that blood drinking was very much in mode in Victorian London, but not here, not in our village. I believe I made a flippant remark about the subject during my religious teachings but never again will I speak in jest. You know as well as I my actions have been reprimanded. If only I could've found it in my soul to repent, for now it's too late. It's not that I can't find courage to seek forgiveness, it is the fact I no longer have a soul.

A pink scar of light scratches the sky. The way the bell tower cuts through a reddening streak manages to send something down my spine as the atmosphere hangs above the steeple, waiting for darkness to take it. I often sit and wonder why that creature chose me. The real questions I have, my dear, are for you: Why did you stay with me all that time? Why did you never run for the white caps of the Fagaras? For the answers I must wait, I know this well.

There is a plain silence in the air, no clouds in the sky above me, just the piercing light of late, low, September sun. If I were to beat the arm of the bench I'd welcome the sound as I would your company with open arms. Instead I lay, cold-blooded and animal, in a faint attempt to recharge my batteries and rekindle my emotions. No longer does my chest rise and fall.

I remember when we first met, before you sorted flowers and the first words you let kiss my ears, "Are you single?" And to this I let my eyebrows rise high enough to arouse an awkward suspicion that I may not have understood the question. I even let an answer form on the tip of

my loose tongue before you finished, "...honours or combined?" We were friends throughout our entire university lives. Oh Mona, what a time we had!

We didn't let my turning hanker in the way of things. No, we saw it as a fresh set of memories to fill, and we obliged. Our first hotel, the romance, and the taking over! The moment we got stuck in the lift and the porter informed us that all three of us had to jump in unison in order for the lift to function. It was ludicrous, for we were dead and weightless. We couldn't move the metal cage for the only liquid we had drunk in the last few days had been from one another. I recall you saying it was our love that powered the lift after we submitted to our ravenous hunger. You must've been correct, because we left traces of our passion in the lift bay for others to find. I wonder if the boy ever turned? We were two vampires in the city. Or at least I thought we were, at times.

Many a day we spent writing over coffee about how we used to fight about nothing in our letters to each other. I often reminisce about our favourite café off St. Leonard's Terrace where we used to sit after walking through Chelsea's smoke and gutters. How we used to people-watch, mark potential victims for each other, and make wagers that we couldn't get them during sunrise (an unfair advantage to which I turned a blind eye). You nullified any compromises I thought you might've had: the non-existent pulse, the coldness of my skin, my peculiar feeding habits. You would continue to wend my way until you died, preaching any ills I had were too nebulous to make any difference. How I yearn for your cathartic ways in these solemn moments of mine.

Wait. Something has unsettled the cow. Its bell is ringing furiously in its perturbed state. I cross the seldom churchyard reverently bowing my head as I pass the altar. I pace about the grass amongst the shadows and the graves, along the picket fence you and I erected. I still ensure the graves are free of lichen just how you prefer, although I fear my best efforts are in vain if you're unable to see them as I continue my search for the beast.

And then I see him. In front of the necropolis and me, stooped over my livestock, is my maker. I can smell the funk radiating from his leather jacket where I'm standing between you and my creator.

"We meet again, Sir Edwin," I remain silent, "for you are royalty now, inherited from your filthy bride, the Queen of vampire slayers."

Malik was his name, and he spat his words.

I (Edwin). "Royalty? Queen slayer?"

Vampire Malik laughed off a wry smile.

"Your Mona was a slayer. The most feared assassin and annihilator in the whole of Christendom. The single weakness she had was her life, and you of course."

There's an eerie pause allowing a cream of carpet fog to connect us at the feet.

"Unfortunately, her blood continues to flow, albeit through your veins due to her contaminating ways. But I shall not take a chance, not a drop of her can remain. We can't

have a rogue amongst our midst. Even I shudder to imagine what the Devil would have to say about that.”

You were a slayer. A vampire killer, yet you continued by my side through adversity like the shadow I’d lost. Were you slaying behind my back? Is this evil fiend who stands before me the reason why you used to let me suck your blood? Come to think of it you used to force me, begged me to go on taking when I could see the rosy hue leaving your face for want of pallor. Is it you meant for your line to continue, did you see me as an opportunity to create a weapon, the ultimate machine you’d always dreamt of using so you could cleanse this world for ever after? I can see it so clearly.

“You say nothing, my brother?” says Malik. “Are you remembering all those years ago when I cursed your place of worship? I was hoping that having made you into the thing she most detested the girl would put down her steaks, that making you immortal would drive her to insanity and, even more sweetly, suicide.

At least then she may have returned as a pure-blood, and with a will such as Mona’s she would have been a fine specimen.”

My anger is smouldering. I can’t stop my legs from lunging forward and find myself reaching claws first for his neck. I’m scratching at anything tactile for my vision is blurry and blackening with rage. I see the red of his blood leave his body as I force my teeth into—into one of my own. Whether it’s my forcefulness or his state of shock that sends him backward on to the ledger slab I’m not certain. I remain shaking as I write with this unsteady hand, as I cannot forget my actions after I saw he was still undead and blinking.

I drank his blood, Mona. I tore at his lymph nodes and spat back his fat. I allowed myself to stand over his scarlet-stained body for too long until I aimed to shout but roared at Malik instead.

“If I am to be bound by your alchemy, you will not share this soil with me!”

After that I killed him.

I’ve been constrained to a church for thirty-one years and have learned to be forever close to a crucifix, a bible, even a petite vile of holy water (blessed by myself it makes it more satisfying when thrown like acid onto an enemy’s face). I shove the cross in his jaw, not worrying about the long, sharp canines. The bible I secure with his arms crossed in a suitable burial pose. I could impale him at once but I want to see him bleed from the wounds he’s sustained.

The blood has been given enough time on the tombstone and is at present thicker than a chocolate creux. As the liquid seeps into each individual letter, looking for a crack in the concrete I wait until it submerges the entire inscription before reading it aloud, and I pray:

“Beautiful Mona, please accept this as a gift from me as proof of our undying love. For I have slayed My maker, Your nemeses and Our tormentor. Let blood seep through the fissures and let soil consume it. Accept this token of our friendship sealed with the blood of our enemy. A

gift that cannot be bettered. Thank you for the joyful memories you have bestowed upon and blessed me with and restored in me. Thank you, my Mona, for you always was, 'the jocund one'."

Malik's second death has aroused feelings within me first felt when I became a monster, when I came round from my slip of unconsciousness and you were so white I thought you'd been drained too, changed forever, like myself. Little did I know it would take years for that shock to fade.

I fear I've become rather animated and am conscious I have only an hour to write you my thoughts down on this paper. I shall cease to warble in your ears any longer and strain your eyes no further tonight. I'm making my way below.

Good evening. I know you find my personality complex and layered, after all I'm looking at your dead body, but isn't this why you find me so indulgent? Tender as ever is your skin, stretched thin like an Italian pastry. My habit of blood drinking is evident from my speckled collar contrasting against the whiteness of your dress, but matching the crimson silkiness of your caskets insides. Bit by bit I lift up your veil of lace to find your obsession for perfection still keeps you with a clear complexion, even after death. I can't help but stare at your face. I will lie next to your corporeal body until daybreak. Only then must I return to the confines of the church. Exactly as you stuck by me I will spend the rest of my unlife with you, my love. In this moment, I'll envelop you with my arms and caress your elegant, undulated body. How you no longer complain about my icy touch is a wonder.

Morning has come. Before I scurry back to the altar I seal my letter to you and tuck it in front of your headstone between the granite and the grass. Next time I must bring flowers, the kind you like. I can't help laughing at the fact I'm choosing for you a bunch of flowers when for a lifetime you arranged all my floral splendours. As I step back from our stereo graves I can't stop the sorrow that washes over me like a rain dance, the daylight presenting me the fact that only one side will ever be filled. Still, the tides of life are forever changing, so I must not lose hope that one day my peace will come. Just now, Mona, I must wait, like you shall until tomorrow night when I'll see you again, my darling.

The darkness can never take you now.

Yours for the moment,

Fr. E. Bindon

Have you ever tried to open an envelope in the dark?

THE END



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THE DEBT COLLECTOR by Steven Havelock

Dominic Thomas did a double take.

Why is such a hotty looking at me?

He'd gotten up, gone to the bar and got a drink.

She's still looking at me!

Dominic wasn't used to getting much attention from females. In his forties, smaller than average, balding on top and with a large nose.

As he walked back to his table with a drink, he looked again.

God, I'm confused, the hottest woman in this joint is staring at me? She must be some sort of con woman, maybe setting a honey trap. I need to get out of here fast.

He looked away and concentrated on his drink instead.

I'm going neck this as fast as I can and get the hell out of here, something just doesn't feel right.

He'd drank half the beer glass and was about to down the rest as fast as possible.

"Excuse me?" Dominic turned to look. It was the hotty.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Dominic stared at the hotty. Long blond hair, tight fitting top that showed off her larger than average breasts and curvy hips and waist.

I know something's not right here.

He stared at her a second longer and the uneasy feeling dissipated like an early morning mist to be replaced by lust and a deep urge to have sex.

"No...please...sit down."

"My name is Angel Rose," she said, taking a seat.

The way she stares at me, it's like she knows me or has seen me before?

"Have we met?" he asked almost gloating over her large breasts.

"I think we may have, not sure where." She took a deep breath and her blue eyes connected with his. "Maybe in another life," she joked.

Dominic laughed uneasily.

God! I'm so turned on!

Angel let out a deep sigh. To Dominic it sounded like a sigh of sexual frustration.

"I'm only in town a few days." She pulled out a business card. Dominic stared at it. It read:

Angel Rose
Debt Collector.
Call now
075229758489

"Call me and we will go on a date."

"Wha? Date? With me?"

"You not as bad as you think," she said with a smile.

Dominic smiled feeling a tight warmth in the pit of his groin.

"Okay, you bet!"

Then almost as fast as Angel Rose had arrived she got up and walked away. Dominic looked at her shapely ass as it wiggled away from him.

Later that night.

How long should I wait to call? Tonight? A day? Two days?

Without thinking about it Dominic found himself looking at the business card, almost automatically his hand went to his phone and he had dialled the number.

Ring...Ring...Dominic took a breath and sighed deeply as he thought about the curvaceous blonde that he had met earlier today.

Ring...

"Hello?"

"Hi Angel, it's me, Dominic."

"Oh, hi Dominic. I was just thinking about you. I was just in the shower. I'm still not dressed"

Dominic felt his blood pressure rise and his heartbeat become more aggressive.

“Listen, you said, you’re not in town long.”

“Yes?”

“So how long exactly are you in town for?”

“Oh, just until some unfinished business is sorted out.”

“Angel, if you’re not in town long, maybe we should make the most of it and hook-up as soon as possible?”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea.”

I can’t believe my luck, Dominic thought.

“How about tomorrow at 6 at Tate Modern?” she said and sighed deeply again. Dominic thought he caught a hint of sexual frustration.

“Do you like art galleries?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure I do,” Trying to think back the last time he had been to one.

“Okay, Tate Modern tomorrow at six.”

“See you then.”

“Okay bye, have sweet dreams, sweetheart. Bye.”

The phone went dead. Dominic looked down and saw he had a full erection.

God! I feel like the luckiest man alive.

A stupid smile plastered across his face.

Dominic arrived 30 minutes early and waited for Angel. He beamed a big stupid smile as soon as he saw her. They greeted each other and headed into the art gallery. Soon, they were staring at many different pictures from many eras.

Angel guided Dominic over to one picture.

What the hell! He looks just like me!

“That guy in that painting looks just like me,” Dominic said.

“His name is Paganini. He was a 17th century Italian violinist. Probably the best the world has ever seen.”

“Oh...Okay...what happened to him?”

“He committed suicide.”

“Why did he do that?”

“He was trying to back out of a deal.”

Dominic aged 27.

What's woken me? What's that smell, it disgusting like sulphur?

Dominic's room was deep in shadow, but as his bleary eyes adjusted he saw a tall dark humanoid shape standing over his bed.

“Who the hell are you?” said Dominic, too sleepy to be afraid, still half believing this was a dream.

I will come for you.

An almost silent sibilant whisper that left Dominic feeling cold.

“Well, why did he commit suicide to back out of a deal?” He looked at the face again. “I mean, the worst they could do is kill him.”

Angel was staring deeply at the picture. She said almost in a whisper, “You will understand soon but believe me you will wish you hadn't. I'm collecting my debt tomorrow. Tomorrow is the last time you will see me.”

I knew it was too good to be true. I feel crushed.

After a few more hours staring at various paintings. They said their goodbyes.

Ring...Ring...Ring

Dominic answered his mobile. He looked at his watch.

It's 9 a.m.

“Hello, it's Angel, I'm collecting my debt in two hours. Just wondering if you would like to have some quality time before I leave town?”

“Yes, would love to.”

“Okay, I will be right over.”

The phone call ended. Dominic found himself staring at his mobile and felt deeply uneasy, but couldn't work out why. Then he looked down and saw the semi hard erection.

Something's not right.

Dominic stumbled back to his bed, with a sickening feeling in his stomach.

I will just lay down for a few minutes.

Dominic dreamt.

He was on stage playing a violin. As he played to large crowded audience, he noticed a humanoid figure in the front row seat.

Oh my God! He has red skin and horns. It's the devil! And my names not Dominic! The man in the picture!

The entity for a millisecond caught him in his stare.

Tomorrow I will take my payment. The words seemed to enter Dominic's head telepathically.

Later that night.

I can't let the Devil take me. I should never have done it! There must be a way out.

The sun rose above the horizon. Dominic had spent most of the night racking his brains.

Eureka! I know what I will do.

He went to the kitchen, grabbed a knife and in one swift motion stabbed himself in the heart.

As he lay dying, he saw a white light. He found himself falling down and down a deep tunnel made of white light.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Dominic was aroused from his slumber by the rapping on the door.

“Hold on! Hold on!” he shouted as he stumbled out of bed.

“I know you are a debt collector, but give me a minute!” he shouted, trying to be confident and jovial even though he didn’t feel like it.

He opened the door. And stared at Angel.

God, she is so beautiful. I’m hard again, he thought as he felt a warm feeling in his groin again.

Angel stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

“I come to collect my debt.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

Angle pulled out a small violin which Dominic hadn’t noticed at first under her arm. She held it out to him.

“Play.”

Confused, Dominic took the violin and started to play. When he finished a few minutes later, he thought.

Oh my god! I’m an expert violinist?

“Hey, how did you know I could play? And something else that has been puzzling me, how did you know where I lived?”

“I know many things, both the seen and the unseen.” She stared straight at him. Her eyes seemed to be boring into his soul. “Did you really think you could escape me?”

“Wha...What?”

“And now I’m here to collect my debt.”

She pointed her finger at his heart.

Burning pain! Pain like he’d never felt before! Unbearable...unbearable...

Angel Rose had become the horned devil that Dominic had seen that night at the violin show in his dream. Dominic felt his soul leaving his body. Blackness assailed him.

THE END.

Steven Havelock's books are available on [Amazon](#).

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GERIATRIA by Ian Fletcher

I

“Ah, Cool Mint Oreos,” Ian thinks, reading the packet.

“Yep, I’ll have some of those. They’re my favourites!” he mumbles to himself.

“Now, where did I put my damn trolley? Is this one it? What’s inside? Salt and vinegar crisps, Heinz Spaghetti Hoops, cans of Heineken...must be mine.”

“The store will be closing in five minutes. Please go to the check-out counter,” an anodyne female voice announces over the intercom.

Ian looks up and down the aisle.

“Now where the hell is the...”

“That way sir,” says a store clerk who has suddenly appeared. He points to one end of the aisle. “Just turn left, sir, and you can’t miss it.”

“Oh yes, of course,” says Ian.

He wheels his trolley along the aisle.

“Blast! Was it left or right?” he thinks.

“On your left, sir,” says the clerk who is now directing an elderly lady with a trolley full of toiletries towards the check-out.

The cashier duly scans the barcodes on his Cool Mint Oreos, salt and vinegar crisps, Heinz Spaghetti Hoops and cans of Heineken.

“That’s twelve pounds fifty, sir,” she says.

“OK,” says Ian.

“My wallet!” he thinks, tapping his front trouser pockets. The lump in right side tells him it’s there.

He takes out the wallet and opens it. “No cash?” he thinks. “Ah, there’s my card.”

He hands the credit card to the cashier.

“Thank you, sir. Please sign the receipt,” she says.

“Sure,” says Ian. “What the heck? I’m Ian...” he ponders and looks at his card: FLETCHER. I.

“Fletcher, Fletcher,” he mumbles, now able to scrawl his signature automatically.

The cashier turns her attention to the lady with the toiletries who has arrived behind him at the counter.

Ian heads for the exit in front of him, without his purchases.

II

Emerging into the high street, he discovers it's dusk.

"What time is it?" he thinks, raising his right arm, but he has no watch.

"Ian!" says a male voice from across the road. An elderly couple are standing in front of The Royal Oak. Their taxi drives off.

"Hello," Ian says, thinking that they look familiar.

"Fancy a pint?" says the man.

"You bet!" says Ian, and crosses the street.

"Tom, that's it," he thinks, "and, goddamn, what's her name?"

The trio goes into the pub.

"A pint of Guinness for me and a G&T for my wife," says Tom as they arrive at the bar.

"And what's your poison, Ian?" Tom says.

"I'll have a pint of...uh."

"Your usual, sir? A Heineken?" says the barman helpfully.

"Yes, yes, my usual," says Ian.

"Sit down and I'll bring your drinks right over," says the amiable barman, unconcerned that no one has paid for the order.

They sit at a table by the fake coal fire with a picture of Constable's *The Hay Wain* above it.

The barman brings their drinks.

The jukebox starts playing.

"It's Ziggy Stardust, Maggie!" exclaims Tom.

"Oh! I love Bowie," says Maggie.

Ian remembers the song and an image of the LP cover flashes briefly into his head.

They sit drinking contentedly as the glam-rock album plays its way through.

“Goodness. I think I need to pee,” thinks Ian as he finishes his pint.

He gets up.

“Now, where the bloody hell are the toilets?” he thinks, looking from side to side.

“Over there, sir!” shouts the barman over Bowie’s “Hang onto Yourself.”

“Ah, yes!” Ian says, walking to the doors on the right side of the bar.

“The blue sym... symb... sign, that’ll be the gents,” thinks Ian.

He opens the door and walks over to the urinals.

He is shocked by the white-haired, gaunt-faced reflection he sees in the mirror.

“Is that me?” he thinks. “But I...”

He can’t recall going to the toilet but his zipper is up and he no longer feels the need to pee, so he washes his hands.

“How do I get back into the supermarket?” he thinks, but luckily there’s only one door so he makes his way towards it.

“Must buy some biscuits,” he reminds himself as he opens the door back into the bar.

“What the...Oh, yes,” he recalls, seeing Tom and Maggie sitting under The Hay Wain.

“Drink up, ladies and gentlemen! It’s closing time,” says the barman.

“How long have I been here? Wasn’t it dusk just now? How many pints did I have?” Ian muses as he sits down.

“Your taxi’s here!” says the barman.

Ian gets up with Tom and Maggie and follows them out of the bar back into the high street.

The taxi driver directs him into the front seat of the yellow cab, while Tom and Maggie get in the back.

“Where are we going?” wonders Ian, too embarrassed to ask.

“Fasten your seatbelts, please,” says the driver.

Ian fumbles to his left and right trying to make sense of the various straps and clips.

“It’s OK, sir,” says the driver who leans across and straps him in.

They drive down the high street. All the shops are closed.

The taxi turns into a dark road with subdued street lamps and lined with trees.

Ian is feeling sleepy and dozes off momentarily.

“Here we are!” says the taxi driver.

He opens the doors and they get out in front of the entrance to the apartment building.

It is surrounded by lawns and flower beds, and is one of many identical buildings in a sprawling complex that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Over the entrance is the sign “East Park Complex, Building 23.”

The taxi drives away. No one had thought to pay the driver.

Two young women are there to greet them.

“Welcome home, Mr. and Mrs. Jones! Did you have a good evening?” says one of them.

“Wonderful!” says Tom. They smile and follow her into the building.

“And how was your evening Mr. Fletcher?” says the other young woman.

“Fletcher?” thinks Ian.

“Did you have a good evening, Ian?” says the woman.

“Oh, oh...yes! Lovely,” says Ian.

The woman takes his arm and guides him through the lobby, into an elevator, and then out into a corridor with rooms like a hotel.

Ian has no idea which floor he is on or which room is his.

“Here we are!” chirps the young woman, opening a door.

They walk into the apartment. It’s one room with a bathroom. There is a bed, a table with a couple of wooden chairs, a bookcase, a dressing table with a mirror, and a simple but comfortable looking sofa facing a wall screen TV.

Ian is again perturbed by the white-haired, gaunt-faced reflection he sees in the dressing table mirror.

On the table he sees a picture of two middle-aged women with young children and an elderly woman in the centre.

“Now they’re ...” he thinks, unable to recall who is in the picture.

“Let’s get you ready for bed, shall we?” says the young woman.

She unbuttons his shirt, takes off his shoes and trousers. She briskly removes the adult diaper and puts it into a plastic bag she is carrying. This done, she puts on some rubber gloves and washes him down with some cleaning oil.

“We’ll be giving you your bath tomorrow morning as usual,” she says.

“Oh yes, of course,” says Ian as the young woman puts on a new diaper and gets the clean pair of pyjamas placed on the top of the bed.

Soon, Ian is lying under the duvet. He can hardly keep his eyes open.

“Goodnight, Mr. Fletcher!” says the nurse, switching off the light and closing the door behind her.

III

Ian sleeps deeply.

The alcohol-free lager he was given earlier contained his recommended supplements and medication, plus the sleeping potion that was standard for all the residents of this vast and expanding suburban complex to the north of the metropolis, one of many in cities throughout the land.

Ian dreams of Oreos and Heineken, interspersed with images from his past which he can no longer understand.

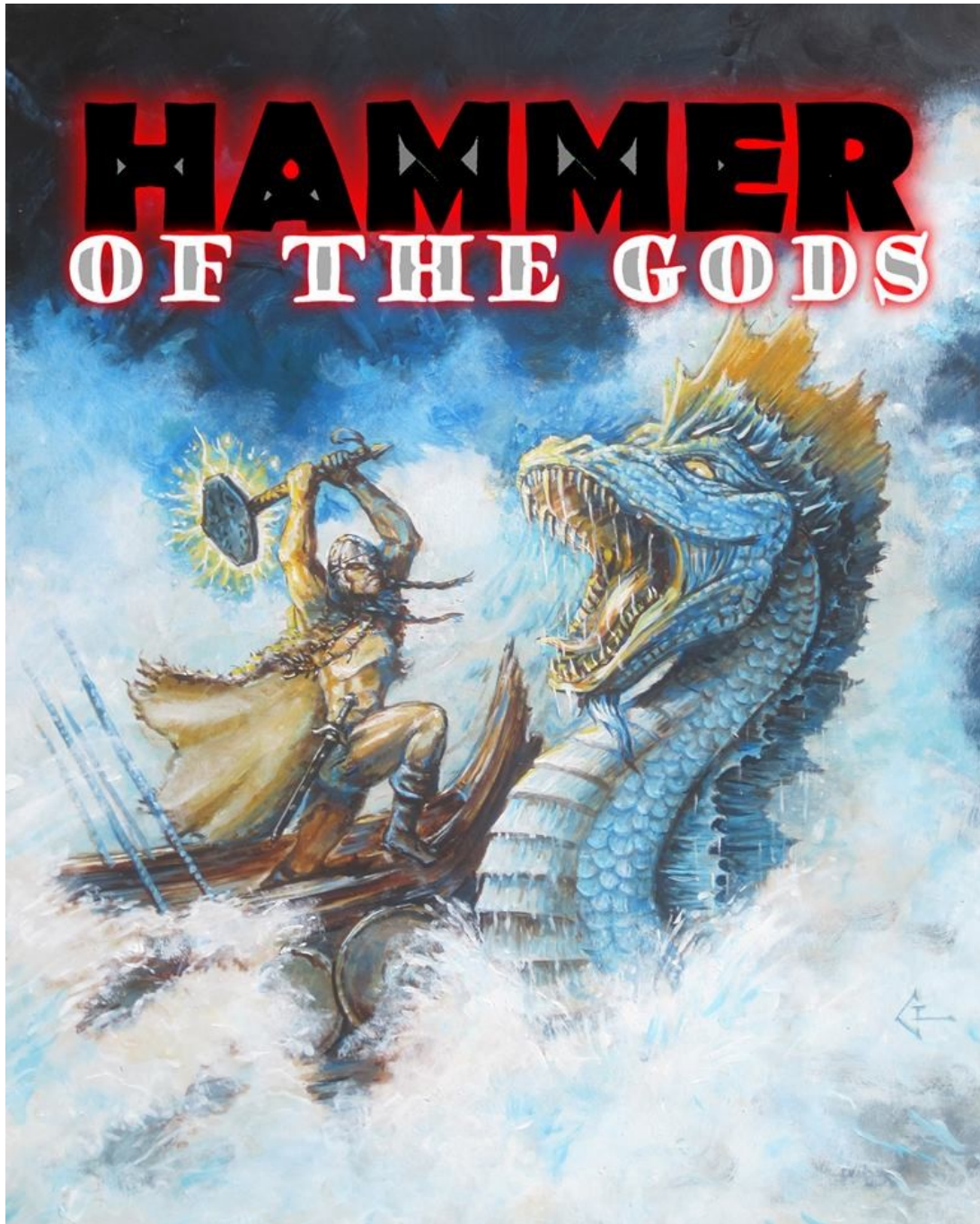
Tomorrow he will wake up bewildered, not knowing where he is.

It will be just another day in Geriatria.

THE END

NOW AVAILABLE FROM [ROGUE PLANET PRESS](#):

*By the sacred blood of Odin! Ruthless warriors sail turbulent oceans
in search of gold and plunder. Death in battle holds no fears, for
should they die they will gain entry into the feasting halls of their
savage gods. But to what strange shores and uncharted seas will their
voyaging take them? Theirs is a world of trolls and dragons, and
many other realms lie beyond...*



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DARK FICTION NEWS by Grey Matter Press

GREY MATTER PRESS ACQUIRES COMPLETE JOHN F.D. TAFF FICTION CATALOG IN FOUR-BOOK DEAL THAT INCLUDES THE ALL-NEW COLLECTION LITTLE BLACK SPOTS

CHICAGO, June 6, 2017 —In a four-book deal announced today, Grey Matter Press (GMP) becomes the publisher of the complete fiction catalogue of Bram Stoker Award®-nominated horror author John F.D. Taff in an agreement that re-introduces three of his out-of-print titles and brings an exciting new fiction collection to market. The deal sees three of Taff's popular works—*Little Deaths*, *The Bell Witch* and *Kill-Off*—repackaged and re-released by the Chicago publisher late this summer, with a new collection of short fiction—*Little Black Spots*—arriving early this fall.

Taff, author of the Stoker-nominated *The End in All Beginnings*, is a respected name in the horror field after more than 25 years of publication in the genre. His work has appeared in GMP anthologies *Dark Visions: Volume 1*, *Ominous Realities*, *Death's Realm* and *Savage Beasts*, as well as other popular genre fiction outlets *Cemetery Dance*, *Gutted: Beautiful Horror Stories* and *The Horror Library* series.

Little Deaths, Taff's first fiction collection, was hailed by *HorrorTalk* as the best horror collection of 2012. To celebrate its fifth anniversary, Grey Matter re-imagines the collection in a revised special edition complete with expanded notes, a new afterword from the author, five additional stories original to this version and a new foreword by Josh Malerman, bestselling author of *Bird Box* and *Black Mad Wheel*. The *Little Deaths Fifth Anniversary Edition* will be available this fall.

Beginning in August, Grey Matter will also release revised editions of Taff's wildly popular historical ghost novel *The Bell Witch* and his suspense novel *Kill-Off*—of which Joe McKinney said: "Taff hits this one out of the park."

"I'm honoured that John's entire fiction library has found a home at Grey Matter Press," said publisher Anthony Rivera. "The re-release of these three previously published works leads up to the publication of a stunning new fiction collection *Little Black Spots*, a title that capitalizes on his reputation as modern horror's 'King of Pain.'"

Little Black Spots features a combination of previously published short stories as well as work never before seen. Each features Taff's well-known, unique approach to emotional storytelling that readers were first exposed to in the original version of *Little Deaths* and later in his critically acclaimed novella collection *The End in All Beginnings*.

"As an author, you always want your back catalogue available to fans. So I'm thrilled to be able to build on an already fantastic relationship with Grey Matter Press. I'm proud to have all of my work available from one of today's absolute best publishers of dark fiction," said Taff. "And I'm especially excited to bring a new collection of my short fiction, *Little Black Spots*, to readers."

* * *

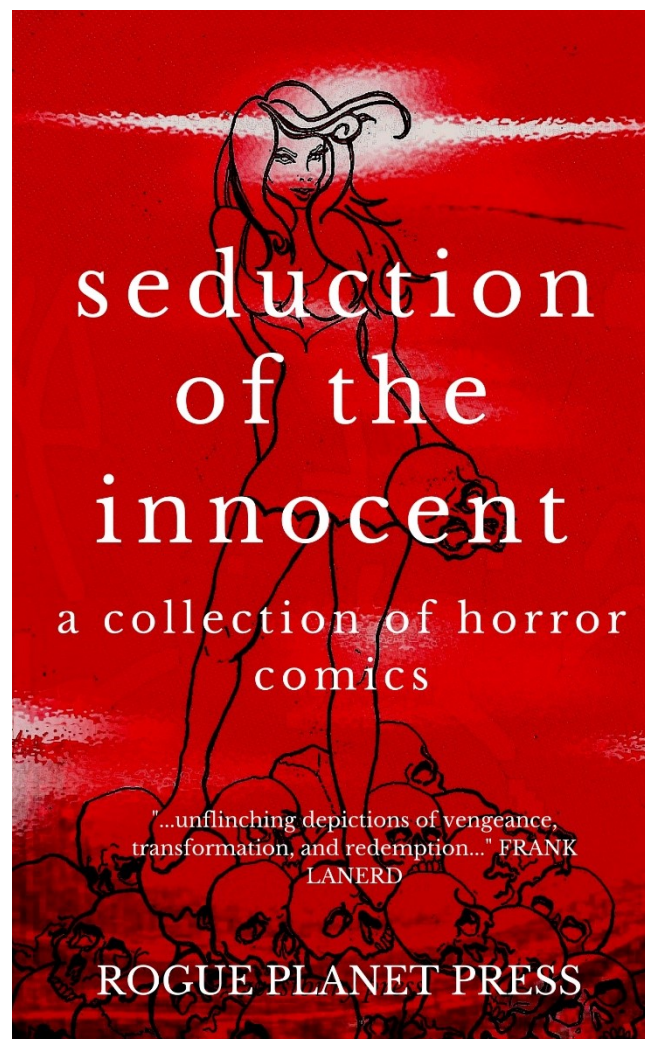
ABOUT JOHN F.D. TAFF

John F.D. Taff has published more than 90 short stories in markets that include Cemetery Dance, Deathrealm, Big Pulp, Postscripts to Darkness, Hot Blood: Fear the Fever, Hot Blood: Seeds of Fear and Shock Rock II. His critically acclaimed novella collection, The End in All Beginnings, was a finalist for the prestigious Bram Stoker Award. Six of his short stories have been named honourable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. More information about John F.D. Taff is available at johnfdtaff.com.

ABOUT GREY MATTER PRESS

Grey Matter Press is a Chicago-based publisher whose mission it is to discover and cultivate the best voices working in the dark fiction genre. The company is committed to producing only the finest quality volumes of literary fiction containing exceptional tales of horror, fantasy, science fiction and speculative fiction. More information about Grey Matter Press is available at greymatterpress.com

THE END



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Eleven

The hours, the days passed quickly. Offloading the “Bellerophon” of its heavy equipment went on without pause, and traffic between the moons of Jupiter was heavy.

Illara made many patrols between Callisto and Io, with stops at Europa and Ganymede. She was still new to all this, and filled with the joy of discovery. Occasionally Ward went with her, but for the most part he remained with his ship, the O8-111A, waiting for word from Colonel Westland that it was time to go after the Scroungers.

Occasionally, at Emily’s insistence, Ward and Illara came by to visit the Talbot family for dinner. Emily always greeted Ward with a big hug, which Ward rewarded with one of his rare smiles.

“Good to see ya, kid,” he said.

“Me, too, you, too,” she answered. “I’m going to school now,” she happily informed Carter.

“That’s good,” Ward said.

Jeffrey, too, was in technical school. He would soon have to decide which profession he would be following, here on Callisto.

“It’s good to feel normalcy once again,” Story Talbot remarked over after dinner drinks.

“Yes, it is,” Joyce agreed with some feeling.

Mud, for his part, was bored, and he was weighing the pros and cons of stirring up some trouble, just to pass the time on this very bland and boring Callisto. With no casinos, no party girls, and no market for his illicit mud, there was nothing for him to do except wait for the order to come down from the “Bellerophon.”

And there was yet another three hundred hours to go. The heaviest equipment had been offloaded already. Now came the smaller, and the far more delicate, pieces, carefully calibrated equipment that could not stand up to even the least rough handling. And all attention was focused on this last extremely delicate piece of work.

His forces finally organized, his plans in place, Turhan Mot led his armada from Astra Palace. His own ship, the “Grand Marquis” was in the fore. It carried eighty small fighter craft, this in addition to the heavy armaments of his ship.

Following fifty miles behind was Yamir’s ship, the “Reliant”, with a crew of sixty men and women. In addition to these, Turhan Mot had convinced some forty other freebooters to join his expedition, people with their own, smaller ships with crews of only three or four people.

Fleet and highly manoeuvrable, these small ships were deadly against larger and sluggish space transports.

They followed the twisted, corkscrewing path that Turhan Mot had worked out with his pilot, Tu Hit, which kept the planet Jupiter always between Turhan Mot's armada and his target. A lengthy path, yet the stratagem worked. As the armada came within a hundred hours of Jupiter, those who lived upon the bases of the planet's moons had no forewarning of their approach.

As the people of those colonies went about their routines, as the "Bellerophon" offloaded its cargo, as Emily and Jeffrey settled into their schools, Turhan Mot's fleet sped toward Callisto, his lust for vengeance growing ever more malignant as he drew near.

It so happened that Illara had taken 'Izzy' out on patrol when the first sign of approaching disaster appeared. She was rounding Io again, and preparing to return to Callisto when the "Grand Marquis" came into view on her visiscreens, from behind the vast disc of Jupiter. Ward was not with her on this trip, so she faced this menace alone.

Instantly behind the "Grand Marquis" came the "Reliant", and fanning out in a wide crescent were the forty freebooters in their small, fleet ships.

"Unidentified ships, please identify yourselves. Over," Illara said through her communications system.

She received no answer.

"Unidentified ships, identify yourselves," she asked again.

Still no answer.

She saw two small ships peel away from the armada, then swoop down toward the bases on Io. Thin red beams of laser from their laser cannons hit one of the bases there.

"Callisto Security, this is Captain Illara Fain on patrol near Io," she said. "We have numerous hostiles approaching. We have..." she waited for half a second, as her ship's computers quickly counted and measured the attackers.

"We have two large transport ships, and forty smaller ships. Io Base Two has already been attacked. We..."

She had to cut off her communication, as two of the smaller ships pulled away from the armada to attack her. She was instantly caught up in a dog fight, and had not even a millisecond to communicate further.

But her one hasty message was successful. The crews upon Callisto and the "Bellerophon" had ten full minutes to prepare to meet the attack.

"All Jovian Security are called to duty. Report to your nearest post. We are under attack," Colonel Bridgemont ordered. His words were broadcast all throughout the bases on Callisto through the public-address systems.

Loud sirens blasted through the colonies. The civilians were at a loss. They'd never heard the sirens before, though they knew of them. Still, hearing the sirens left many in a state of confusion.

"Is this a test?" many asked. "What should we do?"

The security personnel, trained for this, ushered many of the civilians off the streets, and into the basements below the surface of the city.

"Recall all Earth Space Forces to the "Bellerophon", Colonel Westland ordered, when once Colonel Bridgemont had forwarded Illara's warning to him. His message went out to every person under his command, flashing from their wristbands.

"Shore leave is ended," Westland said. "All pilots return to your ships and make ready for combat."

Then, to Captain Waddell of the "Bellerophon" who was then at the bridge, Westland said through the ship's communications system, "Shut her up, and get this ship out of here. We're sitting ducks, in this position. Get her up to interplanetary speeds, then we can fight."

"Yes, Colonel," Captain Waddell answered. In combat, Colonel Westland took over command of the ship.

But shutting her up, putting an end to the offloading operations, would take many minutes. Perhaps even an hour.

"We need escort now!" Westland bellowed.

Mud perked up.

"Well it's about damn time we saw some action!" He leaped from the cot on his ship, the "Charon" on which he had been napping, and strode into the cockpit.

"Okay, baby," he said, slapping the console. "Let's have some fun!"

He strapped himself into the pilot's seat, and urged his ship forward out of its pod, and onto the tarmac. A dozen other ships were waiting before him, ships carrying pilots of the Earth Space Forces hurrying back to their ship. They launched all in quick succession.

Ward was not far behind Mud. When it came Mud's turn to launch into the sky, Ward was right behind him.

"You with me, buddy boy?" Mud asked Ward through their communicators.

"Yep," was what Ward said.

"Who d'ya think these hostiles are? Any idea?"

"My money says it's Turhan Mot, not waiting for us to find him."

“That’s as good a guess as any,” Mud agreed. (Good of him to save us the trouble.”

They approached the “Bellerophon” and found it already surrounded with a fleet of small fighters deployed as a defensive wall. They circled the “Bellerophon” as it slowly and sluggishly pulled itself out of the stationary position it had held above Callisto Base 1.

“You guys ready?”

It was Lieutenant Hardy, speaking to them from his own fighter craft, as he led the ships surrounding the “Bellerophon” in a protective web.

“Yep,” Ward said.

“Yahoo!” Mud agreed.

“Here they come!” Hardy warned. “I got a visual!”

Ward, Mud, and everyone else saw the approaching ships.

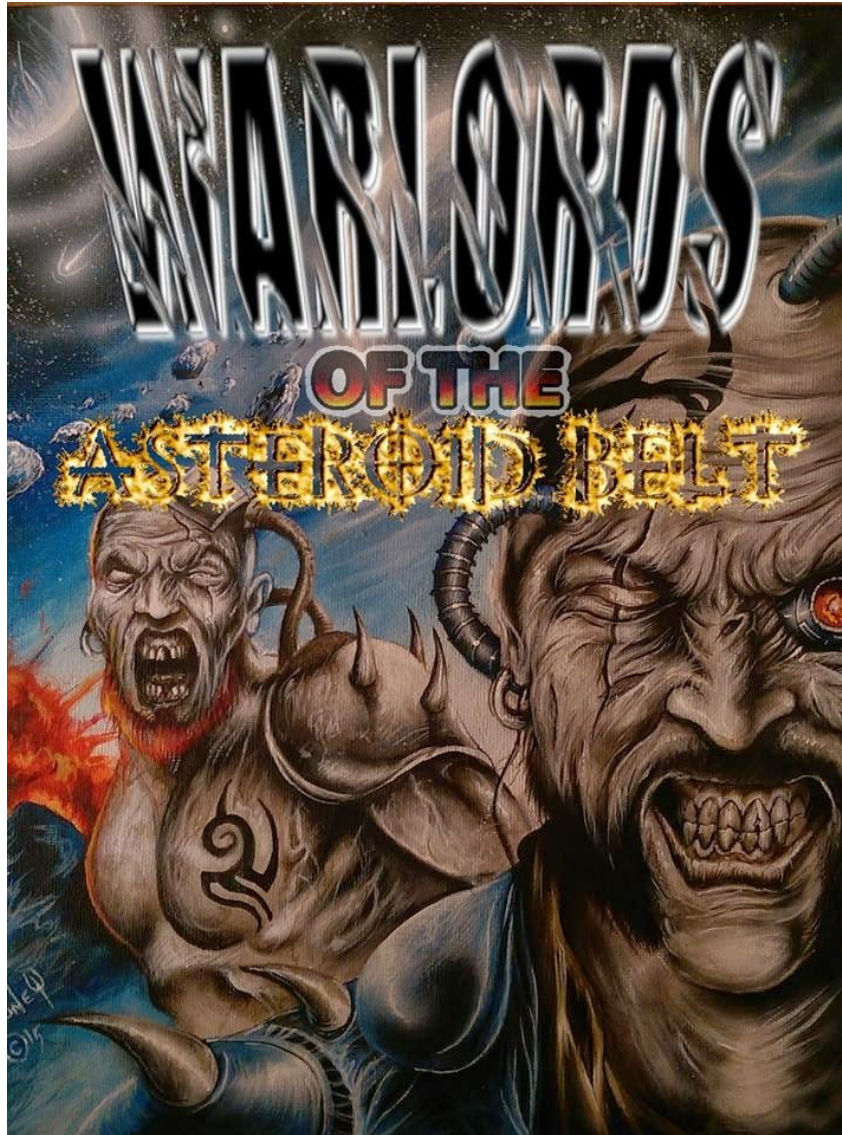
The “Grand Marquis” and the “Reliant” were forging directly toward the “Bellerophon”. Buzzing about them were thirty smaller ships, twenty of the peeling away to attack the bases on Callisto directly. Others had already gone off to attack the bases on Europa and Ganymede. In moments, battles were raging on all four moons.

But the central battle, the key battle, would be that between the “Grand Marquis”, the “Reliant” and the “Bellerophon”.

And before anyone was truly ready for it, the battle was upon them.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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



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

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A VICTIM OF THE HIGHER SPACE by Algernon Blackwood

“There’s an extraordinary gentleman to see you, sir,” said the new man.

“Why ‘extraordinary’?” asked Dr. Silence, drawing the tips of his thin fingers through his brown beard. His eyes twinkled pleasantly. “Why ‘extraordinary,’ Barker?” he repeated encouragingly, noticing the perplexed expression in the man’s eyes.

“He’s so—so thin, sir. I could hardly see ‘im at all—at first. He was inside the house before I could ask the name,” he added, remembering strict orders.

“And who brought him here?”

“He come alone, sir, in a closed cab. He pushed by me before I could say a word—making no noise not what I could hear. He seemed to move so soft like—”

The man stopped short with obvious embarrassment, as though he had already said enough to jeopardise his new situation, but trying hard to show that he remembered the instructions and warnings he had received with regard to the admission of strangers not properly accredited.

“And where is the gentleman now?” asked Dr. Silence, turning away to conceal his amusement.

“I really couldn’t exactly say, sir. I left him standing in the ‘all—”

The doctor looked up sharply. “But why in the hall, Barker? Why not in the waiting-room?” He fixed his piercing though kindly eyes on the man’s face. “Did he frighten you?” he asked quickly.

“I think he did, sir, if I may say so. I seemed to lose sight of him, as it were—” The man stammered, evidently convinced by now that he had earned his dismissal. “He come in so funny, just like a cold wind,” he added boldly, setting his heels at attention and looking his master full in the face.

The doctor made an internal note of the man’s halting description; he was pleased that the slight signs of psychic intuition which had induced him to engage Barker had not entirely failed at the first trial. Dr. Silence sought for this qualification in all his assistants, from secretary to serving man, and if it surrounded him with a somewhat singular crew, the drawbacks were more than compensated for on the whole by their occasional flashes of insight.

“So the gentleman made you feel queer, did he?”

“That was it, I think, sir,” repeated the man stolidly.

“And he brings no kind of introduction to me—no letter or anything?” asked the doctor, with feigned surprise, as though he knew what was coming.

The man fumbled, both in mind and pockets, and finally produced an envelope.

“I beg pardon, sir,” he said, greatly flustered; “the gentleman handed me this for you.”

It was a note from a discerning friend, who had never yet sent him a case that was not vitally interesting from one point or another.

“Please see the bearer of this note,” the brief message ran, “though I doubt if even you can do much to help him.”

John Silence paused a moment, so as to gather from the mind of the writer all that lay behind the brief words of the letter. Then he looked up at his servant with a graver expression than he had yet worn.

“Go back and find this gentleman,” he said, “and show him into the green study. Do not reply to his question, or speak more than actually necessary; but think kind, helpful, sympathetic thoughts as strongly as you can, Barker. You remember what I told you about the importance of thinking, when I engaged you. Put curiosity out of your mind, and think gently, sympathetically, affectionately, if you can.”

He smiled, and Barker, who had recovered his composure in the doctor’s presence, bowed silently and went out.

There were two different reception-rooms in Dr. Silence’s house. One (intended for persons who imagined they needed spiritual assistance when really they were only candidates for the asylum) had padded walls, and was well supplied with various concealed contrivances by means of which sudden violence could be instantly met and overcome. It was, however, rarely used. The other, intended for the reception of genuine cases of spiritual distress and out-of-the-way afflictions of a psychic nature, was entirely draped and furnished in a soothing deep green, calculated to induce calmness and repose of mind. And this room was the one in which Dr. Silence interviewed the majority of his “queer” cases, and the one into which he had directed Barker to show his present caller.

To begin with, the arm-chair in which the patient was always directed to sit, was nailed to the floor, since its immovability tended to impart this same excellent characteristic to the occupant. Patients invariably grew excited when talking about themselves, and their excitement tended to confuse their thoughts and to exaggerate their language. The inflexibility of the chair helped to counteract this. After repeated endeavours to drag it forward, or push it back, they ended by resigning themselves to sitting quietly. And with the futility of fidgeting there followed a calmer state of mind.

Upon the floor, and at intervals in the wall immediately behind, were certain tiny green buttons, practically unnoticeable, which on being pressed permitted a soothing and persuasive narcotic to rise invisibly about the occupant of the chair. The effect upon the excitable patient was rapid, admirable, and harmless. The green study was further provided with a secret spy-hole; for John Silence liked when possible to observe his patient’s face before it had assumed that mask the features of the human countenance invariably wear in the presence of another person. A man sitting alone wears a psychic expression; and this expression is the man himself. It disappears the moment another person joins him. And Dr. Silence often learned more from a few moments’ secret observation of a face than from hours of conversation with its owner afterwards.

A very light, almost a dancing, step followed Barker's heavy tread towards the green room, and a moment afterwards the man came in and announced that the gentleman was waiting. He was still pale and his manner nervous.

"Never mind, Barker" the doctor said kindly; "if you were not psychic the man would have had no effect upon you at all. You only need training and development. And when you have learned to interpret these feelings and sensations better, you will feel no fear, but only a great sympathy."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir!" And Barker bowed and made his escape, while Dr. Silence, an amused smile lurking about the corners of his mouth, made his way noiselessly down the passage and put his eye to the spy-hole in the door of the green study.

This spy-hole was so placed that it commanded a view of almost the entire room, and, looking through it, the doctor saw a hat, gloves, and umbrella lying on a chair by the table, but searched at first in vain for their owner.

The windows were both closed and a brisk fire burned in the grate. There were various signs—signs intelligible at least to a keenly intuitive soul—that the room was occupied, yet so far as human beings were concerned, it was empty, utterly empty. No one sat in the chairs; no one stood on the mat before the fire; there was no sign even that a patient was anywhere close against the wall, examining the Bocklin reproductions—as patients so often did when they thought they were alone—and therefore rather difficult to see from the spy-hole. Ordinarily speaking, there was no one in the room. It was undeniable.

Yet Dr. Silence was quite well aware that a human being was in the room. His psychic apparatus never failed in letting him know the proximity of an incarnate or discarnate being. Even in the dark he could tell that. And he now knew positively that his patient—the patient who had alarmed Barker, and had then tripped down the corridor with that dancing footstep—was somewhere concealed within the four walls commanded by his spy-hole. He also realised—and this was most unusual—that this individual whom he desired to watch knew that he was being watched. And, further, that the stranger himself was also watching! In fact, that it was he, the doctor, who was being observed—and by an observer as keen and trained as himself.

An inkling of the true state of the case began to dawn upon him, and he was on the verge of entering—indeed, his hand already touched the door-knob—when his eye, still glued to the spy-hole, detected a slight movement. Directly opposite, between him and the fireplace, something stirred. He watched very attentively and made certain that he was not mistaken. An object on the mantelpiece—it was a blue vase—disappeared from view. It passed out of sight together with the portion of the marble mantelpiece on which it rested. Next, that part of the fire and grate and brass fender immediately below it vanished entirely, as though a slice had been taken clean out of them.

Dr. Silence then understood that something between him and these objects was slowly coming into being, something that concealed them and obstructed his vision by inserting itself in the line of sight between them and himself.

He quietly awaited further results before going in.

First he saw a thin perpendicular line tracing itself from just above the height of the clock and continuing downwards till it reached the woolly fire-mat. This line grew wider, broadened, grew solid. It was no shadow; it was something substantial. It defined itself more and more. Then suddenly, at the top of the line, and about on a level with the face of the clock, he saw a round luminous disc gazing steadily at him. It was a human eye, looking straight into his own, pressed there against the spy-hole. And it was bright with intelligence. Dr. Silence held his breath for a moment—and stared back at it.

Then, like someone moving out of deep shadow into light, he saw the figure of a man come sliding sideways into view, a whitish face following the eye, and the perpendicular line he had first observed broadening out and developing into the complete figure of a human being. It was the patient. He had apparently been standing there in front of the fire all the time. A second eye had followed the first, and both of them stared steadily at the spy-hole, sharply concentrated, yet with a sly twinkle of humour and amusement that made it impossible for the doctor to maintain his position any longer.

He opened the door and went in quickly. As he did so he noticed for the first time the sound of a German band coming in gaily through the open ventilators. In some intuitive, unaccountable fashion the music connected itself with the patient he was about to interview. This sort of prevision was not unfamiliar to him. It always explained itself later.

The man, he saw, was of middle age and of very ordinary appearance; so ordinary, in fact, that he was difficult to describe—his only peculiarity being his extreme thinness. Pleasant—that is, good—vibrations issued from his atmosphere and met Dr. Silence as he advanced to greet him, yet vibrations alive with currents and discharges betraying the perturbed and disordered condition of his mind and brain. There was evidently something wholly out of the usual in the state of his thoughts. Yet, though strange, it was not altogether distressing; it was not the impression that the broken and violent atmosphere of the insane produces upon the mind. Dr. Silence realised in a flash that here was a case of absorbing interest that might require all his powers to handle properly.

“I was watching you through my little peep-hole—as you saw,” he began, with a pleasant smile, advancing to shake hands. “I find it of the greatest assistance sometimes—”

But the patient interrupted him at once. His voice was hurried and had odd, shrill changes in it, breaking from high to low in unexpected fashion. One moment it thundered, the next it almost squeaked.

“I understand without explanation,” he broke in rapidly. “You get the true note of a man in this way—when he thinks himself unobserved. I quite agree. Only, in my case, I fear, you saw very little. My case, as you of course grasp, Dr. Silence, is extremely peculiar, uncomfortably peculiar. Indeed, unless Sir William had positively assured me—”

“My friend has sent you to me,” the doctor interrupted gravely, with a gentle note of authority, “and that is quite sufficient. Pray, be seated, Mr.—”

“Mudge—Racine Mudge,” returned the other.

“Take this comfortable one, Mr. Mudge,” leading him to the fixed chair, “and tell me your condition in your own way and at your own pace. My whole day is at your service if you require it.”

Mr. Mudge moved towards the chair in question and then hesitated.

“You will promise me not to use the narcotic buttons,” he said, before sitting down. “I do not need them. Also I ought to mention that anything you think of vividly will reach my mind. That is apparently part of my peculiar case.” He sat down with a sigh and arranged his thin legs and body into a position of comfort. Evidently he was very sensitive to the thoughts of others, for the picture of the green buttons had only entered the doctor’s mind for a second, yet the other had instantly snapped it up. Dr. Silence noticed, too, that Mr. Mudge held on tightly with both hands to the arms of the chair.

“I’m rather glad the chair is nailed to the floor,” he remarked, as he settled himself more comfortably. “It suits me admirably. The fact is—and this is my case in a nutshell—which is all that a doctor of your marvellous development requires—the fact is, Dr. Silence, I am a victim of Higher Space. That’s what’s the matter with me—Higher Space!”

The two looked at each other for a space in silence, the little patient holding tightly to the arms of the chair which “suited him admirably,” and looking up with staring eyes, his atmosphere positively trembling with the waves of some unknown activity; while the doctor smiled kindly and sympathetically, and put his whole person as far as possible into the mental condition of the other.

“Higher Space,” repeated Mr. Mudge, “that’s what it is. Now, do you think you can help me with that?”

There was a pause during which the men’s eyes steadily searched down below the surface of their respective personalities. Then Dr. Silence spoke.

“I am quite sure I can help,” he answered quietly; “sympathy must always help, and suffering always owns my sympathy. I see you have suffered cruelly. You must tell me all about your case, and when I hear the gradual steps by which you reached this strange condition, I have no doubt I can be of assistance to you.”

He drew a chair up beside his interlocutor and laid a hand on his shoulder for a moment. His whole being radiated kindness, intelligence, desire to help.

“For instance,” he went on, “I feel sure it was the result of no mere chance that you became familiar with the terrors of what you term Higher Space; for Higher Space is no mere external measurement. It is, of course, a spiritual state, a spiritual condition, an inner development, and one that we must recognise as abnormal, since it is beyond the reach of the world at the present stage of evolution. Higher Space is a mythical state.”

“Oh!” cried the other, rubbing his birdlike hands with pleasure, “the relief it is to be able to talk to someone who can understand! Of course, what you say is the utter truth. And you are right that no mere chance led me to my present condition, but, on the other hand, prolonged and deliberate study. Yet chance in a sense now governs it. I mean, my entering the condition of Higher Space seems to depend upon the chance of this and that circumstance. For instance,

the mere sound of that German band sent me off. Not that all music will do so, but certain sounds, certain vibrations, at once key me up to the requisite pitch, and off I go. Wagner's music always does it, and that band must have been playing a stray bit of Wagner. But I'll come to all that later. Only first, I must ask you to send away your man from the spy-hole."

John Silence looked up with a start, for Mr. Mudge's back was to the door, and there was no mirror. He saw the brown eye of Barker glued to the little circle of glass, and he crossed the room without a word and snapped down the black shutter provided for the purpose, and then heard Barker snuffle away along the passage.

"Now," continued the little man in the chair, "I can begin. You have managed to put me completely at my ease, and I feel I may tell you my whole case without shame or reserve. You will understand. But you must be patient with me if I go into details that are already familiar to you—details of Higher Space, I mean—and if I seem stupid when I have to describe things that transcend the power of language and are really therefore indescribable."

"My dear friend," put in the other calmly, "that goes without saying. To know Higher Space is an experience that defies description, and one is obliged to make use of more or less intelligible symbols. But, pray, proceed. Your vivid thoughts will tell me more than your halting words."

An immense sigh of relief proceeded from the little figure half lost in the depths of the chair. Such intelligent sympathy meeting him half-way was a new experience to him, and it touched his heart at once. He leaned back, relaxing his tight hold of the arms, and began in his thin, scale-like voice.

"My mother was a Frenchwoman, and my father an Essex bargeman," he said abruptly. "Hence my name—Racine and Mudge. My father died before I ever saw him. My mother inherited money from her Bordeaux relations, and when she died soon after, I was left alone with wealth and a strange freedom. I had no guardian, trustees, sisters, brothers, or any connection in the world to look after me. I grew up, therefore, utterly without education. This much was to my advantage; I learned none of that deceitful rubbish taught in schools, and so had nothing to unlearn when I awakened to my true love—mathematics, higher mathematics and higher geometry. These, however, I seemed to know instinctively. It was like the memory of what I had deeply studied before; the principles were in my blood, and I simply raced through the ordinary stages, and beyond, and then did the same with geometry. Afterwards, when I read the books on these subjects, I understood how swift and undeviating the knowledge had come back to me. It was simply memory. It was simply re-collecting the memories of what I had known before in a previous existence and required no books to teach me."

In his growing excitement, Mr. Mudge attempted to drag the chair forward a little nearer to his listener, and then smiled faintly as he resigned himself instantly again to its immovability, and plunged anew into the recital of his singular "disease."

"The audacious speculations of Bolyai, the amazing theories of Gauss—that through a point more than one line could be drawn parallel to a given line; the possibility that the angles of a triangle are together greater than two right angles, if drawn upon immense curvatures—the breathless intuitions of Beltrami and Lobatchewsky—all these I hurried through, and

emerged, panting but unsatisfied, upon the verge of my—my new world, my Higher Space possibilities—in a word, my disease!

“How I got there,” he resumed after a brief pause, during which he appeared to be listening intently for an approaching sound, “is more than I can put intelligibly into words. I can only hope to leave your mind with an intuitive comprehension of the possibility of what I say.

“Here, however, came a change. At this point I was no longer absorbing the fruits of studies I had made before; it was the beginning of new efforts to learn for the first time, and I had to go slowly and laboriously through terrible work. Here I sought for the theories and speculations of others. But books were few and far between, and with the exception of one man—a ‘dreamer,’ the world called him—whose audacity and piercing intuition amazed and delighted me beyond description, I found no one to guide or help.

“You, of course, Dr. Silence, understand something of what I am driving at with these stammering words, though you cannot perhaps yet guess what depths of pain my new knowledge brought me to, nor why an acquaintance with a new development of space should prove a source of misery and terror.”

Mr. Racine Mudge, remembering that the chair would not move, did the next best thing he could in his desire to draw nearer to the attentive man facing him, and sat forward upon the very edge of the cushions, crossing his legs and gesticulating with both hands as though he saw into this region of new space he was attempting to describe, and might any moment tumble into it bodily from the edge of the chair and disappear from view. John Silence, separated from him by three paces, sat with his eyes fixed upon the thin white face opposite, noting every word and every gesture with deep attention.

“This room we now sit in, Dr. Silence, has one side open to space—to Higher Space. A closed box only seems closed. There is a way in and out of a soap bubble without breaking the skin.”

“You tell me no new thing,” the doctor interposed gently.

“Hence, if Higher Space exists and our world borders upon it and lies partially in it, it follows necessarily that we see only portions of all objects. We never see their true and complete shape. We see their three measurements, but not their fourth. The new direction is concealed from us, and when I hold this book and move my hand all round it I have not really made a complete circuit. We only perceive those portions of any object which exist in our three dimensions; the rest escapes us. But, once we learn to see in Higher Space, objects will appear as they actually are. Only they will thus be hardly recognisable!

“Now, you may begin to grasp something of what I am coming to.”

“I am beginning to understand something of what you must have suffered,” observed the doctor soothingly, “for I have made similar experiments myself, and only stopped just in time—”

“You are the one man in all the world who can hear and understand, and sympathise,” exclaimed Mr. Mudge, grasping his hand and holding it tightly while he spoke. The nailed chair prevented further excitability.

“Well,” he resumed, after a moment’s pause, “I procured the implements and the coloured blocks for practical experiment, and I followed the instructions carefully till I had arrived at a working conception of four-dimensional space. The tesseract, the figure whose boundaries are cubes, I knew by heart. That is to say, I knew it and saw it mentally, for my eye, of course, could never take in a new measurement, or my hands and feet handle it.

“So, at least, I thought,” he added, making a wry face. “I had reached the stage, you see, when I could imagine in a new dimension. I was able to conceive the shape of that new figure which is intrinsically different to all we know—the shape of the tesseract. I could perceive in four dimensions. When, therefore, I looked at a cube I could see all its sides at once. Its top was not foreshortened, nor its farther side and base invisible. I saw the whole thing out flat, so to speak. And this tesseract was bounded by cubes! Moreover, I also saw its content—its insides.”

“You were not yourself able to enter this new world,” interrupted Dr. Silence.

“Not then. I was only able to conceive intuitively what it was like and how exactly it must look. Later, when I slipped in there and saw objects in their entirety, unlimited by the paucity of our poor three measurements, I very nearly lost my life. For, you see, space does not stop at a single new dimension, a fourth. It extends in all possible new ones, and we must conceive it as containing any number of new dimensions. In other words, there is no space at all, but only a spiritual condition. But, meanwhile, I had come to grasp the strange fact that the objects in our normal world appear to us only partially.”

Mr. Mudge moved farther forward till he was balanced dangerously on the very edge of the chair. “From this starting point,” he resumed, “I began my studies and experiments, and continued them for years. I had money, and I was without friends. I lived in solitude and experimented. My intellect, of course, had little part in the work, for intellectually it was all unthinkable. Never was the limitation of mere reason more plainly demonstrated. It was mystically, intuitively, spiritually that I began to advance. And what I learnt, and knew, and did is all impossible to put into language, since it all describes experiences transcending the experiences of men. It is only some of the results—what you would call the symptoms of my disease—that I can give you, and even these must often appear absurd contradictions and impossible paradoxes.

“I can only tell you, Dr. Silence”—his manner became exceedingly impressive— “that I reached sometimes a point of view whence all the great puzzle of the world became plain to me, and I understood what they call in the Yoga books ‘The Great Heresy of Separateness’; why all great teachers have urged the necessity of man loving his neighbour as himself; how men are all really one; and why the utter loss of self is necessary to salvation and the discovery of the true life of the soul.”

He paused a moment and drew breath.

“Your speculations have been my own long ago,” the doctor said quietly. “I fully realise the force of your words. Men are doubtless not separate at all—in the sense they imagine—”

“All this about the very much Higher Space I only dimly, very dimly, conceived, of course,” the other went on, raising his voice again by jerks; “but what did happen to me was the humbler accident of—the simpler disaster—oh, dear, how shall I put it—?”

He stammered and showed visible signs of distress.

“It was simply this,” he resumed with a sudden rush of words, “that, accidentally, as the result of my years of experiment, I one day slipped bodily into the next world, the world of four dimensions, yet without knowing precisely how I got there, or how I could get back again. I discovered, that is, that my ordinary three-dimensional body was but an expression—a projection—of my higher four-dimensional body!

“Now you understand what I meant much earlier in our talk when I spoke of chance. I cannot control my entrance or exit. Certain people, certain human atmospheres, certain wandering forces, thoughts, desires even—the radiations of certain combinations of colour, and above all, the vibrations of certain kinds of music, will suddenly throw me into a state of what I can only describe as an intense and terrific inner vibration—and behold I am off! Off in the direction at right angles to all our known directions! Off in the direction the cube takes when it begins to trace the outlines of the new figure! Off into my breathless and semi-divine Higher Space! Off, inside myself, into the world of four dimensions!”

He gasped and dropped back into the depths of the immovable chair.

“And there,” he whispered, his voice issuing from among the cushions, “there I have to stay until these vibrations subside, or until they do something which I cannot find words to describe properly or intelligibly to you—and then, behold, I am back again. First, that is, I disappear. Then I reappear.”

“Just so,” exclaimed Dr. Silence, “and that is why a few—”

“Why a few moments ago,” interrupted Mr. Mudge, taking the words out of his mouth, “you found me gone, and then saw me return. The music of that wretched German band sent me off. Your intense thinking about me brought me back—when the band had stopped its Wagner. I saw you approach the peep-hole and I saw Barker’s intention of doing so later. For me no interiors are hidden. I see inside. When in that state the content of your mind, as of your body, is open to me as the day. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!”

Mr. Mudge stopped and again mopped his brow. A light trembling ran over the surface of his small body like wind over grass. He still held tightly to the arms of the chair.

“At first,” he presently resumed, “my new experiences were so vividly interesting that I felt no alarm. There was no room for it. The alarm came a little later.”

“Then you actually penetrated far enough into that state to experience yourself as a normal portion of it?” asked the doctor, leaning forward, deeply interested.

Mr. Mudge nodded a perspiring face in reply.

“I did,” he whispered, “undoubtedly I did. I am coming to all that. It began first at night, when I realised that sleep brought no loss of consciousness—”

“The spirit, of course, can never sleep. Only the body becomes unconscious,” interposed John Silence.

“Yes, we know that—theoretically. At night, of course, the spirit is active elsewhere, and we have no memory of where and how, simply because the brain stays behind and receives no record. But I found that, while remaining conscious, I also retained memory. I had attained to the state of continuous consciousness, for at night I regularly, with the first approaches of drowsiness, entered nolens volens the four-dimensional world.

“For a time this happened regularly, and I could not control it; though later I found a way to regulate it better. Apparently sleep is unnecessary in the higher—the four-dimensional—body. Yes, perhaps. But I should infinitely have preferred dull sleep to the knowledge. For, unable to control my movements, I wandered to and fro, attracted, owing to my partial development and premature arrival, to parts of this new world that alarmed me more and more. It was the awful waste and drift of a monstrous world, so utterly different to all we know and see that I cannot even hint at the nature of the sights and objects and beings in it. More than that, I cannot even remember them. I cannot now picture them to myself even, but can recall only the memory of the impression they made upon me, the horror and devastating terror of it all. To be in several places at once, for instance—”

“Perfectly,” interrupted John Silence, noticing the increase of the other’s excitement, “I understand exactly. But now, please, tell me a little more of this alarm you experienced, and how it affected you.”

“It’s not the disappearing and reappearing per se that I mind,” continued Mr. Mudge, “so much as certain other things. It’s seeing people and objects in their weird entirety, in their true and complete shapes, that is so distressing. It introduces me to a world of monsters. Horses, dogs, cats, all of which I loved; people, trees, children; all that I have considered beautiful in life—everything, from a human face to a cathedral—appear to me in a different shape and aspect to all I have known before. I cannot perhaps convince you why this should be terrible, but I assure you that it is so. To hear the human voice proceeding from this novel appearance which I scarcely recognise as a human body is ghastly, simply ghastly. To see inside everything and everybody is a form of insight peculiarly distressing. To be so confused in geography as to find myself one moment at the North Pole, and the next at Clapham Junction—or possibly at both places simultaneously—is absurdly terrifying. Your imagination will readily furnish other details without my multiplying my experiences now. But you have no idea what it all means, and how I suffer.”

Mr. Mudge paused in his panting account and lay back in his chair. He still held tightly to the arms as though they could keep him in the world of sanity and three measurements, and only now and again released his left hand in order to mop his face. He looked very thin and white and oddly unsubstantial, and he stared about him as though he saw into this other space he had been talking about.

John Silence, too, felt warm. He had listened to every word and had made many notes. The presence of this man had an exhilarating effect upon him. It seemed as if Mr. Racine Mudge still carried about with him something of that breathless Higher-Space condition he had been describing. At any rate, Dr. Silence had himself advanced sufficiently far along the legitimate

paths of spiritual and psychic transformations to realise that the visions of this extraordinary little person had a basis of truth for their origin.

After a pause that prolonged itself into minutes, he crossed the room and unlocked a drawer in a bookcase, taking out a small book with a red cover. It had a lock to it, and he produced a key out of his pocket and proceeded to open the covers. The bright eyes of Mr. Mudge never left him for a single second.

“It almost seems a pity,” he said at length, “to cure you, Mr. Mudge. You are on the way to discovery of great things. Though you may lose your life in the process—that is, your life here in the world of three dimensions—you would lose thereby nothing of great value—you will pardon my apparent rudeness, I know—and you might gain what is infinitely greater. Your suffering, of course, lies in the fact that you alternate between the two worlds and are never wholly in one or the other. Also, I rather imagine, though I cannot be certain of this from any personal experiments, that you have here and there penetrated even into space of more than four dimensions, and have hence experienced the terror you speak of.”

The perspiring son of the Essex bargeman and the woman of Normandy bent his head several times in assent, but uttered no word in reply.

“Some strange psychic predisposition, dating no doubt from one of your former lives, has favoured the development of your ‘disease’; and the fact that you had no normal training at school or college, no leading by the poor intellect into the culs-de-sac falsely called knowledge, has further caused your exceedingly rapid movement along the lines of direct inner experience. None of the knowledge you have foreshadowed has come to you through the senses, of course.”

Mr. Mudge, sitting in his immovable chair, began to tremble slightly. A wind again seemed to pass over his surface and again to set it curiously in motion like a field of grass.

“You are merely talking to gain time,” he said hurriedly, in a shaking voice. “This thinking aloud delays us. I see ahead what you are coming to, only please be quick, for something is going to happen. A band is again coming down the street, and if it plays—if it plays Wagner—I shall be off in a twinkling.”

“Precisely. I will be quick. I was leading up to the point of how to effect your cure. The way is this: You must simply learn to block the entrances.”

“True, true, utterly true!” exclaimed the little man, dodging about nervously in the depths of the chair. “But how, in the name of space, is that to be done?”

“By concentration. They are all within you, these entrances, although outer cases such as colour, music and other things lead you towards them. These external things you cannot hope to destroy, but once the entrances are blocked, they will lead you only to bricked walls and closed channels. You will no longer be able to find the way.”

“Quick, quick!” cried the bobbing figure in the chair. “How is this concentration to be effected?”

“This little book,” continued Dr. Silence calmly, “will explain to you the way.” He tapped the cover. “Let me now read out to you certain simple instructions, composed, as I see you divine, entirely from my own personal experiences in the same direction. Follow these instructions and you will no longer enter the state of Higher Space. The entrances will be blocked effectively.”

Mr. Mudge sat bolt upright in his chair to listen, and John Silence cleared his throat and began to read slowly in a very distinct voice.

But before he had uttered a dozen words, something happened. A sound of street music entered the room through the open ventilators, for a band had begun to play in the stable mews at the back of the house—the March from Tannhäuser. Odd as it may seem that a German band should twice within the space of an hour enter the same mews and play Wagner, it was nevertheless the fact.

Mr. Racine Mudge heard it. He uttered a sharp, squeaking cry and twisted his arms with nervous energy round the chair. A piteous look that was not far from tears spread over his white face. Grey shadows followed it—the grey of fear. He began to struggle convulsively.

“Hold me fast! Catch me! For God’s sake, keep me here! I’m on the rush already. Oh, it’s frightful!” he cried in tones of anguish, his voice as thin as a reed.

Dr. Silence made a plunge forward to seize him, but in a flash, before he could cover the space between them, Mr. Racine Mudge, screaming and struggling, seemed to shoot past him into invisibility. He disappeared like an arrow from a bow propelled at infinite speed, and his voice no longer sounded in the external air, but seemed in some curious way to make itself heard somewhere within the depths of the doctor’s own being. It was almost like a faint singing cry in his head, like a voice of dream, a voice of vision and unreality.

“Alcohol, alcohol!” it cried, “give me alcohol! It’s the quickest way. Alcohol, before I’m out of reach!”

The doctor, accustomed to rapid decisions and even more rapid action, remembered that a brandy flask stood upon the mantelpiece, and in less than a second he had seized it and was holding it out towards the space above the chair recently occupied by the visible Mudge. Then, before his very eyes, and long ere he could unscrew the metal stopper, he saw the contents of the closed glass phial sink and lessen as though some one were drinking violently and greedily of the liquor within.

“Thanks! Enough! It deadens the vibrations!” cried the faint voice in his interior, as he withdrew the flask and set it back upon the mantelpiece. He understood that in Mudge’s present condition one side of the flask was open to space and he could drink without removing the stopper. He could hardly have had a more interesting proof of what he had been hearing described at such length.

But the next moment—the very same moment it almost seemed—the German band stopped midway in its tune—and there was Mr. Mudge back in his chair again, gasping and panting!

“Quick!” he shrieked, “stop that band! Send it away! Catch hold of me! Block the entrances! Block the entrances! Give me the red book! Oh, oh, oh-h-h-h!!!”

The music had begun again. It was merely a temporary interruption. The Tannhäuser March started again, this time at a tremendous pace that made it sound like a rapid two-step as though the instruments played against time.

But the brief interruption gave Dr. Silence a moment in which to collect his scattering thoughts, and before the band had got through half a bar, he had flung forward upon the chair and held Mr. Racine Mudge, the struggling little victim of Higher Space, in a grip of iron. His arms went all round his diminutive person, taking in a good part of the chair at the same time. He was not a big man, yet he seemed to smother Mudge completely.

Yet, even as he did so, and felt the wriggling form underneath him, it began to melt and slip away like air or water. The wood of the arm-chair somehow disentangled itself from between his own arms and those of Mudge. The phenomenon known as the passage of matter through matter took place. The little man seemed actually to get mixed up in his own being. Dr. Silence could just see his face beneath him. It puckered and grew dark as though from some great internal effort. He heard the thin, reedy voice cry in his ear to “Block the entrances, block the entrances!” and then—but how in the world describe what is indescribable?

John Silence half rose up to watch. Racine Mudge, his face distorted beyond all recognition, was making a marvellous inward movement, as though doubling back upon himself. He turned funnel-wise like water in a whirling vortex, and then appeared to break up somewhat as a reflection breaks up and divides in a distorting convex mirror. He went neither forward nor backwards, neither to the right nor the left, neither up nor down. But he went. He went utterly. He simply flashed away out of sight like a vanishing projectile.

All but one leg! Dr. Silence just had the time and the presence of mind to seize upon the left ankle and boot as it disappeared, and to this he held on for several seconds like grim death. Yet all the time he knew it was a foolish and useless thing to do.

The foot was in his grasp one moment, and the next it seemed—this was the only way he could describe it—inside his own skin and bones, and at the same time outside his hand and all round it. It seemed mixed up in some amazing way with his own flesh and blood. Then it was gone, and he was tightly grasping a draught of heated air.

“Gone! gone! gone!” cried a thick, whispering voice, somewhere deep within his own consciousness. “Lost! lost! lost!” it repeated, growing fainter and fainter till at length it vanished into nothing and the last signs of Mr. Racine Mudge vanished with it.

John Silence locked his red book and replaced it in the cabinet, which he fastened with a click, and when Barker answered the bell he inquired if Mr. Mudge had left a card upon the table. It appeared that he had, and when the servant returned with it, Dr. Silence read the address and made a note of it. It was in North London.

“Mr. Mudge has gone,” he said quietly to Barker, noticing his expression of alarm.

“He’s not taken his ‘at with him, sir.”

“Mr. Mudge requires no hat where he is now,” continued the doctor, stooping to poke the fire. “But he may return for it—”

“And the humbrella, sir.”

“And the umbrella.”

“He didn’t go out my way, sir, if you please,” stuttered the amazed servant, his curiosity overcoming his nervousness.

“Mr. Mudge has his own way of coming and going, and prefers it. If he returns by the door at any time remember to bring him instantly to me, and be kind and gentle with him and ask no questions. Also, remember, Barker, to think pleasantly, sympathetically, affectionately of him while he is away. Mr. Mudge is a very suffering gentleman.”

Barker bowed and went out of the room backwards, gasping and feeling round the inside of his collar with three very hot fingers of one hand.

It was two days later when he brought in a telegram to the study. Dr. Silence opened it, and read as follows:

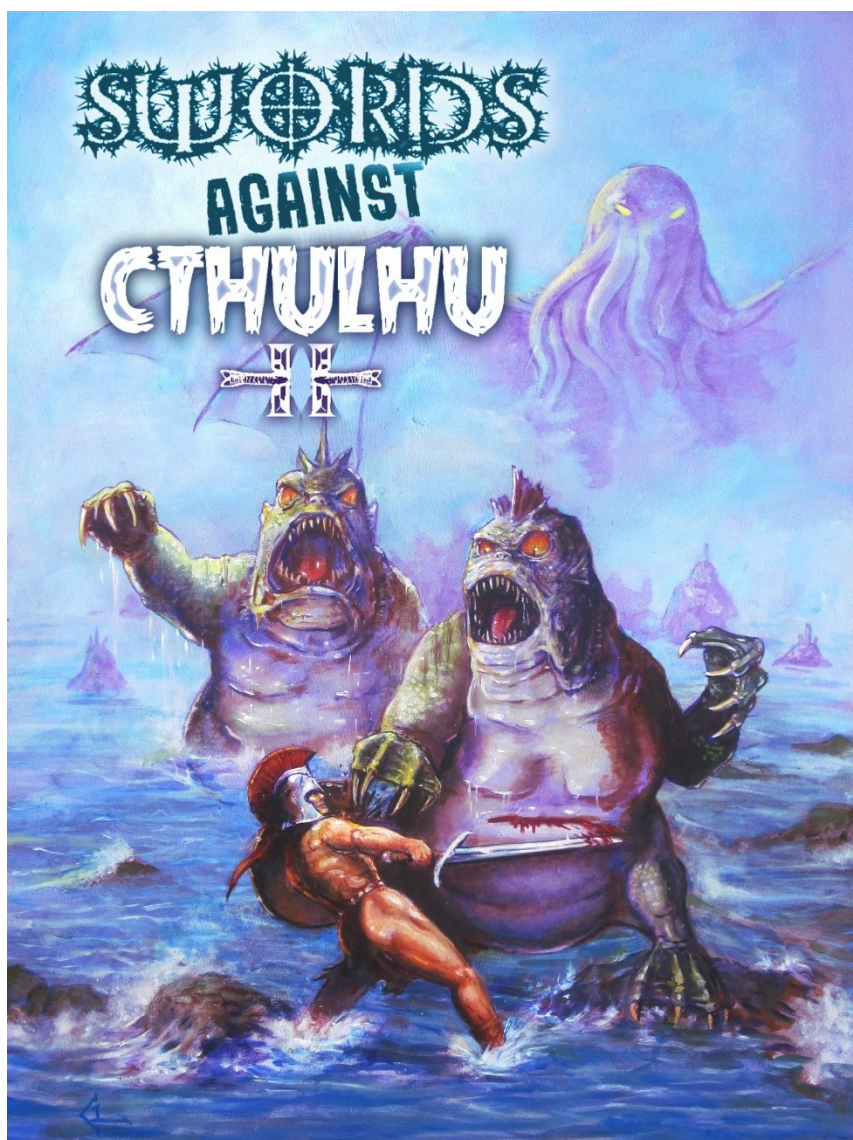
“Bombay. Just slipped out again. All safe. Have blocked entrances. Thousand thanks. Address Cooks, London. —MUDGE.”

Dr. Silence looked up and saw Barker staring at him bewilderingly. It occurred to him that somehow he knew the contents of the telegram.

“Make a parcel of Mr. Mudge’s things,” he said briefly, “and address them Thomas Cook & Sons, Ludgate Circus. And send them there exactly a month from to-day and marked ‘To be called for.’”

“Yes, sir,” said Barker, leaving the room with a deep sigh and a hurried glance at the waste-paper basket where his master had dropped the pink paper.

THE END



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part Two: Abandoned

Chapter 17

These last words justified the colonists' presentiment. There had been some mournful past, perhaps expiated in the sight of men, but from which his conscience had not yet absolved him. At any rate the guilty man felt remorse, he repented, and his new friends would have cordially pressed the hand which they sought; but he did not feel himself worthy to extend it to honest men! However, after the scene with the jaguar, he did not return to the forest, and from that day did not go beyond the enclosure of Granite House.

What was the mystery of his life? Would the stranger one day speak of it? Time alone could show. At any rate, it was agreed that his secret should never be asked from him, and that they would live with him as if they suspected nothing.

For some days their life continued as before. Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett worked together, sometimes chemists, sometimes experimentalists. The reporter never left the engineer except to hunt with Herbert, for it would not have been prudent to allow the lad to ramble alone in the forest; and it was very necessary to be on their guard. As to Neb and Pencroft, one day at the stables and poultry-yard, another at the corral, without reckoning work in Granite House, they were never in want of employment.

The stranger worked alone, and he had resumed his usual life, never appearing at meals, sleeping under the trees in the plateau, never mingling with his companions. It really seemed as if the society of those who had saved him was insupportable to him!

"But then," observed Pencroft, "why did he entreat the help of his fellow-creatures? Why did he throw that paper into the sea?"

"He will tell us why," invariably replied Cyrus Harding.

"When?"

"Perhaps sooner than you think, Pencroft."

And, indeed, the day of confession was near.

On the 10th of December, a week after his return to Granite House, Harding saw the stranger approaching, who, in a calm voice and humble tone, said to him: "Sir, I have a request to make of you."

"Speak," answered the engineer, "but first let me ask you a question."

At these words the stranger reddened, and was on the point of withdrawing. Cyrus Harding understood what was passing in the mind of the guilty man, who doubtless feared that the engineer would interrogate him on his past life.

Harding held him back.

“Comrade,” said he, “we are not only your companions but your friends. I wish you to believe that, and now I will listen to you.”

The stranger pressed his hand over his eyes. He was seized with a sort of trembling, and remained a few moments without being able to articulate a word.

“Sir,” said he at last, “I have come to beg you to grant me a favour.”

“What is it?”

“You have, four or five miles from here, a corral for your domesticated animals. These animals need to be taken care of. Will you allow me to live there with them?”

Cyrus Harding gazed at the unfortunate man for a few moments with a feeling of deep commiseration; then, —

“My friend,” said he, “the corral has only stables hardly fit for animals.”

“It will be good enough for me, sir.”

“My friend,” answered Harding, “we will not constrain you in anything. You wish to live at the corral, so be it. You will, however, be always welcome at Granite House. But since you wish to live at the corral we will make the necessary arrangements for your being comfortably established there.”

“Never mind that, I shall do very well.”

“My friend,” answered Harding, who always intentionally made use of this cordial appellation, “you must let us judge what it will be best to do in this respect.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied the stranger as he withdrew.

The engineer then made known to his companions the proposal which had been made to him, and it was agreed that they should build a wooden house at the corral, which they would make as comfortable as possible.

That very day the colonists repaired to the corral with the necessary tools, and a week had not passed before the house was ready to receive its tenant. It was built about twenty feet from the sheds, and from there it was easy to overlook the flock of sheep, which then numbered more than eighty. Some furniture, a bed, table, bench, cupboard, and chest were manufactured, and a gun, ammunition, and tools were carried to the corral.

The stranger, however, had seen nothing of his new dwelling, and he had allowed the settlers to work there without him, while he occupied himself on the plateau, wishing, doubtless, to put the finishing stroke to his work. Indeed, thanks to him, all the ground was dug up and ready to be sowed when the time came.

It was on the 20th of December that all the arrangements at the corral were completed. The engineer announced to the stranger that his dwelling was ready to receive him, and the latter replied that he would go and sleep there that very evening.

On this evening the colonists were gathered in the dining room of Granite House. It was then eight o'clock, the hour at which their companion was to leave them. Not wishing to trouble him by their presence, and thus imposing on him the necessity of saying farewells which might perhaps be painful to him, they had left him alone and ascended to Granite House.

Now, they had been talking in the room for a few minutes, when a light knock was heard at the door. Almost immediately the stranger entered, and without any preamble, —

“Gentlemen,” said he, “before I leave you, it is right that you should know my history. I will tell it you.”

These simple words profoundly impressed Cyrus Harding and his companions. The engineer rose.

“We ask you nothing, my friend,” said he; “it is your right to be silent.”

“It is my duty to speak.”

“Sit down, then.”

“No, I will stand.”

“We are ready to hear you,” replied Harding.

The stranger remained standing in a corner of the room, a little in the shade. He was bareheaded, his arms folded across his chest, and it was in this posture that in a hoarse voice, speaking like someone who obliges himself to speak, he gave the following recital, which his auditors did not once interrupt: —

“On the 20th of December 1854, a steam-yacht, belonging to a Scotch nobleman, Lord Glenarvan, anchored off Cape Bernouilli, on the western coast of Australia, in the thirty-seventh parallel. On board this yacht were Lord Glenarvan and his wife, a major in the English army, a French geographer, a young girl, and a young boy. These two last were the children of Captain Grant, whose ship, the ‘Britannia,’ had been lost, crew and cargo, a year before. The ‘Duncan’ was commanded by Captain John Mangles, and manned by a crew of fifteen men.

“This is the reason the yacht at this time lay off the coast of Australia. Six months before, a bottle, enclosing a document written in English, German, and French, had been found in the Irish Sea, and picked up by the ‘Duncan.’ This document stated in substance that there still existed three survivors from the wreck of the ‘Britannia,’ that these survivors were Captain Grant and two of his men, and that they had found refuge on some land, of which the document gave the latitude, but of which the longitude, effaced by the sea, was no longer legible.

“This latitude was 37deg 11’ south; therefore, the longitude being unknown, if they followed the thirty-seventh parallel over continents and seas, they would be certain to reach the spot inhabited by Captain Grant and his two companions. The English Admiralty having hesitated to undertake this search, Lord Glenarvan resolved to attempt everything to find the captain. He communicated with Mary and Robert Grant, who joined him. The ‘Duncan’ yacht was equipped for the distant voyage, in which the nobleman’s family and the captain’s children wished to take part, and the ‘Duncan,’ leaving Glasgow, proceeded towards the Atlantic, passed through the Straits of Magellan, and ascended the Pacific as far as Patagonia, where, according to a previous interpretation of the document, they supposed that Captain Grant was a prisoner among the Indians.

“The ‘Duncan’ disembarked her passengers on the western coast of Patagonia, and sailed to pick them up again on the eastern coast at Cape Corrientes. Lord Glenarvan traversed Patagonia, following the thirty-seventh parallel, and having found no trace of the captain, he re-embarked on the 13th of November, so as to pursue his search through the Ocean.

“After having unsuccessfully visited the islands of Tristan D’Cunha and Amsterdam, situated in her course, the ‘Duncan,’ as I have said, arrived at Cape Bernouilli, on the Australian coast, on the 20th of December 1854.

“It was Lord Glenarvan’s intention to traverse Australia as he had traversed America, and he disembarked. A few miles from the coast was established a farm, belonging to an Irishman, who offered hospitality to the travellers. Lord Glenarvan made known to the Irishman the cause which had brought him to these parts, and asked if he knew whether a three-masted English vessel, the ‘Britannia,’ had been lost less than two years before on the west coast of Australia.

“The Irishman had never heard of this wreck, but, to the great surprise of the bystanders, one of his servants came forward and said, —

“‘My lord, praise and thank God! If Captain Grant is still living, he is living on the Australian shores.’

“‘Who are you?’ asked Lord Glenarvan.

“‘A Scotchman like yourself, my lord,’ replied the man; ‘I am one of Captain Grant’s crew—one of the castaways of the “Britannia.”’

“This man was called Ayrton. He was, in fact, the boatswain’s mate of the ‘Britannia,’ as his papers showed. But, separated from Captain Grant at the moment when the ship struck upon the rocks, he had till then believed that the captain with all his crew had perished, and that he, Ayrton, was the sole survivor of the ‘Britannia.’

“‘Only,’ he added, ‘it was not on the west coast, but on the east coast of Australia that the vessel was lost, and if Captain Grant is still living, as his document indicates, he is a prisoner among the natives, and it is on the other coast that he must be looked for.’

“This man spoke in a frank voice and with a confident look; his words could not be doubted. The Irishman, in whose service he had been for more than a year, answered for his trustworthiness. Lord Glenarvan, therefore, believed in the fidelity of this man and, by his

advice, resolved to cross Australia, following the thirty-seventh parallel. Lord Glenarvan, his wife, the two children, the major, the Frenchman, Captain Mangles, and a few sailors composed the little band under the command of Ayrton, while the ‘Duncan,’ under charge of the mate, Tom Austin, proceeded to Melbourne, there to await Lord Glenarvan’s instructions.

“They set out on the 23rd of December 1854.

“It is time to say that Ayrton was a traitor. He was, indeed, the boatswain’s mate of the ‘Britannia,’ but, after some dispute with his captain, he endeavoured to incite the crew to mutiny and seize the ship, and Captain Grant had landed him, on the 8th of April, 1852, on the west coast of Australia, and then sailed, leaving him there, as was only just.

“Therefore this wretched man knew nothing of the wreck of the ‘Britannia’; he had just heard of it from Glenarvan’s account. Since his abandonment, he had become, under the name of Ben Joyce, the leader of the escaped convicts; and if he boldly maintained that the wreck had taken place on the east coast, and led Lord Glenarvan to proceed in that direction, it was that he hoped to separate him from his ship, seize the ‘Duncan,’ and make the yacht a pirate in the Pacific.”

Here the stranger stopped for a moment. His voice trembled, but he continued,—

“The expedition set out and proceeded across Australia. It was inevitably unfortunate, since Ayrton, or Ben Joyce, as he may be called, guided it, sometimes preceded, sometimes followed by his band of convicts, who had been told what they had to do.

“Meanwhile, the ‘Duncan’ had been sent to Melbourne for repairs. It was necessary, then, to get Lord Glenarvan to order her to leave Melbourne and go to the east coast of Australia, where it would be easy to seize her. After having led the expedition near enough to the coast, in the midst of vast forests with no resources, Ayrton obtained a letter, which he was charged to carry to the mate of the ‘Duncan’—a letter which ordered the yacht to repair immediately to the east coast, to Twofold Bay, that is to say a few days’ journey from the place where the expedition had stopped. It was there that Ayrton had agreed to meet his accomplices, and two days after gaining possession of the letter, he arrived at Melbourne.

“So far the villain had succeeded in his wicked design. He would be able to take the ‘Duncan’ into Twofold Bay, where it would be easy for the convicts to seize her, and her crew massacred, Ben Joyce would become master of the seas. But it pleased God to prevent the accomplishment of these terrible projects.

“Ayrton, arrived at Melbourne, delivered the letter to the mate, Tom Austin, who read it and immediately set sail, but judge of Ayrton’s rage and disappointment, when the next day he found that the mate was taking the vessel, not to the east coast of Australia, to Twofold Bay, but to the east coast of New Zealand. He wished to stop him, but Austin showed him the letter!... And indeed, by a providential error of the French geographer, who had written the letter, the east coast of New Zealand was mentioned as the place of destination.

“All Ayrton’s plans were frustrated! He became outrageous. They put him in irons. He was then taken to the coast of New Zealand, not knowing what would become of his accomplices, or what would become of Lord Glenarvan.

“The ‘Duncan’ cruised about on this coast until the 3rd of March. On that day Ayrton heard the report of guns. The guns on the ‘Duncan’ were being fired, and soon Lord Glenarvan and his companions came on board.

“This is what had happened.

“After a thousand hardships, a thousand dangers, Lord Glenarvan had accomplished his journey, and arrived on the east coast of Australia, at Twofold Bay. ‘No “Duncan!” He telegraphed to Melbourne. They answered, “Duncan” sailed on the 18th instant. Destination unknown.’

“Lord Glenarvan could only arrive at one conclusion; that his honest yacht had fallen into the hands of Ben Joyce, and had become a pirate vessel!

“However, Lord Glenarvan would not give up. He was a bold and generous man. He embarked in a merchant vessel, sailed to the west coast of New Zealand, traversed it along the thirty-seventh parallel, without finding any trace of Captain Grant; but on the other side, to his great surprise, and by the will of Heaven, he found the ‘Duncan,’ under command of the mate, who had been waiting for him for five weeks!

“This was on the 3rd of March, 1855. Lord Glenarvan was now on board the ‘Duncan,’ but Ayrton was there also. He appeared before the nobleman, who wished to extract from him all that the villain knew about Captain Grant. Ayrton refused to speak. Lord Glenarvan then told him, that at the first port they put into, he would be delivered up to the English authorities. Ayrton remained mute.

“The ‘Duncan’ continued her voyage along the thirty-seventh parallel. In the meanwhile, Lady Glenarvan undertook to vanquish the resistance of the ruffian.

“At last, her influence prevailed, and Ayrton, in exchange for what he could tell, proposed that Lord Glenarvan should leave him on some island in the Pacific, instead of giving him up to the English authorities. Lord Glenarvan, resolving to do anything to obtain information about Captain Grant, consented.

“Ayrton then related all his life, and it was certain that he knew nothing from the day on which Captain Grant had landed him on the Australian coast.

“Nevertheless, Lord Glenarvan kept the promise which he had given. The ‘Duncan’ continued her voyage and arrived at Tabor Island. It was there that Ayrton was to be landed, and it was there also that, by a veritable miracle, they found Captain Grant and two men, exactly on the thirty-seventh parallel.

“The convict, then, went to take their place on this desert islet, and at the moment he left the yacht these words were pronounced by Lord Glenarvan:—

““Here, Ayrton, you will be far from any land, and without any possible communication with your fellow-creatures. You cannot escape from this islet on which the ‘Duncan’ leaves you. You will be alone, under the eye of a God who reads the depths of the heart, but you will be neither lost nor forgotten, as was Captain Grant. Unworthy as you are to be remembered by

men, men will remember you. I know where you are Ayrton, and I know where to find you. I will never forget it!

“And the ‘Duncan,’ making sail, soon disappeared. This was 18th of March, 1855.¹

“Ayrton was alone, but he had no want of either ammunition, weapons, tools, or seeds.

“At his, the convict’s disposal, was the house built by honest Captain Grant. He had only to live and expiate in solitude the crimes which he had committed.

“Gentlemen, he repented, he was ashamed of his crimes and was very miserable! He said to himself, that if men came some day to take him from that islet, he must be worthy to return among them! How he suffered, that wretched man! How he labored to recover himself by work! How he prayed to be reformed by prayer! For two years, three years, this went on, but Ayrton, humbled by solitude, always looking for some ship to appear on the horizon, asking himself if the time of expiation would soon be complete, suffered as none other suffered! Oh! how dreadful was this solitude, to a heart tormented by remorse!

“But doubtless Heaven had not sufficiently punished this unhappy man, for he felt that he was gradually becoming a savage! He felt that brutishness was gradually gaining on him!

“He could not say if it was after two or three years of solitude, but at last he became the miserable creature you found!

“I have no need to tell you, gentlemen, that Ayrton, Ben Joyce, and I, are the same.”

Cyrus Harding and his companions rose at the end of this account. It is impossible to say how much they were moved! What misery, grief, and despair lay revealed before them!

“Ayrton,” said Harding, rising, “you have been a great criminal, but Heaven must certainly think that you have expiated your crimes! That has been proved by your having been brought again among your fellow-creatures. Ayrton, you are forgiven! And now you will be our companion?”

Ayrton drew back.

“Here is my hand!” said the engineer.

Ayrton grasped the hand which Harding extended to him, and great tears fell from his eyes.

“Will you live with us?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“Captain Harding, leave me some time longer,” replied Ayrton, “leave me alone in the hut in the corral!”

¹ (The events which have just been briefly related are taken from a work which some of our readers have no doubt read, and which is entitled, “Captain Grant’s children.” They will remark on this occasion, as well as later, some discrepancy in the dates; but later again, they will understand why the real dates were not at first given.)

“As you like, Ayrton,” answered Cyrus Harding. Ayrton was going to withdraw, when the engineer addressed one more question to him:—

“One word more, my friend. Since it was your intention to live alone, why did you throw into the sea the document which put us on your track?”

“A document?” repeated Ayrton, who did not appear to know what he meant.

“Yes, the document which we found enclosed in a bottle, giving us the exact position of Tabor Island!”

Ayrton passed his hand over his brow, then after having thought, “I never threw any document into the sea!” he answered.

“Never?” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Never!”

And Ayrton, bowing, reached the door and departed.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter I: Irene, Empress of The Earth

A gulf of blackness and the curtain lifts again upon a very different Olaf from the young northern lord who parted from Iduna at the place of sacrifice at Aar.

I see myself standing upon a terrace that overlooks a stretch of quiet water, which I now know was the Bosphorus. Behind me are a great palace and the lights of a vast city; in front, upon the sea and upon the farther shore, are other lights. The moon shines bright above me, and, having naught else to do, I study my reflection in my own burnished shield. It shows a man of early middle life; he may be thirty or five-and-thirty years of age; the same Olaf, yet much changed. For now my frame is tall and well-knit, though still somewhat slender; my face is bronzed by southern suns; I wear a short beard; there is a scar across my cheek, got in some battle; my eyes are quiet, and have lost the first liveliness of youth. I know that I am the captain of the Northern Guard of the Empress Irene, widow of the dead emperor, Leo the Fourth, and joint ruler of the Eastern Empire with her young son, Constantine, the sixth of that name.

How I came to fill this place, however, I do not know. The story of my journey from Jutland to Byzantium is lost to me. Doubtless it must have taken years, and after these more years of humble service, before I rose to be the captain of Irene's Northern Guard that she kept ever about her person, because she would not trust her Grecian soldiers.

My armour was very rich, yet I noted about myself two things that were with me in my youth. One was the necklace of golden shells, divided from each other by beetles of emeralds, that I had taken from the Wanderer's grave at Aar, and the other the cross-hilted bronze sword with which this same Wanderer had been girded in his grave. I know now that because of this weapon, which was of a metal and shape strange to that land, I had the byname of Olaf Red-Sword, and I know also that none wished to feel the weight of this same ancient blade.

When I had finished looking at myself in the shield, I leaned upon the parapet staring at the sea and wondering how the plains of Aar looked that night beneath this selfsame moon, and whether Freydisa were dead by now, and whom Iduna had married, and if she ever thought of me, or if Steinar came to haunt her sleep.

So I mused, till presently I felt a light touch upon my shoulder, and swung round to find myself face to face with the Empress Irene herself.

"Augusta!" I said, saluting, for, as Empress, that was her Roman title, even though she was a Greek.

"You guard me well, friend Olaf," she said, with a little laugh. "Why, any enemy, and Christ knows I have plenty, could have cut you down before ever you knew that he was there."

"Not so, Augusta," I answered, for I could speak their Greek tongue well; "since at the end of the terrace the guards stand night and day, men of my own blood who can be trusted. Nothing which does not fly could gain this place save through your own chambers, that are also

guarded. It is not usual for any watch to be set here, still I came myself in case the Empress might need me.”

“That is kind of you, my Captain Olaf, and I think I do need you. At least, I cannot sleep in this heat, and I am weary of the thoughts of State, for many matters trouble me just now. Come, change my mind, if you can, for if so I’ll thank you. Tell me of yourself when you were young. Why did you leave your northern home, where I’ve heard you were a barbarian chief, and wander hither to Byzantium?”

“Because of a woman,” I answered.

“Ah!” she said, clapping her hands; “I knew it. Tell me of this woman whom you love.”

“The story is short, Augusta. She bewitched my foster-brother, and caused him to be sacrificed to the northern gods as a troth-breaker, and I do not love her.”

“You’d not admit it if you did, Olaf. Was she beautiful, well, say as I am?”

I turned and looked at the Empress, studying her from head to foot. She was shorter than Iduna by some inches, also older, and therefore of a thicker build; but, being a fair Greek, her colour was much the same, save that the eyes were darker. The mouth, too, was more hard. For the rest, she was a royal-looking and lovely woman in the flower of her age, and splendidly attired in robes brodered with gold, over which she wore long strings of rounded pearls. Her rippling golden hair was dressed in the old Greek fashion, tied in a simple knot behind her head, and over it was thrown a light veil worked with golden stars.

“Well, Captain Olaf,” she said, “have you finished weighing my poor looks against those of this northern girl in the scales of your judgment? If so, which of us tips the beam?”

“Iduna was more beautiful than ever you can have been, Augusta,” I replied quietly.

She stared at me till her eyes grew quite round, then puckered up her mouth as though to say something furious, and finally burst out laughing.

“By every saint in Byzantium,” she said, “or, rather, by their relics, for of live ones there are none, you are the strangest man whom I have known. Are you weary of life that you dare to say such a thing to me, the Empress Irene?”

“Am I weary of life? Well, Augusta, on the whole I think I am. It seems to me that death and after it may interest us more. For the rest, you asked me a question, and, after the fashion of my people, I answered it as truthfully as I could.”

“By my head, you have said it again,” she exclaimed. “Have you not heard, most innocent Northman, that there are truths which should not be mentioned and much less repeated?”

“I have heard many things in Byzantium, Augusta, but I pay no attention to any of them—or, indeed, to little except my duty.”

“Now that this, this—what’s the girl’s name?”

“Iduna the Fair,” I said.

“——this Iduna has thrown you over, at which I am sure I do not wonder, what mistresses have you in Byzantium, Olaf the Dane?”

“None at all,” I answered. “Women are pleasant, but one may buy sweets too dear, and all that ever I saw put together were not worth my brother Steinar, who lost his life through one of them.”

“Tell me, Captain Olaf, are you a secret member of this new society of hermits of which they talk so much, who, if they see a woman, must hold their faces in the sand for five minutes afterwards?”

“I never heard of them, Augusta.”

“Are you a Christian?”

“No; I am considering that religion—or rather its followers.”

“Are you a pagan, then?”

“No. I fought a duel with the god Odin, and cut his head off with this sword, and that is why I left the North, where they worship Odin.”

“Then what are you?” she said, stamping her foot in exasperation.

“I am the captain of your Imperial Majesty’s private guard, a little of a philosopher, and a fair poet in my own language, not in Greek. Also, I can play the harp.”

“You say ‘not in Greek,’ for fear lest I should ask you to write verses to me, which, indeed, I shall never do, Olaf. A soldier, a poet, a philosopher, a harpist, one who has renounced women! Now, why have you renounced women, which is unnatural in a man who is not a monk? It must be because you still love this Iduna, and hope to get her some day.”

I shook my head and answered,

“I might have done that long ago, Augusta.”

“Then it must be because there is some other woman whom you wish to gain. Why do you always wear that strange necklace?” she added sharply. “Did it belong to this savage girl Iduna, as, from the look of it, it might well have done?”

“Not so, Augusta. She took it for a while, and it brought sorrow on her, as it will do on all women save one who may or may not live to-day.”

“Give it me. I have taken a fancy to it; it is unusual. Oh! fear not, you shall receive its value.”

“If you wish the necklace, Augusta, you must take the head as well; and my counsel to you is that you do neither, since they will bring you no good luck.”

“In truth, Captain Olaf, you anger me with your riddles. What do you mean about this necklace?”

“I mean, Augusta, that I took it from a very ancient grave——”

“That I can believe, for the jeweller who made it worked in old Egypt,” she interrupted.

“——and thereafter I dreamed a dream,” I went on, “of the woman who wears the other half of it. I have not seen her yet, but when I do I shall know her at once.”

“So!” she exclaimed, “did I not tell you that, east or west or north or south, there is some other woman?”

“There was once, Augusta, quite a thousand years ago or more, and there may be again now, or a thousand years hence. That is what I am trying to find out. You say the work is Egyptian. Augusta, at your convenience, will you be pleased to make another captain in my place? I would visit Egypt.”

“If you leave Byzantium without express permission under my own hand—not the Emperor’s or anybody else’s hand; mine, I say—and are caught, your eyes shall be put out as a deserter!” she said savagely.

“As the Augusta pleases,” I answered, saluting.

“Olaf,” she went on in a more gentle voice, “you are clearly mad; but, to tell truth, you are also a madman who pleases me, since I weary of the rogues and lick-spittles who call themselves sane in Byzantium. Why, there’s not a man in all the city who would dare to speak to me as you have spoken to-night, and like that breeze from the sea, it is refreshing. Lend me that necklace, Olaf, till to-morrow morning. I want to examine it in the lamplight, and I swear to you that I will not take it from you or play you any tricks about it.”

“Will you promise not to wear it, Augusta?”

“Of course. Is it likely that I should wish to wear it on my bare breast after it has been rubbing against your soiled armour?”

Without another word I unhooked the necklace and handed it to her. She ran to a little distance, and, with one of those swift movements that were common to her, fastened it about her own neck. Then she returned, and threw the great strings of pearls, which she had removed to make place for it, over my head.

“Now have you found the woman of that dream, Olaf?” she asked, turning herself about in the moonlight.

I shook my head and answered:

“Nay, Augusta; but I fear that you have found misfortune. When it comes, I pray you to remember that you promised not to wear the necklace. Also that your soldier, Olaf, Thorvald’s son, would have given his life rather than that you should have done so, not for the sake of any dream, but for your sake, Augusta, whom it is his business to protect.”

“Would, then, it were your business either to protect me a little more, or a little less!” she exclaimed bitterly.

Having uttered this dark saying, she vanished from the terrace still wearing the string of golden shells.

On the following morning the necklace was returned to me by Irene’s favourite lady, who smiled as she gave it to me. She was a dark-eyed, witty, and able girl named Martina, who had been my friend for a long while.

“The Augusta said that you were to examine this jewel to see that it has not been changed.”

“I never suggested that the Augusta was a thief,” I replied, “therefore it is unnecessary.”

“She said also that I was to tell you, in case you should think that it has been befouled by her wearing of it, that she has had it carefully cleaned.”

“That is thoughtful of her, Martina, for it needed washing. Now, will you take the Augusta’s pearls, which she left with me in error?”

“I have no orders to take any pearls, Captain Olaf, although I did notice that two of the finest strings in the Empire are missing. Oh! you great northern child,” she added in a whisper, “keep the pearls, they are a gift, and worth a prince’s ransom; and take whatever else you can get, and keep that too.”²

Then, before I could answer her, she was gone.

For some weeks after this I saw no more of the Augusta, who appeared to avoid me. One day, however, I was summoned to her presence in her private apartments by the waiting-lady Martina, and went, to find her alone, save for Martina. The first thing that I noticed was that she wore about her neck an exact copy of the necklace of golden shells and emerald beetles; further, that about her waist was a girdle and on her wrist a bracelet of similar design. Pretending to see nothing, I saluted and stood to attention.

“Captain,” she began, “yonder”—and she waved her hand towards the city, so that I could not fail to see the shell bracelet—“the uncles of my son, the Emperor, lie in prison. Have you heard of the matter, and, if so, what have you heard?”

“I have heard, Augusta, that the Emperor having been defeated by the Bulgarians, some of the legions proposed to set his uncle, Nicephorus—he who has been made a priest—upon the throne. I have heard further that thereon the Emperor caused the Cæsar Nicephorus to be blinded, and the tongues of the two other Cæsars and of their two brothers, the Nobilissimi, to be slit.”

“Do you think well of such a deed, Olaf?”

² I have no further vision concerning these priceless pearls and do not know what became of them. Perhaps I was robbed of them during my imprisonment, or perhaps I gave them to Heliodore or to Martina. Where are they now, I wonder?—Editor.

“Augusta,” I answered, “in this city I make it my business not to think, for if I did I should certainly go mad.”

“Still, on this matter I command you to think, and to speak the truth of your thoughts. No harm shall come to you, whatever they may be.”

“Augusta, I obey you. I think that whoever did this wicked thing must be a devil, either returned from that hell of which everyone is so fond of talking here, or on the road thither.”

“Oh! you think that, do you? So I was right when I told Martina that there was only one honest opinion to be had in Constantinople and I knew where to get it. Well, most severe and indignant judge, suppose I tell you it was I who commanded that this deed should be done. Then would you change your judgment?”

“Not so, Augusta. I should only think much worse of you than ever I did before. If these great persons were traitors to the State, they should have been executed. But to torment them, to take away the sight of heaven and to bring them to the level of dumb beasts, all that their actual blood may not be on the tormentors’ hand—why, the act is vile. So, at least, it would be held in those northern lands which you are pleased to call barbarian.”

Now Irene sprang from her seat and clapped her hands for joy.

“You hear what he says, Martina, and the Emperor shall hear it too; aye, and so shall my ministers, Stauracius and Aetius, who supported him in this matter. I alone withstood him; I prayed him for his soul’s sake to be merciful. He answered that he would no longer be governed by a woman; that he knew how to safeguard his empire, and what conscience should allow and what refuse. So, in spite of all my tears and prayers, the vile deed was done, as I think for no good cause. Well, it cannot be undone. Yet, Olaf, I fear that it may be added to, and that these royal-born men may be foully murdered. Therefore, I put you in charge of the prison where they lie. Here is the signed order. Take with you what men you may think needful, and hold that place, even should the Emperor himself command you to open. See also that the prisoners within are cared for and have all they need, but do not suffer them to escape.”

I saluted and turned to go, when Irene called me back.

At that moment, too, in obedience to some sign which she made, Martina left the chamber, looking at me oddly as she did so. I came and stood before the Empress, who, I noted, seemed somewhat troubled, for her breast heaved and her gaze was fixed upon the floor now. It was of mosaic, and represented a heathen goddess talking to a young man, who stood before her with his arms folded. The goddess was angry with the man, and held in her left hand a dagger as though she would stab him, although her right arm was stretched out to embrace him and her attitude was one of pleading.

Irene lifted her head, and I saw that her fine eyes were filled with tears.

“Olaf,” she said, “I am in much trouble, and I know not where to find a friend.”

I smiled and answered:

“Need an Empress seek far for friends?”

“Aye, Olaf; farther than anyone who breathes. An Empress can find flatterers and partisans, but not a single friend. Such love her only for what she can give them. But, if fortune went against her, I say that they would fall away like leaves from a tree in a winter frost, so that she stood naked to every bitter blast of heaven. Yes, and then would come the foe and root up that tree and burn it to give them warmth and to celebrate their triumph. So I think, Olaf, it will be with me before all is done. Even my son hates me, Olaf, my only child for whose true welfare I strive night and day.”

“I have heard as much, Augusta,” I said.

“You have heard, like all the world. But what else of ill have you heard of me, Olaf? Speak out, man; I’m here to learn the truth.”

“I have heard that you are very ambitious, Augusta, and that you hate your son as much as he hates you, because he is a rival to your power. It is rumoured that you would be glad if he were dead and you left to reign alone.”

“Then a lie is rumoured, Olaf. Yet it is true that I am ambitious, who see far and would build this tottering empire up afresh. Olaf, it is a bitter thing to have begotten a fool.”

“Then why do you not marry again and beget others, who might be no fools, Augusta?” I asked bluntly.

“Ah! why?” she answered, flashing a curious glance upon me. “In truth, I do not quite know why; but from no lack of suitors, since, were she but a hideous hag, an empress would find these. Olaf, you may have learned that I was not born in the purple. I was but a Greek girl of good race, not even noble, to whom God gave a gift of beauty; and when I was young I saw a man who took my fancy, also of old race, yet but a merchant of fruits which they grow in Greece and sell here and at Rome. I wished to marry him, but my mother, a far-seeing woman, said that such beauty as mine—though less than that of your Iduna the Fair, Olaf—was worth money or rank. So they sent away my merchant of fruits, who married the daughter of another merchant of fruits and thrived very well in business. He came to see me some years ago, fat as a tub, his face scored all over with the marks of the spotted sickness, and we talked about old times. I gave him a concession to import dried fruits into Byzantium—that is what he came to see me for—and now he’s dead. Well, my mother was right, for afterwards this poor beauty of mine took the fancy of the late Emperor, and, being very pious, he married me. So the Greek girl, by the will of God, became Augusta and the first woman in the world.”

“By the will of God?” I repeated.

“Aye, I suppose so, or else all is raw chance. At least, I, who to-day might have been bargaining over dried fruits, as I should have done had I won my will, am—what you know. Look at this robe,” and she spread her glittering dress before me. “Hark to the tramp of those guards before my door. Why, you are their captain. Go into the antechambers, and see the ambassadors waiting there in the hope of a word with the Ruler of the Earth! Look at my

legions mustered on the drilling-grounds, and understand how great the Grecian girl has grown by virtue of the face which is less beautiful than that of—Iduna the Fair!”

“I understand all this, Augusta,” I answered. “Yet it would seem that you are not happy. Did you not tell me just now that you could not find a friend and that you had begotten a fool?”

“Happy, Olaf? Why, I am wretched, so wretched that often I think the hell of which the priests preach is here on earth, and that I dwell in its hottest fires. Unless love hides it, what happiness is there in this life of ours, which must end in blackest death?”

“Love has its miseries also, Augusta. That I know, for once I loved.”

“Aye, but then the love was not true, for this is the greatest curse of all—to love and not to be beloved. For the sake of a perfect love, if it could be won—why, I’d sacrifice even my ambition.”

“Then you must keep your ambition, Augusta, since in this world you’ll find nothing perfect.”

“Olaf, I’m not so sure. Thoughts have come to me. Olaf, I told you that I have no friend in all this glittering Court. Will you be my friend?”

“I am your honest servant, Augusta, and I think that such a one is the best of friends.”

“That’s so; and yet no man can be true friend to a woman unless he is—more than friend. Nature has writ it so.”

“I do not understand,” I answered.

“You mean that you will not understand, and perhaps you are wise. Why do you stare at that pavement? There’s a story written on it. The old goddess of my people, Aphrodite, loved a certain Adonis—so runs the fable—but he loved not her, and thought only of his sports. Look, she woos him there, and he rejects her, and in her rage she stabs him.”

“Not so,” I answered. “Of the end of the story I know nothing, but, if she had meant to kill him, the dagger would be in her right hand, not in her left.”

“That’s true, Olaf; and in the end it was Fate which killed him, not the goddess whom he had scorned. And yet, Olaf, it is not wise to scorn goddesses. Oh! of what do I talk? You’ll befriend me, will you not?”

“Aye, Augusta, to the last drop of my blood, as is my duty. Do I not take your pay?”

“Then thus I seal our friendship and here’s an earnest of the pay,” Irene said slowly, and, bending forward, she kissed me on the lips.

At this moment the doors of the chamber were thrown open. Through them, preceded by heralds, that at once drew back again, entered the great minister Stauracius, a fat, oily-faced man with a cunning eye, who announced in a high, thin voice,

“The ambassadors of the Persians wait upon you, Augusta, as you appointed at this hour.”

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