

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 12, ISSUE 12  
3RD DECEMBER 2017

## **LAST CHANCES**

BY PAUL  
LUBACZEWSKI—  
*ENCROACHING  
DUSK...*

## **ANNALS OF THE SOUTH PART FOUR**

BY JOHN C ADAMS—  
*SO IT IS WRITTEN...*

**THE WRITER  
BY STEVEN  
HAVELOCK**

**A GIRL, SHELDON  
COOPER, AND  
PETER COOK  
BY STEVE LAKER**

[WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK](http://WWW.SCHLOCK.CO.UK)

# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:  
Schlock! Publications  
([www.schlock.co.uk](http://www.schlock.co.uk))

Schlock! Webzine  
*Copyright © 2017 by Gavin Chappell, C Priest Brumley, Gavin Chappell, John C Adams,  
Gregory KH Bryant, HP Lovecraft, HG Wells, Steve Laker*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 12, Issue 12  
3<sup>rd</sup> December 2017

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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

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

Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk) The stories, articles and illustrations contained in this webzine are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.

Schlock! Webzine and its editor accept no liability for views expressed or statements made by contributors to the magazine.

*This Edition*

*This week's cover illustration is Illustration by Alvim Corr ea, from the 1906 French edition of H.G. Wells' "War of the Worlds".by Henrique Alvim Correa. All images within licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons, unless otherwise indicated. Graphic design   by Gavin Chappell, logo design   by C Priest Brumley.*

EDITORIAL

LAST CHANCES by Paul Lubaczewski—*Encroaching dusk...* HORROR

ANNALS OF THE SOUTH PART FOUR by John C Adams—*So it is written...* FANTASY

THE WRITER by Steven Havelock—*I've come to collect...* HORROR

A GIRL, SHELDON COOPER, AND PETER COOK by Steve Laker—*The paradoxical dog...* SCIENCE FICTION

SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE Part 8 by HP Lovecraft— *The Weird Tradition in America...* ARTICLE

VAMPIRE STATE by Gavin Chappell—*It's a plague...* FANTASY

THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO Episode Thirty-Five by Gregory KH Bryant—*Send in the nanobots...* SCIENCE FICTION

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS Book One: Chapter One by HG Wells—*The Eve of the War...* SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

ROGUE PLANET PRESS SUBMISSIONS CALL

## EDITORIAL

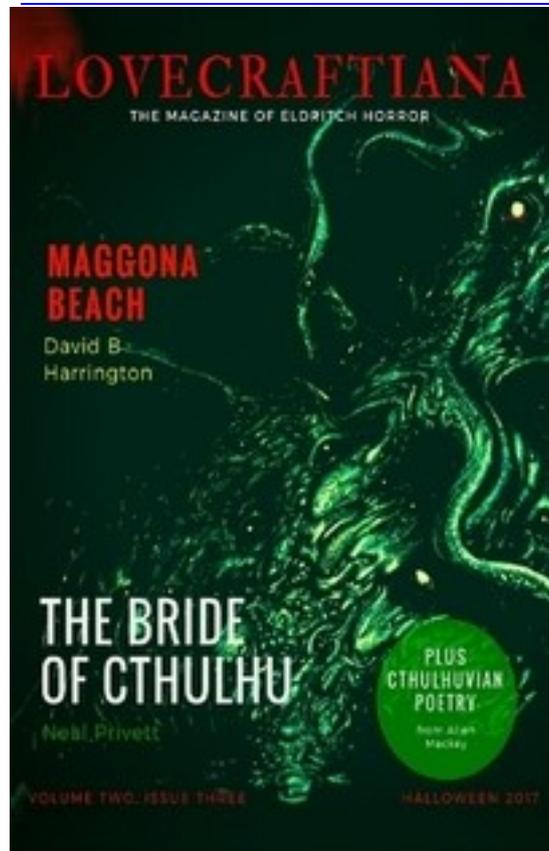
This week, a young hitchhiker learns to distrust the kindness of strangers. Prince Ali of Scimita seeks a bride. An aspiring writer seeks success at all cost. And in the not too distant future, the magic of technology helps cats, dogs and humans to bicker as never before.

Lovecraft tells us about America's weird tradition. The adventurers reach a mountain duchy ruled by the undead. The defenders of Callisto struggle to cope with the collapse of Pod 3. And finally, we begin a new classic tale, HG Wells' seminal alien invasion story, *The War of the Worlds*.

—Gavin Chappell

*Now Available from Rogue Planet Press:*

### [Lovecraftiana Halloween 2017](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

LAST CHANCES by Paul Lubaczewski

*Author's Note: To those lovely people in the 1980's whose response to a boy who with blond hair, who was way too young to be hitchhiking was to not call the cops, but give him a ride, and sometimes a meal. Thank you.*

God, he needed god right now. John claimed he didn't believe in God, but Catholicism digs deep and now would be a great time for God to put in an appearance. The wind and cold buffeted his rail thin body, knocking him sideways. Sometimes the pain would get so great he would moan slightly. It couldn't be melodramatics since there was no audience, but it felt better to do it. If nothing else it filled the moments, walking alone on a country road gave him plenty of moments that needed filling. The earlier rains had soaked John to the bone, and now the fall cold had come right behind it with wind and teeth.

At times the wind knocked him into the road, only to let him stumble back to the gravel shoulder. Not that it mattered if he was in the road John hadn't seen a car in ages, he could walk right down the middle if he really wanted to. No-one to care about him in this encroaching dusk on this lonely country road. John made all kinds of accusations of heartlessness to each car that had passed, ignoring his outstretched thumb. As if they could know John's pain and were just choosing to abandon him out here out of spite. He was just a shape looming up in the dusk to their eyes, not a freezing kid aching with increasing desperation. Night was coming on and fast, he'd have to find somewhere to sleep. He had no idea where he was really, John just knew what it looked like on a map, and where it would take him sooner or later. As long as he didn't fall over before he got there.

Eventually, he reached a crossroads. One way continued down in to the woods, the other went towards rolling hills and fields as far as he could see. He needed to turn here. John had only been going east to get to where he could go north, the fields went in the right direction, to the highway north of here. From there he should be able to hitchhike pretty easily.

Food would be great he thought as he began the Northward portion of his hike. John had a little, but God help him his fingers were numb as was, pulling them out of his pockets to dig through his makeshift pack would only make it worse. At this point John didn't feel like he dared stop anyway, keep moving forward, that was the only way. If he stopped now, he might not be able to will his body further, as far as he could tell, it was only willpower that was moving him.

The clouds from the earlier rains had cleared away a while ago. On the plus side, it meant John could see where he was going by the full moon if he didn't find shelter sooner. But the price to pay for that night vision was the heat trapping humidity had gone with those clouds, leaving only this biting cold, that sapped at his strength if not his will to continue. Even John's will and desire had become a mindless thing. He walked because he had to keep walking, it had become a base state now, no sense to it anymore.

In the distance, John saw lights. The slight roll of the corn fields silhouetted the farm against the night with the moon coming up behind it. A farmstead. He looked at it dumbly for a minute. A house, many of the house lights already out, early though it was. A large barn sat near it, probably the cow barn. But a small distance away from that, an older ramshackle looking barn, that probably dated back well over a hundred years. The thought clawed its way

through the sludge that had become John's thoughts, a barn, that most likely nobody used anymore. A place, to sleep safely. God was running late, but he'd gotten here eventually.

John turned his leaden feet from the road and started to plod across the cornfields, now crusted over with a light covering of ice, and cleared of its stalks. The clear sky and full moon worked to his favor in avoiding tripping over the protruding stumps. His heavy tired feet though worked against him instead, John still tripped and stumbled as if drunk as he forced himself across the frozen field.

Wide though the field was, it did not last forever, and John reached the rough unpainted wood barn. It was enormous and dusty, cobwebs hung from the rafters. The tractors in here looked to be older models, not recently used and coated with greasy dust and grime. Bales of hay were stacked heavily on one side, probably good clover hay, but on the other side, it looked to be mainly straw bales. No-one would need that until later in the day tomorrow if at all. This barn was far enough from the main barn that it was entirely possible no-one would even come in here at all tomorrow, they most likely had a supply in the main barn stacked in case of snow. Getting back to the road tomorrow would be tricky, but he could run for it, or just say he was cutting across country, farmers rarely complained about that.

Exhaustion began to rear its ugly somnambulant head now. John realized he'd never make it back to the road now, even if he wanted to. If he did, it wasn't like he had seen any better options out there. This was going to have to do. John stumbled around the darkened barn for a while trying to find a spot completely out of sight of the door on the straw side. Finding the best spot he could, he rooted his sodden blanket out of his bag. It wasn't completely dry, but it was dry enough. With the blanket and the loose straw he pulled over himself John didn't get warm per se, but at least the cold had ceased to hurt and bite so much. Finally, after his hands and feet warmed from completely numb to aching painfully, they almost began to feel comfortable if not a bit puffy and sore. His hands free, John dug a candy bar out of his belongings which he devoured ravenously.

It wasn't long after that, in his damp cocoon of straw and blanket, sleep finally claimed him as its own.

John hadn't had a choice really. The school would have killed him if he had stayed much longer. It was less a school than a whole community, and the community was its own community. They weren't forbidden to have contact with the local town, but that was almost impossible. They were only allowed off campus together, and only for a very limited amount of time. John had nowhere to turn for help there.

Self-sustaining, self-enclosed, ripe for abuse.

John's house parent had attacked him, thrown him around, broken some of his few possessions. Somehow that didn't hurt that much. If John's life before the school had been normal, he never would have been there in the first place. He'd been hit before. But the names with the abuse... Here was this man who didn't know him. Had no idea what went on inside of John, shouting vile things like he had a god given right to do it. Like John was nothing but garbage who somehow owed this raving maniac for his time. That John was nothing, and would never be anything, and should be thankful to have someone around to beat the shit out of him. He had never fit in there before this, and in its own way, that was

expected, you move enough you never do fit in. Now John didn't want to fit in. One of his only possessions left in this world was his sense of dignity, often assaulted, tattered and battered, but still his own, and John would be damned to hell if he'd let this prick take that.

He didn't cry. He didn't curse. John sat staring at his desk as the lunatic's curses trailed away down the large dorm hall. He waited. Until he heard the door slam to Gary's private living quarters. Then he grabbed a blanket, and the few possessions that weren't broken, and might be of use. This had been the final straw.

John sat with only a lamp on until midnight. Then, he ran for it.

Tap, tap, tap... "Hello?" ...tap, tap, tap... "Boy? Hello?"

Suddenly John was wide awake and terrified, he scrambled back away from the contact with his foot until his back hit a beam. The man who had been tapping his foot looked almost as scared as he did for a second, and then his face creased into a look of concern.

"What chu' doin' here son?" he asked.

"Sle...sleeping," he mumbled as the sudden rush of adrenaline warred with his lingering exhaustion.

"Naw, son," the man said smiling kindly, "I mean why on earth are you sleeping in my barn?"

"Tryin' ta hitchhike home...it got so cold last night," he shivered, "nobody was on the road...I just ran out of gas. I'm so sorry! It was the only place I could find!"

"Where are you headed then?" the man asked standing back upright from leaning over him.

"Philly...I'm from Philly," he said, propping himself up.

"Well, I don't think I can get you that far, but I can probably spare some time and get you as far as the highway," he said smiling again. "Get your stuff and come on in and have some breakfast. I can't rightly leave you out here half frozen and hungry to boot."

The man, his name turned out to be Jimmy, was polite and nice, and thankfully didn't pry too hard, keeping the lies John had to tell to a minimum. But the oatmeal and coffee still felt warm inside him, which put him miles of road, and miles of circumstance ahead of where he had been when he fell asleep last night.

Jimmy had the decency to look worried about letting him out near the highway. "You sure you're going to be all right?"

"Sure," John lied, "I can call to have my Mom pick me up from here, she'd have never found her way on the back roads."

"Well, if you're sure you're okay, well, be seeing you," and then, Jimmy drove away.

He was able to hitch one more ride soon after that. A family on vacation. John was as polite as possible and kept his hands to himself. They most likely picked him up at all to keep their kids occupied for at least a few miles. They seemed nice enough, but then again, everybody seemed nice enough around strangers. That's where everyone keeps their happy special face, where everybody who they think is judging them can see it.

It was just outside of the state's ugly capital city, that the rains began again. They weren't pouring rains or a light drizzle. This was the type of rain that moved in and stayed. Farmers like to call it a "good soaking rain" and it was doing the job it was named for. Within a half, an hour of walking in John was drenched. Soaked all the way through he began to shiver again.

The outwardly directed self-pity set in. He cursed the people in their nice and dry cars as they whipped by him again. It probably all works out, the kind of person that can fly by a soaking wet kid as he shivers by the side of the road, probably had a few curses coming to them anyway. Standing by the highway during a cold soaking winter rain was like being hit by everywhere. You can't pull your collar up anymore, the water just drips in any way, your pants are welded to your skin, nothing but wet, nowhere but cold.

The thought of turning back, of going back, never once crossed his mind, no matter the pain. Better to suffer for a while now, then to spend the rest of his life from now until graduation suffering there. If he even made it to graduation, a kid or two every year checked out of school and everywhere else as well, he was determined more than ever to survive this all.

In the westbound lane, he spotted a beautiful old classic car driving the other way. Must be nice. Leather seats, a good heater, taking you to the kind of house cars like that are parked in front of in magazine ads. There was still the business at hand though, walking backward with his thumb out and a pitiful expression on his face. John didn't have to work at that last part anymore, it was coming pretty naturally now.

After a few minutes of miserable backward splashing, in the distance, John could swear coming towards him he could see the car he'd seen disappear going in the other direction. Must have made a wrong turn somewhere was all John could figure. But somewhere in his frozen mind, the thought reared up, maybe he's coming back because he feels bad for me. Children, even teenage boys, even teenage boys with a bruised soul still hold out hope for pity, often it's the only thing they can hope for. The mood broke when an enormous Impala swerved specifically to hit a puddle, spraying him with it. John quickly jerked his head in the direction and let his grief release in a hearty "F-You!"

Common sense told him to not even stick his thumb out as he saw the enormous 40's classic bear down on him. But hope is sometimes more powerful than sense if anything John stuck it out further. But he still didn't turn his head back to see if the car stopped, instead he scanned ahead to see what might be coming next. A squeaking noise finally grabbed his attention, the squeal of brakes. Unbelievably the car had stopped and was sitting in idle by the side of the highway a few hundred feet away. John ran for it as well as he was still able to, trying to have a turn of speed in his numb legs.

John reached out for the door handle gingerly. The well-dressed man in his thirties gestured impatiently for him to get in. His own face was a mask of worry, this was a very expensive car, foreign and classic. The door pulled open completely smoothly, not even a creak to show its age.

“Come in, sit down, sit down,” the man said equally as impatiently as he had gestured, “the seats are well oiled, I don’t think a bit of wet will damage the leather over much.”

John sat down carefully and closed the door. He tried subconsciously to make himself as small as possible to touch as little of the car as possible. “You won’t break it, boy, it’s a very expensive car, I’ll grant you, but for the amount of money it costs, it isn’t fine china either.”

“It’s just, I’ve never been in a car this nice before sir,” John said starting to feel the ache already as the tension of bearing up to the weather let go.

“Well, to be fair, not many people have ever been in a 47 Bentley, so you aren’t alone. Since I can’t just call you ‘boy’ all the time, what’s your name by the way?” the man said in a rapid-fire staccato.

“Uh, John sir,” he said staring straight ahead. You try to make as little eye contact with a ride as possible. If they’re a creep of some kind, they always take that as encouragement. You keep your eyes forward and mind your own business, even in someone else’s car. If you want to get where you’re going with a minimum of fuss, you talk politely when spoken to and keep everything to yourself.

“Well, John, my name is Richard, we’ve made a start at any rate. Now where are you going on this abysmal afternoon?” the man said staring at the road, but smiling slightly.

“Ummm, Philly sir,” John said in a subdued cautious voice.

“Richard, please! Sir is so formal, but yet we make progress. Alright then, what on earth could drag you to the city of brotherly love?” Richard asked, eyes not leaving the road.

“It’s where I’m from,” John said also staring straight ahead.

“So what on earth are you doing all the way out here in the sticks?”

“I was visiting relatives, my Mom couldn’t come to get me,” John lied.

“Oh and why not?” Richard’s eyebrow raised.

“Car broke down, so I offered to hitch,” this was at least partly true, the car was the reason his mother had given every time Jon begged for her to come take him away from the school.

“Mm hmm. Well then, I can offer you a ride, and obviously, I am. But if I’m any judge, you could also desperately use some food and dry clothes so let’s see about that as well. I may be an old cynic but I don’t think I can leave you to freeze or starve to death, or more like, to catch your death of cold,” Richard said, smiling and briefly glancing over.

“You don’t look that old,” replied John in lieu of anything coherent.

“Nice of you to say. To address your other concerns, since you’ve been on the road a few days I assume you have plenty of concerns or you wouldn’t have made it this far, I am neither a pervert who seeks the comfort of little boys nor do I hack them up or in any other way molest them. You look like the thing you need most right now is a friend, and I’m easily bored enough to want the company. Deal?” Richard laughed.

“Can I think about it?” John asked quietly.

“Of course, we have a bit before the exit, I hope you like pot roast, because that is what’s in the crock pot. Maybe today’s good deed gets a few sins off my record,” Richard drawled smiling.

Eventually, they turned off the country road they had been on, on to a wooded driveway. Richard had attempted to get conversation going, but John had been quiet and close to the vest as possible refusing to be drawn out. His eyes worriedly trying to keep track of where they were, listening for any sign that things were going weird. Charity was already a weird thing to him, something to be viewed with deep suspicion. You could PRAY for help all you wanted, but to just accept it when it came, you had to read the fine print. The man, Richard, looked to be in his mid-thirties, but he didn’t have that desperate hunger for confirmation of value and worth that holy rollers seemed to exude. They always looked so in need of a pat on the head and a hearty “Good Boy!”, Richard, if anything, just looked mildly amused by everything.

He was far too wealthy to be a kind “good ol boy” looking to do “the decent thing”, John’s first ride of the day had fit into that category. A boy from Philadelphia with a mentally ill mother, no father to speak of, who got shipped to a place like the school had learned long ago not to trust the “kindness of strangers”. But try as he may he couldn’t find any ulterior motive or even a hint of it. For all his suspicion, it still looked as Richard said, “Doing good for the amusement of it”.

“It opens up in a second, the trees were planted years ago to give the farmstead itself some privacy,” Richard said.

Soon enough he saw what Richard had meant, a brief drive in the woods opened up into rolling farmland, the woods were if anything, extended natural privacy fencing. The barn was mostly the kind you saw attached to the encroaching horse farms of the area. It had originally been a solid honest barn, but now it was too clean, too well maintained. There were probably a couple of riding horses attached, but it was mainly to show that the property WAS a farm then to do the solid farm work it had been built for. You couldn’t put up a pretentious sign declaring the place to be “Rolling Acres Farm” without an actual barn, it looked silly. It was painted a bright white with red trim. The hexes were like none John had ever seen before during his time in this part of the state, black circles with deep red hex signs, the points sharper looking than normal.

The house itself was another matter entirely. It had started as a stately farm house, like many of the manor homes in this part of the country. But then it had been expanded upon

considerably. The original house's shape could still be seen, but only just, built around it in stone was a vast cavernous expansion, not nearly as simple as the original building.

"Well, here we are, my humble abode," Richard said ironically.

When they got inside John was in awe, rather than the plastering that was usual in these old farmsteads, the walls were artfully wood panelled in what seemed a deep luxurious mahogany. The furnishing was tasteful, antiques all. The entire place exuded old wealth and privilege.

"It started as a farm, on the original land grants dating back to colonial times. It has, of course, been improved upon considerably since then," Richard said showing the awed boy inside.

"It's beautiful," John breathed.

"Well I quite like it, so I'm glad you approve," Richard smiled. "But, you won't catch your death of cold on my watch, so to business. You're pack you can leave here, or take with you, however you prefer. Up the stairs, second door along the hallway to your right is a bathroom, please use it for its stated purpose, please. There should be a robe inside, please dump your sodden clothing down the laundry chute so they can be cleaned and dried. I should be able to find you actual clothes to wear while I'm caring for your wet things. They may smell strongly of mothballs I'm afraid, it can't be helped, teenagers in a growth spurt have not seen these walls for years now, but they will at least be clean and dry, so that put's you well ahead already."

"But..."

"Son, you're soaked to the bone, and you've clearly been without a bath for some time. You'll feel better and it will make you better company. I've already decided to help you today, at least we can be orderly about it. While you're bathing, I will see to your clothes, and set out food for you. That will be in the middle room directly ahead. Altruism does not come easy for me, so, please. If it makes you feel better the bathroom has a lock on it, so up you go," Richard said

"Well...okay I guess," said John quietly.

"There we go, go get clean and warm and I'll go take care of seeing you're fed."

John went to the room he'd been told and entered, shutting the door behind him. Turning on the light revealed the bathroom itself. It was decorated in a maroon and black tile pattern. To one side was an ancient claw footed tub with a large brass shower head above it. Looking at himself in the mirror above the pedestal basin, he had to admit, he was plastered with dirt, the rain hadn't cleaned him as much as packed in the dirt to his skin. He was pale and his hair hung lank and stringy both from the rain and the lack of bathing. If Richard was a pervert he would certainly have to have very rarefied tastes. He walked over to the door and locked it anyway, no point in being stupid though. John admitted to himself the very thought of soaking for a while in hot water had an appeal. It had been days of running from nosy police,

cold, wet and pain. A half an hour of letting hot water get the numb out of his limbs might also help restore some of his numbed sanity.

John turned the tap on the tub and let the water run for a while until he saw steam, then swished his hand under the stream to check the heat. As the tub filled there was a knock on the door and Richard called through the door, "I was right, there were some clothes that should fit, just toss your old ones down the chute, they should be clean and dry in no time."

For a second John listened to the retreating footsteps then unlocked the door and looked out. As promised a pair of slacks, a dress shirt roughly about his size, and a pair of socks sat there. He picked them up and re-locked the door. Oh well, if he had to run for it, it would be better dressed than he had been when he got here. John hung his sopping jacket on the door handle and disrobed, dumping the sodden lump down the chute.

Finally, almost joyously John climbed into the slightly too hot tub. Climbing in had to be done by degrees, he was still so cold, and the water so hot it hurt, but it was the type of pain one withstands bit by bit, just for the promise of pure relaxation that it will bring eventually. Finally, gratefully John sunk below the steaming water. Bliss, everything he'd hoped and prayed to have for days, wrapped up in a warm cocoon of water.

When the water finally started to chill down, and he had scrubbed himself thoroughly John was willing to get out of the tub reluctantly. For the last half an hour, there hadn't had any problems, and he was loath to give the feeling up. But he still got out dripping water and dried himself off with the towels on the rack. John padded damply over to the pile of clothing he'd been given and put them on. They were formal and a little tight because of his height, but overall comfortable enough.

John thought briefly of putting on his shoes but vetoed it, for now, they were practically dripping still. He picked them and his other belongings up trying desperately to glad-hand them and keep them away from his now clean, dry and warm self.

John left the bathroom and padded downstairs almost silently on his stocking feet. He looked around the front room where he had first come into the house and re-oriented. Getting his bearings John then went to the double set of doors under the balcony. Through them was a long hallway going off in either direction, but, sure enough, there was another set of doors directly across from the ones he had just opened.

These opened into an enormous dining room. The only real light was from the fireplace that had a decent fire in it, but with signs of only being recently lit. But considering the recent lighting, the flames were still fitful and it left the far end of the dining room itself bathed in shadows. There was a slight sullen glow coming through what appeared to be a dark red stained-glass window, but that shed no real light at all, it only made for a glowing red spot in the gloom.

The door clicked shut behind him and on the table in front of him, was thankfully food. A steaming plate of meat and potatoes and a soda. There was an envelope next to the plate, but at this point John wasn't very interested in reading, realizing how hungry he was. It was just as well it said, "Read After You've Eaten" on it since that's was the plan anyway. The

steaming pot roast tasted like heaven. He barely remembered to wash it down some with the soda that was with it.

When he'd eaten enough to consider opening the envelope itself, he clawed it open clumsily. It read in a neat and tidy cursive hand-

*“Dear John,*

*I write you with the opportunity of a lifetime. I have had this property and this position for many years, trust me on this, I am much older than I appear. A man, to be of any use here has to be OF a time, not just existing in it, and I am afraid, time, has long since passed me by. It has reduced my value here, so I am going to be re-assigned somewhere my experience and knowledge will have more usefulness. It is a lucky man, such as I, who gets to pick, and train his own successor into a position he has loved, but can no longer fulfil. You were not my first choice, to be honest, but, I think you will be a much better one by far. The one who you would replace was corrupted already, he had already stolen with glee for the theft rather than need, and took love which was not offered by force, my side of the equation, to be truly effective, needs some virtue in it. If I were not such a practiced sinner, it would almost make me despair for the youth of the nation. I need someone who as least some virtue, you cannot understand the way of anything if you have never known it. But you appear to be mainly an innocent still, despite what has happened to you in life. I can offer you now, today, things you have only ever dreamed of in life, wealth, position, a future. How much, do you have now? You have prayed for all of this, over and over, prayers can be heard, and answered, here it is. There is a task, you must complete at the far end of this room when you look upon it, it should be readily apparent what you need to do. Do it quickly, and believe me boy, your ship, has come in.*

*-your friend and mentor  
Richard.”*

He re-read the letter twice to make sure he understood the situation. What did he mean by “innocent” anyway? Cynicism wanted to hold his attention, but at his age, you're used to being acted upon by adults. Free will is really something one hasn't fully developed yet. An adult was acting on him, nothing new here, adults acted upon him all the time, they cut his mom's food stamps, they put him in the school in the first place, they locked his mom up sometimes and put him in foster care, they evicted him, telling kids what to do was just something adults did. But this time, unlike the church, unlike the state, this adult seemed to want to actually help him and was asking, not telling. All he had to do was look. He hadn't done anything but accept some charity he could always say no.

As he walked down the length of the table, it seemed that the stained glass started to glow brighter, and not just because he was getting closer. The shadows almost seemed to swirl around it like tendrils, an obvious trick of the light he dismissed. Once John got close, he saw that there was some kind of flat surface of stone directly in front of the stained glass. A shape covered most of it, and a sheet covered that, obscuring what it was.

John reached out with a shaking hand, afraid now that whatever this final task was, he wouldn't be strong enough. He thought of himself as lacking fortitude, it had been him whimpering in the cold last night after all. Richard was right, this was what he prayed for,

some massive hand coming down, and plucking him from his hideous life. He didn't want to lose it now due to frailty. John drew back the sheet itself.

John stared in shock. On the slab, was a boy his own age, nude and hairless. He was breathing, unconscious but still alive, breathing shallowly. The light behind the stained glass seemed very bright now, creating all kinds of shadows that almost seemed to be reaching for him! There were five golden knives next to the boy, and five dots on the boy's body, two in the shoulders two in the hips, and one...John turned away.

John ran back the length of the room in a panic to the door and wrenched on the handle, but it had locked when he had entered the room! John pounded on it for a moment ineffectually and yelled for Richard! Silence was his only answer, broken only by his own ragged breathing

Stillness came over him, and he walked back down the length of the table to where the other boy lay unaware of the presence of his would-be murderer, and stared down at his face. Even in sleep, it seemed to have a cruel cast to it, it seemed to John. Maybe it was the fire, maybe the light of the stained glass but there seemed to be tendrils of shadow flickering completely around the slab now.

What if he didn't do this? He'd seen so much, could he really believe that Richard was just going to let him waltz right on out of here, no foul no harm! Nobody even knew he was here! Who would miss him anyway really?

Who, would miss him anyway...Who would miss him anyway? His crazy mom? The reprobates she brought home and called his Daddy? Well maybe they might miss having a target for their drunken temper tantrums, but they certainly wouldn't miss his conversation.

John reached down and picked up one of the knives, weighing it in his hand as he thought. It almost seemed that the stained glass was blazing now, casting a red glow over the entire scene. Why in the hell shouldn't he? What did he have to look forward to even if he left? A few more years at home, and then tossed on the street to fend for himself? Richard was right, this is what he had prayed for secretly, a chance to be something, to have a chance to make his own way one day and succeed. To not have all the cards against him for once, isn't that fair? What was the point in praying for anything if you had to give it up for moral reasons when someone wanted to give it to you?

It seemed to him, that out of the corner of his eye, the limbs of shadow tried to embrace him now. This kid was a rapist and a thief, all on his own without any prodding, he'd had his chance, and failed. The kid wasn't on this slab right now by sheer accident. He had been judged and failed. But God, to end a life, a human life, any human life...He'd never done anything more than shoplift gum and food when it got desperate before this, maybe get in fights at school. This was murder. This was a human being before him.

God would judge. John had called out to God a lot in his young life, when had God ever come to help him? Richard was willing to save him. But still, could he murder? He sighed as the tendrils stroked at his face and arms now lovingly, could he pay the price for everything he wanted?

The Jaguar purred like a kitten as he pulled it on to the road. God! He was furious, that idiot State Treasurer had actually shot himself! That wasn't the game they were playing here! He was supposed to go to jail in Club Fed, and then come out clean as a whistle saying he found Jesus or some crap. It was supposed to instill the public with sullen distrust in public institutions, not outright horror! People just didn't know how to play the role he wrote for them some days. He wished Richard was around so he could have someone who understood to talk to. Wonder where Richard was these days?

Soon though, the hum of the road eased the tension out of him. The road, it is the one thing that is eternal. From the day back in dusty time when it was a path that said, "This way to water", to the dirt wagon trails, to the country lane, to the superhighway. It is the eternity of man, always going, somewhere. It offers up endless vile entertainments, endless temptations, endless opportunities to do the devil's work, and Johnathan Richardson was a man who knew where all the best exits were if you could pay the fee.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

AUTUMN 2017

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

A Halloween  
Celebration of  
the works of  
EDGAR  
ALLAN  
POE

**ELEVEN CLASSIC  
TALES OF MYSTERY  
AND TERROR**

**ILLUSTRATED**

BY  
GREGORY KH  
BRYANT

Plus Essays  
and Poems from  
Sandro D.  
Fossemò



[Return to Contents](#)

ANNALS OF THE SOUTH PART FOUR by John C Adams

Eighteen-year-old Prince Ali of Scimita stood on the quayside at Bozorganshahr next to his mother. The baking midday heat seared into his smooth, olive-skinned face and he glanced up, smiling, as the warmth suffused his body. Queen Zahra tried to embrace her son and bid him a safe journey but Ali wriggled free. He smoothed down the sleeves of his silk tunic, picking off some specks of dust settling on the white material. He checked his black-leather shoes, turning up his feet to make sure that even the heels were spotless.

Ali beckoned to the servant to come forward. The bent, wizened man solemnly held a plush, red cushion out in front of him. Resting on it was a pale-blue book with gold-tipped corners and golden letters painted onto the spine. It was pristine and had not been opened since the academics at the University of Farda had finished copying it from the original a week ago. It was identical to all the other copies of the book. The Scimitans took great pride in ensuring that when a copy of the *Annals* was shared with the world it did their country justice. The *Annals* was a record of their proud past and it also contained prophecies about their nation's future, too.

Ali stroked the cover. He minutely adjusted the book so that it was precisely square in the middle of the cushion. He squinted at it, considering sending back to the palace for a slightly larger cushion for it to rest on during their voyage.

The *Annals of the South* deserved the best when it travelled abroad. This copy was ready to leave Scimita, to help replenish the diminishing number of other copies had been spread around the known world.

Queen Zahra shook her head in amusement.

“Are you sailing straight for Murkar?”

“The king will be on his way to Aspatria. I will meet Gortah there. So it is written.”

Ali bowed a last farewell. He gestured for the servant to carry the *Annals of the South* on board. Only when it was safely embarked did Ali process after it onto his ship. He turned and waved to his mother standing on the quayside. There were tears in her eyes and she pulled her billowing, black cloak around her face to try to hide her grief that he was leaving.

“No weeping, Mother. I intend to bring you back a husband worthy of a queen of Scimita.”

“So it is written.”

Ali stood on deck as the crew hauled up the anchor and let down the sails, tightening the rigging and turning the ship into the breeze. As they slipped out of the harbour and caught the sea winds, Ali felt the ship heave beneath him. His mother, the Scimitan capital and their family's palace were soon just specks on the horizon.

The prince stared out over the bow. Ahead lay the Sea of the South and then, in a few days depending on the winds, Aspatria.

As his crew dropped anchor, Ali took the Annals and wrapped it in a white-silk scarf. He tucked it into his leather bag and slung the bag over his shoulder. He waved away his ancient servant and strode up on deck. It was early, and the day was still cold, but the stench of the port of Brewmouth filled his nostrils and he coughed, covering his slim mouth with his handkerchief. Ali fought the urge to retch. The river was wide and clear but the port had a lingering odour of sewage and a stale reek that Ali had learnt from his sailors, who'd stopped here once a year ago, was the sludge of barley used up in brewing.

Ali tiptoed down the gangplank and onto the quayside. It was the first time he'd set foot on solid ground in five days. As he felt the earth heave upwards to meet him, Ali leant against a wooden pillar sunk down into the quayside and tried to catch his breath. His lungs filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread and he felt his stomach settle. He went over to a market stall and handed them a gold coin, picking up a loaf and biting into it. The crone behind the stall stared after him as he walked on into the port.

Ali waited outside an inn until a sailor approached. The Scimitan's faith prevented him from entering but he gave the man another gold coin in return for directions to the capital. Ali set off towards Brewchester, drinking in the cleaner air of the country deaws as the sun broke over the hills. It was midsummer but Ali still shivered as he walked along the path towards the city.

Some women carrying flagons and leading donkeys laden with sacks of barley pointed Ali towards Brewchester. They giggled and refused his offer of gold. He slipped in through the main city gate and made his way up through the winding, cobbled streets towards the citadel. At the inner gate, two guardsmen in armour stopped him. They were carrying spears, and had a sword apiece and a dagger hanging from their belts. One shoved Ali with his shield and Ali staggered back against the wall.

Ali slowly spoke in the Common Tongue. He'd learnt the phrases he needed during his voyage, from a language book he'd had sent over from Farda University. They still sounded very odd to him and he was far from sure he'd understood the correct pronunciation.

"Tell Dextra of Aspatria that Prince Ali of Scimita wishes to meet with one of her guests. Gortah of Murkar is under her roof, is he not?"

The guardsmen looked at each other. Ali realised that his accent was incomprehensible but they'd caught the name of their queen and that of her visitor. They seemed fascinated by Ali's clothes and his appearance. Above all, the word 'Scimita' hung heavy in the air. One of the guards ran to fetch help. Ali waited with the other one, studiously ignoring him and keeping a firm hold of his shoulder bag.

A brown-haired nobleman in his mid-twenties arrived and bowed to Ali. He ushered him into a great hall and Ali warmed himself by the fire whilst other nobles whispered to each other. The man pointed to himself and spoke slowly.

"Sir Godfrey of Whiteacre."

"Prince Ali of Scimita. Tell your queen I am here."

The man's good-natured smile told Ali that he was not really making himself understood but he waited patiently. Somewhere in Brewchester, someone must be familiar with Scimitan. If nothing else, he would continue to ask for Gortah until the man himself appeared. It was written that they would speak. Gortah must know Scimitan for that prophecy to come to pass.

Eventually, a young woman with long, blonde hair entered the hall with a brown-haired man of about the same age who was huge and muscular. She was plainly dressed and looked exhausted. She waited in front of Ali, evidently expecting him to bow. Ali cast a glance around the room. The nobles were staring at him.

The woman pointed to herself and said, 'Dextra of Aspatria'. She pointed to the man beside her. 'Prince Eugene of Murkar'.

Ali bowed low. Dextra curtsied to him. Eugene bowed too. They seemed interested in him, but surprised at his unexpected arrival.

"I have come across the Sea of the South to see King Gortah."

Ali waited for the queen to guess what he was saying. She and Eugene exchanged glances. He slipped his bag down off his shoulder and drew out the Annals. He pulled back the silk scarf and revealed the book to them. It had become slightly scuffed and he rubbed out the mark on its pale-blue cover.

Eugene ran from the room. Ali heard shouting and running feet in the corridor. The nobles in the great hall gathered around Ali and began to take an interest in the Annals. He folded the book in his arms and cuddled it into his chest. The Annals were sacred to all Scimitans.

Dextra sat on her throne and gestured for Ali to sit on a chair in front of her. He stared at her whilst they waited for Gortah. She was weary and her attire did her no favours, but better dressed and with a decent night's sleep behind her he could understand why he'd heard her spoken of as the most beautiful woman in the world. She was thin but as she aged, and bore children, she would fill out and become less angular.

Other than Ali's mother, Dextra was the only ruling queen. Ali had recently persuaded himself that he would like to marry a queen. His mother ruled with tact and skill and he wanted that for his children, too. He wanted a wife who would be his equal.

Eugene returned and ushered Ali into a small chamber along from the great hall. Ali waited in there alone. Five minutes later, an enormous, muscular, silver-haired man of about fifty entered the room. This was Gortah, the king of Murkar.

Ali would've found Gortah fascinating even without the information about the king contained in the Annals. Gortah was routinely described as the most powerful man in the world. Since Ali had been old enough to appreciate that he himself was the richest man in the world, it'd been natural that he would want to compare himself to Gortah.

The king looked older and more tired than Ali had expected. He was simply dressed in a plain tunic and his hair was uncombed. It was not early, but Gortah gave the impression of only just having been woken up. It was clear that he was disorientated and he was very pale. Ali guessed that Gortah had been unwell when his arrival had been announced.

Ali bowed and showed Gortah the book. Gortah's brown eyes widened and he started forwards.

"I have sought this book since I was fourteen. I was not yet king when I first heard of its existence. Since then, I have hunted for it everywhere. Is it true that it contains prophecies about the rest of my life?" Gortah asked in fluent Scimitan.

"Most of it is about an octopus creature but there's plenty in its pages about you, too. You have only to agree to my price and this copy is yours. You'll sit by Queen Dextra's fireside and learn your destiny. By lunchtime, you will know it all."

Ali spoke slowly and he could tell from Gortah's changing facial expressions that the king understood. He held the book out again. Gortah was mesmerised by the pale-blue cover.

"I have seen it before," Gortah breathed. "I was sure I had, somehow, in my dreams."

Ali smiled.

"I ask only that you return to Scimita with me. My mother is currently married to my father but she'll be a widow by the time we arrive in Bozorganshahr."

Ali held the book out. Gortah's fingers lingered over it. He curled them into a fist and put his hands behind his back.

"You will be married to the queen of Scimita. So it is written."

Gortah shook his head.

"My father tried to assassinate me last week. You needn't scruple that my mother will soon lose him. It's the just outcome. She'll make you a good wife. Besides, it is written that Gortah of Murkar's daughter will be queen of Scimita in the next generation. Read your destiny! You've only to reach out and take it in your grasp."

Gortah went to the fireplace and stared down into the flames for a long time.

"I am already pledged."

Ali swallowed.

"To whom?"

"I am Queen Dextra's preferred suitor."

"That's nothing. You are free!"

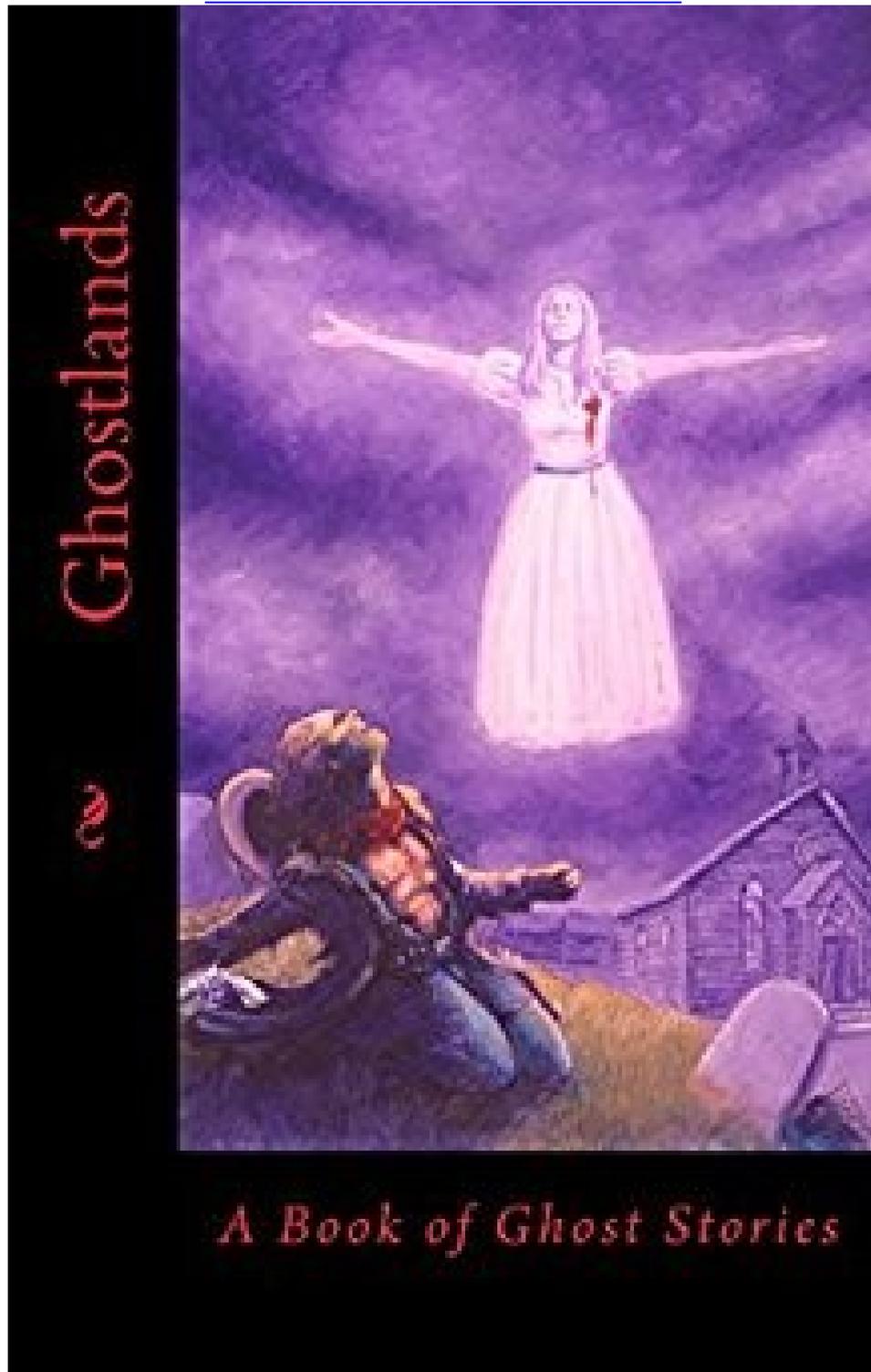
"I don't want to be. I love her."

Gortah strode out of the chamber, leaving Ali to wrap the Annals back up in his scarf and make his way back to his ship alone.

THE END

John C. Adams is a Schlock! webzine regular and a Contributing Editor for Dublin-based Albedo One magazine. Her debut novel *Souls for the Master* is available from Sinister Saints Press, and her new short story anthology *Blackacre* is forthcoming from Oscillate Wildly Press. You can read more of her fiction for free at her website: <http://johncadams.wix.com/johnadamssf>

### Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands



[Return to Contents](#)

THE WRITER by Steven Havelock

Elliot Nicholson sat in his basement flat staring at his computer screen. The room was in shadow except for the light of the computer monitor.

*Damn! I've sat here for the last five hours and I've only written three lines! What I wouldn't give to complete my book.*

Elliot sat there for another three hours. It was nearing midnight and Elliot was not only frustrated but tired as well. He about to retire to bed when there was a knock at the door.

*Who the hell is that at this time?*

Elliot opened the door and was blown away by what he saw. *God! She is so hot!*

Standing in the doorway, wearing a tight fitting red dress, was a gorgeous beautiful blond.

"Hello? Can I help you?" asked Elliot.

"I was passing by and someone told me there was a writer here who needed some help."

"Yes, I am a writer," said Elliot sticking his chest out with pride, "But I'm going through a slow phase right now."

"Well aren't you going to invite me in?" The blond smiled and instantly Elliot felt a hundred times happier.

*She smiled at me!*

It was then that Elliot noticed the gold necklace around her neck.

*There are little caricatures, about three centimetres tall, of famous people. I recognise Harvey Smith the baseball star and judge James Williams.*

"Please come in."

The blond stepped into the basement flat. "It's not much, but its adequate for me right now," said Elliot, slightly embarrassed by the shabby flat and lack of furnishings.

They walked to Elliot's old shabby sofa which was in the middle of the room and sat down. "So how bad do you want it?" the blond asked.

"To be a writer?" He paused, thinking about it deeply. "I want it more then anything else in the world, it's the only thing I've ever wanted to be"

"I can give you what you want."

"Okay, please, if you can help me, please do!" said Elliot, thinking she might be a publishing agent.

“There’s just one thing I want in return.”

“Anything.”

“When the time comes I will ask you to do something for me, and you must do it.”

“No problem!” Elliot’s heart was now beating like a giant drum, “Anything you say, I will do it, but please! Please give me the break I need.”

“Shake on it,” said the blond.

They shook hands.

Ten years later.

“Daddy, how did you become so good at writing?” asked Jennifer Elliot’s 6-year-old daughter.

Elliot thought back to that night, when the woman had knocked on his door.

*The lady lived up to her promise*, he thought.

“A lot of hard work and a bit of luck.” He looked at the birthday cake on the kitchen table which he had bought for his wife earlier that morning, after she had left for work.

“Daddy, you’re famous. When I go to school and tell my teachers you are my daddy, they are very impressed.”

Elliot had a faraway look in his eyes as he thought about the blond and that fateful night nearly ten years ago.

“Daddy I’m going upstairs to play on my computer.”

“Okay, Jennifer.”

Jennifer got up and ran up the stairs.

Just then there was a knock at the door. *Who the hell is that? I’m not expecting anyone?*

Elliot opened the door and took a harsh breath in. *It’s the woman I met on that fateful night ten years ago!*

“Hi Elliot,” she smiled. It was a smile that sent chills down Elliot’s back, a cold calculating smile. Elliot stepped back and the woman entered the house.

She looked around.

“Not bad. Much better furnished than your shabby flat I saw you in nearly ten years ago.”

“What can I do for you?” asked Elliot, his heart pounding.

“I’ve come to collect.”

“What?”

“The promise you made me ten years ago to do me a favour, once you were famous.”

“Money? How much do you want? I have plenty.”

“It’s not a question of money.” The smile left her face. “There’s a man named *Mickey one-shot* downtown. He’s looking at a fifteen year stretch for shooting dead three dodgy crooks.”

“Yes? What’s this got to do with me?”

“I want you to confess to the murders of those three undesirables.”

“What?” The colour drained from Elliot’s face, “But I’ll go down for that.”

“You agreed, and now I’ve come to collect.”

“I have money...lots of it...You can have it...Have it all!”

“You’re not trying to go cold on our deal, are you?”

“No! Not at all! Look, I have a family, a wife, children, and I’m a world-famous writer. I have a reputation to keep! Please, no...No...anything but this!”

“I thought you would be different. You’re just like the others.”

“The others?”

She pointed to the necklace around her neck. For a second the small figures seemed to come alive.

*They look like they are squirming!*

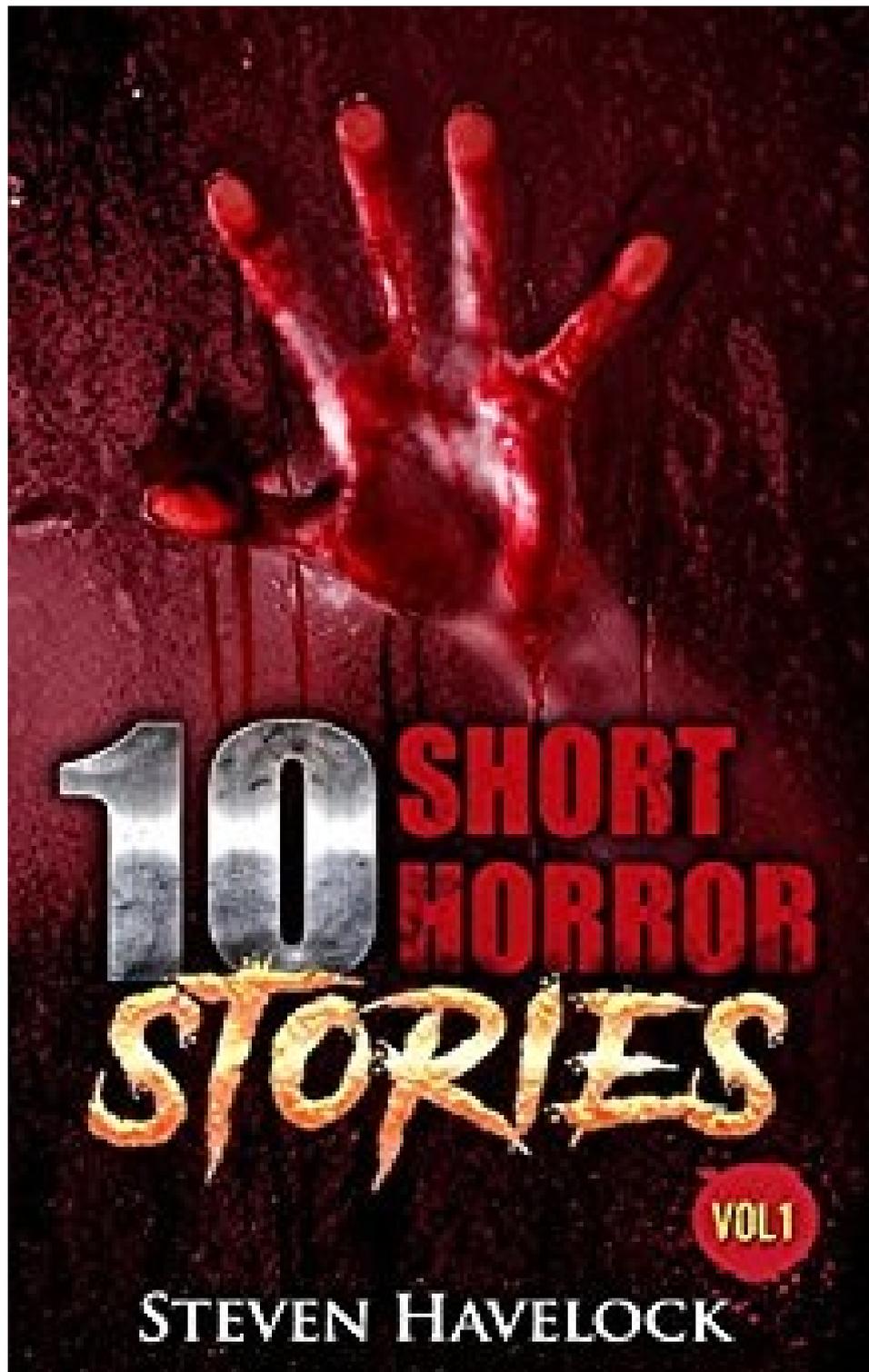
“We had a deal, you shook on it.” She stretched out her hand. Elliot felt himself shrinking, getting smaller and smaller. Suddenly he was no taller than three centimetres. He looked up and saw a large hand descending towards him.

The woman picked him up and attached him to her necklace which had a dozen other figures attached to it.

*Now I’ve got to go see a struggling musician a few blocks away who needs my services.*

THE END

Steven Havelock’s books are available from [Amazon](#).



[Return to Contents](#)

A GIRL, SHELDON COOPER, AND PETER COOK by Steve Laker

On earth, it was generally accepted among cats, that cats were the superior species. In this feline hierarchy, humans and dogs were equal but different, with little regard for the white mice and dolphins.

This social order came about when Amazon integrated universal translation algorithms into their Alexa AI home assistants, and others followed. In 2042, life in the home was very different to the one we know now.

The term “animal” had long since fallen into obscurity, now reserved for those who are less than “person” in its modern definition: a sentient, self-aware and self-determining being, which has a conscience, experiences emotions, and displays empathy with other people.

A few exceptions aside, most *Persona non grata* had written themselves out of any worthwhile news and were confined to their own history. Only a few Tory grandees clung on in antiquated underground offices, blathering about the past and not being listened to.

“Do you know what I think?” Sheldon Cooper asked.

“No,” replied Peter Cook, looking up from his chair. “And I didn’t ask.”

“What are you two talking about?” Ellie wondered, wiping her hands on her jeans.

“Did you wash your hands?” Sheldon asked, sitting up on the sofa.

“Yes,” Ellie replied, “what are you talking about?”

“Well, *he*,” Peter nodded at the cat, “was going to spout on about something...”

“I don’t *spout*,” Sheldon protested.

“As I was saying, I didn’t want to hear.”

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“Aha!” said the dog, sitting up, “how do you know?”

“Can you read my mind?” Sheldon asked.

“No,” Peter replied, “can you?”

“Okay,” Ellie interrupted. “Who’s for dinner?”

“I’ll eat him if you want,” Peter said.

“I’d make your breath smell better,” the cat replied.

“Okay,” Ellie interrupted again. “What would you like for dinner? I’ll cook.”

“Do you have tuna?” Sheldon asked.

“We do,” Ellie replied.

“Line-caught?”

“Yes.”

“In water, not brine?”

“Yes, in water.”

“Cut into chunks, with some black pepper and a squeeze of fresh lemon?”

“Like you always have it.”

“Yes. That please.”

“Fine. Pete?”

“Er...” Peter yawned, “Got any steak? You know, that one they grow, not farmed.”

“We *should* have. If not, I can print you some.”

“Yeah, do that anyway, fresher.”

“Hey, why does he get printed food?”

“I’ll print yours if you like, cat.”

“No, I like it the way you do it.”

“So, why...” Ellie thought, “never mind.”

“What are *you* having?” Pete asked Ellie.

“I’ll probably just print a pizza.”

“Is it Thursday?” Sheldon wondered, as Ellie made dinner, “I sense it’s going to be a strange night.”

“Here we go,” Ellie announced, returning with food, “up at the table please. Anyone wanna smoke?”

“Told you,” said the cat. “Do you mind if we eat while you smoke?”

“What shall we talk about?” Ellie ignored the cat.

“Death,” Pete said. “But you wouldn’t know about that, would you cat, with your nine lives and everything. Have you worked out what those are all for yet?”

“We will find that out around 3000 years from now.”

“Oh, here we go...The self-proclaimed superior species on this planet, haven’t worked out why they’re here yet.”

“Well neither have you, dog.”

“I sometimes think I’m dead already.”

“Why?” Sheldon wondered.

“Can you tell me I’m not?”

“Well, I can *see* you’re not. So what, you think all this is a computer simulation, like The Matrix?”

“Could be.”

“But you lack proof.”

“And you don’t know why you’re here, cat.”

“I need to urinate.” Sheldon jumped down from his chair and wandered around the garden.

“I love the way you two get on,” Ellie said to Peter.

“Sarcasm?” Pete wondered aloud.

“Only partly. I’m very fond of the way you are.”

“Well, everyone’s themselves Ellie, and most people shouldn’t apologise for that. I think with dogs and cats, it’s a mutual tolerance and a begrudging respect.”

“What about humans?”

“What about them?”

“Do you just tolerate us?”

“Sometimes it’s confusing,” Pete thought. “We do look up to you, because you’re pretty smart. But sometimes you overcomplicate things. Dogs look at things more simply. We worry less. I mean, go out for a walk with us a couple of times a day, open a box of DogNip chews, and I’ve pretty much nailed my day.”

“You’re much less paranoid and insecure than us humans.”

“Oh, I don’t know Ellie. Having you around is nice for company, but all dogs have an inferiority complex, and issues of balance.”

“Balance? Of what?”

“We wonder about things like the difference between friends and family, and the colours of cars. I mean, we’re perhaps more in touch with our instincts, but those are a bit sexist and misogynistic. And I think purple cars smell nicer than green ones.”

“How’d you mean?”

“Well, they’re like candyfloss.”

“Yes, but the sexism and misogyny.”

“Oh, all that old-fashioned nature stuff, going to mum for milk, and dad for protection. Then in humans, the hunter-gatherer and the cook.”

“Well, we’re more a commune here, friends and family.”

“Yes, I know. I remember when you came out of hospital that time, and you were in a wheelchair. I didn’t know whether to hug you or sit on your lap.”

“Ellie?” Sheldon was back. “Where are my wipes?”

“I don’t know. Use mine, they’re upstairs.”

“But those are yours, and they’re upstairs. I specifically hid mine here, so I had them when I came in.”

“I might have eaten them.” Pete said.

“Why?” the cat asked.

“To freshen my breath? I don’t know if I did, I’m just saying I might have.”

“The paradoxical dog,” Sheldon muttered, jumping back on his chair.

“Did you wipe your feet?” Pete asked.

“I always clean my feet, so yes.”

“One day you’ll forget.”

“So what if I do?”

“You’ll know you’re getting old. Anyway, why do *you* get to go out at all hours and I don’t?”

“Excuse *me*,” Ellie interrupted, “You can go out whenever you like Pete, on your own, or with your friends.”

“Oh. And there was me, thinking you enjoyed walking with me, playing your favourite game in the park.”

“Which one?”

“Throwing sticks.”

“*My* game?”

“Well, yes. I assume that’s why you throw sticks, because you enjoy me fetching them for some reason.”

“But that’s *your* game.”

“No it’s not. You made it up.”

“Yeah, because you like fetching sticks.”

“No I don’t. I couldn’t care where they end up, but you seem to have so much fun throwing them, I just figure I’m humouring you.”

“One day,” Ellie said, “you dogs will get over your inferiority complex.”

“Not while there are cats around,” Pete replied, “they have a *superiority delusion*.”

“It’s not a delusion,” Sheldon argued.

“So what about them lives then, what are they for?”

“Curiosity, which is just as likely to kill anyone else as it is a cat. But cats seek knowledge, so we were given nine lives with which to discover it.”

“While everyone else already worked out it’s pretty dull, so they’re just sitting around relaxing,” Pete suggested. “Ellie, what do you think about death?”

“That’s a very big question, because it depends on the definition of death.”

“What, more than either dead or alive?”

“Well, yeah. It’s not a bipolar subject. I mean, I don’t fear my own death—except maybe the means of departure—but being forgotten scares me, like being erased from history. I believe that life as we know it, is a passing phase, in something we don’t fully understand yet.”

“Do you subscribe,” Sheldon interrupted, “to quantum physics?”

“Well, it stopped being a theory long ago. If you mean, do I get that everything exists in more than one state simultaneously, and that quantum entanglement means every subatomic particle in the universe is connected to another, telepathically, then yes. Definitely.”

“Good,” the cat said, “because a lot of philosophical and theoretical examples of my species perished in that debate.”

“See?” Pete perked up. “Bloody cats, getting everywhere, proving things. When was a dog ever involved in an experiment? I mean, why not Schrödinger’s dogs? By the way, what in the name of anyone’s arse, did mankind think it was getting up to, sending one of my kind up to space, before we had the technology to ask if it was okay?”

“That,” Ellie replied, “was humanity getting up its *own* arse. But Laika was our little trailblazer, still floating in a tin can out there somewhere. We owe her a lot.”

“At least you’re grateful,” Pete said, “fetching your sticks, flying your spaceships...And yes, Laika’s floating around out there, unceremoniously abandoned, but it’s quite poetic in a way.”

“What, like Space Oddity, David Bowie?”

“No, I just think it’s funny. Who’s to say Laika didn’t get out there and everything worked fine? Then she sussed the controls and just buggered off. Maybe it was all an elaborate plan, and the dogs had another planet somewhere.”

“Unlikely.”

“But equally, not impossible. You couldn’t talk to us back then. What you might have thought was static noise, could have been her talking. But there was no universal translator back then.”

“The paradoxical dog,” Sheldon murmured.

“Well, yes,” Pete agreed, “but the point is, humans had no right to do that. Because back then, humans didn’t regard what they called animals as having feelings or emotions. But what was clearly a sentient, self-determining and self-aware being, was used in an experiment without consultation or consent, simply because it was assumed to be inferior. That is immoral, and even more so for the cowardice in persecuting a person whose voice couldn’t be heard.”

“So is much which humanity has done,” Ellie agreed, “against its own kind too. It’s a burden which rests heavily on those of us who give a shit.”

“If I might add a cat’s opinion,” Sheldon said, “it might make things easier to understand.”

“Go on.”

“Humans were in denial. Your science hadn’t proven the obvious, that so-called animals could *feel*, so it was conveniently overlooked and humans continued, well, being human.”

“*Now* I feel good about myself. Thanks Sheldon.”

“Sarcasm?”

“*No!*”

“Oh. And I thought I was getting the hang of that one.”

“Ever since we’ve been able to talk,” Pete said, “there is still much about humans which confuses us.”

“Same,” Ellie added, “only now that we *can* talk, can we talk like this.”

“Really, I hadn’t noticed,” Sheldon noted.

“Sarcasm?” Pete wondered.

“No. Cats have always been able to talk, and to hear you. Nothing’s changed with humans, because you still don’t make sense.”

“But you can understand me?” Ellie checked.

“I can *hear* you, and the rest of the human race, in you. But with a growing number of exceptions, humans still seem hell bent on destroying our planet.”

“You mean,” Pete said, “the planet we all share?”

“You’re only here because the humans brought you. Earth was originally the cats’. Then humans came along and our ancestors agreed to let humans be humans, hoping they might learn.”

“Who says?”

“Many ancient feline scribes.”

“Like the human ones,” Ellie added, “who wrote the various human religious scriptures?”

“Very much so,” Sheldon confirmed, “and those ancient human scribes wrote of cat gods, did they not?”

“In Egypt, and some other places, yes.”

“So,” Sheldon continued, “doesn’t that prove that man worshipped cats as gods?”

“Not at all. Each ancient script is an individual’s interpretation of events, as they saw them, and recorded using the means available to them at the time. It’s what all ancient alien theories are built on, and it’s what unifies science and religion in many humans now. The point is, it’s a paradox. But it doesn’t matter who was here first, it’s what we do now that we’re here.”

“Sometimes,” Pete spoke now. “Sometimes, I wish I was a dyslexic insomniac.”

“Why?”

“Because dogs are generally agnostic, and that would allow me to lie awake at night, wondering if God is a dog.”

“Really though,” Sheldon said, “we’re all the same.”

“Hardly,” Pete said.

“No, I mean inside, and at a fundamental level. Forget animals and humans as the outdated terms which they now are. As people, we are all the same. Just as the root of all humans’ conflicts—both internal and external—is in an inability to see others as alternative versions of themselves, so that can be transcended to encompass us all. Whether we’re an atheist cat, an agnostic dog, or a whatever you are Ellie, all those scribes wrote what they saw, and science proved what we now know. And *that*, is that we’re all connected and that the only true creator is the universe itself.”

“Yeah, but who set that off?” Pete wondered.

“Oh, for fuck sake.”

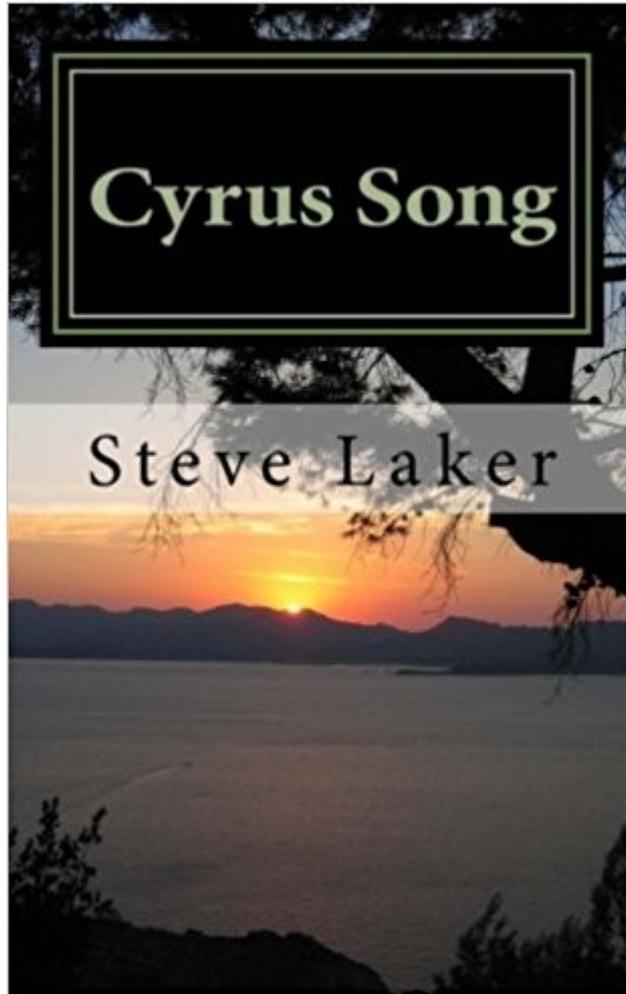
“It’s a good job we can all talk now.”

© Steve Laker, 2017.

THE END

*Now available from Steve Laker:*

[Cyrus Song](#)



[Return to Contents](#)

VIII. The Weird Tradition in America

The public for whom Poe wrote, though grossly unappreciative of his art, was by no means unaccustomed to the horrors with which he dealt. America, besides inheriting the usual dark folklore of Europe, had an additional fund of weird associations to draw upon; so that spectral legends had already been recognised as fruitful subject-matter for literature. Charles Brockden Brown had achieved phenomenal fame with his Radcliffian romances, and Washington Irving's lighter treatment of eerie themes had quickly become classic. This additional fund proceeded, as Paul Elmer More has pointed out, from the keen spiritual and theological interests of the first colonists, plus the strange and forbidding nature of the scene into which they were plunged. The vast and gloomy virgin forests in whose perpetual twilight all terrors might well lurk; the hordes of coppery Indians whose strange, saturnine visages and violent customs hinted strongly at traces of infernal origin; the free rein given under the influence of Puritan theocracy to all manner of notions respecting man's relation to the stern and vengeful God of the Calvinists, and to the sulphureous Adversary of that God, about whom so much was thundered in the pulpits each Sunday; and the morbid introspection developed by an isolated backwoods life devoid of normal amusements and of the recreational mood, harassed by commands for theological self-examination, keyed to unnatural emotional repression, and forming above all a mere grim struggle for survival—all these things conspired to produce an environment in which the black whisperings of sinister grandams were heard far beyond the chimney corner, and in which tales of witchcraft and unbelievable secret monstrosities lingered long after the dread days of the Salem nightmare.

Poe represents the newer, more disillusioned, and more technically finished of the weird schools that rose out of this propitious milieu. Another school—the tradition of moral values, gentle restraint, and mild, leisurely phantasy tinged more or less with the whimsical—was represented by another famous, misunderstood, and lonely figure in American letters—the shy and sensitive Nathaniel Hawthorne, scion of antique Salem and great-grandson of one of the bloodiest of the old witchcraft judges. In Hawthorne we have none of the violence, the daring, the high colouring, the intense dramatic sense, the cosmic malignity, and the undivided and impersonal artistry of Poe. Here, instead, is a gentle soul cramped by the Puritanism of early New England; shadowed and wistful, and grieved at an unmoral universe which everywhere transcends the conventional patterns thought by our forefathers to represent divine and immutable law. Evil, a very real force to Hawthorne, appears on every hand as a lurking and conquering adversary; and the visible world becomes in his fancy a theatre of infinite tragedy and woe, with unseen half-existent influences hovering over it and through it, battling for supremacy and moulding the destinies of the hapless mortals who form its vain and self-deluded population. The heritage of American weirdness was his to a most intense degree, and he saw a dismal throng of vague spectres behind the common phenomena of life; but he was not disinterested enough to value impressions, sensations, and beauties of narration for their own sake. He must needs weave his phantasy into some quietly melancholy fabric of didactic or allegorical cast, in which his meekly resigned cynicism may display with naive moral appraisal the perfidy of a human race which he cannot cease to cherish and mourn despite his insight into its hypocrisy. Supernatural horror, then, is never a primary object with Hawthorne; though its impulses were so deeply woven into his personality that he cannot help suggesting it with the force of genius when he calls upon the unreal world to illustrate the pensive sermon he wishes to preach.

Hawthorne's intimations of the weird, always gentle, elusive, and restrained, may be traced throughout his work. The mood that produced them found one delightful vent in the Teutonised retelling of classic myths for children contained in *A Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales*, and at other times exercised itself in casting a certain strangeness and intangible witchery or malevolence over events not meant to be actually supernatural; as in the macabre posthumous novel *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*, which invests with a peculiar sort of repulsion a house existing to this day in Salem, and abutting on the ancient Charter Street Burying Ground. In *The Marble Faun*, whose design was sketched out in an Italian villa reputed to be haunted, a tremendous background of genuine phantasy and mystery palpitates just beyond the common reader's sight; and glimpses of fabulous blood in mortal veins are hinted at during the course of a romance which cannot help being interesting despite the persistent incubus of moral allegory, anti-Popery propaganda, and a Puritan prudery which has caused the late D. H. Lawrence to express a longing to treat the author in a highly undignified manner. *Septimius Felton*, a posthumous novel whose idea was to have been elaborated and incorporated into the unfinished *Dolliver Romance*, touches on the Elixir of Life in a more or less capable fashion; whilst the notes for a never-written tale to be called "The Ancestral Footstep" shew what Hawthorne would have done with an intensive treatment of an old English superstition—that of an ancient and accursed line whose members left footprints of blood as they walked—which appears incidentally in both *Septimius Felton* and *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*.

Many of Hawthorne's shorter tales exhibit weirdness, either of atmosphere or of incident, to a remarkable degree. "Edward Randolph's Portrait", in *Legends of the Province House*, has its diabolic moments. "The Minister's Black Veil" (founded on an actual incident) and "The Ambitious Guest" imply much more than they state, whilst "Ethan Brand"—a fragment of a longer work never completed—rises to genuine heights of cosmic fear with its vignette of the wild hill country and the blazing, desolate lime-kilns, and its delineation of the Byronic "unpardonable sinner", whose troubled life ends with a peal of fearful laughter in the night as he seeks rest amidst the flames of the furnace. Some of Hawthorne's notes tell of weird tales he would have written had he lived longer—an especially vivid plot being that concerning a baffling stranger who appeared now and then in public assemblies, and who was at last followed and found to come and go from a very ancient grave.

But foremost as a finished, artistic unit among all our author's weird material is the famous and exquisitely wrought novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which the relentless working out of an ancestral curse is developed with astonishing power against the sinister background of a very ancient Salem house—one of those peaked Gothic affairs which formed the first regular building-up of our New England coast towns, but which gave way after the seventeenth century to the more familiar gambrel-roofed or classic Georgian types now known as "Colonial". Of these old gabled Gothic houses scarcely a dozen are to be seen today in their original condition throughout the United States, but one well known to Hawthorne still stands in Turner Street, Salem, and is pointed out with doubtful authority as the scene and inspiration of the romance. Such an edifice, with its spectral peaks, its clustered chimneys, its overhanging second story, its grotesque corner-brackets, and its diamond-paned lattice windows, is indeed an object well calculated to evoke sombre reflections; typifying as it does the dark Puritan age of concealed horror and witch-whispers which preceded the beauty, rationality, and spaciousness of the eighteenth century. Hawthorne saw many in his youth, and knew the black tales connected with some of them. He heard, too, many rumours of a curse upon his own line as the result of his great-grandfather's severity as a witchcraft judge in 1692.

From this setting came the immortal tale—New England’s greatest contribution to weird literature—and we can feel in an instant the authenticity of the atmosphere presented to us. Stealthy horror and disease lurk within the weather-blackened, moss-crusting, and elm-shadowed walls of the archaic dwelling so vividly displayed, and we grasp the brooding malignity of the place when we read that its builder—old Colonel Pyncheon—snatched the land with peculiar ruthlessness from its original settler, Matthew Maule, whom he condemned to the gallows as a wizard in the year of the panic. Maule died cursing old Pyncheon—“God will give him blood to drink”—and the waters of the old well on the seized land turned bitter. Maule’s carpenter son consented to build the great gabled house for his father’s triumphant enemy, but the old Colonel died strangely on the day of its dedication. Then followed generations of odd vicissitudes, with queer whispers about the dark powers of the Maules, and peculiar and sometimes terrible ends befalling the Pyncheons.

The overshadowing malevolence of the ancient house—almost as alive as Poe’s House of Usher, though in a subtler way—pervades the tale as a recurrent motif pervades an operatic tragedy; and when the main story is reached, we behold the modern Pyncheons in a pitiable state of decay. Poor old Hepzibah, the eccentric reduced gentlewoman; child-like, unfortunate Clifford, just released from undeserved imprisonment; sly and treacherous Judge Pyncheon, who is the old Colonel all over again—all these figures are tremendous symbols, and are well matched by the stunted vegetation and anaemic fowls in the garden. It was almost a pity to supply a fairly happy ending, with a union of sprightly Phoebe, cousin and last scion of the Pyncheons, to the prepossessing young man who turns out to be the last of the Maules. This union, presumably, ends the curse. Hawthorne avoids all violence of diction or movement, and keeps his implications of terror well in the background; but occasional glimpses amply serve to sustain the mood and redeem the work from pure allegorical aridity. Incidents like the bewitching of Alice Pyncheon in the early eighteenth century, and the spectral music of her harpsichord which precedes a death in the family—the latter a variant of an immemorial type of Aryan myth—link the action directly with the supernatural; whilst the dead nocturnal vigil of old Judge Pyncheon in the ancient parlour, with his frightfully ticking watch, is stark horror of the most poignant and genuine sort. The way in which the Judge’s death is first adumbrated by the motions and sniffing of a strange cat outside the window, long before the fact is suspected either by the reader or by any of the characters, is a stroke of genius which Poe could not have surpassed. Later the strange cat watches intently outside that same window in the night and on the next day, for—something. It is clearly the psychopomp of primeval myth, fitted and adapted with infinite deftness to its latter-day setting.

But Hawthorne left no well-defined literary posterity. His mood and attitude belonged to the age which closed with him, and it is the spirit of Poe—who so clearly and realistically understood the natural basis of the horror-appeal and the correct mechanics of its achievement—which survived and blossomed. Among the earliest of Poe’s disciples may be reckoned the brilliant young Irishman Fitz-James O’Brien (1828–1862), who became naturalised as an American and perished honourably in the Civil War. It is he who gave us “What Was It?”, the first well-shaped short story of a tangible but invisible being, and the prototype of de Maupassant’s “Horla”; he also who created the inimitable “Diamond Lens”, in which a young microscopist falls in love with a maiden of an infinitesimal world which he has discovered in a drop of water. O’Brien’s early death undoubtedly deprived us of some masterful tales of strangeness and terror, though his genius was not, properly speaking, of the same titan quality which characterised Poe and Hawthorne.

Closer to real greatness was the eccentric and saturnine journalist Ambrose Bierce, born in 1842; who likewise entered the Civil War, but survived to write some immortal tales and to disappear in 1913 in as great a cloud of mystery as any he ever evoked from his nightmare fancy. Bierce was a satirist and pamphleteer of note, but the bulk of his artistic reputation must rest upon his grim and savage short stories; a large number of which deal with the Civil War and form the most vivid and realistic expression which that conflict has yet received in fiction. Virtually all of Bierce's tales are tales of horror; and whilst many of them treat only of the physical and psychological horrors within Nature, a substantial proportion admit the malignly supernatural and form a leading element in America's fund of weird literature. Mr. Samuel Loveman, a living poet and critic who was personally acquainted with Bierce, thus sums up the genius of the great shadow-maker in the preface to some of his letters:

"In Bierce, the evocation of horror becomes for the first time, not so much the prescription or perversion of Poe and Maupassant, but an atmosphere definite and uncannily precise. Words, so simple that one would be prone to ascribe them to the limitations of a literary hack, take on an unholy horror, a new and unguessed transformation. In Poe one finds it a tour de force, in Maupassant a nervous engagement of the flagellated climax. To Bierce, simply and sincerely, diabolism held in its tormented depth, a legitimate and reliant means to the end. Yet a tacit confirmation with Nature is in every instance insisted upon.

"In 'The Death of Halpin Frayser', flowers, verdure, and the boughs and leaves of trees are magnificently placed as an opposing foil to unnatural malignity. Not the accustomed golden world, but a world pervaded with the mystery of blue and the breathless recalcitrance of dreams, is Bierce's. Yet, curiously, inhumanity is not altogether absent."

The "inhumanity" mentioned by Mr. Loveman finds vent in a rare strain of sardonic comedy and graveyard humour, and a kind of delight in images of cruelty and tantalising disappointment. The former quality is well illustrated by some of the subtitles in the darker narratives; such as "One does not always eat what is on the table", describing a body laid out for a coroner's inquest, and "A man though naked may be in rags", referring to a frightfully mangled corpse.

Bierce's work is in general somewhat uneven. Many of the stories are obviously mechanical, and marred by a jaunty and commonplacely artificial style derived from journalistic models; but the grim malevolence stalking through all of them is unmistakable, and several stand out as permanent mountain-peaks of American weird writing. "The Death of Halpin Frayser", called by Frederic Taber Cooper the most fiendishly ghastly tale in the literature of the Anglo-Saxon race, tells of a body skulking by night without a soul in a weird and horribly ensanguined wood, and of a man beset by ancestral memories who met death at the claws of that which had been his fervently loved mother. "The Damned Thing", frequently copied in popular anthologies, chronicles the hideous devastations of an invisible entity that waddles and flounders on the hills and in the wheatfields by night and day. "The Suitable Surroundings" evokes with singular subtlety yet apparent simplicity a piercing sense of the terror which may reside in the written word. In the story the weird author Colston says to his friend Marsh, "You are brave enough to read me in a street-car, but—in a deserted house—alone—in the forest—at night! Bah! I have a manuscript in my pocket that would kill you!" Marsh reads the manuscript in "the suitable surroundings"—and it does kill him. "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot" is clumsily developed, but has a powerful climax. A man named Manton has horribly killed his two children and his wife, the latter of whom lacked the middle toe of the right foot. Ten years later he returns much altered to the neighbourhood;

and, being secretly recognised, is provoked into a bowie-knife duel in the dark, to be held in the now abandoned house where his crime was committed. When the moment of the duel arrives a trick is played upon him; and he is left without an antagonist, shut in a night-black ground floor room of the reputedly haunted edifice, with the thick dust of a decade on every hand. No knife is drawn against him, for only a thorough scare is intended; but on the next day he is found crouched in a corner with distorted face, dead of sheer fright at something he has seen. The only clue visible to the discoverers is one having terrible implications: "In the dust of years that lay thick upon the floor—leading from the door by which they had entered, straight across the room to within a yard of Manton's crouching corpse—were three parallel lines of footprints—light but definite impressions of bare feet, the outer ones those of small children, the inner a woman's. From the point at which they ended they did not return; they pointed all one way." And, of course, the woman's prints shewed a lack of the middle toe of the right foot. "The Spook House", told with a severely homely air of journalistic verisimilitude, conveys terrible hints of shocking mystery. In 1858 an entire family of seven persons disappears suddenly and unaccountably from a plantation house in eastern Kentucky, leaving all its possessions untouched—furniture, clothing, food supplies, horses, cattle, and slaves. About a year later two men of high standing are forced by a storm to take shelter in the deserted dwelling, and in so doing stumble into a strange subterranean room lit by an unaccountable greenish light and having an iron door which cannot be opened from within. In this room lie the decayed corpses of all the missing family; and as one of the discoverers rushes forward to embrace a body he seems to recognise, the other is so overpowered by a strange foetor that he accidentally shuts his companion in the vault and loses consciousness. Recovering his senses six weeks later, the survivor is unable to find the hidden room; and the house is burned during the Civil War. The imprisoned discoverer is never seen or heard of again.

Bierce seldom realises the atmospheric possibilities of his themes as vividly as Poe; and much of his work contains a certain touch of naiveté, prosaic angularity, or early-American provincialism which contrasts somewhat with the efforts of later horror-masters. Nevertheless the genuineness and artistry of his dark intimations are always unmistakable, so that his greatness is in no danger of eclipse. As arranged in his definitively collected works, Bierce's weird tales occur mainly in two volumes, *Can Such Things Be?* and *In the Midst of Life*. The former, indeed, is almost wholly given over to the supernatural.

Much of the best in American horror-literature has come from pens not mainly devoted to that medium. Oliver Wendell Holmes's historic *Elsie Venner* suggests with admirable restraint an unnatural ophidian element in a young woman pre-natally influenced, and sustains the atmosphere with finely discriminating landscape touches. In *The Turn of the Screw* Henry James triumphs over his inevitable pomposity and prolixity sufficiently well to create a truly potent air of sinister menace; depicting the hideous influence of two dead and evil servants, Peter Quint and the governess Miss Jessel, over a small boy and girl who had been under their care. James is perhaps too diffuse, too unctuously urbane, and too much addicted to subtleties of speech to realise fully all the wild and devastating horror in his situations; but for all that there is a rare and mounting tide of fright, culminating in the death of the little boy, which gives the novelette a permanent place in its special class.

F. Marion Crawford produced several weird tales of varying quality, now collected in a volume entitled *Wandering Ghosts*. "For the Blood Is the Life" touches powerfully on a case of moon-cursed vampirism near an ancient tower on the rocks of the lonely South Italian sea-coast. "The Dead Smile" treats of family horrors in an old house and an ancestral vault in

Ireland, and introduces the banshee with considerable force. "The Upper Berth", however, is Crawford's weird masterpiece; and is one of the most tremendous horror-stories in all literature. In this tale of a suicide-haunted stateroom such things as the spectral salt-water dampness, the strangely open porthole, and the nightmare struggle with the nameless object are handled with incomparable dexterity.

Very genuine, though not without the typical mannered extravagance of the eighteen-nineties, is the strain of horror in the early work of Robert W. Chambers, since renowned for products of a very different quality. *The King in Yellow*, a series of vaguely connected short stories having as a background a monstrous and suppressed book whose perusal brings fright, madness, and spectral tragedy, really achieves notable heights of cosmic fear in spite of uneven interest and a somewhat trivial and affected cultivation of the Gallic studio atmosphere made popular by Du Maurier's *Trilby*. The most powerful of its tales, perhaps, is "The Yellow Sign", in which is introduced a silent and terrible churchyard watchman with a face like a puffy grave-worm's. A boy, describing a tussle he has had with this creature, shivers and sickens as he relates a certain detail. "Well, sir, it's Gawd's truth that when I 'it 'im 'e grabbed me wrists, sir, and when I twisted 'is soft, mushy fist one of 'is fingers come off in me 'and." An artist, who after seeing him has shared with another a strange dream of a nocturnal hearse, is shocked by the voice with which the watchman accosts him. The fellow emits a muttering sound that fills the head like thick oily smoke from a fat-rendering vat or an odour of noisome decay. What he mumbles is merely this: "Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

A weirdly hieroglyphed onyx talisman, picked up in the street by the sharer of his dream, is shortly given the artist; and after stumbling queerly upon the hellish and forbidden book of horrors the two learn, among other hideous things which no sane mortal should know, that this talisman is indeed the nameless Yellow Sign handed down from the accursed cult of Hastur—from primordial Carcosa, whereof the volume treats, and some nightmare memory of which seems to lurk latent and ominous at the back of all men's minds. Soon they hear the rumbling of the black-plumed hearse driven by the flabby and corpse-faced watchman. He enters the night-shrouded house in quest of the Yellow Sign, all bolts and bars rotting at his touch. And when the people rush in, drawn by a scream that no human throat could utter, they find three forms on the floor—two dead and one dying. One of the dead shapes is far gone in decay. It is the churchyard watchman, and the doctor exclaims, "That man must have been dead for months." It is worth observing that the author derives most of the names and allusions connected with his eldritch land of primal memory from the tales of Ambrose Bierce. Other early works of Mr. Chambers displaying the outré and macabre element are *The Maker of Moons* and *In Search of the Unknown*. One cannot help regretting that he did not further develop a vein in which he could so easily have become a recognised master.

Horror material of authentic force may be found in the work of the New England realist Mary E. Wilkins; whose volume of short tales, *The Wind in the Rose-Bush*, contains a number of noteworthy achievements. In "The Shadows on the Wall" we are shewn with consummate skill the response of a staid New England household to uncanny tragedy; and the sourceless shadow of the poisoned brother well prepares us for the climactic moment when the shadow of the secret murderer, who has killed himself in a neighbouring city, suddenly appears beside it. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in "The Yellow Wall Paper", rises to a classic level in subtly delineating the madness which crawls over a woman dwelling in the hideously papered room where a madwoman was once confined.

In “The Dead Valley” the eminent architect and mediaevalist Ralph Adams Cram achieves a memorably potent degree of vague regional horror through subtleties of atmosphere and description.

Still further carrying on our spectral tradition is the gifted and versatile humourist Irvin S. Cobb, whose work both early and recent contains some finely weird specimens. “Fishhead”, an early achievement, is banefully effective in its portrayal of unnatural affinities between a hybrid idiot and the strange fish of an isolated lake, which at the last avenge their biped kinsman’s murder. Later work of Mr. Cobb introduces an element of possible science, as in the tale of hereditary memory where a modern man with a negroid strain utters words in African jungle speech when run down by a train under visual and aural circumstances recalling the maiming of his black ancestor by a rhinoceros a century before.

Extremely high in artistic stature is the novel *The Dark Chamber* (1927), by the late Leonard Cline. This is the tale of a man who—with the characteristic ambition of the Gothic or Byronic hero-villain—seeks to defy Nature and recapture every moment of his past life through the abnormal stimulation of memory. To this end he employs endless notes, records, mnemonic objects, and pictures—and finally odours, music, and exotic drugs. At last his ambition goes beyond his personal life and reaches toward the black abysses of hereditary memory—even back to pre-human days amidst the steaming swamps of the Carboniferous age, and to still more unimaginable deeps of primal time and entity. He calls for madder music and takes stronger drugs, and finally his great dog grows oddly afraid of him. A noxious animal stench encompasses him, and he grows vacant-faced and sub-human. In the end he takes to the woods, howling at night beneath windows. He is finally found in a thicket, mangled to death. Beside him is the mangled corpse of his dog. They have killed each other. The atmosphere of this novel is malevolently potent, much attention being paid to the central figure’s sinister home and household.

A less subtle and well-balanced but nevertheless highly effective creation is Herbert S. Gorman’s novel, *The Place Called Dagon*, which relates the dark history of a western Massachusetts backwater where the descendants of refugees from the Salem witchcraft still keep alive the morbid and degenerate horrors of the Black Sabbath.

*Sinister House*, by Leland Hall, has touches of magnificent atmosphere but is marred by a somewhat mediocre romanticism.

Very notable in their way are some of the weird conceptions of the novelist and short-story writer Edward Lucas White, most of whose themes arise from actual dreams. “The Song of the Sirens” has a very pervasive strangeness, while such things as “Lukundoo” and “The Snout” rouse darker apprehensions. Mr. White imparts a very peculiar quality to his tales—an oblique sort of glamour which has its own distinctive type of convincingness.

Of younger Americans, none strikes the note of cosmic terror so well as the California poet, artist, and fictionist Clark Ashton Smith, whose bizarre writings, drawings, paintings, and stories are the delight of a sensitive few. Mr. Smith has for his background a universe of remote and paralysing fright—jungles of poisonous and iridescent blossoms on the moons of Saturn, evil and grotesque temples in Atlantis, Lemuria, and forgotten elder worlds, and dank morasses of spotted death-fungi in spectral countries beyond earth’s rim. His longest and most ambitious poem, *The Hashish-Eater*, is in pentameter blank verse; and opens up chaotic and incredible vistas of kaleidoscopic nightmare in the spaces between the stars. In sheer

daemonic strangeness and fertility of conception, Mr. Smith is perhaps unexcelled by any other writer dead or living. Who else has seen such gorgeous, luxuriant, and feverishly distorted visions of infinite spheres and multiple dimensions and lived to tell the tale? His short stories deal powerfully with other galaxies, worlds, and dimensions, as well as with strange regions and aeons on the earth. He tells of primal Hyperborea and its black amorphous god Tsathoggua; of the lost continent Zothique, and of the fabulous, vampire-curst land of Averoine in mediaeval France. Some of Mr. Smith's best work can be found in the brochure entitled *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933).

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

SUMMER 2017

# Schlock!

Quarterly

Includes Two Episodes of Sword and Planet epic  
**THE CAVES OF MARS**

**THOUGHTS DURING THE STORM**  
Christopher A Lay

**THE GOD OF FAMILIAR PASTURES**  
BY KONSTANTINE PARADIAS

Plus Four More Stories and Poems from the thrilling pages of Schlock! Webzine

[Return to Contents](#)

VAMPIRE STATE by Gavin Chappell

Eyes glowing red, the vampire lunged for Gerald.

Terrified, he scrambled for the carbuncle he'd taken from the ogres' treasury. The moment it was out of his shoe, the darkness of the lock-up vanished as the gem shone out like a magnesium flare. The vampire that had been Maragda cowered back, scrambling to cover eyes that wept blood. Blood ran from her mouth. It seemed as if she had almost glutted herself with blood before she came to him. Her white dress suffused with red as the blood continued to gush from every orifice.

Gerald caught a whiff of something foul, like his mum cooking meat that was well past its sell-by date. Suddenly the vampire was billowing black smoke. Flames leapt out of her white dress. In the carbuncle's light, Gerald recognised it as the folds of a shroud. It was burning now, and so was the walking corpse beneath it. Screeching, the vampire fell back against the door. This too soon caught fire.

Covering nose and mouth against the choking smoke, Gerald ran into the night.

Percy looked down in concern at the shivering, unconscious figure of Maragda's father. Anton lay in his bed, where he had staggered after the funeral feast ended.

He had helped himself to too much funeral ale, drowning his sorrows. The others had stayed downstairs as the guests departed, and swigged dolefully at what remained. Hearing strange noises from upstairs, they had come up to investigate, finding the window open and Anton feverish.

'Exactly the same as Maragda,' Norman said as he shut the window.

'And he's been sleeping in a draught,' Brian said. 'Who left that window open? Him? Silly bastard should've known better, specially after what happened to his daughter.'

'I'm not surprised Gerald cracked up like he did,' Percy said thoughtfully. 'Maragda shouldn't have died from a chill. I thought it looked like something worse.'

'It's a plague,' Norman said, starting back in horror.

Percy looked at him levelly. 'I don't think it's catching,' he said. 'Not unless they bite you.'

'Bite you?' Norman's face twisted. 'You're sounding like Gerald. Do you really think there are vampires round here?'

'You said yourself,' Brian broke in, 'we've met stranger things.'

'One thing we can be sure about,' said Percy, 'Anton's not going to be sitting in judgement over Gerald tomorrow. Even if he lives, he won't be in any fit state.'

‘We’re wasting time here,’ Brian declared. ‘The king’s army is on the way, with knights and barbarians and maybe even ogres going to lay waste to the village and this whole duchy. We should get moving.’

‘We can’t leave Anton here like this,’ Norman complained. ‘He needs someone to look after him.’

‘Brian’s right, we should go,’ said Percy. ‘We should go after Lady Candida and Gurak, help them persuade the duke to raise an army. But Norman’s right too, we can’t just leave Anton here. We’ll tell the villagers what’s happening, get one of them to look after him.’

‘Good thinking, Percy,’ said Norman.

They climbed back down the ladder, hurried across the main room and out into the snowy courtyard. Across the lane was the wheelwright’s place. The man lived over the shop, Percy knew. He banged loudly on the door to the family quarters. He received no answer except for a distant groaning. He frowned at the others, then banged again and kept banging until he heard someone drawing back the bolts.

The door opened. Percy glimpsed a white-faced figure that stared at him in sick horror—then fell face-down on the doorstep.

Percy sprang back.

‘What the fuck...?’ Brian shouted. Grimacing in revulsion, Percy crouched down and felt the wheelwright’s neck. No pulse.

Then the corpse rolled over, grinned, and went for him.

Brian brought his bastard sword down like a fish-spear. It went straight through the wheelwright’s face and came out the back of its skull with a sickening crunch. The wheelwright threshed on the sword blade until Percy drew his own sword and cut its head off.

He froze as he heard more groaning. Several figures were shambling down the stairs towards them; a girl, a boy, a woman. The perfect family group, come to avenge the head of their household.

There was a flash of light from further down the lane. The walking corpses halted momentarily. Percy and his friends turned to see light pouring from the lock-up. As he watched, it caught fire.

‘What’s fuckwit up to now?’ Percy panted as he ran down the lane, followed by Brian and Norman. Percy skidded to a halt in the snow as a figure dashed from the smoking ruin.

It was Gerald. In his hand he held the glowing carbuncle.

‘Gerald!’ Percy cried. ‘What are you doing? How did you get out?’

‘A vampire came in,’ Gerald replied, panting. ‘It was... it had been... Maragda. It burst into flame when I shone my carbuncle on it. I was right! There are undead!’

‘You don’t need tell us that!’ Brian shouted. ‘The undead are coming!’

Percy and Gerald whirled round. They saw Brian and Norman, swords drawn, watching in horror as cottages opened their doors and walking corpses shambled out.

‘Maragda must have been saving me for last,’ Gerald commented. ‘Looks like she went on a biting spree.’

Percy looked back at him strangely. ‘Her dad caught the same fever she had,’ he said. ‘Norman thought it was the plague, but...’

Gerald thrust the glowing carbuncle at the nearest one. It reared back momentarily, then shambled towards him again, batting at him with a hand whose fingernails resembled talons.

‘What are you doing, Gerald?’ Percy asked.

‘My carbuncle killed the other vampire,’ he gasped, as he backed away in horror. ‘But it’s not working on these things.’

‘I don’t think they are vampires,’ Norman said, swinging his sword back and forth to warn off the ones creeping towards him. ‘They’re definitely not like this in my sister’s Twilight books.’

‘They’re more like those zombies we met in Kashamash,’ Percy commented.

Brian hacked and chopped with his bastard sword. A zombie’s head went flying, but the body shambled on towards them.

‘Holy fuck!’ he said.

‘Fight them!’ Percy shouted, lashing out at the closest zombies. ‘Gerald, drop that carbuncle. Where’s your sword?’

‘I don’t know!’ Gerald shouted. ‘You took it off me, remember? When you dragged me to the lock-up!’

Percy went white. ‘Shit,’ he muttered. ‘I left it in the manor.’

Norman was fighting off two zombies. ‘There’s no stopping them!’ he shouted. ‘They just keep coming. What’s controlling them?’

Inspiration struck Gerald. ‘They’re under vampire control,’ he said. ‘Maragda must have them under her spell.’

‘She’s dead, isn’t she?’ Percy asked, still fighting. ‘I mean, she burnt up when you got your carbuncle out.’

‘Then there must be another vampire,’ Gerald said.

‘Of course,’ Percy replied. ‘Anton!’

‘Anton?’ Gerald boggled. ‘When did he become a vampire?’

Percy was busy fighting zombies. In a spare moment, he said, ‘Maragda must have bitten him. We found him just like she was. Now stop titting about and get up to the manor. Shine your light in Anton’s face. It might turn the tables. He’s in his own bed—where you were snoozing.’

‘Yeah,’ said Gerald. ‘And how do I do that? I’ve got no fucking sword. And this carbuncle does nothing to zombies.’

‘Your gi-jhal!’ said Percy. ‘Your ghoul-sign! See if that works on them.’

Gerald rolled down his sleeve. He looked dubiously at the silver claw-scratch that marked him as a ghoul-friend. ‘But they’re not ghouls...’

‘Just try it!’ Percy shouted. Two zombies were attacking him while another, which was missing both its legs, was trying to drag him down to the snow.

Gerald thrust his ghoul-sign towards them but they snarled at him, undeterred. Percy lifted his sword high and brought it smashing down through the ribcage of one zombie, so that the left side of its torso sagged away from its spine. Stoically, it turned and came at him with its claws.

‘Fuck this,’ said Gerald. Shoving the other zombie to one side, he ran across the snow. On either side of him, his friends struggled with the zombies. Norman was down, rolling in the snow with one legless villager that tried to sink its teeth into his throat the more he tried to force it away. Brian stood in blood-stained snow, surrounded by severed limbs, swinging his great bastard sword, but still the zombies came at him; armless, legless, one even that was headless.

Then Gerald was free of the fight. He sprinted across the moonlit snow towards the manor house, entered the courtyard and ran up to the main building. The doors stood open. He ventured inside.

All was still and silent. Only Gerald’s carbuncle illuminated the main room; the fire in the hearth had burnt down to coals. His sword lay on the table and he picked it up, but it gave him little comfort. Panting with fear, he crossed to the ladder and began to ascend.

Still the place was silent. Sword in one hand, carbuncle in the other, he tiptoed up the passage to the room where he had been sleeping. Dropping the carbuncle in his pocket, he pushed the door open.

A motionless figure lay beneath the sheets. It looked like a corpse. Gerald came closer. The chest was not moving. It was Anton. He was not breathing. He was dead. Stone dead.

Or was he? Gerald put his sword down, leaned over and felt the ice-cold skin for a pulse. No, nothing. No signs of life, no vital spark, not the faintest indication that Anton lived on—until a claw-like hand seized him by the throat.

Gerald cried out as the nails dug into his skin, as the fingers closed round his throat. Anton's body lay motionless, like the corpse it was, except for this horrifically mobile arm. The corpse lay still, its body bloated, blood dribbling from its mouth, from its unopened eyes.

They opened, like red pits of malice. The bloody mouth split like a wound to reveal jagged fangs.

'You will join us!' Anton hissed. 'You will become one of us! You will join the undead!'

Gerald tore himself free, leaving strips of skin curling from the claws of the vampire. Anton sat up, lolling like a puppet, then turned in the bed and put his bare feet down on the floorboards. He grinned horribly, again revealing his fangs.

Gerald pulled out the carbuncle and shoved it straight in the vampire's face. The vampire exploded.

Covered in gore, Gerald was flung back down the passage by the force of the blast. He hit the still-open trapdoor with enough force to knock the breath from him, then sagged there, wheezing. The bedchamber blazed with fire and soon smoke filled the passage.

Gerald could feel that his old wound had opened again during all this exertion and blood was leaking into his clothes, which were already stained with the gore of Anton. Vampire-slaying was no kind of rest cure.

As the smoke curled lovingly in the air above him, he heard voices from below.

'I see an arse.' It was Percy's voice. 'Hanging down out of the trapdoor.'

'Whose arse is it?' Brian asked.

'I think it's Gerald's,' Norman replied.

'Euww!' Brian said. 'You recognise Gerald's arse? You must have been looking at it! Perve!'

Gerald struggled to his feet, coughed in the smoke, then shot down the ladder.

He found the others three standing in the main room beside the cold fire, gaping at him. 'What happened to the zombies?' he demanded.

'They stopped attacking,' replied Percy.

'They're dead?'

'They're just standing there like retards,' Brian told him.

'What about Anton?' asked Norman.

Gerald coughed again as smoke wisped down from the floor above. He looked upwards. Red light throbbled through the trapdoor. He could hear a crackling sound. More smoke twirled down.

‘Get the fuck out of here!’ he shouted. ‘Time we left this village.’

As the manor house burned, they ran out into the lane, which was packed with unmoving zombies. Men, women and children stood in the snow, their eyes blank, rocking back and forth as they groaned in chorus. But to Gerald’s relief none of them so much as moved towards the four adventurers as they walked down the lane and onto the stone paves of the king’s highway.

Gerald looked up and down it. To the right, and south, the road led down beyond the snow-covered fields that surrounded the village into the pine forest. To the left, it led northwards and upwards into the Duchy of Overwold. Grabbing some snow, Gerald started to wipe off the gore that covered him.

Once this was done, they marched north. The manor house blazed unchecked above the houses of the silent village.

By dawn they were looking out across a snow-covered plateau as the ruddy light of the sun, rising over the peaks, flooded it with blood. It was a garish sight, with unpleasant associations for all.

‘I could do with a rest,’ Percy said. The others agreed that this would be a good idea.

‘Look!’ said Gerald, pointing at the snowfield ahead. ‘There’s a village. Bound to be an inn. We could rest there.’ His wound was aching from all the exertion, though the bleeding had stopped. He could really do with several weeks of rest, but even a chance to sit down for a bit would be welcome.

As they came down into the slight dip where the village lay, they passed fields where sheep cropped at the grass beneath the snow. A shepherd stood beside a heap of stones, staring into the distance. Norman waved at him, but he did not respond.

‘How rude,’ Norman said disapprovingly.

They entered the village, a prosperous-looking place with two streets lined by stone buildings, some of three storeys. An inn stood on one corner. Despite the apparent wealth, an air of more recent neglect hung over the place. Several villagers stood idly in the streets, paying no attention to the four adventurers.

Gerald pushed open the inn door and entered the cold common room beyond. It was shadow-hung. The fireplace that dominated the far side of the bar was unlit and unswept. A drunk lay head-down at one of the tables. The landlord stood silently in the gloom of the bar.

‘It is first thing in the morning,’ Percy pointed out. ‘Maybe they had a night of it last night.’

‘Who didn’t?’ asked Gerald. He led his friends across the cold room to the bar.

‘Landlord!’ he called. ‘Four rooms for the night and four ales while we’re waiting.’

At first the landlord failed to respond. After an awkward pause, he shuffled forward into the dim light.

The jowled face showed no animation. Dull eyes stared at them for a while. Then the landlord began pulling pints, almost mechanically. He handed the first one to Gerald. As Gerald took it and paid for it, by some accident he brushed the landlord’s hand. The hairs rose on his scalp.

The landlord’s hand was icy cold. Like a corpse.

Gerald dropped his tankard and it hit the unswept floor with a thud, sending ale splashing across the four adventurers’ legs.

‘Gerald!’ Percy complained.

‘I’m all wet now!’ Norman said. ‘You’ve made me all wet!’

Brian grabbed the empty tankard and started wringing out his trouser legs into it. The landlord, showing no sign of having noticed the accident, proffered another pint. Percy stepped over the puddle of ale and was about to take it when Gerald put his hand on his forearm.

‘Look,’ he whispered. ‘The landlord isn’t breathing.’

The landlord continued to hold out the tankard while Percy and the others stared in horror at his motionless chest.

‘And his skin is deathly-cold to the touch,’ Gerald added. ‘That’s why I dropped the tankard.’

‘I’m getting out of here,’ said Percy nervously. They followed him from the bar.

Percy stood on the corner of the street, staring at the unmoving villagers. Gerald, Brian and Norman caught up with him. They looked around them in creeping horror. The more they looked, the more derelict and abandoned the village seemed. Broken windows, unswept paths, deep snowdrifts, peeling paint. And the villagers stood there, staring into the distance, or down at their shoes. No one was doing anything.

‘They’re dead, Gerald,’ Percy said. ‘Everyone’s dead.’

Brian walked straight up to one of the villagers. ‘Are you dead?’ he bellowed in his face. The echoes of his shout reverberated unnaturally from the stone walls of the village. Gerald cringed, expecting the villager to lash out suddenly with a taloned hand, but there was simply no response. None at all. That was truly unnatural. Most people felt a need to step back from Brian when he approached, even if he wasn’t shouting in their face.

He joined Brian and peered at the villager. Then, tentatively, he touched him. His skin was icy cold.

‘Percy’s right,’ he whispered. ‘Everyone’s dead.’

Fear flooded his heart and he turned and hurried from the village. Staring around them in bewilderment, the others followed him.

‘More zombies,’ Gerald muttered as they hurried down the king’s highway. ‘What is this, some kind of badly-directed zombie apocalypse?’

‘When the king comes, these saps won’t be able to resist him,’ Brian said. ‘There’s no hope of raising an army in this duchy. It’s full of brain-dead zombies.’

‘We’ll go to Castle Overwold,’ Gerald resolved, ‘find Lord Gurak and Lady Candida, and then we’ll get the fuck out of here. Hopefully we’ll get down to Trinovant in time to warn them about the king.’

They journeyed through a dismal, silent land. Several more villages were the same as the first; recent signs of dereliction, unmoving figures just standing around in the sunlight; some with snow piled on their heads and shoulders. Not vampires. But nevertheless, the walking dead.

In places, they saw towers or castles on distant hilltops. These too were dark and lifeless-looking. Brian wanted them to explore one, but democracy triumphed and he was shouted down.

‘Let’s just find our friends and get out of this country!’ Gerald repeated.

On the second day of their journey through the cold land, they saw, standing in the middle of a bleak, windswept moor where sheep cropped miserably at frozen grass, framed by the mountain peaks, a great citadel. Huddled at its feet like ducklings around their mother was a small settlement of houses. Outside was a large cemetery.

From where they stood, they could see a tiny figure digging a grave, while another lay unmoving on the ground beside them. Other figures stood nearby but they were unmoving.

‘They’re not dead,’ Percy said.

‘One of them isn’t,’ Norman corrected him.

‘Come on,’ said Gerald. ‘At least there’s someone here who’s not a zombie.’

They started down the highway towards the citadel and its settlement. Soon the graveyard had vanished behind a rise in the ground and all they could see were the towers of the citadel above the trees.

They came round a rocky outcrop and the cemetery stretched out before them, the citadel in the background. They could hear a voice, sobbing and wailing, then cursing someone.

‘Why do you just stand there watching?’ it was demanding. It was a woman’s voice. A chill struck Gerald. He led the others into the graveyard.

In an open space near the middle, a grave had been hacked from the cold earth. Soil was piled up on one side of it. The woman who had been digging it put down a spade and scrambled out. Scowling at the motionless figures dotted about the graveyard, she went to the motionless figure lying on the snow-covered ground. With an effort, she picked it up. She turned and began to carry the corpse towards the freshly dug grave. Gerald recognised the white streak in her hair.

He wanted to be sick. It was Lady Candida. And the shrouded body she bore in her arms, as tears ran down her cheeks, was the right size and shape for Lord Gurak.

‘Milady!’ Norman cried, and the others echoed him. Gerald ran forward, followed by Percy, and together they aided Lady Candida with her burden.

‘What happened, milady?’ Gerald asked as gently as he could.

She looked at him blindly. ‘I’ll put him in the earth,’ she said. ‘Mother Tesh will embrace him in death as I never did in life.’

‘Is it Lord Gurak?’ Percy asked. ‘What happened to him?’ He looked at the motionless figures dotted around the cemetery. ‘Was it... the zombies?’

She did not answer him at once. Together they lowered the body into the grave, while Brian and Norman looked on awkwardly. The zombies moaned quietly.

Lady Candida threw the first clods down onto the shrouded figure. Percy took the spade and began to shovel the heaped earth back into the grave. Gerald took Lady Candida to one side.

‘Milady?’ he said gently. ‘You must tell us what happened.’

But she said nothing, just stared blindly across the graveyard. A cold wind blew, sending snow skittering across the grave. Brian and Norman helped Percy by flinging earth in with their bare hands.

‘Come with me,’ Lady Candida whispered when the grave was filled. She led them from the graveyard and into the settlement.

They halted at an inn as dilapidated as the last. Lady Candida pushed open the door and led them into the cold, cavernous bar where a buxom landlady gazed into space. Lady Candida took them upstairs into a chamber where she sat down on the bed. As they came in, she put her head in her hands and sobbed.

Gerald went to comfort her but Percy held him back, shaking his head. The boys watched her grief uncomfortably. When she had cried herself out, she dabbed at her eyes with a filmy scarf, and began speaking in a monotone.

‘We rode across a country that seemed barely inhabited. Every village we passed through was deserted except for a few idlers. When at last we reached Castle Overwold it was early

evening and we took rooms at this inn. Lord Gurak dealt with the uncommunicative landlady, who took his money as if in a dream. We asked her when the Duke accepted petitioners but she would not say. Since our mission was of the utmost urgency, we resolved to go at once to the citadel and seek his grace.

‘The citadel was neglected, unheated, full of dust and cobwebs, like the settlement and the inn itself. We found no one in the staterooms. Lord Gurak suggested we each choose a part of the citadel and explore it alone until we could find the duke—or anyone who knew where he might be. I took the upper levels while milord investigated the lower.

‘I found no one but a few servants in the dust-thick halls and passages of the citadel. Like the landlady, the servants were unmoving and unspeaking; I could get nothing from them. Frustrated, I returned downstairs to meet Lord Gurak. He seemed distant, dreamy. It seemed he had not found the duke.

‘We returned to the inn as evening was turning into night, and there we sought our beds. I slept like the dead, despite the crypt-like coldness of the chamber, but when I woke in the morning I found Lord Gurak tossing and turning in his bed, feverish...’ ‘And I think we all know what happened then,’ said Gerald. He got to his feet.

Lady Candida looked up, her beautiful eyes wide with surprise.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Look, this is going to come as a shock to you,’ Gerald began, ‘but Lord Gurak is now a vamp...’

Percy burst into a fit of coughing. ‘Sit down, Gerald,’ he wheezed. ‘Let milady finish her story.’

Gerald shrugged and did as Percy suggested. He listened to the rest impatiently.

‘He fought the fever for a long time, while I tended him and nursed him,’ Lady Candida went on. ‘I lost all track of time. But at last he gave up the ghost, and due to the slothfulness of the boors who dwell in this village, I had to dig his grave for him. I went back up to the citadel when I knew milord was dead, hoping to find his grace, hoping to find help. But none came. The citadel remained deserted by all but the dust and silent servants. And so you found me at the graveside.’

While Norman spoke sympathetically to Lady Candida, Gerald drew Percy to one side. ‘Look, it’s obvious what’s happened,’ he began.

‘I know it’s obvious,’ Percy hissed. ‘What were you going to do, dig him up and stick a stake through his heart? How do you think Lady Candida would feel?’

Gerald felt stupid. ‘She’d not be happy,’ he said at last. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘It’s a funeral, isn’t it?’ said Percy. ‘What else do you do at a funeral—except get pissed?’

They sent Brian and Norman downstairs to get some ale—and wine, at Lady Candida’s request—and food from the unspeaking landlady. The duo returned shortly after, weighed down with acquisitions which, Brian boasted, they had taken from under her very nose without her noticing.

So the funeral feast began. Somewhere round midnight, Lady Candida expressed a wish to go to bed. Gerald seconded the motion and said he’d like to join her. He seemed surprised when they all ended up outside her door. Percy grinned and shrugged.

‘Plenty of rooms to choose from,’ he said, opening a door at random. Gerald copied him and found a cold, dusty room that held little appeal. He tried another room. After a while, he realised that they were all as bad as each other, so he crawled into a bed, still fully dressed, and went to sleep.

He woke to find the afternoon sun streaming in through the window and Percy shaking him awake.

‘Wassit?’ he mumbled. ‘Wassamarrer?’

‘Wake up, Gerald,’ Percy said, his voice urgent. ‘Wake up!’

Gerald sat up. Percy’s face was white. From somewhere else in the building came a wailing moan.

‘It’s not...?’ he began.

Percy nodded. ‘Lady Candida,’ he said. ‘She’s feverish.’

Gerald rushed into her bedchamber. She lay on the bed, thrashing around, sweat standing out on her forehead and soaking her nightgown. Norman sat beside her bed, trying to mop her brow, while Brian watched worriedly

Norman looked up. He shook his head. ‘Just like the others,’ he said. ‘The window was open when we came in.’

Gerald ran out of the room. Percy followed him, catching up as they got outside.

‘Where are you going?’ he panted.

‘Graveyard,’ Gerald said shortly

They reached the cemetery only a few minutes later. Lord Gurak’s grave had been disturbed. The soil had been flung all over the place, and the empty grave itself gaped like a hungry mouth. Gerald cursed.

There was no sign of the corpse, but Gerald hadn’t expected there to be.

‘I always hated that bastard,’ he said. ‘We should have realised. We should have taken precautions. We should have done something to protect her!’

‘What, garlic? Crucifixes?’ Percy said. ‘We don’t even know if that works in this world. Anyway, how were we to know that as soon as he became a vampire, Lord Gurak would come straight back for Lady Candida?’

‘I said we should have staked him!’ Gerald whirled round, pointing accusingly at Percy.

Percy looked in silence at the churned-up grave soil. ‘We’d better get back,’ he said.

By the time they had returned to the chamber, Lady Candida was lying quietly. For a moment Gerald thought death had already come, but then her eyes opened and fixed upon him.

‘Lord Gurak came to me in the night,’ she said.

Gerald grunted. ‘I thought as much.’

‘I was so happy!’ she murmured. ‘I thought I had lost him forever. Now we will be united eternally. Beyond the grave.’

Something wrenched at Gerald’s heart. He had never been quite sure what he felt for this woman. He knew that his rivalry with Lord Gurak had been over more than just who led the group. But now Lord Gurak had won. Lady Candida and Gurak would be together in eternity.

‘He gave me a message,’ she added. ‘For you.’

‘For me? What did the bastard say?’ Gerald demanded

‘He told me how he had encountered Duke Overwold in the crypt beneath the citadel, where the vampire duke lies in state in his tomb, his courtiers around him. How, as the sun set, his grace awoke, drank his blood and let him go free. How Lord Gurak became a vampire after death.

‘Milord was terrified when he returned, lost and alone—until he felt an urge to go to the citadel crypt. Here he learnt what had happened, how he had joined the legions of the undead. He learnt the history of this place from older vampires who spoke in guarded whispers to the newcomer. How the gentry of this land had become vampires after death, ruling from the shadows, much as they rule many lands in this world and others.

‘But a new breed of vampire has arisen, who have challenged the immemorial customs of the vampire race. They celebrate their blood-lust in unfettered orgies of vampirism, spread throughout the duchy at night, drinking the blood of all they encountered; transforming the gentry into vampires, the peasantry into mindless zombies, unthinking beasts who obey the commands of vampires yet have no life of their own; whose blood is stale and flat. They have now reached even the villages at the edge of the duchy—as we saw.

‘Formerly, vampires treated humans as cattle from whom they took no more than they had to in order to survive. But the new breed, in their youthful brashness, drain the human population dry. Now they are blood-starved, having turned all their bloodstock into zombies.

‘Now that they have bled the duchy white, they plan... expansion.’

‘Expansion?’ Gerald gulped.

‘Duke Overwold will send out his zombie armies to conquer the surrounding lands. They will seize the plump, fat, juicy city of Trinovant and suck it dry. Then move on. Like a plague of locusts, the vampires will spread through the world, their ever-growing zombie army conquering cities and kingdoms and empires...’

‘Trinovant is in for trouble,’ Percy said. ‘Between the zombies and the army of the king...’

‘But these vampires who spoke to Lord Gurak...’ Gerald said. ‘They don’t agree?’

‘They believe the vampires should never have gone to such extremes,’ she replied. ‘They should have preserved the old system, preying upon their people but never going so far. Where will it end? In a world sucked dry? Yet they can do nothing against the duke, who is so much more powerful than them.’

‘So what’s to be done?’ Gerald asked.

‘The vampires control the zombies with the power of their minds,’ Lady Candida went on. ‘The duke has a circlet which, when worn, enhances the mental power of the wearer and makes him more powerful than the other vampires: thus he can control all the zombies. It lies with him in his tomb. A brave adventurer might be able to wrest it from him and gain control over the zombie army. Order them to rise up in revolt against their vampire lords. And...’

‘And send them to attack the king!’ Gerald exclaimed. ‘Even an army of ogres will be no match against the undead!’ He drew his carbuncle from his shoe and its light was like daylight in the chamber. ‘And with this,’ he said, ‘no vampire can stop us! Come on, guys!’

Norman didn’t move. ‘What about milady?’ he asked. ‘Who’s going to look after her?’ Tired out by her long speech, she had returned to her sleep, or coma, or whatever it was.

Gerald looked at him incredulously. ‘Look at her!’ he said. ‘She’s turning into a vampire! Lord bloody Gurak’s bitten her, and he wants her to join him. Are you going to wait around until she bites you?’ Suspicion furrowed his brow. ‘You don’t want to be eternally united beyond the grave as well, do you?’

‘I just don’t think we should abandon her,’ Norman objected. ‘She’s not well.’

‘She’s turning into a vampire,’ Gerald repeated. ‘She’s...’ He slumped down in a chair and put the carbuncle back in his shoe. ‘Okay,’ he said tiredly. ‘I get what you’re saying. We can’t really leave her to die on her own.’

‘How many of us do we need to steal the circlet of the vampire duke?’ Percy asked suddenly. ‘As long as we go now while it’s still daylight, those vampires are still going to be dead, right? It’s only in the night-time that they walk. So we can leave Norman here to look after Lady Candida, and then go and get the circlet. Like now. Before the vampires get busy.’

‘Okay...’ said Gerald doubtfully. ‘You stay here, Norman. But for fuck’s sake get running the moment she’s dead. Like Percy says, night’s when the vampires walk. We don’t want you joining their legions of the undead.’ He turned to Percy and Brian. ‘Come on, guys. We’re outa here.’

They went down into the cold, gloomy common room of the inn, where the landlady still stood at the bar. As Gerald went past, he saw that spiders had woven a cobweb that led from her head to her shoulders. He shuddered, and hurried outside.

It was late afternoon, and the sunlight slanted down through the clouds as it sank behind the western peaks. Twilight wasn’t far off. Not a good time to be vampire slaying.

They hurried up the winding streets of the settlement, towards the soaring citadel. Long shadows hung over the courtyard as they approached the barbican.

No guards stood at the entrance. The courtyard was thick with snow and they had to plough through deep drifts. When they reached the steps that led up to the gate, Gerald saw that within all was dark and silent.

‘As quiet as the grave,’ Percy murmured.

‘Thanks for that,’ Gerald snapped. ‘That’s the last thing we want to be thinking about.’

‘Come on, you two,’ said Brian. ‘Why’ve you always got to be bickering? Like a married couple.’ He swept up the steps and vanished into the gloom of the citadel.

Gerald and Percy followed. Gerald fingered the carbuncle he carried in his pocket. He wanted to get this all over with.

The steps led into a large, echoing hall. Brian stood in the middle, idly swinging his bastard sword. Sconces projected from the walls but none of them were lit. Tapestries and banners hung from the ceiling, fading and gathering dust. On the far side, a chair stood on a small dais. It was empty, like the citadel as a whole.

‘There’s some stairs back here,’ Percy reported, having gone to explore. A flight of steps led upwards, another downwards. Gerald remembered what Lady Candida had said. She had looked upstairs while Gurak went below—into the crypts of the citadel. And down was where they had to go.

He looked up at a noise from upstairs. Moments later, two figures shuffled into view at the head of the steps, and stood in silence. They wore plain but elegant clothes. Servants, Gerald realised.

‘What do they want?’ Brian wanted to know. The servants stood at the head of the steps, unspeaking, unmoving.

Gerald shook his head. ‘Who knows what zombies want?’ he asked. ‘Time we were moving. Down here.’

He led them down the steps to the crypt.

The walls were dank and dripping, the air was cold and musty. Beyond the first few steps, it was pitch dark until Gerald produced his carbuncle. The light from the gem chased away the shadows and revealed a long staircase leading down into the depths of the earth. The drip-drip-drip of water was audible from below.

‘Come on,’ Percy said. ‘They’re dead until sunset. No point in arseing around.’

As they picked the way down the slimy steps, the cold grew more and more intense. The shadows flickered as Gerald’s hand shook and the carbuncle’s light flickered. They reached the foot of the steps, where a passageway led onwards.

Gerald froze as he heard slow, dragging footsteps. But the sound was coming from the steps behind them. He turned round, and the shadows ducked and weaved with the light cast by the carbuncle. Gerald shone it upwards.

Coming down the steps with slow, inexorable tread were the two servants. Behind them came several more.

‘I don’t like the look of this,’ Percy said nervously.

Gerald couldn’t breathe. They were trapped beneath the earth. The zombies stood between them and escape.

He tried to see the bright side.

‘Stop being a coward, Percy,’ he said. ‘All we have to do is deal with the vampires and these zombies will stop in their tracks. Remember Maragda’s village?’

Brian postured with his bastard sword. ‘Just try it!’ he told the slowly approaching zombies. ‘You’re messing with Brian the Destroyer here.’

They turned to go on. At the end of the wet, slimy passage was an ornate archway. This must lead to the crypt, Gerald realised. As he led his friends forwards, he saw something moving in the darkness beyond it. Fear clutched him. Something was in there, something alive—or undead. It couldn’t be the vampires. The sun had not yet set. They must still be in their tombs.

The figures shuffled forward. Three, no four, zombies lurched down the passageway towards them. They carried cudgels. Gerald looked over his shoulder. The other zombies were following. Shit, he thought to himself. They were cut off.

‘Brian, you take the ones coming down the steps!’ he shouted. His terrified echo mocked him as it resounded from the cold, dank walls. ‘Percy, come with me! We’ll cut our way through them.’

Brian yelled a barbarian war-cry as he raced towards the steps, brandishing his bastard sword. Percy and Gerald approached the zombies from the crypt with less enthusiasm. Carbuncle in one hand, sword in the other, Gerald attacked the closest one.

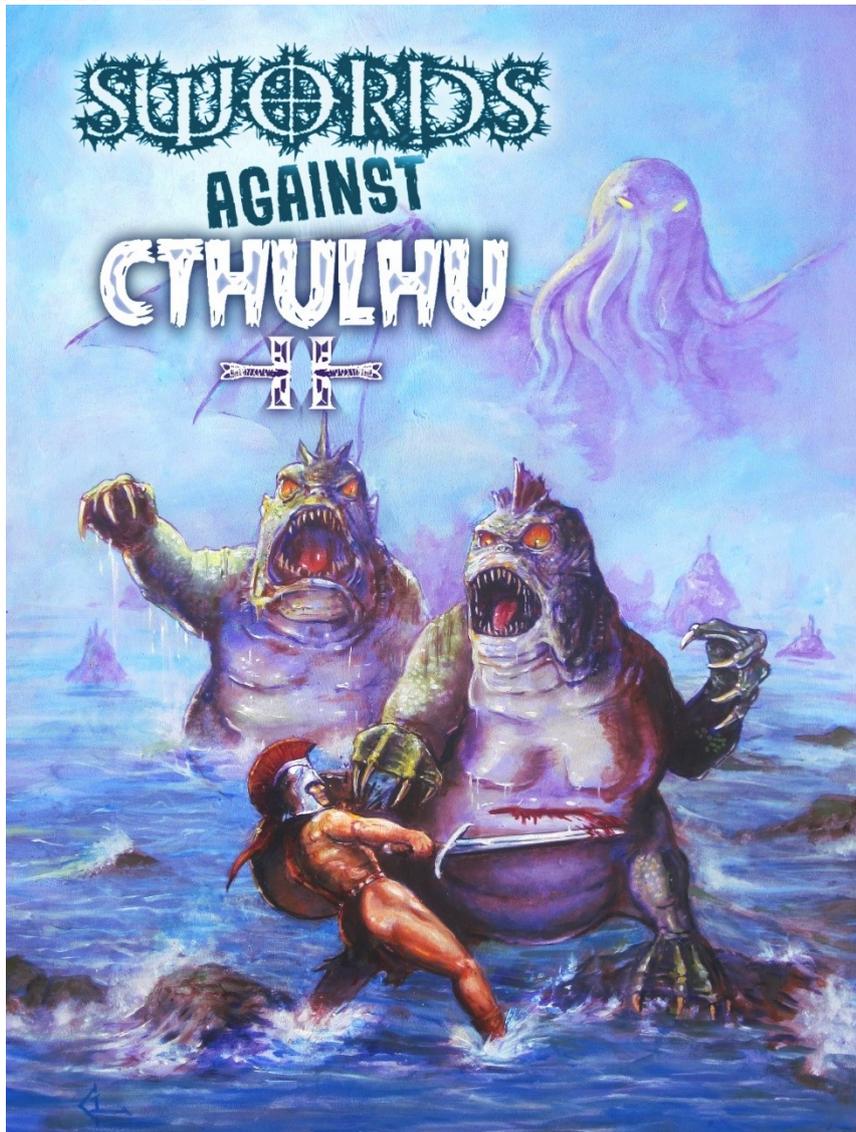
With unanticipated speed, the zombie blocked his blow with the heavy cudgel. Gerald's sword sank into the wood and stuck there. The zombie seized his left wrist with its taloned claw. Desperately Gerald tried to free his sword. As they circled in the centre of the passage, the shadows thrown by the carbuncle danced across the walls. He saw Percy fighting two zombies.

Then he yanked his sword free from the zombie's cudgel, turned, and slipped on the wet floor. He tried to right himself but a bolt of pain shot through him from his barely-healed wound and he went down with a crash, tearing his wrist from the zombie's grip but losing the carbuncle in the process.

Their only source of light, the tiny, glowing gem, went skittering down the passage, like a shooting star bouncing into dark infinity. It splashed into a patch of slime and its light winked out. Shadows swooped down on every side: blackness closed around the struggling adventurers. So near yet so far. They were alone in the dark.

Alone, but for the undead...

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



[Return to Contents](#)

## THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

### Episode Thirty-Six

Colonel Bridgemont was almost an hour bringing his command through the ruined streets of Callisto Base 1 to the scene of the collapse of Pod 3. The base was chaos everywhere. The air was thick with dust from concrete crushed to powder. So heavy was it that Bridgemont could barely see more than a dozen yards ahead. People covered with the powder wandered, stunned, like wraiths through the darkened streets.

Lights had gone out, and in places the water pipes that ran under the sidewalks burst, sending huge geysers high overhead. Doorways lay open, the doors broken off their hinges. Windows were shattered and shards of glass lay in thick, deadly carpets underfoot.

Each time Bridgemont made out the black and purple uniform of Jovian Security wandering among the dispirited wraiths that were the colonists of Callisto, he added the man or woman wearing the uniform to his growing ranks, all working their way toward the collapse of Pod 3 where many hundreds of people may—or may not—still lay trapped under the ruins.

Bridgemont did not know. And the emergency crews on site were too busy working to respond to his queries.

But at last, after nearly an hour of making his painstaking way through the fog of dust and shattered glass, Bridgemont found the site.

Pod 3 was somewhat removed from the single, central main street that functioned almost as an axis for the city. All the Pod were to be found at the end of narrow side streets that branched out from the main street, named, most unimaginatively, Street 1. Most of the Pods were isolated from the others, with only the single street attaching them to Street 1. Some, however, were connected to neighboring Pods with yet even smaller side streets.

That was the case with Pod 3. It was connected by two narrow streets to Pods 1 and 5. In addition to the surface streets were several subsurface tunnels forming part of a network that ran all throughout the colony

It was by way of Street 1 that Bridgemont and his troops made their way through the rubble to the scene of the collapse.

It was not a pretty sight.

The yellow emergency walls had slammed down, cutting Pod 3 off from the rest of the colony, in case of any breaks that would cause the atmosphere within the colony to be sucked out into space. Cracks had formed in the transparent steel that made up the canopy over the side street leading to Pod 3. The walkways were shattered, and the many plants that had once lined the street had been uprooted in the chaos of the battle over Callisto. Trunks of trees lay in broken pieces while flowering bushes lay in heaps.

A commander leading an emergency squad recognized Colonel Bridgemont. He stepped up to the man saluted.

“Sir!” he said.

Bridgemont surveyed the scene with narrowing eyes.

“Whadda we got?” he asked.

“It’s not good, sir,” the commander replied.

“Anyone get out?”

“We don’t know that yet, sir. Pod 3 is connected, above surface, to both Pod 1 and 5, sir.”

“Yeah?”

“But everything was shut down when Pod 3 collapsed. Anyone who got out had to do it before the emergency walls came down.”

“And...?”

“Except for maybe a couple dozen, and they’re still being counted in... well, we haven’t heard anything from any possible survivors.”

“What about the tunnels?”

“We’ve sent a couple teams in, sir. No power, downstairs. No light. Tricky, dangerous footing.”

“You send in the nanobots?”

“Yes, sir. No positive reports from them yet, either.”

Reports were still coming in from throughout Callisto Base 1 of weakened pods nearing collapse. But this, the already collapsed Pod 3, was of the highest priority. Bridgemont did not order anyone away from the site of the Pod 3 collapse. But, desperate as it was, he did not pull anyone away from the many other disaster sites, either. They needed every hand they had. Bridgemont considered the situation with a scowl upon his face.

He raised his wristband to his face. Tapping quickly on the keypad, he managed to get a signal out to the “Bellerophon”.

“Also good news,” Bridgemont said. “This is Bridgemont,” he said. “Give me Westland, if that battle hound can spare a minute.”

The wristband went silent, then a series of nearly silent electronic ‘beeps and ‘boops’ told Bridgemont that his communication was being sent through.

Finally a holographic image of Colonel Westland at his command center in the “Bellerophon” showed up above Bridgemont’s wristband.

“Yuh, Westland here. That you, Bridgemont?”

“Yeah. What’s it looking like, upstairs?”

“We got the hounds on the run. That’s the good news. And we took out one of their big ships.”

“Also good news,” Bridgemont interjected.

“Yeah,” Westland agreed. His voice was hoarse and harsh. “But we lost the other one. It got away.”

“Not good news,” Bridgemont said.

“Not at all,” Westland admitted. “But the rest are bailing out. We have the field to ourselves. Hardy is mopping up on Europa and Ganymede. I expect to hear from him soon.”

“Good to know,” Bridgemont said. “Good to know.”

“How’s things downtown?” Westland asked.

“Not good. Almost every kind of bad.”

“Oh?”

“Pod 3 has collapsed. We have maybe as many as two or three thousand dead, or trapped.”

“I can send some people your way,” Westland offered,

“Thanks. Every hand you can spare.”

“Ah... got it now. My boys are showing it to me on our visiscreens... Damn... damn...that looks bad. Real bad. I’ll send it down to you.”

Instantly a holographic image was projected from Colonel Bridgemont’s wristband. The done, seen from above, was ruined, It lay flat in a depression it had created itself when it fell, its beams and shattered steels twisted upon itself, like a monstrous, charred and collapsed soufflé. Except this soufflé had buried underneath it perhaps many hundreds of people.

The ice just beyond the dome had melted in the heat of the collapse, to almost instantly freeze again in the sub-zero temperatures of the Callistoan desert. Frozen ice, the sick, purplish color of bruised flesh hung in nightmarish icicles from the contorted beams. In some cases, the ice had frozen so quickly that splashes of it remained poised, like furious waves ready to spill but yet unmoving.

“You see that?” Westland asked.

“Yeh. Got it,” Bridgemont answered tersely.

“We can’t get to the neighboring streets from here,” he said. “Can you give me a recon?”

“Did and done,” Westland answered from the command center of the “Bellerophon”. He ordered the ship’s cameras to pan the area surrounding Pod 3. Bridgemont watched, eyes tense, but silent, as the holographic image projected from his wristband moved across the area with a smooth and mechanical motion.

The side streets leading to Pod 3 had been locked down by the bright orange emergency walls. The transparent domes above those streets were cracked, the support beams bent and straining under the shifting weight. Outside those streets emergency crews were working hard, but the emergency walls could not be made to reopen.

Bridgemont’s face gave no clue to what he was thinking, or feeling. His wife, or her body, was somewhere in that rubble.

He heard a voice break through on his wristband.

“Sir?” it said. It was Lieutenant Hardy, leading his fighters to Europa. He was responding to the call Colonel Westland’s had just put to him.

“Yeah,” Westland said to Bridgemont. “I wanted you in on this discussion.”

“All right,” was all that Colonel Bridgemont said.

“Hardy, send half your people back here. You go on to Europa with half your fighters. We need those people.”

“Yes, sir,” Hardy answered.

“And so you know, Pod 3 has collapsed. And the other pods are pretty shaky.”

Lieutenant Hardy had spent many happy hours at Pod 3, enjoying the company of his new friends, Illara, Story Talbot and Colonel Bridgemont himself. Though shocked, Hardy gave no clue to his feelings.

“Yes, sir,” was all he said.

Signing off with Colonel Westland, Hardy gave a series of curt commands to the fighters in his fleet. Nine of the seventeen ships that flew with him turned back to meet up with the “Bellerophon”. Hardy flew on toward Europa with eight ships.

Junior Lieutenant Maria Sanchez, Lieutenant Harold Blanche, and Lieutenant Samuel Sanders, aka, ‘Misfit’, of his original squadron, flew on with Lieutenant Hardy to Europa.

Jeffrey led Emily toward the crowds that stood surrounding the massive building that was the civilian living quarters, connected to the now destroyed Educational Center. Emily, groggy with morphine, searched the crowds for her parents, Story and Joyce Talbot.

“Do you see them?” she asked Jeffrey, her voice rising. “Do you see them?” Jeffrey was taller than Emily by a good two feet, so it made sense to her that he should be able to pick them easily out of the crowds.

“Not yet. Not yet... I’m looking,” Jeffrey answered.

“Where are they?” Emily demanded. “They should be here!”

Jeffrey just silently shook his head as he led Emily through the stunned multitude.

Though Pod 3 was crowded, the silence was heavy. Shocked at all that had happened thus far, no one knew what to say. Indeed, any sound they could make seemed to them all only grotesquely out of place. They milled about, some in aimless circles, pointlessly, or engaging themselves in futile chores, the routine the mundane giving them a hopeless comfort in the face of the chaos that had descended upon them.

One woman, who had hurriedly bundled up armfuls of clothing, sat on a bench nearby, endlessly folding and refolding it into separate piles, as her husband stood at her elbow, watching her with tears brimming his eyes. Others moved through the crowd, haunting it, almost, wraithlike, projecting images of wives, husbands and children from their wristbands asking, ‘Have you seen her?’, ‘Have you seen him?’

The street and walkways were covered with dust that had settled from the collapse of the Educational Center. One doughty soul at the edge of the massed crowd took it upon himself to sweep the dust from the walkway with a palm frond broken from a tree.

“Just tryin’ to nice it up,” he said to himself, over and over. “Just tryin’ to nice it up a bit.”

Holding her hand, Jeffrey led Emily through the dazed throng, his eyes ever alert for any sight of their parents. He had no idea that so many people were there at Pod 3.

Then Emily jerked at Jeffrey’s hand.

“There they are!” Emily squealed, pulling Jeffrey. “There they are! And Missus Bridgemont, and, and... Illara’s friends... the astronomer lady. And her boyfriend!”

Jeffrey looked in the direction Emily was pulling him. Yes. There they were, standing apart from the milling crowds.

“Mom! Dad!” he called out, waving his hand over his head. “We’re here! We’re here!”

Story Talbot and Joyce heard Jeffrey’s call. They turned to look.

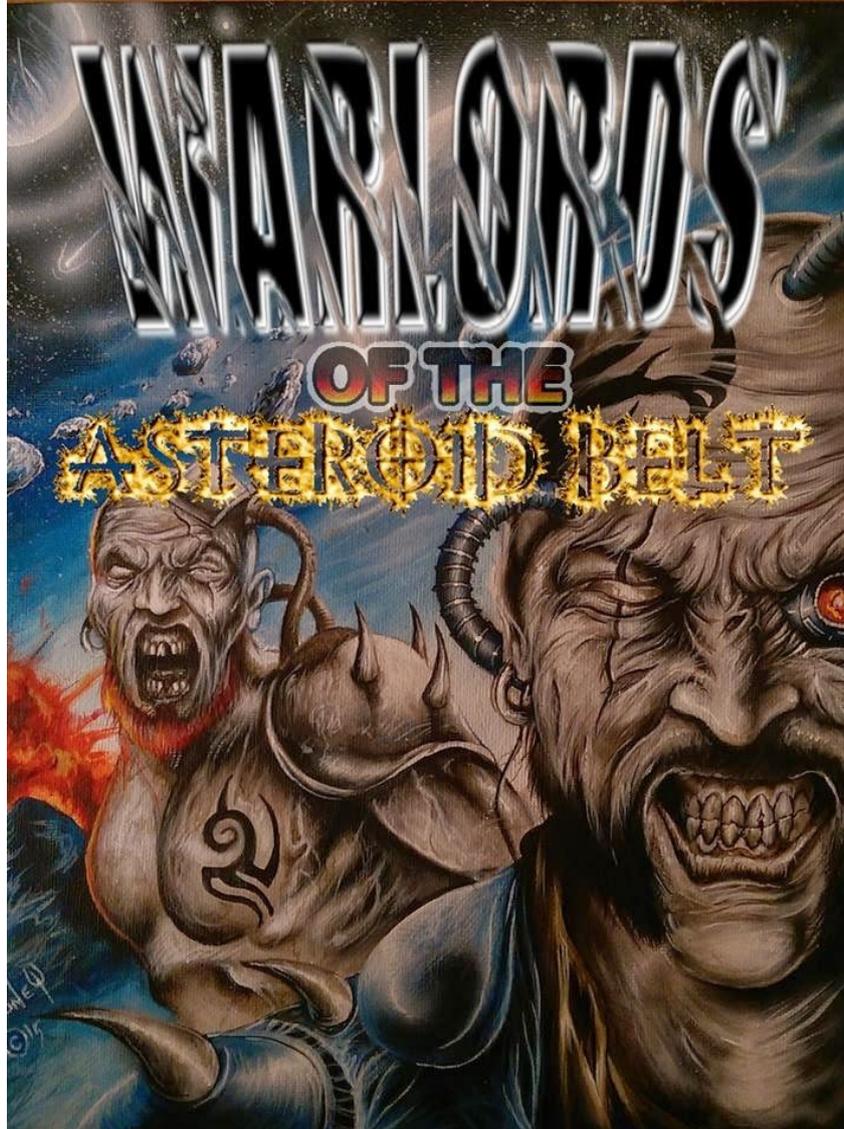
And the ground under their feet shifted suddenly by several feet. It dropped a foot, then rose up again.

“Emily!” Joyce cried out. “Jeffrey!”

Her voice was muffled by the huge groaning of bending steel as the dome overhead began to buckle.

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](#).*

[Return to Contents](#)

## THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

### Book One: The Coming of The Martians

#### Chapter One: The Eve of The War

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as sources of human danger, or thought of them only to dismiss the idea of life upon them as impossible or improbable. It is curious to recall some of the mental habits of those departed days. At most terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise.

Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.

The planet Mars, I scarcely need remind the reader, revolves about the sun at a mean distance of 140,000,000 miles, and the light and heat it receives from the sun is barely half of that received by this world. It must be, if the nebular hypothesis has any truth, older than our world; and long before this earth ceased to be molten, life upon its surface must have begun its course. The fact that it is scarcely one seventh of the volume of the earth must have accelerated its cooling to the temperature at which life could begin. It has air and water and all that is necessary for the support of animated existence.

Yet so vain is man, and so blinded by his vanity, that no writer, up to the very end of the nineteenth century, expressed any idea that intelligent life might have developed there far, or indeed at all, beyond its earthly level. Nor was it generally understood that since Mars is older than our earth, with scarcely a quarter of the superficial area and remoter from the sun, it necessarily follows that it is not only more distant from time's beginning but nearer its end.

The secular cooling that must someday overtake our planet has already gone far indeed with our neighbour. Its physical condition is still largely a mystery, but we know now that even in its equatorial region the midday temperature barely approaches that of our coldest winter. Its air is much more attenuated than ours, its oceans have shrunk until they cover but a third of its surface, and as its slow seasons change huge snow-caps gather and melt about either pole and periodically inundate its temperate zones. That last stage of exhaustion, which to us is still incredibly remote, has become a present-day problem for the inhabitants of Mars. The immediate pressure of necessity has brightened their intellects, enlarged their powers, and hardened their hearts. And looking across space with instruments, and intelligences such as we have scarcely dreamed of, they see, at its nearest distance only 35,000,000 of miles sunward of them, a morning star of hope, our own warmer planet, green with vegetation and

grey with water, with a cloudy atmosphere eloquent of fertility, with glimpses through its drifting cloud wisps of broad stretches of populous country and narrow, navy-crowded seas.

And we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us. The intellectual side of man already admits that life is an incessant struggle for existence, and it would seem that this too is the belief of the minds upon Mars. Their world is far gone in its cooling and this world is still crowded with life, but crowded only with what they regard as inferior animals. To carry warfare sunward is, indeed, their only escape from the destruction that, generation after generation, creeps upon them.

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

The Martians seem to have calculated their descent with amazing subtlety--their mathematical learning is evidently far in excess of ours--and to have carried out their preparations with a well-nigh perfect unanimity. Had our instruments permitted it, we might have seen the gathering trouble far back in the nineteenth century. Men like Schiaparelli watched the red planet--it is odd, by-the-by, that for countless centuries Mars has been the star of war--but failed to interpret the fluctuating appearances of the markings they mapped so well. All that time the Martians must have been getting ready.

During the opposition of 1894 a great light was seen on the illuminated part of the disk, first at the Lick Observatory, then by Perrotin of Nice, and then by other observers. English readers heard of it first in the issue of Nature dated August 2. I am inclined to think that this blaze may have been the casting of the huge gun, in the vast pit sunk into their planet, from which their shots were fired at us. Peculiar markings, as yet unexplained, were seen near the site of that outbreak during the next two oppositions.

The storm burst upon us six years ago now. As Mars approached opposition, Lavelle of Java set the wires of the astronomical exchange palpitating with the amazing intelligence of a huge outbreak of incandescent gas upon the planet. It had occurred towards midnight of the twelfth; and the spectroscope, to which he had at once resorted, indicated a mass of flaming gas, chiefly hydrogen, moving with an enormous velocity towards this earth. This jet of fire had become invisible about a quarter past twelve. He compared it to a colossal puff of flame suddenly and violently squirted out of the planet, "as flaming gases rushed out of a gun."

A singularly appropriate phrase it proved. Yet the next day there was nothing of this in the papers except a little note in the Daily Telegraph, and the world went in ignorance of one of the gravest dangers that ever threatened the human race. I might not have heard of the eruption at all had I not met Ogilvy, the well-known astronomer, at Ottershaw. He was immensely excited at the news, and in the excess of his feelings invited me up to take a turn with him that night in a scrutiny of the red planet.

In spite of all that has happened since, I still remember that vigil very distinctly: the black and silent observatory, the shadowed lantern throwing a feeble glow upon the floor in the corner, the steady ticking of the clockwork of the telescope, the little slit in the roof--an oblong

profundity with the stardust streaked across it. Ogilvy moved about, invisible but audible. Looking through the telescope, one saw a circle of deep blue and the little round planet swimming in the field. It seemed such a little thing, so bright and small and still, faintly marked with transverse stripes, and slightly flattened from the perfect round. But so little it was, so silvery warm--a pin's-head of light! It was as if it quivered, but really this was the telescope vibrating with the activity of the clockwork that kept the planet in view.

As I watched, the planet seemed to grow larger and smaller and to advance and recede, but that was simply that my eye was tired. Forty millions of miles it was from us--more than forty millions of miles of void. Few people realise the immensity of vacancy in which the dust of the material universe swims.

Near it in the field, I remember, were three faint points of light, three telescopic stars infinitely remote, and all around it was the unfathomable darkness of empty space. You know how that blackness looks on a frosty starlight night. In a telescope it seems far profounder. And invisible to me because it was so remote and small, flying swiftly and steadily towards me across that incredible distance, drawing nearer every minute by so many thousands of miles, came the Thing they were sending us, the Thing that was to bring so much struggle and calamity and death to the earth. I never dreamed of it then as I watched; no one on earth dreamed of that unerring missile.

That night, too, there was another jetting out of gas from the distant planet. I saw it. A reddish flash at the edge, the slightest projection of the outline just as the chronometer struck midnight; and at that I told Ogilvy and he took my place. The night was warm and I was thirsty, and I went stretching my legs clumsily and feeling my way in the darkness, to the little table where the siphon stood, while Ogilvy exclaimed at the streamer of gas that came out towards us.

That night another invisible missile started on its way to the earth from Mars, just a second or so under twenty-four hours after the first one. I remember how I sat on the table there in the blackness, with patches of green and crimson swimming before my eyes. I wished I had a light to smoke by, little suspecting the meaning of the minute gleam I had seen and all that it would presently bring me. Ogilvy watched till one, and then gave it up; and we lit the lantern and walked over to his house. Down below in the darkness were Ottershaw and Chertsey and all their hundreds of people, sleeping in peace.

He was full of speculation that night about the condition of Mars, and scoffed at the vulgar idea of its having inhabitants who were signalling us. His idea was that meteorites might be falling in a heavy shower upon the planet, or that a huge volcanic explosion was in progress. He pointed out to me how unlikely it was that organic evolution had taken the same direction in the two adjacent planets.

“The chances against anything manlike on Mars are a million to one,” he said.

Hundreds of observers saw the flame that night and the night after about midnight, and again the night after; and so for ten nights, a flame each night. Why the shots ceased after the tenth no one on earth has attempted to explain. It may be the gases of the firing caused the Martians inconvenience. Dense clouds of smoke or dust, visible through a powerful telescope on earth as little grey, fluctuating patches, spread through the clearness of the planet's atmosphere and obscured its more familiar features.

Even the daily papers woke up to the disturbances at last, and popular notes appeared here, there, and everywhere concerning the volcanoes upon Mars. The serio-comic periodical Punch, I remember, made a happy use of it in the political cartoon. And, all unsuspected, those missiles the Martians had fired at us drew earthward, rushing now at a pace of many miles a second through the empty gulf of space, hour by hour and day by day, nearer and nearer. It seems to me now almost incredibly wonderful that, with that swift fate hanging over us, men could go about their petty concerns as they did. I remember how jubilant Markham was at securing a new photograph of the planet for the illustrated paper he edited in those days. People in these latter times scarcely realise the abundance and enterprise of our nineteenth-century papers. For my own part, I was much occupied in learning to ride the bicycle, and busy upon a series of papers discussing the probable developments of moral ideas as civilisation progressed.

One night (the first missile then could scarcely have been 10,000,000 miles away) I went for a walk with my wife. It was starlight and I explained the Signs of the Zodiac to her, and pointed out Mars, a bright dot of light creeping zenithward, towards which so many telescopes were pointed. It was a warm night. Coming home, a party of excursionists from Chertsey or Isleworth passed us singing and playing music. There were lights in the upper windows of the houses as the people went to bed. From the railway station in the distance came the sound of shunting trains, ringing and rumbling, softened almost into melody by the distance. My wife pointed out to me the brightness of the red, green, and yellow signal lights hanging in a framework against the sky. It seemed so safe and tranquil.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

[Return to Contents](#)

SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL  
SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL

**Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror**

Lovecraftiana is a quarterly publication from Rogue Planet Press, with issues coming out April 30th, July 31st, October 31st, and January 31st, featuring stories, articles, poetry or artwork on Cthulhu Mythos / Lovecraftian themes.

Submissions can be sent to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

the current edition is available from [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

**Swords against Cthulhu III: A New Dark Age**

Deadline: Until full

Payment: Exposure and Royalties

Flash fiction, Poetry, Short Stories (2,000 6,000 words)

Reprints will also be considered.

*Sword and sorcery in the aeon of Cthulhu Rising!*

*‘The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.’*

*So saith Lovecraft.*

*Picture a future Earth, a savage world where science is jettisoned in favour of primitive superstition, where technology has become the idol of a new religion. A world where the truth of Cthulhu has been revealed, where a lunatic humanity has discovered its true insignificance—the punchline in a cosmic joke. A new dark age has descended upon a species that has learnt too much. Science and superstition and the sorcery of the Mad Arab create a world where only the strong survive, and barbarian warriors battle for existence in a bleak and pitiless universe...*

Science fantasy tales of dying earths, of low tech dystopias, of medieval post-apocalyptic worlds—all with a Cthulhu Mythos slant—will be welcome in this anthology.

Submission guidelines:

Please submit your manuscript as a .rtf, .doc or .docx file (all other formats will automatically be rejected. Contact me prior to submitting if this presents an issue for you.)

Font and formatting: Please submit in Times New Roman, 12-point font; single line spacing. Please format the document to 1st line indentation of 1". The page margin should be set to .1" on all sides.

No headers, footers, or page numbers.

Please check grammar.

Upon acceptance into the anthology, you agree that Horrified Press holds exclusive publishing rights for six months from the date of publication. All intellectual property rights over the author's work remain with the author, with the proviso that Horrified Press retains distribution rights in the format of the contracted anthology.

This title will be available as an e book and trade quality paperback.

Gavin Chappell will be presiding over this anthology.

Email your submission as an attachment to: [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

The email subject line must read 'SUBMISSION SAC: Dark Age—your story title' or your submission will not be considered for this anthology.

Successful applicants will be notified before the deadline has expired.