

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 3
6TH MAY 2018

INCURSION OF TALLBIKER HEADS

BY ALEX S
JOHNSON
*THEY COME
FROM ACROSS
THE
IRIDESCENT
SHORE...*

THE DISCORPORATION OF THE WHITE RABBIT

BY KEVIN REES
*TJK 33 DREW
HIMSELF UP AND
STARED DEATH
IN THE EYES...*

DEATHPHONICA BY GK MURPHY

**REVIEW
BY JOHN C
ADAMS**

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Murphy, John C Adams, Gregory KH Bryant, Milly "Mad Dog" McGuigan, Percy Greg, HG
Wells*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 3
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *landscape double sun rock wall 1112911/* by DasWortgewand.
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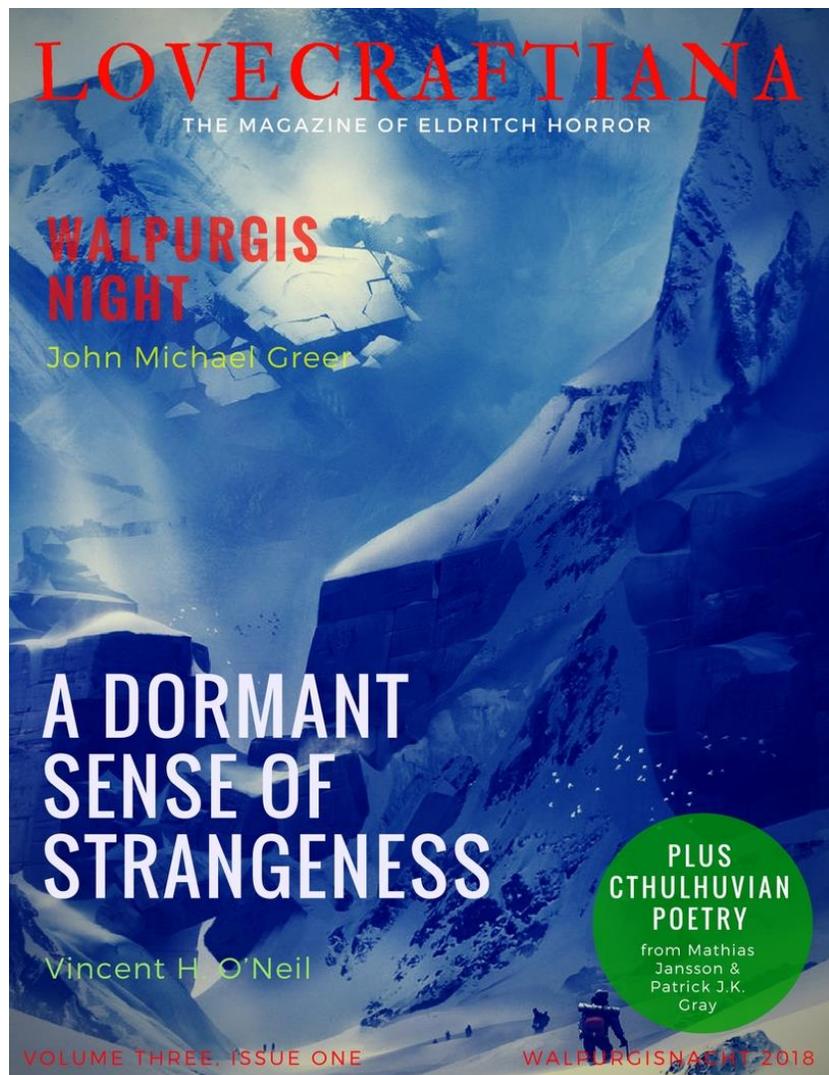
EDITORIAL

This week begins with a bargain with death, which is followed by a surreal invasion, after which Death returns in aural form. And John C Adams reviews a horror anthology.

Watson and Miss Marency flee the horrors of the jungle. Carter Ward approaches a dark derelict in space. On Mars, our hero is presented at court. And on a Martian infested Earth, a nameless narrator breathes again the sweet air of freedom.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: the Walpurgisnacht 2018 edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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THE DISCORPORATION OF THE WHITE RABBIT by Kevin Rees

“You do understand the consequences of submitting this request, TJK-33?”

The figure seated across the grey desk nodded once and sat back heavily in a chair designed to keep its occupant stiffly upright.

“In the eons I have served as Administrator of the Dominarium I have only seen one of these requests... until today,” the Administrator declared. She unrolled the tightly bound scroll on which the request had been written very carefully by hand. “You do fully comprehend the gravity of the action you are requesting?”

“I fully comprehend the magnitude of my request, Madam Administrator.... Yet with no realistic alternative, I must act. He must be stopped. I beg of you to authorize my request to be taken to the final stage,” TJK-33 pleaded. She found something odd in his eyes, an unusual discordance that was impossible to ignore.

The Administrator stood and drifted towards a window that overlooked a churning grey spiral of energized cloud. She remained silent and pondered the dilemma that was presented quite eloquently and in a format she approved. Behind her, TJK-33 sat in the chair, wringing his hands. Time wasn't observed in the same fashion it was elsewhere, but in the Administrator's office it passed very slowly. She returned to her amber desk and chair and rolled up the scroll. “Very well, TJK-33, I'll sanction your request, only because I believe it will be rejected at the highest level. However, given the circumstance, I would like to express personally how very brave I think you are to take such radical action.” She offered him the scroll with her seal of approval.

“I have no choice, Administrator. Thank you.” He took the scroll and got up to leave.

The Administrator waited until she was alone and leant over her desk to a small box.

“Inform the Higher, I am sending TJK 3 up with a formal request I have authorized for further scrutiny.”

“Yes, Madam Administrator.”

With the scroll grasped tightly in his hand, TJK-33 ascended a grey staircase that led to the domain of the one who could put right the wrongs of his corporeal existior. At the top he found a junior clerk waiting for him. He led him through a maze of gloomy corridors until they opened up into a well-lit but sparse waiting area with one single chair. The clerk smiled and told him to wait. TJK-33 complied automatically, as he had always done since becoming matter.

“You may enter,” said the clerk with the nametag FL 41.

TJK-33 got up and glided nervously towards two pillars that seemed to grow organically out of the floor and disappear into a swirling dark nothingness a distance above his head. He suddenly realized he was witnessing the realm his companions spoke of often in quiet reverence and lowered voices. TJK-33 began to feel an unusual sensation of quiet peace uncurl inside him as he moved between the pillars.

The instant transition between his plain and the one he now found himself in hardly registered. TJK-33 emerged into a colossally large room with vast shelves of books lining every wall.

“Welcome, TJK-33.”

A soft, deep voice rumbled around him, adding to an overwhelming sense of disorientation that threatened to disturb the calm he was trying to cling onto.

“Please, don’t be afraid,” it continued.

“I’m not,” whispered TJK-33, wishing his body wouldn’t ripple so rapidly and give away the lie.

“Then please, sit with me,” the honeyed tone cast a gentle hypnotic net around TJK-33, which drew him towards a chair set close to an identical one where the voice seemed to emanate from.

TJK-33 sat and looked curiously across to the other chair where a form composed entirely of dark light blazed intensely and began to transform. TJK-33 watched in awe as the light hardened into the shape of a woman of advancing years. When the transformation was complete he was thankful she, the Highest of the High, had adopted kindly features. TJK-33 rippled in his chair and wondered if he was expected to bow or genuflect.

“May I look at that?” She pointed at the scroll TJK-33 clutched tightly in his hand.

Nervously, he reached forward with the bound document. As their outstretched hands met, her finger brushed lightly over one of his, causing TJK-33 to recoil as if stung by something lethally venomous. He sat back in the chair, clouded with confusion. He had never experienced pain. It was impossible, as he had no nervous system to transmit the experience. Yet, here he sat in the chair nursing a finger that pulsed with an uncomfortable coldness as if it were mimicking a heartbeat. Another impossibility, he noted.

“My apologies for your finger,” she said, nodding to his hand. She sat back with the scroll and read it very slowly, ensuring all the correct investigations had been completed.

TJK-33 tried to move the frozen digit, which had become completely immobile.

“I am intrigued, TJK-33,” she said, distracting him away from his finger. “Screen on,” she ordered. A view screen came into existence, so huge it filled the space between them.

“Corporeal... Thomas Jerome Keller... Earth, America, New York... Present,” she commanded.

The opaque screen switched to a view of a darkened room with the monotonous buzz of traffic in the background providing a distinct soundtrack. Dusk light shone through holes in ragged curtains, silhouetting a man sitting on the edge of a bed rocking violently.

“No!” he cried out to the advancing darkness. “No, I don’t want to!” Desperately, he slapped his scalp with a heavy tattoo of blows to drown out the clamour inside his head, but it was not enough to stop their vile whispering. Exhausted, the man shook his head like a dog trying to dislodge a mite from its ears.

Staggering off the bed he made for a switch just visible on the peeling walls. He dragged it down with the edge of his hand and everything burst into light, causing him to blink rapidly and curse. Stumbling unsteadily, he dragged open the bathroom door and went inside. Reaching out a tremulous hand he spun the cold tap. Water gushed into and over a mottled, cracked sink. He bent over and scooped up handfuls of water, which he slapped hard onto his face. At the end, he left his hands linger on his face enjoying the coolness that filtered through his fingertips. Closing his eyes, he rose up and let his hands drop to his side. A mirror above the sink reflected the corporeal face of TJK-33. It was a haunted, gaunt shell that stared back. When he opened his eyes, it was impossible to miss this man’s story. He lived in unending pain so severe it formed lines intertwined with old scars that punctuated his face. The features were so unlike the smooth contours of his ghost. Here was a horror story of sleepless nights, enduring distress and irresistible feelings he couldn’t control anymore.

TJ Keller turned away and bit the inside of his mouth until he could taste coppery blood. He felt the urge had grown too powerful to resist. It was impossible to deny himself, or deny the monster inside him.

TJ dressed quickly thinking about the life that would be sacrificed tonight by his hands. He had chosen his victim at random and tracked her like a forest deer, not through woods, through the streets and subways. Hiding in the shadows, he watched her walk cautiously down the steep steps to her apartment in the basement of a tenement block. It took another three days observing the apartment to make sure there wasn’t anyone else living there that could complicate things. At the end of his surveillance he was satisfied she lived alone in her small world. Now he knew her routine perfectly, how she lived her life and the time she spent away from her home. When she was at work in a restaurant four blocks away, he slipped from the alley and checked the lock on her door. It was old but one he could pick easily and quietly. Now he was prepared.

Before leaving his room, TJ made sure everything he needed was where it should be in the pockets of his long overcoat.

Satisfied, he left.

“Pause, screen.”

TJK-33 turned away with an overwhelming sense of shame.

“Why should I enact this mortal’s discorporation? I have taken far worse corrupted flesh. These useless meat sacks have such a propensity to commit the vilest acts.”

TJK-33 drew himself up and stared Death in the eyes.

“Madam, my existor has murderously taken the lives of many innocent corps. I have personally experienced the savagery of one of these deaths and the aftermath of pleasure it gives him. I feel nothing but disgust, and I find myself haunted by the image of that switched off corporeal face. Ironic I know, Madam... I beg you please, you must help me!”

“I see,” said Death. “Maybe I should witness more. Screen, resume.”

TJ checked his watch. Soon the last patrol car would pass and there would be a gap before the next shift took over. He smiled, as on cue there was the car. It pulled slowly into the street and moved to the next block, unaware a killer was watching them. He ran across the road from the small alleyway and strode confidently to the steps leading down below street level. He’d disabled the security light the day before when he pretended to check on the gas mains. No one took any notice of him. No one ever did take notice in New York. The streets were just a sea of faces with no connection.

TJ took out his lock picks and with very practiced fingers had the door unlocked in a few seconds. He pushed it gently. A brass chain inside rattled and pulled taut across the opening. Swearing quietly, TJ took out a small pair of bolt cutters from his pocket and snipped the chain. Before going inside TJ took out one more thing from his pockets. It was a mask. It had filled the front pages and stacked up the column inches of the newspapers, which had named him The White Rabbit Killer. He pulled the eerily realistic mask over his head and went inside.

He closed the door quietly and stood in the small entrance hall. TJ took in a deep breath and checked his watch. He read ten to midnight. He had nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds left. He checked the corridor that led down the length of the apartment. There were three rooms on each side, bedroom one, kitchen and second bedroom. On the other side was the bathroom, lounge and a small box room. TJ knew which room his lamb was in. He took off his coat and let it slip to the floor, then undressed quickly as a craving to see blood overwhelmed his senses. TJ caught sight of his nude hairless body reflected in a long mirror. Before every slaughter he shaved everywhere to make it harder for forensics to identify him through DNA. The only thing breaking up the symmetry of his pale skin was a wristwatch, and it told him he needed to speed up. He reached down and pulled out a straight razor from his coat. He brought the blade up to his lips and kissed it tenderly like it was the most beautiful of lovers. TJ positioned the blade carefully in his hand, turned, and walked slowly toward the first bedroom.

“Pause screen,” Death commanded. “You have only moments left to make your case, 33.”

TJK-33 got out of the chair and stood before Death. “No corp should determine who lives and dies. Surely that’s your domain, your purpose...”

“...They’ve been killing themselves without my intervention since one of them first picked up a stone and found how effective it was in smashing their enemies brains out,” Death interjected.

“Then aren’t you at fault?” TJK-33 demanded. Realizing he had gone too far, he slumped back into the chair. The benign expression Death had worn for him morphed into something uglier. “I am sorry if I offend you, but this existor must be stopped before he kills. It has to be done by you, now!”

Death stood up and stared down at the cowed ghost. “Do you presume to tell me how and when I take a corporeal? I cannot be responsible for all humanity. They kill each other over the most trivial things.”

“Please!”

Death glanced over, and a clock materialized out of nothing.

“You only have two segments of time remaining, 33. Then 34 will take your place.” Death sat back down. “Screen, resume.”

TJ opened the bedroom door and stepped inside. He held his breath and listened. No sound was coming from the sleeper in bed. The curtains were drawn, and the only light came from the glow of the bedside clock whose red numbers were counting down fast towards midnight. He had three minutes left. If the newspapers knew the truth they would use a new moniker to label him The Birthday Boy Killer. TJ liked to kill some of his victims at the stroke of midnight as a birthday present to himself. Moving panther like to the bed, he could just make out a shape underneath the blankets. He held his breath and caressed the straight razor.

“Freeze screen.”

Death seemed to ponder for a moment. She reached down and took up the scroll. She read it closely while TJK-33 glanced nervously at the clock and watched his time slip away. TJK 34 would come into existence in moments and this folly would either start again or be tolerated by the new ghost.

“Alright,” Death boomed, making TJK-33 jump. “This once only.” She pressed her thumb to the bottom of the scroll sending smoke spiralling up in lazy swirls. “Screen, resume. Au revoir, TJK-

33.”

TJ raised the blade above his head. With his other hand he grasped the blanket and ripped.

A bright light shone in his face.

“Hi, creep. Hands where I can see them!” the woman ordered. She emphasized her demand with a gun gripped in both hands, pointing at him. The light came from a small torch slung underneath the weapon.

TJ screamed in fury and brought the arc of the razor down.

The impact of four bullets hitting his face and chest threw him backwards into the wall and blew off the mask. He slid down with enough life left to see a woman climbing out of the bed holding a smoking gun and reaching for the light switch.

“Officer Murphy, are you okay?”

“He’s dead, Sarge,” a police officer announced checking the body of TJ Keller for any sign of life. “Guess we got lucky the ex-cop above reported seeing this guy tampering with the light outside and recognized him from the sketch we put out.”

“Nice shooting, Gail,” the sergeant said, ushering the woman out of the bedroom. “You took out The White Rabbit.”

TJK-33 realized he had left the chair and the Dominarium when everything around him suddenly cascaded into a multitude of white lights. He closed his eyes wishing this transition would be over quickly. It was—at the precise moment he heard the sound of traffic. He knew he was on Earth, New York, Present. He opened his eyes slowly and witnessed Thomas Jerome Keller’s shrouded body being placed inside an ambulance. Close behind, the woman who shot TJK-33’s corp existor emerged onto the sidewalk flanked by her fellow officers. TJK-33 raised a hand of thanks as for the briefest moment the woman glanced over and seemed to recognize him. Her eyes widened with momentary confusion turning to blind terror. Gail Murphy’s hand began to rise and point towards the alley just as she was bundled into a police car and driven away with sirens blaring.

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

STEAM-POWERED DREAM ENGINES

The book cover features a steampunk-themed illustration. At the top, the title 'STEAM-POWERED DREAM ENGINES' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font with a red glow effect. Below the title, a woman in a black and white steampunk outfit with goggles on her head stands next to a large, complex mechanical device with a red top section. The background shows a dark, industrial setting with buildings and pipes. In the foreground, several large, golden gears are arranged in a cluster. At the bottom, a yellow, rounded rectangular box contains the text 'COMPILED AND EDITED BY SERGIO PALUMBO & GAVIN CHAPPELL' in a white, sans-serif font.

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
SERGIO PALUMBO & GAVIN CHAPPELL

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INCURSION OF TALLBIKER HEADS by Alex S Johnson

It was in the nature of a run for it.

Denizens of the towers—those sombre, ruminating spires that glowered over the town proper—had seen the tall bikers. And what they saw, they internalized then and there.

At first the bikers were just a rumour, a joke. The headmasters at the university colleges which saturated the atmosphere of the towers with an aura of extreme scholarship, rushed to quell potential rebellion. But once seen, the bikers imprinted the towers with their magic. That magic—a power both metaphysical and chemical—released in the bloodstream of the tower inhabitants. It rose like a hot vapour; it yanked pivots and chains of eternal powers with a magnetic pull, out from the stones that could bend at any time, cast themselves off, go almost mad with the energy. That was how it felt. You could sense it in the air.

Through some interchange nobody fully grasped, the students' minds transformed. Maybe it was the revolution of the wheels, the tilt of the bikers as they pushed past the pebbled windows and astonished faces; the bikers' glowing costumes with zippered pockets, their conical helmets that lent them the sombre majesty of sorcerers. Flickers of light, glittering grids of pixels stuttered to life in heads saturated with drowsy knowledge. The castoff of the bikers' reality made so much more sense than the stultifying data they absorbed day and night. They'd been navel gazing so long, like the vegetative beings of Xurxes Todd which sleep in trees machine grown from fractal patterns, that they'd forgotten how they came to the towers in the first place. Which was odd, because they were very young. But the traditions of the university and the tower community stretched back hundreds of years, and they—not the incipient dreams of incoming students—held sway here. The very stones of the towers were said to hold thousands of circuit boards that made a thrumming, secret, cybernetic nervous system; information qua information turned holy host.

“What are we to do?” Pastor Rilling Darté of the Supreme Tower Command spoke first. His colleagues stood in robes of sombre black, not daring to meet his eyes.

“Well?” He waited.

Outside, they heard noises, as of hundreds of tiny engines starting up. These were sounds never before heard in the region. The headmasters could barely conceive of the implications. All they knew was that the tall bikers were to blame.

“It's them,” at last said Pastor Dollemore of the Second Tier Tower Command Force, a level of power ancillary to that headed by Darté—for it was imperative that all the headmasters held a place of equal weight, extended laterally, which might seem hierarchical from certain angles glimpsed beneath their hoods.

“Yes, well, go on...” urged Darté. Naturally, as soon as Dollemore pieced together a theory, any theory at all, Darté would rush to ratify it. And when that happened, everyone would agree.

“I mean, obviously...” Dollemore gestured wildly, his thumb and forefingers springing apart and seizing together again in baroque spirals, as though he were milking the spirits of the air.

“Obviously, our traditional way of life is under attack. These bikes, these riders...where do they come from?”

“Oh, I know,” said Pastor Kripley Wanktot, a headmaster from Haxtley College who had recently replaced the long moribund Dankstyle. Wanktot was far too eager, more like a student than a colleague, but his credentials were impeccable, besides his being a legacy. “They’re...” And he too began to gesticulate, adding head wobbles and shoulder jerks to the repertoire of agitated movement in the room.

His eyes were bright and wild as some mariner come to buzz kill a wedding feast. He shook his head, and his hood collapsed back around his shoulders; his face, like the others a soft-focus plastic, swarmed suddenly with thousands of nude pink skin cells. “They come from across the Iridescent Shore, humping the rainbow arch between the mirror worlds, to convey a new gospel. Whereas ours has been lo these many years the scripture of the word, the bikers bring a seed of new life, the word made fleshflood. When the students saw them, a corollary pulse began to surge in their own minds. It was inevitable, actually, has been coming for centuries if we only connected the dots. The students’ minds have taken the structure of tall bikes. Wheels nestled within wheels. Their souls are awoken, and never again will they accept this narcissistic data gargle we extol.”

“This is a lot of rhetoric,” Dollemore snapped, mashing a hand down on his hood which for some reason had begun to yank itself away from his forehead. “Yes, we’re very much aware of the prophecy, and signs of the Iridescent Shore are overwhelming. The bowspan curve of that beach swims in the utility fog that rises from the pavements of the city; it’s lore, and legend, the topic of musical fiestas, besides the occasional breakout of frolic amongst the students. But as for the tall bikers, I don’t see how...”

“Oh, it’s useless to explain.” Suddenly Wanktot rushed across the room in which they were holding the conference and opened the door.

The headmasters blinked in the dazzling light. They looked down and saw, to their astonishment, green hedges animated, bounding and leaping across the university quadrangle, trailing clumps of dirt bound roots like neural ganglia. Students rushed towards one another carrying satchels of purple and onion grey, or luminous pieces of fruit, or astonishing hand-held gadgets activated with a slight caress. They walked but also flipped, square danced, box danced, split off into micro empires of pugilistic ballet. Even statuary, grey blocks of concrete, bronze and marble facades, crackled with neon streaks; facades cracked, raw flesh bulged and popped from frozen forms, spraying clouds of powder and hot, molten metal. Riding alongside these students, carrying banners with slogans, some of which made quite a bit of sense and the rest incipient wisdom—now nonsense—the tall bikers paraded, their gravity charming vehicles built from dreams of a weird, hopelessly romantic geometry. The students looked up at the headmasters.

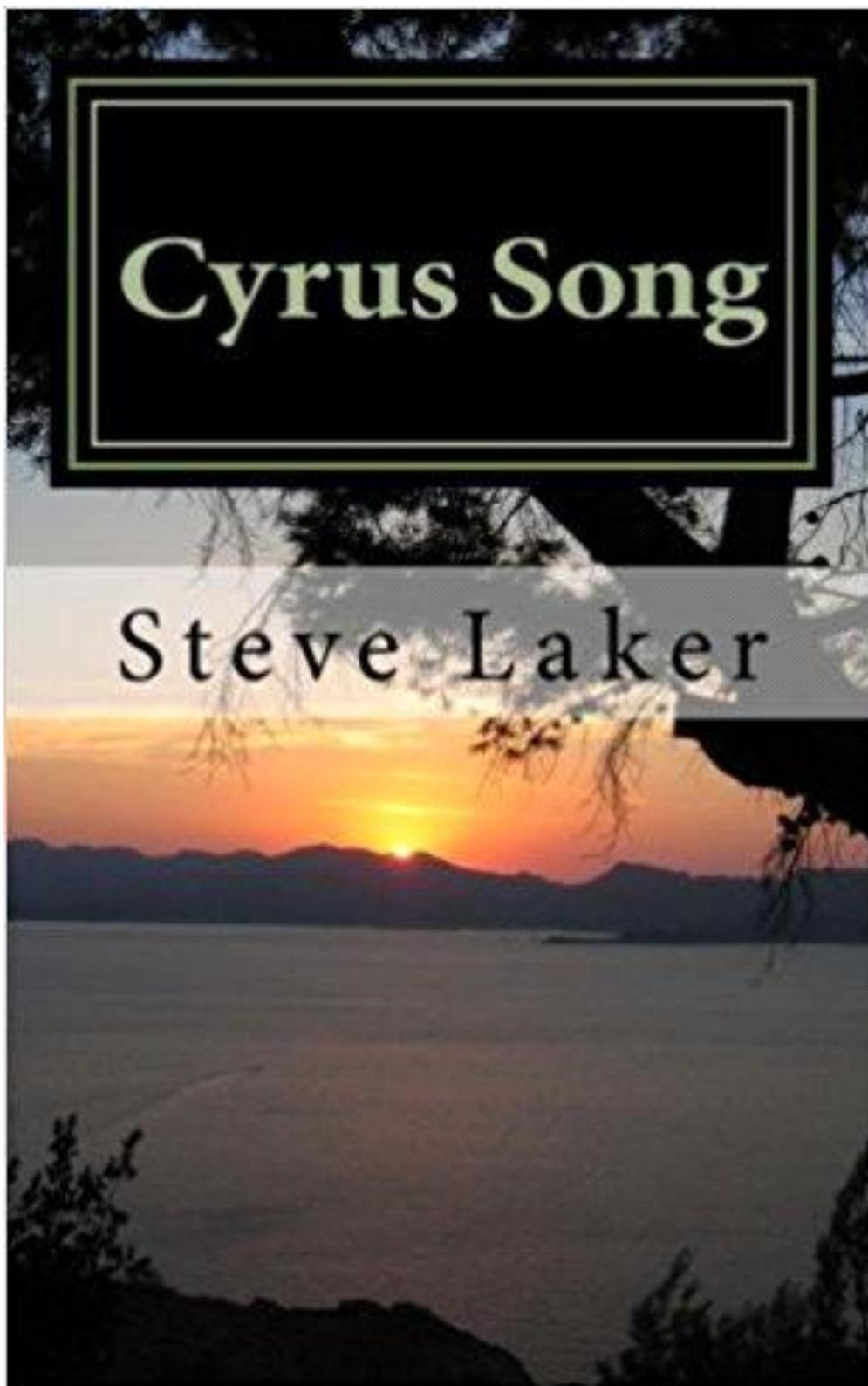
“Oh, c’mon, join us!” cried Wanktot, who had shed his robes as he climbed down the spiralling scaffolds erected around the towers for the tall bikers. He was clothed now in a suit of motley

spontaneously stitched together by students who ran by his side, doling out lengths of fabric tailored on the spot. “It’s amazing!”

“It’s amazing,” Dollemore repeated, dully and mechanically at first, then with increasing fervour. Finally, he skidded down to the quadrangle, where he emerged with a spray bouquet of flowers expanding from his astonished head. He kneeled and kissed the lawn, which hissed and writhed and kissed him back from as many lips as could be sorted on the spot.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



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DEATHPHONICA by GK Murphy

Assassinations occur in many forms. From Feudal Japan's ninjas and Samurai, Boku Haram's private backroom discussions on the decimation of townships, to Saddam and Assad in Syria, to the dictator Gaddafi, or unknown nerve agents applied to door handles in small town UK, administered to maim former spies defected from their countries of origin in bad favour so had to die as a price for their disloyalty. Possibly, they had insulted the sanctity of their glorified yet somehow primitive organizations; but who knew...would anybody ever know?

Assassinations were big deals. Yet, each vicious act had one understanding—it was always a human life taken, however messily.

Tracy Farah worked for The Ministry. Enough said...

The Ministry was based in the heart of Europe and operated under The Leader of the Party and his covert operations corporation based in the East. The challenge they faced on a daily basis was keeping the US in check with threat of military action (which the US could return if in a corner). They maximized troop and hardware presence around "those territories in immediate threat of invasion" —some of those ignorant fellow Europeans subject to an overdue long time coming kick in the pants—those whose land, cities and towns could be put to better use.

Invasion was always on the cards. Tracy Farah removed the headset and smiled across the Oval Table at The Leader of the Party, who tried his damned best, yet could neither smile nor appear satisfied, even if his very life depended upon it. Humour and hilarity were glorious things, but it was—like he as a human being—a place with little humour. The one time he smiled a genuine smile was when he was updated on his bank account and retirement fund. This feller was richer than even the Russians...

Farah swept auburn wispy hair away from her pale brow.

"It is ready and complete, Colonel. I have concocted a watered-down version of it for you as Leader of the Party, just enough to give you a taste—the gist. Yes, the hardcore version is slightly in the background, yet I will control this. It will only work with the tonal key which only I as Leader of Sonic Operations possess ...” She handed the headphones across the table to him, “Here you are, sir. You asked me to bring you a war. In these recordings, I bring you the death of nations...please, sir, put the phones on and listen to the future of our planet!”

He accepted but looked reluctant. Resting the phones on the mahogany table he looked around nervously. “No,” he said bluntly, “I trust you implicitly, yet not when I could die right here and now.”

“Sir, I love my country and to me there is no other like it for humanity, kindness, generosity, civility, its most sincere and loving people...and, of course, you sir, my gracious Colonel, and deserved Leader of the Party. I beg you, Colonel...” She appeared to have tears in her eyes, “Trust me on this, or I will fall on my sword.”

“Let me say this, Miss Farah...if anything happens to me, you will be beheaded, and your traitor’s head be skewered and placed on a spike along the castle walls for all to spit upon.”

She looked nervous. “I would die for you at any cost, sir. However, today we will share between us one true and deserved ultimate glory.”

Almost greedily, The Leader picked up the headset and put it on. He nodded to indicate for Tracy to start the music.

It took a while for The Leader to praise her hard work. “It sounds beautiful...it reminds me of early Bach, the strings are mesmerizing.”

“The music serves as a phonic poison,” she said.

There was such childlike glee on The Leader’s face...

He grinned, his dentures rattled in his mouth, and he gushed like a baby during feeding time. “I love it, I love it...please, turn it up, it must be louder—LOUDER, I say, turn it up LOUDER...I COMMAND IT, YOU BITCH!”

“But sir, if I do that, I can’t...”

“I’LL HAVE YOU FED TO THE PIGS. NOW! —TURN UP THE MUSIC NOW! —I COMMAND YOU OR ELSE YOU FUCKING DIE!”

“But really, sir...” she pleaded, like she was begging for her life.

“I’LL HAVE YOU KILLED RIGHT NOW. I’LL GIVE THE ORDER...” The Leader looked around, attracting two of the guards.

Little did anyone realize (except Tracy) or expect, but the mechanism was wired to the inner sanctum speakers, which could be set up to synchronize with amplifiers whenever The Leader watched his IMAX movies.

Tracy placed the cotton buds firmly in her ears. She switched up the volume. Pandemonium played. The pitch lifted, and the cacophony blared throughout the huge room. A raw and deathly chorus harmonized with demonic rapture. The Leader’s eyes turned a snotty green and burst in their sockets, sprayed a festooning wide arc of green and bloody pus across the table. The Leader slumped and fell forwards, his face and head bashing the mahogany counter.

The two guards convulsed on the marble floor of the huge room, their faces swelled and enlarged. In one spasmodic twist, their skulls cracked. Both of the guards’ bodies collapsed.

Tracy reached out and switched off the machine. She knew she would perish for this. She would be executed, for sure.

But she was a bitter lady, despite her obvious beauty. And she wouldn't go down without a fight. A crowd of thousands had gathered outdoors on The Plaza. The Leader's public address ought to have been minutes away. She was a bitter lady indeed. She envisioned her destiny. She was a technology expert, after all.

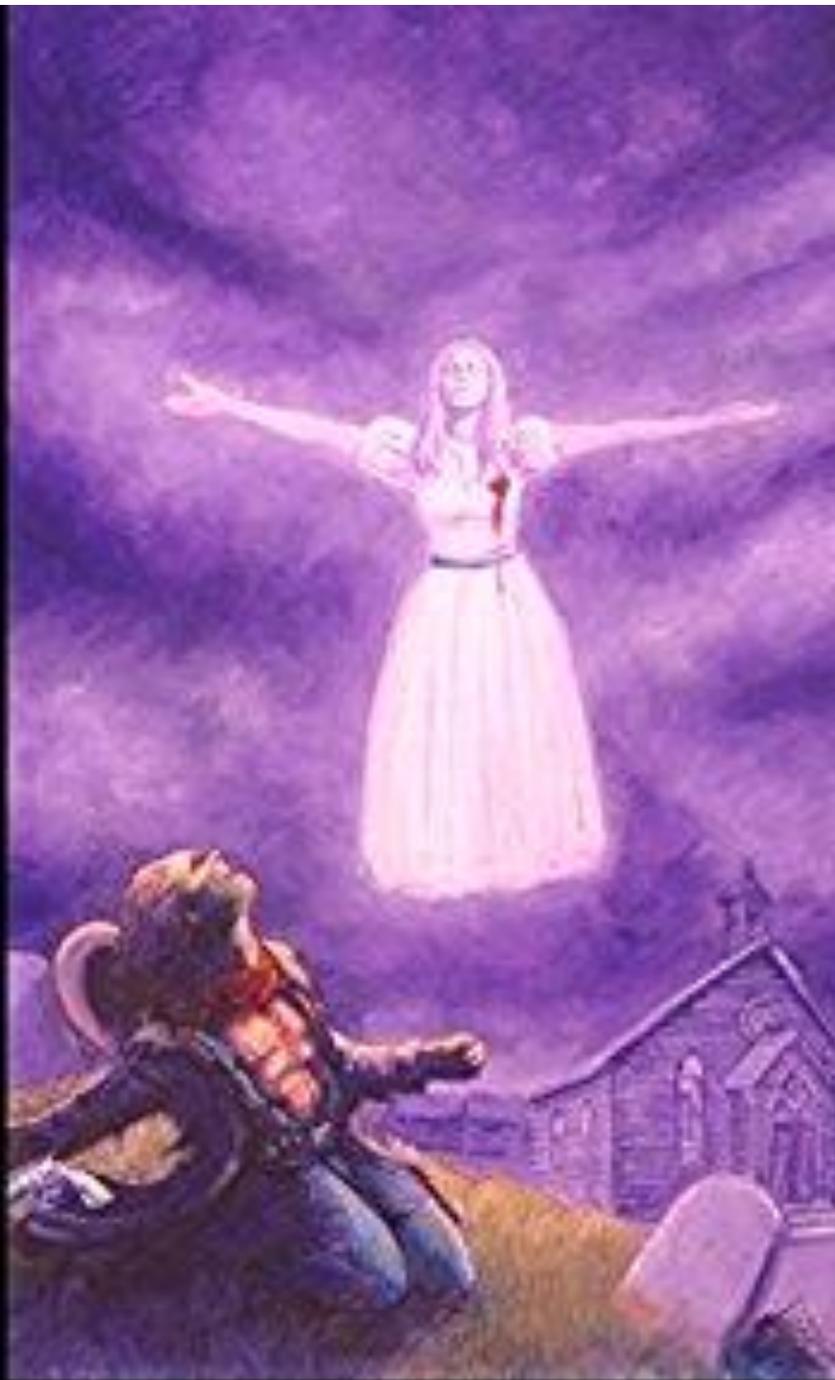
She wired her orchestral device to The Leader's powerful public-address speakers. Below, the people cheered and called The Leader's name, begging him to reveal himself and share with his adoring public his great words of wisdom.

On this day, history was made, and everybody was forced to face the music.

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

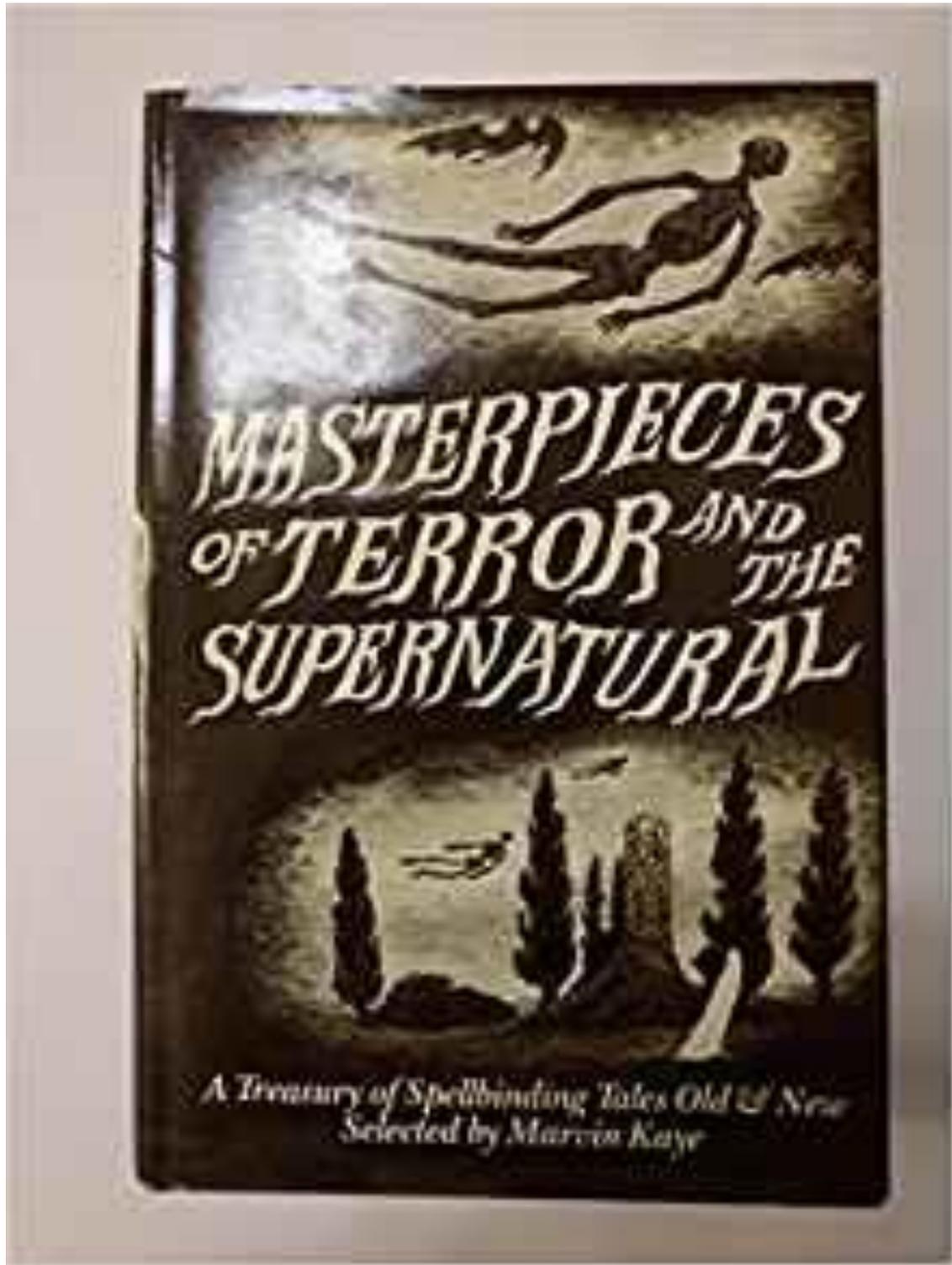
Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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REVIEW by John C Adams



Masterpieces of Terror and the Supernatural by Marvin Kaye

This book is billed as ‘a collection of spine chilling tales old and new’ and it doesn’t disappoint. This anthology of 53 short stories and a few poems is divided thematically into tales of fiends of creatures, lovers and other monsters, acts of god and other horrors, the beast within and ghosts and miscellaneous nightmares. There’s over 650 pages of shivering, uncomfortable stories in this volume—no one ever accused Kaye of not giving the reader value for money!

In amongst old favourites like *Carmilla* and *Dracula’s Guest*, are some newer, fresher picks. Nor is Kaye to stray away from mainstream horror authors if the interest of variety—he includes tales from Tennessee Williams, Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman, for example.

It’s the sheer range of talent on show here that I love most about this volume.

In *Lan Lung* by M Lucie Chin, the reader is transported to modern day China in the company of the ghost of Daniel Wing, a tourist who died falling off the Great Wall. Condemned to wander a country he barely knows, he teams up with Taoist monk Hsu Yuen Pao and—to their mutual surprise—a tiny dragon who nestles in the ghost’s knapsack:

At first I watched Yuen Pao. Then I watched what he watched. There was the smallest ripple of movement with my bag. Hsu Yuen Pao said one word.

The creature that emerged was tiny, palm sized. It seemed, as the young of reptiles may, exquisitely perfect in miniature.

The challenges of cold, heat, thirst and hunger plus the hostility of villagers and combat lie ahead for the unlikely trio, but they stick together right to the end.

In *The Nightwire* by H F Arnold, we have one of the most popular stories ever to appear in *Weird Tales*. We’re back on more familiar territory, superficially at least, in America. The uncanny tale is narrated by the night manager of the wire service in a western seaport town. News is received and transmitted onwards via telegraph from stringers and reporters all over the globe, whilst everyone else sleeps. The murders, earthquakes and political by lines then morph into fully worked up stories for newspapers on our doormats before breakfast. One night, dispatches are received from the mysterious town of Xebico. During the hours that follow they pour in—fog, lost rescue parties, human agony—but it turns out that Xebico isn’t what it seems:

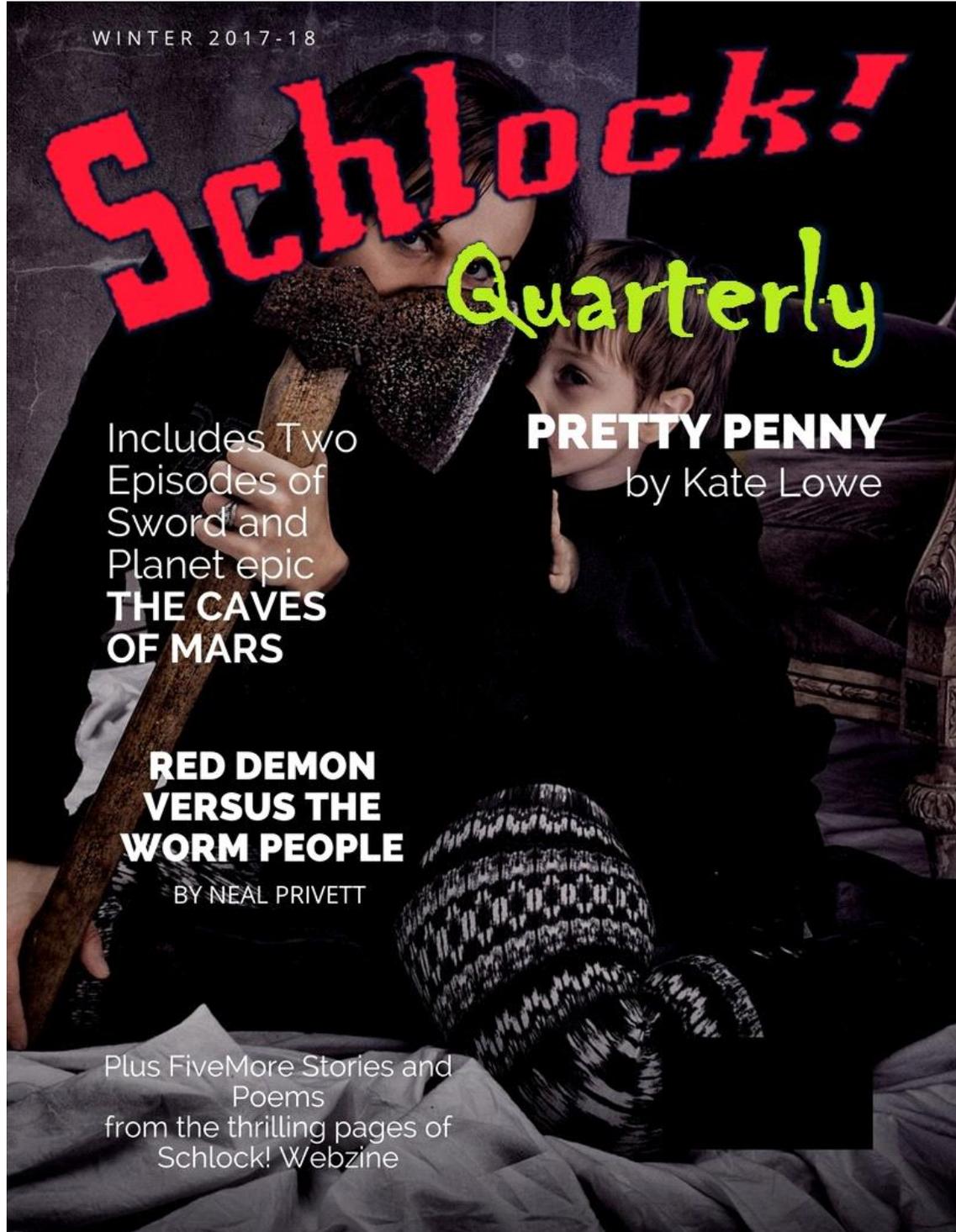
Queer story, wasn’t it. Not that we aren’t used to it, for alot of unusual stories come in over the wire. But for some reason or other, perhaps because it was so quiet that night, the report of the fog made a great impression on me.

It was almost with dread that I went over to the waiting piles of copy.

There were so many unusual and chilling stories in this volume that I was hooked right up until the end.

Enjoy!

THE END

The cover of the magazine 'Schlock! Quarterly' features a dark, atmospheric photograph of a man and a woman. The man, on the left, is holding a large, dark axe over his shoulder, looking intensely at the camera. The woman, on the right, is looking towards the man. The background is dark and textured, possibly a cave or a dimly lit room. The title 'Schlock!' is written in large, red, jagged letters across the top, and 'Quarterly' is written in a smaller, green, handwritten-style font below it. The text 'WINTER 2017-18' is in the top left corner. The main content is listed in white text: 'Includes Two Episodes of Sword and Planet epic THE CAVES OF MARS', 'RED DEMON VERSUS THE WORM PEOPLE BY NEAL PRIVETT', and 'PRETTY PENNY by Kate Lowe'. At the bottom, it says 'Plus Five More Stories and Poems from the thrilling pages of Schlock! Webzine'.

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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE BEAST MEN OF ATLANTIS by Milly "Mad Dog"
McGuigan

Chapter Nine

By the time we returned to our own camp, it was fully dark. We had been gone for several hours, and Ngoma and his fellows were in a panic. It took some stern words from Miss Marency to settle them.

'They thought we had been carried off by the slavers,' she reported to Holmes and me as we sat by the fire. 'Abu Murra is notorious from here to the coast. It must be since my time here that his depredations have reached this far, though. I have never heard of him before. There were other slavers, however.'

'And yet the British Empire does nothing,' I muttered. I stared remorsefully into the fire. The sheik himself had proved a perfect gentleman, until at the last when he forgot himself. How could so charming a man fall prey to such gross superstition? Or did he have a good reason to fear the land that was our destination?

'What did he call Nkume?' I asked. 'Ballad- something.'

Miss Marency had gone off to check the guards, rifle under one slim arm. 'Balad 'Abu Al' Akadhib,' said Holmes, drawing on his pipe. He had carefully hoarded his dwindling supplies of tobacco since leaving the coast and civilisation, and now he kept the mosquitoes at bay with clouds of smoke. 'It is an Arabic name, meaning The Country of the Father of Lies.'

'The Father of Lies being the Devil himself, I take it,' I said with a laugh. 'So rumours have reached even the fearless Arab slave traders. Precisely what is it we're getting involved in, Holmes?'

'We're following a case, Dr Watson,' Holmes said, giving me a beady look. 'Solving a hideous crime.'

And I believe that was all it was to him, this journey into Darkest Africa. Another case. Of course, he was in better fettle than I, top physical condition and mental too, while the pain from my leg had been playing up throughout the journey. I had dosed us all with quinine regularly since coming to the coast, and neither Holmes nor Miss Marency showed any ill effects. But I knew that I was weakening.

There was a rustle from the bushes and Miss Marency returned. She stacked her rifle with the others and joined us, her face cold and impassive.

'What has happened?' Holmes saw through the mask. 'Are the bearers still troubled by the slave traders?'

'No,' she said. 'It's not the slavers who are troubling them now. Several of the sentries have

reported hearing movement among the trees, and smelling something they didn't like.'

'Animals?' I asked. 'Surely no predator would come so close to two encampments of people.' She shrugged, but would not commit herself.

The next day we continued our journey through the thorn thickets without seeing any sign of our nocturnal visitors, although one of Ngoma's men swore that in the early hours he had seen amidst the swamp mist something that walked on its back legs, although it had not been a man. We followed the path that had been taken by Abu Murra's slavers, but we saw no sign of them either, except a broken fetter cast to one side of the track and the footprints of slavers and slaves.

At last we came out onto the banks of the river. At first, I thought it more swamp water, but although it stretched far into the mist hung distance, it lacked the stink of the swamp, and it was fast flowing. Shading my hand as I stood on the bank I saw the distant shore, where mangrove trees grew. Beyond it, dimly visible, jungle swathed slopes vanished upwards.

The bearers unshouldered their burdens, gathering on the banks in a chattering little mob. Miss Marency and Holmes opened up the map and examined it. I joined them, peering over Holmes' shoulder.

His long lean finger stabbed at a point on the map. 'Here we are,' he said. 'On the Nago River. Already it is swollen with waters from the icy peaks of the Kong Mountains. Here,' and he traced a line upriver towards the peaks, 'is the route we must take. Until we reach these falls, the river should be navigable.'

'We'll be paddling against the current all the way,' I objected.

Miss Marency glanced at me. 'It will be quicker than wading through swamps and hacking through jungles.' She rose and looked out across the water, then scanned the surrounding vegetation. Striding down to the bearers she began directing them to cut down several of the larger trees. I gathered that we would be using their hollowed-out trunks as pirogues.

'I wonder if our quarry went this way,' I murmured.

Holmes looked up at me. 'Last night, in our camping place, I found the blackened remains of two tins of bully beef,' he said. 'Today I discovered empty shells from a Martini-Henry by the path-side and three skeletons that had been picked clean by ants but were nevertheless very fresh. Unless another white man has come this way, I think we can assume it was McAllister, and the skeletons represent either natives who he fought or else his own native troops, killed by attackers. We can establish perhaps that he met with hostile natives.'

I felt heartened that we were on the right track, but these were grisly relics. 'Perhaps they killed him,' I said.

Holmes shook his head. 'None of the skeletons wore white men's clothes. Perhaps he has been taken prisoner, but it is possible that he is holding his own in this territory. He is an old Africa

hand, after all.'

I watched Miss Marency as she directed the wood felling operations and stood over two black men as they began a fire on the trunk of one tree, preparatory to carving out the wood. 'He is not the only one,' I remarked.

Holmes followed my gaze. 'Indeed,' he said, 'Miss Marency would be a boon on any African expedition. An invaluable asset. You have nothing to fear while this young lady is with us, Watson.'

I gave him a look. Was he mocking me? But he had returned his attention to the map. I saw that he was gazing at the symbol marking the city of Nkume.

Even with my supervision it took over a day to provide enough pirogues to proceed upstream in the direction of the mountains, and I waited with a growing sense of frustration. How far had McAllister gone? It began to seem to me that even wading through snake-haunted swamps would be quicker. My faith in the river as a means of travel was further weakened when I noticed crocodiles and hippos in the water. The vultures that gathered on the treetops behind us were hardly encouraging either. But Miss Marency showed no weakness and Holmes was equally implacable.

We took to the water on the following morning, with men paddling against the current as we swung out into the midstream. I sat in the stern of one, acting as helmsman. Due to the added burden of equipment and provisions, each pirogue was low in the water.

I felt more than a little trepidation setting out on crocodile infested waters, but for the first few hours everything went well. The cold wind off the water whipped my face, driving away the slowly gathering gloom that had beset me, and my spirits lifted. Dark jungle walls were visible to either side of the wide water, but beyond them lay a mystery. Overhead, the sky was misty.

Later that day we reached a series of rapids. Paddling ashore we examined the map to see no sign of them.

'Greater falls are shown further upstream,' Holmes said, 'but Sir Digory did not see fit to depict these. Well, we must resort to portage.'

It took the rest of the day, alternately carrying the pirogues and cutting through the jungle vegetation that grew down as far as the bank, to pass beyond the rapids, and by the time we had reached a clear stretch of water I for one was exhausted. We erected a thorn *boma* on a barren spit of land, drew up our pirogues on the bank beside us, and sought sleep while one of the bearers kept guard.

Holmes took second watch. I had fallen into exhausted sleep shortly on climbing into my tent, but was awoken from troubled dreams by his lean hand on my shoulder.

I leapt up to see his long face in darkness highlighted by the red glow of the fire outside. He

gripped his rifle in his left hand, put a finger to his lips...

‘What is it?’ I hissed.

‘Something is out there,’ he whispered, nodding jerkily towards the jungle wall. ‘It seems our presence has attracted unwelcome attention.’

‘The creatures the bearers saw before we set out?’ I asked in a low voice.

‘Perhaps,’ said Holmes. ‘Get dressed and get your rifle. I’m going to waken Miss Marency and the bearers. This would be the worst of places to be caught napping.’

Hurriedly I dressed, my mind filled with images of the horrors of Maiwand. My old wound pained me as I clambered out of the tent, and rose, rifle in hand, to survey the scene.

Black figures gathered in the middle of the *boma*, the dying embers gleaming on glossy hides and glinting from white eyes and teeth. Somewhere I could hear Miss Marency’s voice giving orders. Holmes appeared from the darkness, rifle at the ready, and crouched down beside me, levelling his weapon. Crouching beside him, I glanced at the jungle, the direction of his own gaze.

The natives settled down in the middle, forming a line of sorts, muskets pointing outwards beyond the thorn walls of the *boma*. Quiet fell, broken only by the crackle of the dying fire, the lapping of river water, and occasional hoots from unidentifiable creatures out in the blackness. An unpleasant odour hung in the air. Not a sound emanated from the remorseless wall of darkness that was the jungle.

I began to develop cramp in my right leg.

‘What did you...?’ I began, Holmes immediately hushed me. His eyes were still focused on the wall of jungle. I yawned involuntarily. Moving like a shadow, Miss Marency joined us. The light of the fire glowed on her skin, the light of battle shone in her eyes.

‘Too late for you, Dr Watson?’ she said jovially, settling beside me, hand resting on her rifle stock. ‘Dear me.’

I looked from her to the implacable jungle wall from which came nothing but silence. A silence so profound it was eerie.

‘I was asleep,’ I admitted. ‘Why is everyone so tense? I can see and hear nothing.’

Before she could speak, Holmes slipped away towards the thorn walls, rifle extended.

‘I was asleep myself,’ Miss Marency informed me. Her hair was still in disarray. ‘Your friend awoke me. He had heard stealthy noises in the jungle. Then they went quiet. We’ve been waiting ever since.’

I looked around at the silent scene. Even the natives were not chattering, but it was fear that kept them quiet rather than policy. Their muskets wavered as they clutched them in fear-palsied hands. I turned my attention to the thorn wall where Holmes stood unmoving in the darkness. It was truly dark now, the embers of the fire shedding almost no light, the moon not yet having risen. But all was still and silent. The jungle brooded, but it did not speak. Again I noticed a rank odour wafting out from beneath the trees. It turned my stomach, but I could not place it.

‘A false alarm,’ I said dismissively. ‘Frankly, I wonder if Holmes, brilliant as he is in the streets of London, isn’t out of his depth in the jungle. I...’

Even as these unworthy words left my lips, the moon rose over the jungle, shedding its silver light on the scene beyond the *boma*. As if it was a signal, the things that had been congregating beneath the trees burst out into the clearing, screaming with voices almost like those of men as they overleapt the thorns.

‘Fire!’ Miss Marency cried, then repeated her order in the natives’ own tongue.

I needed no encouragement, blazing away with my Express at the things as they poured into the *boma*. With them came an overpowering odour, that one that had reached my nostrils earlier. The popping of musket fire accompanied my own shooting. Black furred things fell to the earth but more raced onwards. Were they great apes or men? I could not decide.

I caught one in my sights, squeezed the trigger, fired. It leapt back clutching at its chest and tumbled to the ground but even as it did more of the things were leaping the thorn fence to replace it. They swarmed over the natives, and screams tore the night as brave men were dragged to the ground and butchered.

Miss Marency opened fire from my side. Creature after creature fell to her shooting but more came on. We were caught now, in our little fortress, caught between the waters and the jungle. I looked round desperately for Holmes.

‘Where is he?’ I cried, firing at more of the hairy, black, stinking things. There was no sign of him.

Now it was only Miss Marency and I. The blacks lay dead. I fired at the advancing creatures, but my rifle stuttered and died. At the same time, Miss Marency’s gun fell silent. She grabbed my hand and led me at a run to the pirogues, leaping into one and lifting the paddle.

‘But Holmes...!’ I exclaimed. She flung me a cold look and shook her head.

‘They seized him in the first rush,’ she said. ‘Get in and start paddling.’

I turned hopelessly to see the creatures pouring down onto the stony beach. I clubbed my rifle, determined to fall like the old soldier, ‘mid a ring of the dead and the dying. Miss Marency rose and with surprising strength thrust me into the pirogue. Leaping in after me, she shoved off as

the stinking wave of beast folk rushed after us.

Some leapt into the water as we drew away from the bank. I struck one who came too close with my paddle and a green eyed apish head sank beneath the water. But not until we were in midstream were we safe from them. Then the current dragged the rest away from us.

I kept paddling upstream. I looked back over my shoulder. Holmes was gone. The poor native bearers had been torn to pieces. I was alone in the night with only sick horror and Miss Marency for company.

Chapter Ten

‘We have no food.’

My voice was as pale as the dawn light that glimmered on the northern shore of the Nago River. My stomach growled as I turned from my inspection of the beached pirogue to make my report.

‘Luckily, we have bullets,’ said Miss Marency, patting the bandoleers she wore, as if she was some Mexican bandit, low on her hips. A grim look was on her face.

I grimaced in return. ‘No food, no medical supplies. All this boat contained was ammunition.’ Now my voice was bleak. ‘We’ll never survive. We must go back.’

‘Go back?’ She said the words as if they were a curse. ‘My father is dead. Your Sherlock Holmes too, no doubt, devoured by great apes. And you’d turn back? Besides, if we lack the supplies to go on, we also lack supplies to go back.’ She produced the map—she had thought to bring that if nothing else—and smoothed it out on the sand. ‘See?’ She challenged me. ‘We’re more than halfway to the lost city. The journey there is more feasible than the return journey to the coast.’

I was shaking, and not with fear. ‘We have no quinine,’ I said. ‘This is the White Man’s Grave!’

She shrugged. ‘I lived here for five years without quinine. I have no need of the stuff.’

Despite myself, my professional curiosity was aroused. ‘Then it is possible that white people may develop an immunity?’ I had never read anything to suggest it, but the circumstances of her upbringing were out of the ordinary. ‘Negroes are less susceptible. Perhaps there was something in your diet...’

She slung her rifle over her shoulder. ‘Which reminds me. We’d better go hunting. No bully beef, no biltong, so we need fresh meat. We’ll see what we can find, shoot it, eat what we can and dry what we can’t.’

I brushed at my brow with the back of my hand and looked numbly at the result. My flesh was wet with cold sweat. But I looked up resolutely. Miss Marency was right. Survival was of the utmost importance. And then, yes, we should continue on the trail of the murderer, for what good

it would be. At least we had rescued the map from the wreckage of our expedition. Even if the Great Detective was no longer with us.

Together, rifles loaded, we made our way into the bush. The light of dawn shone strangely on the jungle vegetation. All was still and silent. Not a beast was visible, except jewelled insects that danced impulsively in occasional shafts of light. I followed Miss Marency, watching covertly the expert way she walked, so skilful, so silent. She paused beside a stream to examine animal spoor, and I stood over her, watching the dark wall of jungle, my rifle ready.

Miss Marency rose, smoothing down her tattered garments with one hand, then led me down the path. She lifted her gun suddenly. I whirled round. Something leapt across the gap in the trees above and her rifle barked out. Miss Marency strode forward and returned shortly after with a small dead monkey dangling from her shoulder. She gestured back in the direction of the boat and brushed past me.

The cold dead eyes of the monkey stared accusingly in my direction.

Returning to the tranquil river shore, she skinned and gutted the beast with my aid, then cooked the softer parts over a fire, burying the rest of the carcass nearby for possible later eating, if we ever came back that way. While the meat was cooking, we ate the liver raw, the Leopard Lady showing rather more gusto than me.

Despite my time in India, I am by no means a vegetarian, and both in that country and more recently on this expedition I have wide experience of hunting for my supper. I am hardly one of these effete suburbanites who would not recognise meat unless it had been prepared by the butcher around the corner. Nevertheless, there was something so horribly human about that pathetic little corpse that I was glad when Miss Marency buried it. If Mr Darwin's theories are true, perhaps we were breakfasting on a distant relative. Darkly, I thought of Holmes, and the ape creatures that had attacked us.

Miss Marency wiped blood from her jaw and smacked her lips with relish. 'It's a long time since I breakfasted on raw liver,' she cried, picking at her teeth with the nail of her little finger.

'I suppose it was seldom on the menu at your finishing school,' I observed drily.

She rose and went to inspect the cooking meat. 'We must be moving on soon,' she told me. 'We'll dry this meat and bring it with us. I have eaten enough. Are you still hungry?'

I wasn't hungry, but I wanted to wash down the raw meat with something more palatable. Seeing what looked like apples hanging from a nearby bough, I said, 'I think I'll have some fruit,' and reached out.

She knocked my hand down with strength that surprised, a fierce expression on her usually demure features. 'Don't be a fool,' she hissed. 'Never eat anything you don't recognise. Those fruit are poisonous.'

I lowered my hand gingerly. ‘I suppose you learnt about them during your childhood,’ I commented, my voice barely shaking.

She nodded. ‘I learnt a great deal in a short time. It was that or die. It was a hard school, and I had some rough playmates, but I loved it. The school in Switzerland was a grey and dismal place by contrast. Africa taught me how to live.’

With that, this scion of the English aristocracy went to ready the pirogue for our upriver voyage.

Shortly afterwards, we returned to the placid waters and began to paddle upstream. At first it was easy going, as the river ran wide and slow here, but the further upstream we went, the faster the waters flowed. Breaking through a narrows where the Nago passed between two high cliffs, we came out into a wider lake, and again the paddling became less arduous. Jungle swathed the slopes on either side, mist hung over the murky, silt rich waters. The lake itself seemed quiet enough until the attack came.

We had just reached a point in the middle of the waters. Miss Marency had expressed a desire to fish for our luncheon when I saw a dark mass in the lake ahead. She was preparing a fishing line using cotton torn from her coat when I pointed, crying, ‘What’s that?’

Even as she looked up, the thing surfaced, opening up into a pair of huge jaws. The pirogue capsized in a fountain of spray and we were flung into the water. As I went under I glimpsed the underbelly of the huge creature, its sturdy trunk like legs splashing away in the water. All around us the contents of our primitive vessel were plunging down into the depths. I splashed helplessly. Had we been attacked by a hippopotamus? Or something worse?

I broke surface, looking about the disturbed waters. Where was Miss Marency? Had the creature killed her? I wished I had a rifle to hand. I saw something vast—the... hippo?—submerging a short way away. I’d have put a bullet down that horrific gullet...

I trod water. The lake grew still. I was right in the middle, and my clothes were growing heavy. I had lost my solar topee, lost my rifle, lost everything but the clothes that were dragging me down beneath the surface.

A slim arm appeared from apparently nowhere. I felt myself seized and dragged backwards through the water. Craning my neck round I saw it was Miss Marency.

‘Can you swim, man?’ she gasped. She was swimming with one arm hampered by carrying me.

I prised myself free and together we struck out for the jungle infested shore. All around us, unidentified things circled beneath the surface, curious, hungry. We swam on, and the inhabitants of the lake pursued us.

But at last we reached the edge of the water on hands and knees, amid a confusion of mangrove roots and mud. Miss Marency, now clad in as meagre an outfit as any native, hauled herself onto a long, thick root, then reached down to help me up after her. I seized her wrist and scrambled up

even as some kind of hideous reptile leapt from the water, its fang-brimming jaws clashing just beneath me before it fell back with a resounding splash.

I lay on the broad back of the mangrove root and panted for breath. Gazing upwards, I saw winged creatures circling high overhead. I guessed they were vultures.

‘We’ve lost everything now,’ I said at last. ‘We had food, at least, and guns for hunting as well as self-defence. Now we have nothing.’ I was still panting. Somehow, I couldn’t get my breath back. Cold sweat pooled on my hot skin.

Miss Marency broke off a branch from the mangrove. ‘We modern people must be resourceful,’ she said, ‘even if it means a return to the Stone Age to survive. With this throwing stick, we can catch ourselves food.’

A horrified thought struck me. ‘Did you bring the map?’

She looked at me steadily, then indicated the spreading waters of the lake of monsters. ‘It’s in there,’ she said.

‘Then we’re utterly lost,’ I said bitterly. ‘No Holmes, no map. Do you have any notion where we might be? When you lived in the bush, did you come anywhere near here?’

‘No,’ she said, kneeling down and picking bark from the branch before smoothing it down. ‘But although I lack the photographic memory of your poor friend Mr Sherlock Holmes, I can remember the way well enough. We may have nothing more than the clothes we stand up in, and’—she looked ruefully at the rags we both wore— ‘they are hardly drawing room fashion. However, as soon as we reach dry land, we can start making our way east along the river valley and up into the mountains of Kong.’

Hope should have stirred my heart, but I felt too weak to respond.

And so it was for several days. We left our precarious perch among the mangrove trees and made our way to solid ground, wading through snake-haunted swamps or scrambling from limb to limb. When at last we reached land that did not shake under our feet, I was too weary to go on, and lay down shaking in the jungle gloom. I heard a rustle from the undergrowth. Forcing myself to look up, I saw that Miss Marency had vanished.

I lowered my sweat-soaked head. She had gone. Abandoned me, just as she had forced me to abandon Holmes and the poor native bearers. And now I was alone and feverish in the middle of the bush with not a friendly face for hundreds of miles, in a country where the animals were lethal and even the fruit was deadly. The air was sticky, stifling, and filthy with insects. My hands shook as if I had palsy. That was when I realised that I had fallen prey to malaria. It was the last lucid thought I had for a long time.

I awoke from dreams of death and destruction, of drowned continents and ancient mysteries, to see small figures stepping out of the forest shadows. Silent, they surrounded me like curious

children, but when one came close to me, it had the face of a wizened old black man. Somehow, they managed to drag me away.

That was all I knew until I found myself awake again, feeling refreshed and clear headed in an encampment deep in the dark forest. Primitive shelters, nests almost, had been woven around the trunks of the trees, while a fire burnt in the middle of them. Small figures sitting around them, the figures from my fever dreams. They were the size of children, and yet I could see from their faces that they were not. What fantastic people were they, living so deep in the jungle? Was I still dreaming?

A diminutive black woman saw I had awakened and came over to me. In her hands she held a monkey skull brim-full with some bitter smelling beverage. I accepted it but shuddered in revulsion as I sipped the steaming liquid. It tasted as bitter as it smelt, but she was insistent and urged me to drink it down. She spoke a language that I did not recognise. Having seen I was awake more of her people gathered round, but she chased them away.

‘You nursed me back to health?’ I asked, finishing the bitter brew. She seemed to understand, nodding, her eyes sparkling in the firelight.

‘You can thank the pigmies for taking you in,’ said Miss Marency, striding into the camp with the carcass of a gazelle over her back. ‘I was busy finding us food.’

She now wore a brief costume of animal skins, much like those worn by the small people of the encampment, and carried a bow and a sheaf of stone-tipped arrows. So she had not abandoned me to a terrible fate in the jungles of the Dark Continent! I looked around the encampment at my rescuers. Pigmies! I had heard tales of these tiny people of Africa, but dismissed them as nothing more than a myth.

‘I was suffering from malaria,’ I said. ‘How can I be well again? It’s impossible.’

‘The pygmies cured you,’ she said simply, squatting down beside me to examine me closely.

‘Impossible,’ I said dogmatically. ‘These people are hunter gatherers. How could they have found the secret that has baffled folk in civilised Europe until recent times? Besides, quinine is not found in Africa. It comes from the bark of cinchona trees, which are found only in South America.’

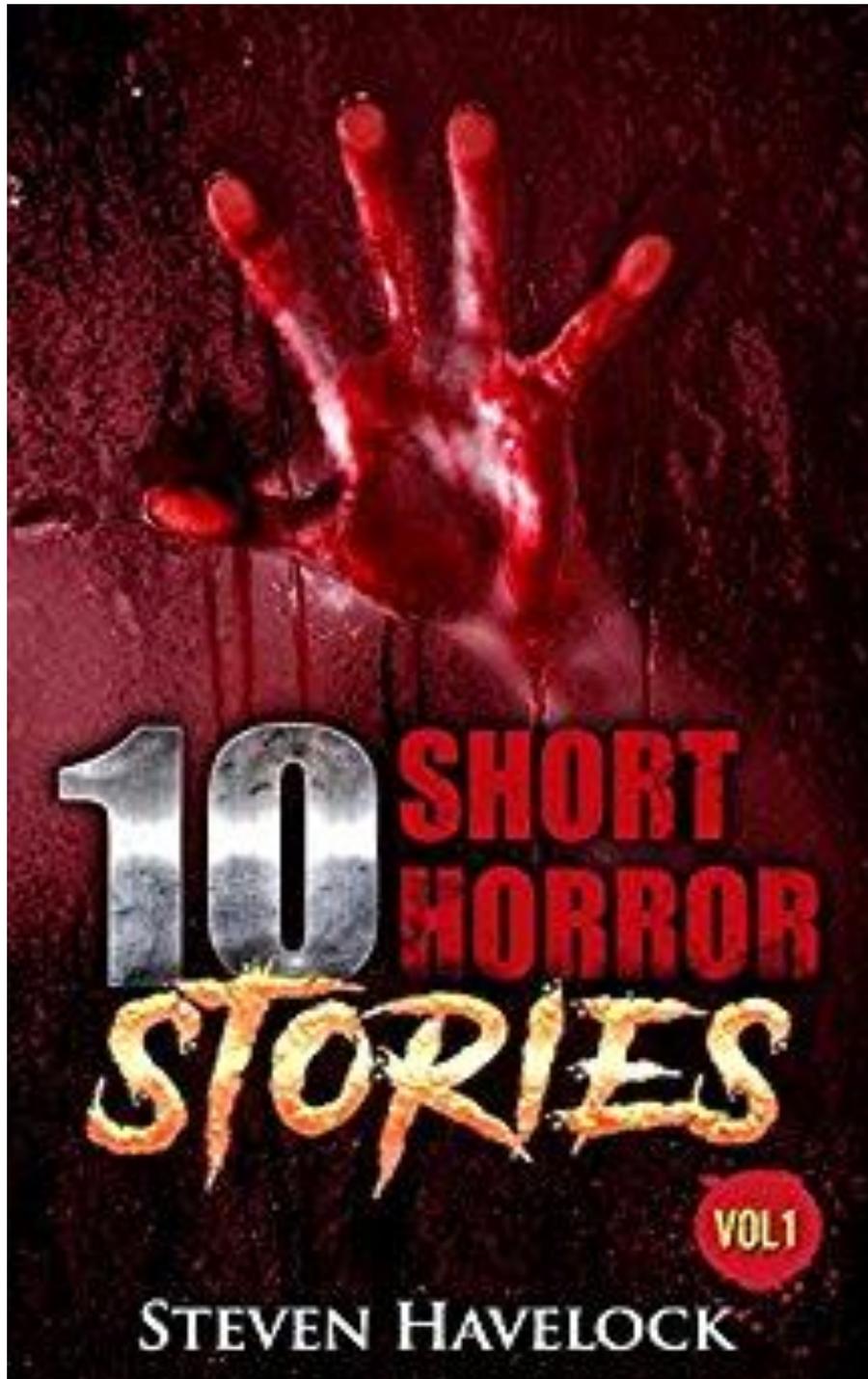
She shrugged. ‘Maybe they don’t know that,’ she told me. ‘Nevertheless they know of a plant that they use in a kind of magic potion to cure what they call the shivering sickness. It worked with you. I had fever when I was a girl, but I no longer suffer from it.’

I shook my head, dismissing the mystery. ‘Where are we now?’ I asked. ‘Are we anywhere near Nkume?’

She shook her head. ‘Still a long way off. I asked the pigmies for assistance in reaching the city, but despite all their help, they refused. They never go there, said their chief. He tells me that

demons live in the mountains. No pigmy who goes that way ever returns.’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Eleven

When he came within twenty hours of the derelict, Kharl Stoff pulled his ship into a parking orbit.

“You still with us?” he asked.

Ward radioed back.

“Yeah,” he said.

“We’re waitin’ for ya, twenty hours out from target.”

“Awrite, see ya then,” Ward finished up.

Yeah, it was a trap. Ward already had that figured out.

But who set it? Who would think him worth the trouble? Ward had his guesses, but they all turned to one man, and that man was Turhan Mot.

Kharl Stoff did as he said he would, and waited the two hours for Card Ward to close up the distance between them.

“See, there,” he pointed to the pixel moving swiftly across his visiscreen. “He comes.”

Ward, for his part, saw Kharl Stoff’s ship plainly as it made a wide orbit around the derelict. The ship that followed, Dimara noted, was also closing up the gap from behind.

“I may have ta letcha take care of those guys, babe,” Ward said. “I suspect I’m going to be busy.”

“Dimara, as always, takes delight in serving the Carter Ward in any way Dimara can,” she answered.

“Yuh ready?” came Kharl Stoff’s heavy voice through the ship’s subspace communications array.

“Yup,” was Ward laconic reply.

“As we planned it out,” Stoff reminded Ward.

“Yeah. Of course,” Ward answered, annoyed.

Ward brought the O8-111A close to Stoff’s ship. Stoff’s was a bulky, rounded vessel, once again

as large as Ward's O8-111A. As it was with almost all the Scroungers' ships, this one was painted a flat black on all its exterior surfaces. Interplanetary law dictated that all craft sailing in space be painted either a bright white or a gleaming silver, that it may be easily seen against the background of the stars.

So it was that Ward was barely able to get a visual of Stoff's craft, but that was hardly an inconvenience. The ship was otherwise quite plainly visible in ultraviolet, infrared and other wavelengths.

Now he was getting a good look at Stoff's ship, Ward, already suspicious, became even more wary.

"Yeah... looks like a man could cram a lotta tricks in there," Ward cautioned himself.

He pulled up to a position five miles behind Kharl Stoff's ship, close enough together that they could be mistaken for a single craft by any scanners coming from the derelict.

For, though they called it 'the derelict', the ship was not entirely uninhabited. It acted, in part, as a prison ship, for those whose crimes had provoked a special interest among the Scroungers. Some were held as hostages, others held for bounties. Even those who were sent to stand guard there were being punished for some infraction or other, because the derelict was in no way a pleasant place.

The derelict, what was once the deep space transport, the DST 427, was only but a husk, a shell of a ship, everything of any value having long since been stripped away from it. Decks and bulkheads remained, and cages that acted as cells for the prisoners, but beyond that and the arrays that communicated directly with Astra Palace, there was nothing that gave comfort to the senses. Lights there were, but they were few and dim. Empty cabins and storage tanks were the birthplace of many shapeless shadows that haunted the hallways.

Some effort had been taken to give the derelict at least a minimum of functionality. A plasma wall had been built into the hull for landing and departures. The landing bay was well maintained, though dark like the rest of the ship.

But once away from the landing bay, and through the halls leading away, into the depths of the ship's bowels, one entered, again, a world of near darkness, and a world decaying and decrepit.

Carter Ward, in his ship, the O8-111A, hugged close to the stern of Kharl Stoff's larger ship as they approached the dark derelict. They were not hailed by anyone aboard the ancient transport ship, which was perfectly in keeping with the custom of derelict ships.

Kharl Stoff brought his ship through the plasma walls into the dimly lit landing bay. He landed it down in an empty corner. Ward followed, and landed his ship next to Stoff's.

Ward locked his ship down. He stared at the ceiling of the bridge for a moment, emptying his mind of all thought. This was the moment. This was the moment that decided whether Ward lived or died. And Ward didn't care, except that he wanted to kill Turhan Mot more than he wanted to die.

Ward climbed out of the pilot's seat, and made his way back to the lower deck. Armed with his plasma pistol, his combat knife and his garrotte, he stepped out of the O8-111A and onto the walkway between his ship and Stoff's.

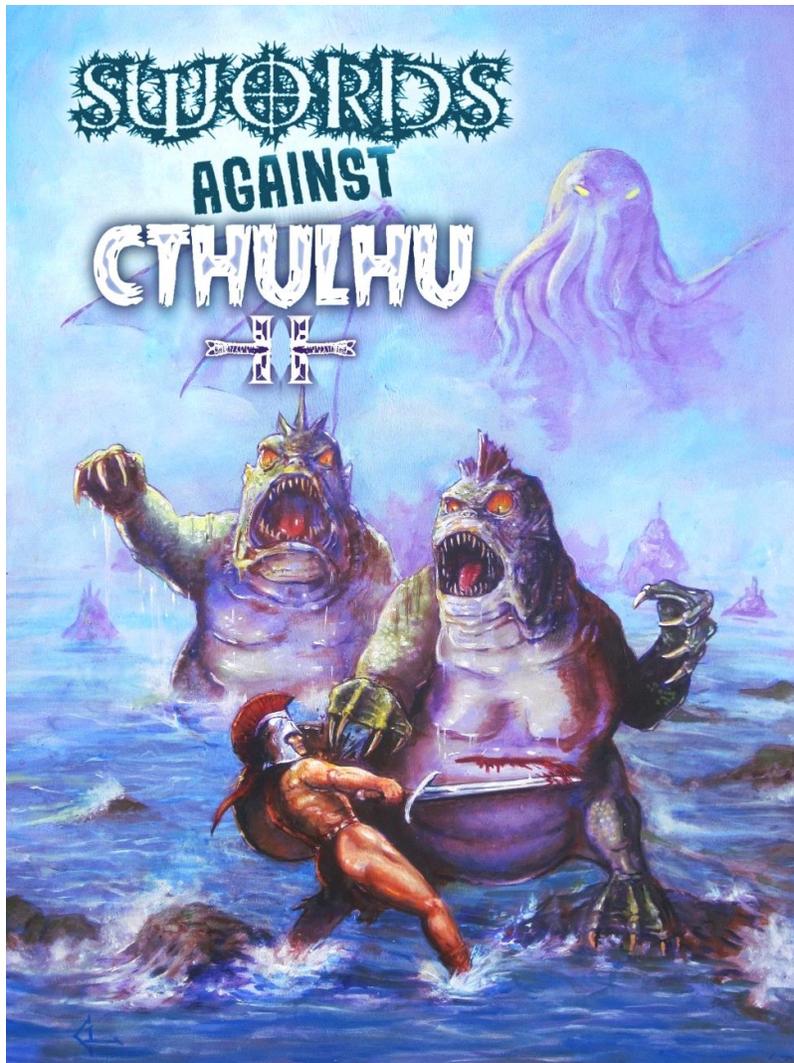
"Hokay, babe," he said to Dimara. "This is it. Keep an eye on my ship, wouldja, good lookin'?"

"Dimara is always pleased to assist the Carter Ward," she said.

"I'm gonna go see what's smokin' around here. Don't let anyone get close to my ship. Anyone who isn't me, tries to get on board my ship, kill `em."

"It will give Dimara great pleasure," she said.

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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XVII—Presented At Court.

Leading Eveena by the hand—for to hold my arm after the European fashion was always an inconvenience and fatigue to her—and preceded by Ergimo, I walked unnoticed to the closed gate of pink crystal, contrasting the emerald green of the outer walls. Along the front of this central portion of the residence was a species of veranda, supported by pillars overlaid with a bright red metal, and wrought in the form of smooth tree trunks closely clasped by creepers, the silver flowers of the latter contrasting the dense golden foliage and ruby like stems. Under this, and in front of the gate itself, were two sentries armed with a spear, the shaft of which was about six feet in length, hollow, and almost as light as the cane or reed handle of an African assegai. The blade more resembled the triangular bayonet. Beside each, however, was the terrible asphyxiator, fixed on its stand, with a bore about as great as that of a nine pounder, but incomparably lighter. These two weapons might at one discharge have annihilated a huge mob of insurgents threatening to storm the palace, were insurrections known in Mars. These men saluted us by dropping the points of their weapons and inclining the handle towards us; gazing upon me with surprise, and with something of soldierly admiration for physical superiority. The doors, wide enough to admit a dozen Martialists abreast, parted, and we entered a vaulted hall whose arched roof was supported not by pillars but by gigantic statues, each presenting the lustre of a different jewel, and all wrought with singular perfection of proportion and of beauty. Here we were met by two officers wearing the same dress as the sentries outside—a diaper of crimson and silver. The rank of those who now received us, however, was indicated by a silver ribbon passing over the left shoulder, and supporting what I should have called a staff, save that it was of metal and had a sharp point, rendering it almost as formidable a weapon as the rapier. Exchanging a word or two with Ergimo, these gentlemen ushered us into a small room on the right, where refreshments were placed before us. Eveena whispered me that she must not share our meal in presence of these strangers; an intimation which somewhat blunted the keen appetite I always derived from a journey through the Martial atmosphere. Checked as it was, however, that appetite seemed a new astonishment to our attendants; the need of food among their race being proportionate to their inferior size and strength. When we rose, I asked Ergimo what was to become of Eveena, as the officers were evidently waiting to conduct me into the presence of their Sovereign, where it would not be appropriate for her to appear. He repeated my question to the principal official, and the latter, walking to a door in the farther corner of the room, sounded an electric signal; a few seconds after which the door opened, showing two veiled figures, the pink ground of whose robes indicated their matronhood, if I may apply such a term to the relation of his hundred temporary wives to the Camptâ. But this ground colour was almost hidden in the embroidery of crimson, gold, and white, which, as I soon found, were the favourite colours of the reigning Prince. To these ladies I resigned Eveena, the officer saying, as I somewhat reluctantly parted from her, “What you entrust to the Camptâ’s household you will find again in your own when your audience is over.” Whether this avoidance of all direct mention of women were matter of delicacy or contempt I hardly knew, though I had observed it on former occasions.

When the door closed, I noticed that Ergimo had left us, and the officers indicated by gesture rather than by words that they were to lead me immediately into the presence. I had considered

with some care how I was, on so critical an occasion, to conduct myself, and had resolved that the most politic course would probably be an assumption of courteous but absolute independence; to treat the Autocrat of this planet much as an English envoy would treat an Indian Prince. It was in accordance with this intention that I had assumed a dress somewhat more elaborate than is usually worn here, a white suit of a substance resembling velvet in texture, and moire in lustre, with collar and belt of silver. On my breast I wore my order of [illegible], and in my belt my one cherished Terrestrial possession—the sword, reputed the best in Asia, that had twice driven its point home within a finger's breadth of my life; and that clove the turban on my brow but a minute before it was surrendered—just in time to save its gallant owner and his score of surviving comrades. In its hilt I had set the emerald with which alone the Commander of the Faithful rewarded my services. The turban is not so unlike the masculine head dress of Mars as to attract any special attention. Re-entering the hall, I was conducted along a gallery and through another crystal door into the immediate presence of the Autocrat. The audience chamber was of no extraordinary size, perhaps one quarter as large as the peristyle of Esmo's dwelling. Along the emerald walls ran a series of friezes wrought in gold, representing various scenes of peace and war, agricultural, judicial, and political; as well as incidents which, I afterwards learnt, preserved the memory of the long struggles wherein the Communists were finally overthrown. The lower half of the room was empty, the upper was occupied by a semicircle of seats forming part of the building itself and directly facing the entrance. These took up about one third of the space, the central floor being divided from the upper portion of the room by a low wall of metal surmounted by arches supporting the roof and hung with drapery, which might be so lowered as to conceal the whole occupied part of the chamber. The seats rose in five tiers, one above the other. The semicircle, however, was broken exactly in the middle, that is, at the point farthest from the entrance, by a broad flight of steps, at the summit of which, and raised a very little above the seats of the highest tier, was the throne, supported by two of the royal brutes whose attack had been so nearly fatal to myself, wrought in silver, their erect heads forming the arms and front. About fifty persons were present, occupying only the seats nearest to the throne. On the upper tier were nine or ten who wore a scarlet sash, among whom I recognised a face I had not seen since the day of my memorable visit to the Astronaut; not precisely the face of a friend—Endo Zamptâ. Behind the throne were ranged a dozen guards, armed with the spear and with the lightning gun used in hunting. That a single Martial battalion with its appropriate artillery could annihilate the best army of the Earth I could not but be aware; yet the first thought that occurred to me, as I looked on these formidably armed but diminutive soldiers, was that a score of my Arab horsemen would have cut a regiment of them to pieces. But by the time I had reached the foot of the steps my attention was concentrated on a single figure and face—the form and countenance of the Prince, who rose from his throne as I approached. Those who remember that Louis XIV., a prince reputed to have possessed the most majestic and awe-inspiring presence of his age, was actually beneath the ordinary height of Frenchmen, may be able to believe me when I say that the Autocrat of Mars, though scarcely five feet tall, was in outward appearance and bearing the most truly royal and imposing prince I have ever seen. His stature, rising nearly two inches over the tallest of those around him, perhaps added to the effect of a mien remarkable for dignity, composure, and self-confidence. The predominant and most immediately observable expression of his face was one of serene calm and command. A closer inspection and a longer experience explained why, notwithstanding, my first conception of his character (and it was a true one) ascribed to him quite as much of fire and spirit as of impassive grandeur. His voice, though its tone was gentle and almost strikingly quiet, had in it something

of the ring peculiar to those which have sent the word of command along a line of battle. I felt as I heard it more impressed with the personal greatness, and even with the rank and power, of the Prince before me, than when I knelt to kiss the hand of the Most Christian King, or stood barefooted before the greatest modern successor of the conqueror of Stamboul.

“I am glad to receive you,” he said. “It will be among the most memorable incidents of my reign that I welcome to my Court the first visitor from another world, or,” he added, after a sudden pause, and with an inflection of unmistakable irony in his tone, “the first who has descended to our world from a height to which no balloon could reach and at which no balloonist could live.”

“I am honoured, Prince,” I replied, “in the notice of a greater potentate than the greatest of my own world.”

These compliments exchanged, the Prince at once proceeded to more practical matters, aptly, however, connecting his next sentence with the formal phrases preceding it.

“Nevertheless, you have not shown excessive respect for my power in the person of one of my greatest officers. If you treated the princes of Earth as unceremoniously as the Regent of Elcavoo, I can understand that you found it convenient to place yourself beyond their reach.”

I thought that this speech afforded me an opportunity of repairing my offence with the least possible loss of dignity.

“The proudest of Earthly princes,” I replied, “would, I think, have pardoned the roughness which forgot the duty of a subject in the first obligations of humanity. No Sovereign whom I have served, but would have forgiven me more readily for rough words spoken at such a moment, than for any delay or slackness in saving the life of a woman in danger under his own eyes. Permit me to take this opportunity of apologizing to the Regent in your presence, and assuring him that I was influenced by no disrespect to him, but only by overpowering terror for another.”

“The lives of a dozen women,” said the Camptâ, still with that covert irony or sarcasm in his tone, “would seem of less moment than threats and actual violence offered to the ruler of our largest and wealthiest dominion. The excuse which Endo Zamptâ must accept” (with a slight but perceptible emphasis on the imperative) “is the utter difference between our laws and ideas and your own.”

The Regent, at this speech from his Sovereign, rose and made the usual gesture of assent, inclining his head and lifting his left hand to his mouth. But the look on his face as he turned it on me, thus partly concealing it from the camptâ, boded no good should I ever fall into his power. The Prince then desired me to give an account of the motives which had induced my voyage and the adventures I had encountered. In reply, I gave him, as briefly and clearly as I could, a summary of all that is recorded in the earlier part of this narrative, carefully forbearing to afford any explanation of the manner in which the apercig force was generated. This omission the Prince noticed at once with remarkable quickness.

“You do not choose,” he said, “to tell us your secret, and of course it is your property. Hereafter,

however, I shall hope to purchase it from you.”

“Prince,” I answered, “if one of your subjects found himself in the power of a race capable of conquering this world and destroying its inhabitants, would you forgive him if he furnished them with the means of reaching you?”

“I think,” he replied, “my forgiveness would be of little consequence in that case. But go on with your story.”

I finished my narration among looks of surprise and incredulity from no inconsiderable part of the audience, which, however, I noticed the less because the Prince himself listened with profound interest; putting in now and then a question which indicated his perfect comprehension of my account, of the conditions of such a journey and of the means I had employed to meet them.

“Before you were admitted,” he said, “Endo Zamptâ had read to us his report upon your vessel and her machinery, an account which in every respect consists with and supports the truth of your relation. Indeed, were your story untrue, you have run a greater risk in telling it here than in the most daring adventure I have ever known or imagined. The Court is dismissed. Reclamomortâ will please me by remaining with me for the present.”

When the assembly dispersed, I followed their Autocrat at his desire into his private apartments, where, resting among a pile of cushions and motioning me to take a place in immediate proximity to himself, he continued the conversation in a tone and manner so exactly the same as that he had employed in public as to show that the latter was not assumed for purposes of monarchical stage play, but was the natural expression of his own character as developed under the influence of unlimited and uncontradicted power. He only exchanged, for unaffected interest and implied confidence, the tone of ironical doubt by which he had rendered it out of the question for his courtiers to charge him with a belief in that which public opinion might pronounce impossible, while making it apparent to me that he regarded the bigotry of scepticism with scarcely veiled contempt.

“I wish,” he said, “I had half a dozen subjects capable of imagining such an enterprise and hardy enough to undertake it. But though we all profess to consider knowledge, and especially scientific knowledge, the one object for which it is worthwhile to live, none of us would risk his life in such an adventure for all the rewards that science and fame could give.”

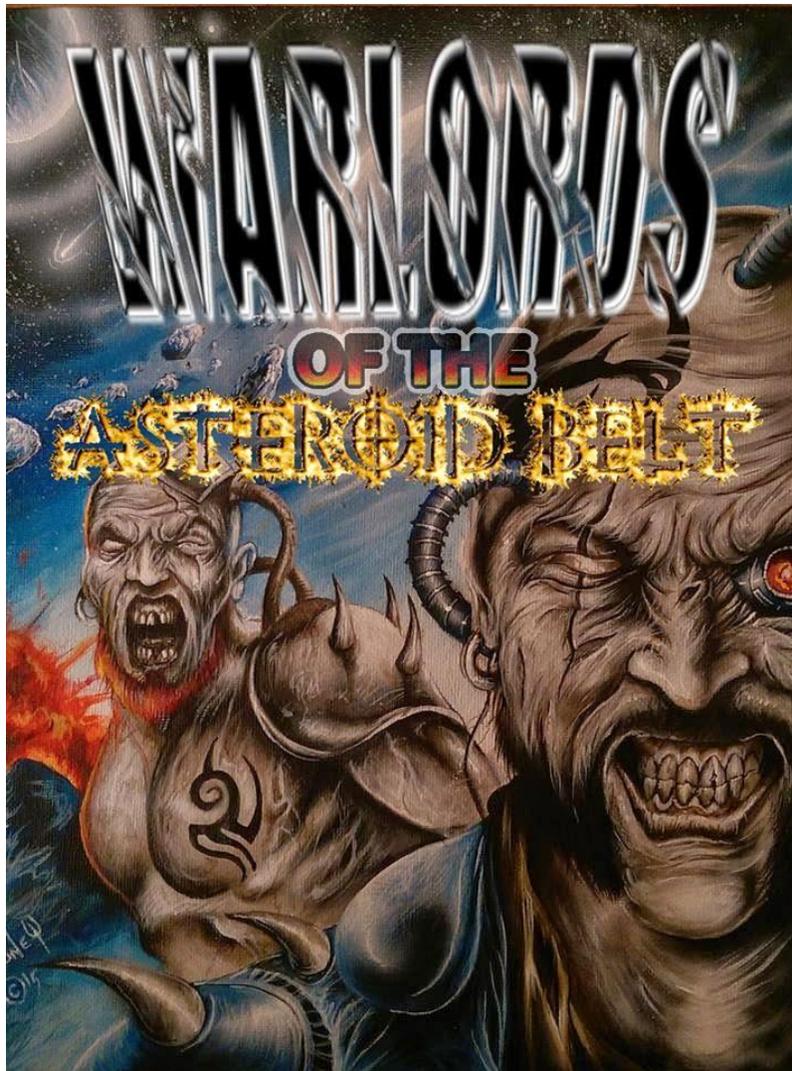
“I think, Prince,” I replied, “that I am in presence of one inhabitant of this planet who would have dared at least as much as I have done.”

“Possibly,” he said. “Because, weary as most of us profess to be of existence, the weariest life in this world is that of him who rules it; living for ever under the silent criticism which he cannot answer, and bound to devote his time and thoughts to the welfare of a race whose utter extermination would be, on their own showing, the greatest boon he could confer upon them. Certainly I would rather be the discoverer of a world than its Sovereign.”

He asked me numerous questions about the Earth, the races that inhabit it, their several systems of government, and their relations to one another; manifesting a keener interest, I thought, in the great wars which ended while I was yet a youth, than in any other subject. At last he permitted me to take leave. "You are," he said, "the most welcome guest I ever have or could have received; a guest distinguished above all others by a power independent of my own. But what honour I can pay to courage and enterprise, what welcome I can give such a guest, shall not be unworthy of him or of myself. Retire now to the home you will find prepared for you. I will only ask you to remember that I have chosen one near my own in order that I may see you often, and learn in private all that you can tell me."

At the entrance of the apartment I was met by the officer who had introduced me into the presence, and conducted at once to a door opening on the interior court or peristyle of the central portion of the Palace. This was itself a garden, but, unlike those of private houses, a garden open to the sky and traversed by roads in lieu of mere paths; not serving, as in private dwellings, the purposes of a common living room. Here a carriage awaited us, and my escort requested me to mount. I had some misgivings on Eveena's account, but felt it necessary to imitate the reserve and affected indifference on such subjects of those among whom I had been thrown, at least until I somewhat better understood their ways, and had established my own position. Traversing a vaulted passage underneath the rearward portion of the Palace, we emerged into the outer garden, and through this into a road lighted with a brilliancy almost equal to that of day. Our journey occupied nearly half an hour, when we entered an enclosure apparently of great size, the avenue of which was so wide that, without dismounting, our carriage passed directly up to the door of a larger house than I had yet seen.

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Five: The Stillness

My first act before I went into the pantry was to fasten the door between the kitchen and the scullery. But the pantry was empty; every scrap of food had gone. Apparently, the Martian had taken it all on the previous day. At that discovery I despaired for the first time. I took no food, or no drink either, on the eleventh or the twelfth day.

At first my mouth and throat were parched, and my strength ebbed sensibly. I sat about in the darkness of the scullery, in a state of despondent wretchedness. My mind ran on eating. I thought I had become deaf, for the noises of movement I had been accustomed to hear from the pit had ceased absolutely. I did not feel strong enough to crawl noiselessly to the peephole, or I would have gone there.

On the twelfth day my throat was so painful that, taking the chance of alarming the Martians, I attacked the creaking rain water pump that stood by the sink, and got a couple of glassfuls of blackened and tainted rain water. I was greatly refreshed by this, and emboldened by the fact that no enquiring tentacle followed the noise of my pumping.

During these days, in a rambling, inconclusive way, I thought much of the curate and of the manner of his death.

On the thirteenth day I drank some more water, and dozed and thought disjointedly of eating and of vague impossible plans of escape. Whenever I dozed I dreamt of horrible phantasms, of the death of the curate, or of sumptuous dinners; but, asleep or awake, I felt a keen pain that urged me to drink again and again. The light that came into the scullery was no longer grey, but red. To my disordered imagination it seemed the colour of blood.

On the fourteenth day I went into the kitchen, and I was surprised to find that the fronds of the red weed had grown right across the hole in the wall, turning the half light of the place into a crimson coloured obscurity.

It was early on the fifteenth day that I heard a curious, familiar sequence of sounds in the kitchen, and, listening, identified it as the snuffing and scratching of a dog. Going into the kitchen, I saw a dog's nose peering in through a break among the ruddy fronds. This greatly surprised me. At the scent of me he barked shortly.

I thought if I could induce him to come into the place quietly I should be able, perhaps, to kill and eat him; and in any case, it would be advisable to kill him, lest his actions attracted the attention of the Martians.

I crept forward, saying "Good dog!" very softly; but he suddenly withdrew his head and disappeared.

I listened—I was not deaf—but certainly the pit was still. I heard a sound like the flutter of a bird's wings, and a hoarse croaking, but that was all.

For a long while I lay close to the peephole, but not daring to move aside the red plants that obscured it. Once or twice I heard a faint pitter patter like the feet of the dog going hither and thither on the sand far below me, and there were more birdlike sounds, but that was all. At length, encouraged by the silence, I looked out.

Except in the corner, where a multitude of crows hopped and fought over the skeletons of the dead the Martians had consumed, there was not a living thing in the pit.

I stared about me, scarcely believing my eyes. All the machinery had gone. Save for the big mound of greyish blue powder in one corner, certain bars of aluminium in another, the black birds, and the skeletons of the killed, the place was merely an empty circular pit in the sand.

Slowly I thrust myself out through the red weed, and stood upon the mound of rubble. I could see in any direction save behind me, to the north, and neither Martians nor sign of Martians were to be seen. The pit dropped sheerly from my feet, but a little way along the rubbish afforded a practicable slope to the summit of the ruins. My chance of escape had come. I began to tremble.

I hesitated for some time, and then, in a gust of desperate resolution, and with a heart that throbbed violently, I scrambled to the top of the mound in which I had been buried so long.

I looked about again. To the northward, too, no Martian was visible.

When I had last seen this part of Sheen in the daylight it had been a straggling street of comfortable white and red houses, interspersed with abundant shady trees. Now I stood on a mound of smashed brickwork, clay, and gravel, over which spread a multitude of red cactus shaped plants, knee high, without a solitary terrestrial growth to dispute their footing. The trees near me were dead and brown, but further a network of red thread scaled the still living stems.

The neighbouring houses had all been wrecked, but none had been burned; their walls stood, sometimes to the second story, with smashed windows and shattered doors. The red weed grew tumultuously in their roofless rooms. Below me was the great pit, with the crows struggling for its refuse. A number of other birds hopped about among the ruins. Far away I saw a gaunt cat slink crouchingly along a wall, but traces of men there were none.

The day seemed, by contrast with my recent confinement, dazzlingly bright, the sky a glowing blue. A gentle breeze kept the red weed that covered every scrap of unoccupied ground gently swaying. And oh! the sweetness of the air!

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