

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 5
20TH MAY 2018

ALONE

BY SERGIO
PALUMBO
(EDITED BY
MICHELE
DUTCHER)
RACING MY OWN
SHADOW...

I LOVE THE LITTLE BASTARDS

BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK
"...THE MURDER
OF SIX MUSLIM
WOMEN"

THE FAVOURITE BY GREGORY OWEN CONCLUDES

REVIEW BY JOHN C ADAMS.

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Schlock! Webzine

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McGuigan, Percy Greg, HG Wells*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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EDITORIAL

This week, our story of family favouritism and murder comes to an epically blasphemous conclusion. Next we encounter a British Columbian legend. John C Adams review George RR Martin. And Steven Havelock offers a bewildering tale of mistaken identity and murder.

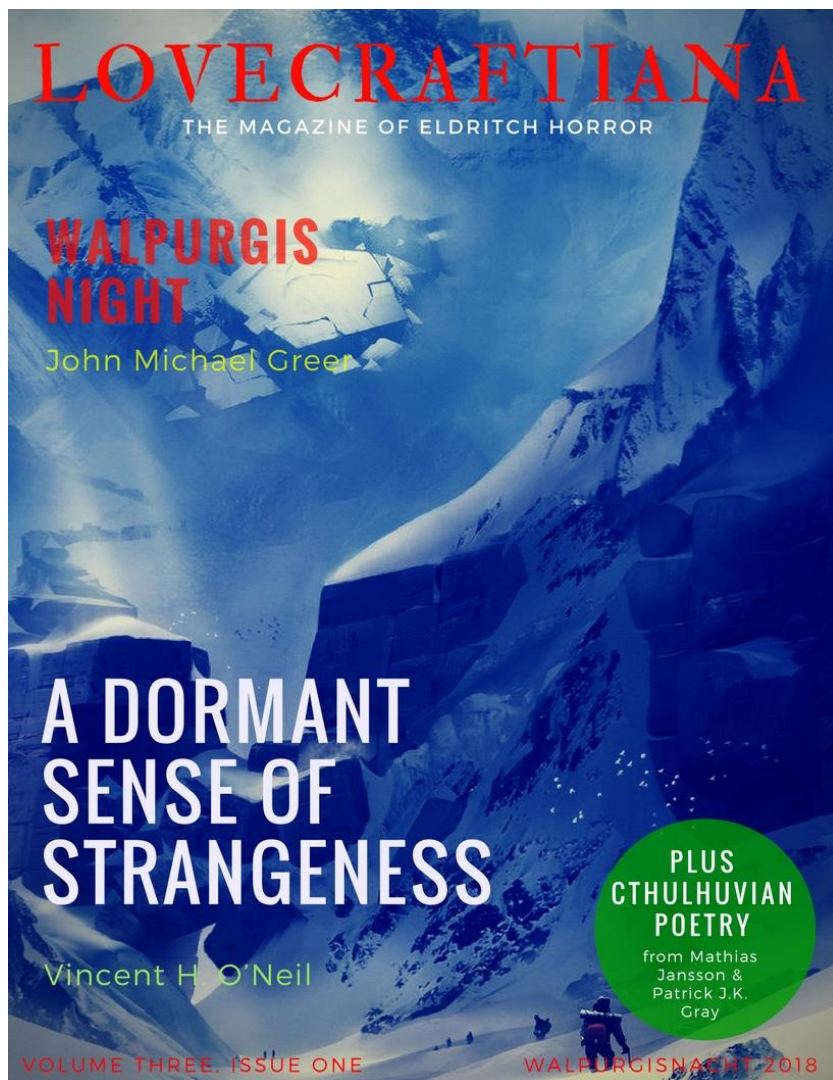
Holmes returns and, accompanied by Watson and Miss Marency, he meets the Queen of the Lost City of Nkume. Shadowy figures converge on Carter Ward. Our visitor to Mars tackles marital bliss. And the survivor of the Martian attack has a new encounter with an old acquaintance.

—Gavin Chappell

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And the Walpurgisnacht edition of [Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror](#).



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THE FAVOURITE by Gregory Owen

Part 2

“*Answer me!*”

She winced at the volume of his rage, but she quickly resumed her defensive stance. “It was an accident. Wasn’t my fault.”

“*Why?*” Mom squeaked.

“She—” Laurie swallowed. “She... she asked for it... *deserved it*... She pushed me to this. You,” she pointed at her parents, “you *all* pushed me...”

Mom and Dad were flabbergasted at the accusation, but Dad was especially filled with contempt by it. “Excuse me, young lady? Would you care to elaborate on that little bit of *maniacal* wisdom?” Dad’s strict parenting didn’t falter even in the face of his own deceased child. “Explain yourself!”

“She was *always* your favourite!”

Mom blubbered profusely, kissing Brooke’s cheek, and took one last look at her. “*No...*” She noticed the ornate dagger in her daughter’s grip, and carefully prying her fingers from the handle, Mom took the blade and inspected it. It was as though she were looking for imperfections or defects. She had seen the weapon before.

“No, no... we loved you both... but *she* had a responsibility.” Dad paused, standing up slowly. “A *great* responsibility... something we didn’t want to expose you to quite yet. Damn it, if only you could have waited another hour...” He sighed as Mom stood upright too.

“But I *heard* you all... you never knew I was around. I could always, *always* hear you whispering. ‘*Brooke, you’re the favourite.*’ What in the hell was I supposed to think about that?! She was your favourite and you never gave two shits about me!”

“You’re wrong, Laurie,” Mom said as her tears dried.

“The way you’d look at her...” Laurie sniffed and narrowed her eyes. “You even forgot my *sixteenth birthday!*”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “No, we didn’t. We knew.”

“We always knew, Laurie,” Mom confirmed.

“Then why didn’t either one of you say anything?! You didn’t even say ‘Happy Birthday’ to me! I thought maybe, just maybe, I’d get a *surprise party* or *something...*”

Neither Mom nor Dad answered.

Laurie took a step downward, motioning at her dead sister. “Brooke forgot all about it! She had no *fucking* clue! She was busy in her room *in in in* that ugly dress with *that that* knife!” She was unsure why she stammered then. So much adrenaline—from the running, the arguing, and the murder. That was the only explanation she could formulate.

“Brooke... had a lot on her mind,” Dad clarified.

“She did. Quite a lot.”

Laurie scoffed, managing a small giggle that she didn’t even try to hide. “Right... sure, she had a great deal on her mind. What was it? A *responsibility*, right?” she posed mockingly. “A *duty*?”

“Yes, Laurie,” Mom replied.

“Yeah, it’s such a *huge freaking duty* to be your favourite! This day was supposed to be about *me*! It was supposed to be *special*!”

“It is.”

“No, it isn’t! I’ve never been the good one... you’ve always treated me like dog shit and I’ve *accidentally* killed Brooke, and now... I...” She trailed off, taking a breath.

“She doesn’t understand.” Mom looked to Dad. “We need to tell her, then.”

“Very well.” Dad looked at the floor and inhaled slowly. “Brooke was not *our* favourite, Laurie,” he uttered. “She was *his* favourite.” His face carried in its musculature the utmost seriousness. He stared coldly at Laurie, who only responded with bafflement.

“What? *His*? *Who*...? *What* are you talking about?”

Both Mom and Dad, nearly in unison, moved up the stairs and past their youngest daughter. “Come with us, Laurie.”

“What?” Perplexity couldn’t even begin to describe what Laurie felt upon hearing her father’s enigmatic statement. *His favourite? ‘His?’ Who in the fuck are they babbling about? This is the strangest birthday I’ve ever had. The strangest day, even. They act like... like they don’t really care that Brooke is dead. More like... that she died because of me.*

The three of them entered Dad’s study. Dad walked over to the podium near one of the large bookcases as Mom and Laurie watched, and from it he took a large, dirty book. Laurie had seen it a number of times, as Dad spent a great deal of his spare time most nights looking through its pages. It was also one of the works in his collection she had attempted to read once before. As humourless as he had been to that point, he presented it to her.

“I want you to look at this.”

Taking it from him, Laurie curled her nose in boredom. “Yeah, I remember this thing. *Necro whatever*.”

“The *Necronomicon*, Laurie,” Dad corrected.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Show him to her, dear,” Mom nodded. The tears shed for Brooke’s passing were long gone, her runny black make up dried in a way that made her brown eyes look like eclipsed suns with no light in them at all.

Dad took the *Necronomicon*, flipped through some pages, and handed it back to Laurie. “Look there... the drawing. The name below it.” The picture, drawn in a reddish brown ink the colour of dried blood, looked like a group of circles, and above them seemed to be, at least to Laurie, a massive amalgamation of squiggly lines, like snakes or vines or something in that respect. Behind it were what appeared to be stars, part of some unseen galaxy, with no familiar constellations.

Laurie, confounded, tried to read the name, but didn’t even attempt to pronounce it aloud. “I can’t read this... what does it say?” She would only butcher the word if she tried, and she didn’t feel like wasting her time. Dad plucked the *Necronomicon* away from her.

“He is our *God*. Brooke was *his favourite*. The chosen of Yog Sothoth.”

“*Yog Soth-Thoth?*” Laurie said, doing her best to enunciate. “Who is that? What is going on?”

“He demands a sacrifice be made... not just from us, but from the other families in Dunwich Heights. All of them.” Mom held the dagger taken from Brooke, deftly caressing it with her silky fingers, and stepped behind Brooke to Dad’s desk. “He chooses his favourite among us, each generation, and we are to offer their flesh, their blood, their *very being* to him. We must sacrifice one of our own so that we can continue to keep our knowledge and wealth—to endure as we have for centuries.”

“What?” Laurie believed then that the stress from Brooke’s sudden death had gone to Mom’s head and she was spouting the ravings of a psychotic. She was losing her grasp on the real world, clinging by a thread, and what Laurie had done had succeeded in snapping the line. That theory would have worked well if Dad hadn’t shared the psychosis.

“Have you ever wondered how this family became rich, Laurie?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, but...”

Dad held up the book, still open to the very page Laurie had examined. “None of us ever worked for it! None of the families in this community *ever* did! Our fortune, and our abundant knowledge, was granted by *our Lord*, the Opener of the Way!”

“Yog Sothoth, the Lurker at the Threshold...” Mom proclaimed with a smile. “... Father of *Nug* and *Yeb*, and grandfather of the great *Cthulhu*...”

“Brooke knew the implications of her role, and accepted for all of *us*...”

“This is crazy!” Laurie exclaimed through clenched jaws. “You are fucking crazy!” The judge at her trial would send Laurie to prison and commit her parents to a lunatic asylum. The local news stations would make a killing in the ratings.

“... She accepted for *you*.”

Laurie recalled Brooke’s words. “She—she said it was for me...” What was for her? *They’re trying to tell me it’s some kind of sacrifice? What is going on?!*

“It was... it’s for all of us.” Dad placed the Necronomicon on his desk while Mom, still sitting there, pushed another book amid the scattered papers to him. It was smaller than the Necronomicon, but it seemed much newer, as though whomever owned it before took great care of it. Perhaps they treasured it. Dad seemed to.

“So, Brooke was... *chosen*... as his *favourite*?” Laurie nervously played along, focusing her attention on her father. She might possibly calm them both down by talking irrationally, just as they were. She just had to feign both interest and belief for the time being. “What does that mean?”

“It is the greatest of honours, Laurie. I know how that must sound to you, but believe me when I say it. To be one of Yog Sothoth’s chosen is to be groomed and treated well, to show that his gift was not in vain. To satisfy his desire is to prolong our prosperity.”

That explains why she was treated better than I was, Laurie reflected as he spoke.

“She makes the sacrifice, we reap the reward, and so do the future generations... but not without a price.” Mom hopped back to her feet. “There’s always a price, Laurie. For everything good in life, and we have a lot of good.”

“So, she was just going to kill herself?”

Dad frowned. “*Sacrifice herself*, yes. It’s not as trivial as you make it seem. That was her *duty* and *responsibility*, as you’ve seen fit to ridicule, Laurie. It’s painful... but it was what he commanded, and we abide. But *you* have taken that from her. Now...”

“How exactly did you plan to tell me that Brooke was dead?” Laurie interrupted. Minutes ago, she was filled with disdain at her family for not showing her the affection she felt owed to her

but at that moment, she was mortified at the plans in place of which she had been unaware. That and the fact that her parents were certifiable and not merely neglectful to her.

“Though it seemed to have slipped her mind, her death was to be her *gift* to you. For you to finally be the centre of attention, to have continued wealth, Laurie. Her sacrifice was for this family! But most of all, it was for *you!*”

Laurie couldn’t fathom any of the things that she was hearing. “Jesus, you both are—Why did neither of you never tell me any of this?! Why now?” *Yeah, a hell of a birthday present, Mom and Dad.*

“Brooke was the only one who needed to know... you would’ve known soon enough. I didn’t know the truth of it all until I was seventeen.” Dad opened the tome Mom had passed him and started combing through it.

“Sweetheart,” Mom interjected, “I understand your inability to accept this. I didn’t understand it myself when I met your father, but... the things he showed me... the things I’ve seen since. The *splendour* that can be granted...” She contentedly sighed and slid around like an inebriated snake behind Laurie, who followed every move her mother made. She had surely lost her mind.

Dad placed his finger on a page to hold his place, not looking up as he spoke. “I always tried to teach you about sacrifice, Laurie, all throughout your life, though much more subtly than I should have. We did it by showing more love for Brooke, and I hoped you’d realize it... I should have been more open. Your whole life, as you have seen, was itself about *sacrifice*. Brooke was to give up her life willingly, to offer herself to him... and now that your sister cannot complete her task... well, it’s up to you. And we must hope that he will take *you* in her place.”

Laurie, slowly moving back, shook her head defiantly, knowing the gravity of the situation, though not aware of every single detail. “No, I won’t... *I can’t!* You both are fucking nuts, I swear to God! I’m a killer, sure, okay, I know this... but you two should be in a padded room!” She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “I’m getting the hell outta here, okay? I don’t care about my birthday anymore, okay? Forget it... I’ll go to prison. That’s cool with me, but you two aren’t doing anything to me!”

Not content with her bargaining, Dad looked over Laurie’s shoulder and nodded, and Mom slammed the door closed, trapping them all inside the study.

“We must ask him, Laurie,” she said.

Dad lifted up the book in his hands, and Laurie could see the title: *De Vermis Mysteriis. Oh God, that Vermin Mystery thing!*

He started to read aloud. “*Yog Sothoth conjuro te omnipotens pandens iter, et sapientiae tuae parere mortalibus oculis nostris se ostendere.*” He closed it once finished, and shifted his stance to see the back of the study, placing the grimoire back on his desk behind him. “He comes now,” he murmured.

“Can you see, Laurie?” Mom inquired, putting a firm grip on her daughter’s shoulder.

Laurie, however, was speechless once she saw a small explosion of scarlet flame in the centre of the room that roared and swelled outward, and reminiscent of amoebas she had viewed under a microscope in school, began to divide into seven individual spheres that seemed to levitate by some unknown force. In that moment, Laurie experienced an overwhelming sense of déjà vu, and she knew all too well where she had seen this sight before.

The orbs of light! Laurie had imagined them as some sort of weird lamp that her father had bought—that was what she believed it to be. But no, here they were, moving around in the air as disturbing marionettes without strings. Was this Yog Sothoth’s true form? This was all? This was the *God* that Mom and Dad referred to? The God that both of them were viewing in unadulterated awe?

Bearing witness to the sight made Laurie realize then that her parents’ madness was contagious.

“*You... have got to be... shitting me...*” she moaned.

In an instant, the floating orbs all spun around and became eyes, but nothing like those known to Earth. The pupils resembled black clovers with small points at each end, like devilish crosses, and there were orange veins that pulsated across the round, yellow globes.

Laurie, meanwhile, attempted to move to the door, but, as though in a dream, she found her legs to be concrete, and her brain floated, contained within a torrent of sloshing water that prohibited her from going in any direction. She could only listen and watch, paralyzed by some force she couldn’t see but could certainly feel. She felt a weaker form of it the night before when she was spying on Dad.

“*Yooooouuuuu... haaaaave summmmonnnned... meeeee... .*” Yog Sothoth growled, the voice having no discernible source and echoing through the walls, as though he were ingrained in the house itself.

“Yes, my Lord,” Mom and Dad both said together, as though they had practiced. They probably had many times. Had they done so with Brooke, too?

“*Wherrre... issssss... Brrrooooooke?*” the voice gurgled. It sounded primordial and bubbly with loathsome fluid. It sounded disappointed. “*I... awwaaaaaiiiit... herrrrrr.*”

Dad stepped forward with caution. “My Lord, *Almighty Lurker*, I am sorry... Brooke... *she is gone.*”

The pupils all dilated. “*Whhhhhaaaaaaaat?*”

"I'm afraid so, my Lord... it's true. She is dead," Mom explained. "We do not deserve your pity or even your love... we are more deserving of your *divine vengeance* for such a transgression, though it was an accident, but we have a proposition that may interest you..."

Laurie's eyes opened wide. She knew what they were insinuating. "You... you... can't..." she attempted.

"We offer to you our youngest, Brooke's sister. As a means to appease you, but also as an apology for the loss of Brooke, for she was your *favourite* and was to be *yours*." Dad was bargaining with the creature as though Laurie were a used car. She had hoped that maybe he had done something like this to purchase that Ferrari she wanted for her birthday, but that was so long ago now. It was that morning, when her parents weren't completely bat shit.

"*Laaaauuuurrrriiie...*" Hearing her name uttered in such a way covered her in chilled sweat. It knew her. The eyes scanned her from head to toe. "*Sheeee... .willllll... . sssssuuufffiice...*"

"But... I'm not... willing... to sacrifice myself..." Laurie believed her counterpoint would save her, and she thought she would taste victory. She hoped.

Yog Sothoth's voice chortled liquidly, proving that the girl's future in the world of debate was not promising. "*Iiit... matterrrrssss... nooooooot...*" Victory would elude Laurie on this day.

Dad turned to Mom, who was somewhere behind Laurie now, outside of her view. "Darling?"

"Dad... please..." Laurie wanted to beg, but the swimming feeling in her mind spread through her body, making it increasingly difficult to speak or even move at all, and she struggled to fight it.

Small, spindly hands grabbed Laurie around the neck and chest, holding her firmly in place, and at her throat was something cold and very sharp. "On your command, Old One," Mom said.

Laurie, battling Yog Sothoth's power with all of her might, was able to ask one last question. "Wait... Dad... you kept talking... about a *surprise*... for Brooke... what was the surprise..."

Dad became sombre for a moment. "None of us who are still living have ever looked upon the Old One... but Brooke..." His half smile soon returned. "... She was going to see him in his *true* form when he took her!"

His... true form? When he took her? Laurie's mind was aflame with horrific possibilities, and she gasped with terror.

"And now... *you will!* You will see him! It is a privilege to behold the divine grandeur of our *all-powerful God!*"

"*Mmmmm... yeeessssssssssss... .yooooouuuuu... maaaaayyyy... . cooommmmmennnnce...*" it hissed.

“By your will, Old One,” Dad answered, his hand across his chest.

“Daddy, you can’t!”

“We cannot question *his* will!” Mom shrieked with fanatical pride, pressing the blade harder into her neck. “What he gave us, we *must* eternally repay!” She quickly pulled Laurie close and gripped her shoulder with one hand to brace her.

“No, Mom, *please*—” Laurie whimpered, but was unable to finish her plea. She felt a sharp pain and a quick motion from left to right across her throat. Air ceased moving out of her gasping mouth, instead hissing out of the new hole in her neck.

“It begins, Laurie!” Dad shouted.

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeee... ..”

Mom held the bloodied dagger and released Laurie and backed toward the door as Dad joined her. For one brief moment, they looked upon their baby daughter with a small sense of regret. They had not wanted this for her—this was to be Brooke’s final act for the sake of the family. Laurie could have finally known of what was expected of them, and she could have been truly happy. If only she had not been so angry, so rash. They should have been more forthcoming with her about it all. But the momentary sadness was then replaced by pride, however, regardless now of the loss of both of their children.

At least Laurie could look upon their God in all of his glory. It was a comforting idea for both of the parents. They were so proud of her.

“Let’s go,” Dad said softly, taking Mom’s arm as they left the study and closed the door. “We cannot see this. We have to let it finish in privacy.”

The beast’s eyes vanished all at once into bursting clouds of sickly yellow mist, and a small beam of light ripped through the fabric of the air in front of Laurie. The light then became a small, dark opening that, akin to a tearing curtain, expanded in the centre of the room in front of her. From the gaping hole, tentacles belonging to the great Yog Sothoth curved and twisted out onto the floor.

Laurie wanted to escape, though she knew with her mortal wound, she would not go far. She tried so harshly, managing only dwindling twitches, but some unearthly force held her in place. It only grew stronger, and it wouldn’t let go. Yog Sothoth’s influence not only tainted the mind, but also the body as she quickly ascertained—the blood, bones, and soul.

As the warmth flowed from her open throat, washing down her chest and dripping to her feet, Laurie could feel another sensation affecting her senses. The Lurker’s tentacles, exiting the gateway, tied around her legs like constricting serpents and moved up her body with unknown intent. She reached down weakly to try and pry the gooey things from her body, but her strength faded in seconds as she bled, and her muscles turned to gelatine.

The portal opened wider and wider, allowing more and more of Yog Sothoth to enter the study, which itself seemed to become larger to accommodate. The being resembled an enormous, formless mass of tentacles, like great cephalopods of the deepest oceans collected and fused together through unearthly means. There was no identifiable head or semblance of a face to look upon with fear or adoration. No order, only chaos, and behind him, through the opening, were stars and suns, the vast expanse of space and time many of the Old Ones called *home*. It was probably the only realm that could contain his sheer immensity.

Feeling the tentacles force their way into her open mouth, slithering along her tongue, past her teeth and through the gaping wound of her throat, Laurie finally managed to see beyond her gushing tears and beheld the true form of the terrible Yog Sothoth.

His grotesque majesty filled the room and more, dwarfing Laurie's menial, pitiful form of mortal flesh. It drove what small shred of sanity she could possibly cling to into the infinite void of madness. Laurie's hair went ghostly white with shock in mere seconds as she was quickly enveloped by the deity's slimy appendages. Her fracturing mind, utterly consumed with terror at the sight of the massive creature before her, splintered as the tentacles forced themselves into her eye sockets and deep into her skull.

In her last moments, Laurie tried with waning desperation to scream in protest, but managed only a choking burble. Yog Sothoth's tentacles suddenly clenched tight with monstrous strength, rapidly tearing her shape asunder like tissue paper. Laurie's muffled squeals ceased and the all-powerful god proceeded to drag her shredded remains to the realm beyond. The slapping, writhing tentacles sent a splatter of intestinal chunks on the floor in a wet plop of dark blood, leaving only tattered pulp as evidence of the recently turned sixteen year old's existence.

And as quickly as the Old God had made his true form visible minutes earlier, he pulled his mass back through the portal he had created. In its place, the orbs of light reappeared from the ether of his will once more.

"Yoooooooouuu... .maaaaaayyy... .eeeeennnterrrrrrrrrrr..."

The door opened with hesitation and Mom and Dad stepped back through, having waited outside and listened to the entire ordeal. Seeing the violent aftermath of what was left of their daughter, the couple did not show sadness, or fear, or disgust. No, they wouldn't dare. That would displease their master, and they couldn't bear to do that. Instead, they merely smiled. They had nothing but gratitude. They hoped Laurie's sacrifice was not in vain, and that she was a suitable substitute for Brooke.

"Was she worthy?" Dad anxiously hoped that Laurie was a fitting replacement.

The floating eyes seemed to express satisfaction, or even some odd form of joy. *"Yooooourrr... .sssssaacrifiiiiice... issss... aaaaccepted..."*

Dad chuckled, relieved at the answer. "Thank you, Great Lurker."

“Old One, might I make a request?”

Yog Sothoth’s eyes probed Mom curiously. “*Yesssssss...*”

“We’ve lost the child that was meant for you, as you know,” she said, “and now you have... *our youngest...*”

Dad knew she was right. They had no other children now, and they were getting too old to have anymore. “Who will carry on our *legacy*?”

“It can be lonely, too, my Lord,” Mom added. Dad moved his arm around her and held her tightly, and they both looked at each other with the utmost fondness.

“I think... what my wife is asking is, uh—”

“*Feeeeaaarrrr noooooooooot,*” the Lurker said. “*Yoooouuu shaaaalllll beeeee graaaaanted anoooootherrrrr...*”

Mom’s face lit up with jubilation, and Dad was grateful for the boon to be bestowed upon them. “Oh, thank you, Lord... we don’t deserve the blessings you bestow...”

“*Sssssummonnnn meeee agaaaaaainnnn... aaaaannnd weeeee willlllll dissssscusssssss it...*”

“Thank you!” Mom screeched.

The Great Opener of the Way dissipated into nothingness, leaving Mom and Dad alone in the study. Dad looked at his wife and down to her abdomen, imagining briefly that her womb would soon become the future vessel of the all-powerful Yog Sothoth’s progeny. She would not be the first to experience it, but to be one of a very select few?

Such an honour it would be—a blessing.

The duo shared a kiss and held each other for a long time before finally resolving to clean the study. They went downstairs to the kitchen for cleaning supplies, both stopping to spend a moment with Brooke’s corpse, which they would attend to later, and returned to the second floor. Mom carried bleach and sponges while Dad had two buckets, one empty and one filled with soapy water.

“We’ll use the bleach after we wipe this all up,” Mom explained.

“Yeah, I know, honey.”

They each took a sponge, dipped it into the water bucket, and started mopping up Laurie’s blood. After a few minutes of Dad’s diligent silence and Mom’s upbeat humming, she started talking.

“You know, I really wish Laurie could’ve had the birthday she wanted...”

“She could’ve had spectacular birthdays for the rest of her life if she... hadn’t acted so impulsively,” Dad answered dismissively. He noticed there were pieces of meat in the blood. “I need the empty bucket.”

Mom pushed it to him. “We could have given her one today if she—”

“I know. Maybe we should have told her... not been so focused on Brooke.”

“Maybe.” Mom soaked her sponge. “But she experienced a wondrous thing, though, didn’t she?” She tried to encourage herself as well as her husband. “To be given to our Lord... it’s a privilege, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

She smiled. “It is.”

Picking up pieces of his daughter’s entrails from the floor, Dad began to recall when he first truly learned of his God and his splendour. In retrospect, it was a wondrous day, but at the time, it was anything but. It was the day of his older sister’s sacrifice that he first learned of Yog Sothoth and of the existence of the Old Ones. The day he returned home from a double date with some local friends and found his father in his personal study, now Dad’s study, cleaning blood from the floor. He wept for hours afterward, locked in his room.

The next day, he spoke with his father, who explained everything to him, which fell on deaf and disbelieving ears. With his sister’s sacrifice, it was left upon Dad to learn all he could to carry on the legacy that began generations before during the witch trials of the 1600s. As with many legacies, it was one that he wanted to deny at first. His father, by then a single parent, tried to force him to see the full implications of what was required and to continue the annual sacrifices to their God, or else risk annihilation.

At first, Dad rebelled in his own way, wanting to enjoy his life and make something of himself. He was fearful and unenlightened then. It was a by-product of youth. After graduating high school, he chose to go to Miskatonic University, joining the then prestigious medical school. It was a choice that inadvertently led him back to what he ignored, and it gave him a new purpose, but he would only know it later.

After a mere month of his college tenure, he bore witness to the ghastly repercussions of an event known only as the “Miskatonic Massacre.” According to most accounts around Arkham and surrounding towns, a transfer student began experimenting with dead bodies in the morgue that involved a so called “miracle of life” drug. The deceased were resurrected, becoming beastly, mindless cannibals that took the lives of a great many of the staff and student body. It took years to recover from the brutality.

Thankfully, Dad survived. And because of what he saw, he accepted his father's words and chose to drop out of school to travel the world using his family's money. He sought to learn all he could about the Old Ones, seeing the bloodbath at Miskatonic as some manifestation of vengeance on behalf of the Gods... maybe even just that of Yog Sothoth. He felt that the young student responsible was an agent sent to force him to accept his heritage.

It was an epiphany that Dad felt had saved his life.

During his travels, he discovered and purchased a great many artefacts involving the deities, having most boxed and shipped home, but his most prized possession that he was able to carry with him was a fifth edition of the *Necronomicon*, a book originally written in Arabic with blood by the "Mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred. Later translated in Greek and Latin (the more recent copies were in the latter), it was a most difficult grimoire to find and, while just a copy, was a very expensive item. It was also needed, seeing as how the copy owned by his father was well worn and, after three generations, quite difficult to read.

Unknown to most outside of Arkham, one of the only genuine copies of the *Necronomicon* was, and still is, held in the library at Miskatonic. But, as Dad quickly learned, the university was unwilling to release it to anyone's possession, no matter the price offered. His father had tried many times to purchase it over the years, always to no avail. Still, it was not of any concern, since for the right amount of money, anything was attainable.

Dad found the book incredibly fascinating, and he was thankful for one aspect of his short time in medical school—namely, his ability to read Latin. It allowed him to read and know the genealogy and history of Yog Sothoth, his ancestors, his children, and the many, many other beings who controlled the cosmos, shaping the very stars to satisfy every whim. It allowed him to know how better to serve his *Master*, and that came to mean everything to him.

Upon returning home, his father passed quietly after a long battle with dementia, and Dad inherited the family home in Dunwich Heights. Soon after, he met Mom, a recent transplant from the Midwest. They fell in love and they were married within a year. The wedding was a lavish ceremony showing the deep love they had for each other, and even then, Dad had kept a secret from his amorous wife... but not for long.

It was on their honeymoon, a week long excursion in Florence, that he made Yog Sothoth known to her as well. Like him, she took a bit of convincing, but also like him, she accepted his God as her own with time. He was so delighted for her.

She embraced it even more enthusiastically than he had. In fact, Mom was so accepting that she managed to find and provide for Dad a companion for the *Necronomicon*, a book known as *De Vermis Mysteriis*, or *Mysteries of the Worm*, to add to his vast collection. It was a gift for their second anniversary, and it allowed better communication with Yog Sothoth through its collections of spells and invocations. She even happily rejoiced when the Lurker at the Threshold chose Brooke as his "favourite" of their family.

That particular evening's celebration by both parents led to Laurie's conception.

Even now, dropping another chunk of his younger daughter into the bucket, Dad still found himself drifting back to the time before he was a devout worshiper of the Opener of the Way, before responsibility weighed as heavily upon him. It seemed so long ago.

He still wondered about the transfer student at Miskatonic. It was never known what happened to him and his re animation formula. There was just the horror he left behind. He was believed dead, though he still existed as something of an urban legend now, and even as a cautionary tale against the consequences of trying to control life. It was all a most unusual thing. *Keep away from Doctor West, or else you'll end up like the rest.*

Truly, even before Dad knew his family was one of many that served Yog Sothoth, and one of many more that worshiped the Old Ones, there had been a great many strange occurrences throughout both Arkham and Dunwich. Occurrences that, as a child, would send chills into his heart before bed each night. Ones that involved invisible monsters, disturbing deaths, and unsolved disappearances.

Now, none of that seemed so strange or unusual. There was nothing peculiar about anything outside of the imagination anymore. It was commonplace.

He wondered if Brooke felt any pain in her death. Above all, Dad wondered if she felt a sense of loss at not being able to fulfil her duty. She was so earnest in her desire to prove herself, and she was more than willing to die for her family and for her Lord. Did Laurie feel any remorse at taking that away from her sister?

Ah, Laurie. Misguided and angry, but still his little girl. If only she had known the truth. She could have had all she ever wanted if she accepted her position. She wanted to be the favourite so badly, but she only believed it was a title dictating her status.

If only she had known, she'd still be alive. Damn it, he should have told her sooner...

Dad understood her resentment. After all, he had felt the same at times toward his sister, but he had never acted on compulsion like Laurie had. Because of her actions, she suffered a horrible end—one she wasn't prepared for, and one meant for her elder sister. He *knew* she suffered. He saw it in her eyes when her throat spewed blood and he could hear her struggles through the closed door. He knew she was terrified, and for a silent moment as he cleaned, he sympathized.

As with all of those who worship any deity, there is love and a desire to please—to attain appreciation. But there is also an inherent fear. Yog Sothoth's "love" was likely considered by any rational human to carry with it a horrible stigma, but his vengeance... that was something not worth incurring or experiencing. Dad believed he had seen Yog Sothoth's indirect wrath at Miskatonic, and he knew that he never wanted to see direct intervention first hand.

Had any of the other families in Dunwich Heights, all followers of the great Opener of the Way like him, angered their God? Had any of them failed in their sacrifices and felt his mighty rage?

Despite his love and pride, despite the Lurker's promise that they would have another child to replace the loss of both of their daughters, Dad was still afraid at times. He couldn't admit it outright for fear of retaliation. Along with his fear, he was also thankful, but not for reasons he felt to be any less than selfish.

Still, reaching for the bucket to pull it closer to him, he decided to make his opinion known to someone else.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say this," Dad muttered, looking away from his wife sheepishly, "but, knowing what I do now, I was always glad..." He shook his head with hesitation and cleared his throat, picking up another piece of flesh. "Never mind."

"Glad? About what, dear?" Mom asked. She sniffed briefly as she wiped up the blood, small fragments of bone slipping and sliding around in the refuse. Dad didn't answer, so she probed her husband further. "What is it?"

"No, it goes against what we believe... I'd rather not." He leaned in close. "It's *blasphemy*."

"Go on," Mom said, squeezing red water into the bucket. She smiled as reassuringly as she could manage. "I won't think any less of you."

Might as well, he pondered. As long as I still serve the Old Ones, I can share my thoughts... I still do what's expected of me. She'll understand.

"Well?"

"Well... I was always glad..." Dad focused on the stain that acted as a reminder of what had been, and the violence that left it as another permanent brand in his memory.

He thought of his sister.

"Honey?"

He thought of Brooke and Laurie.

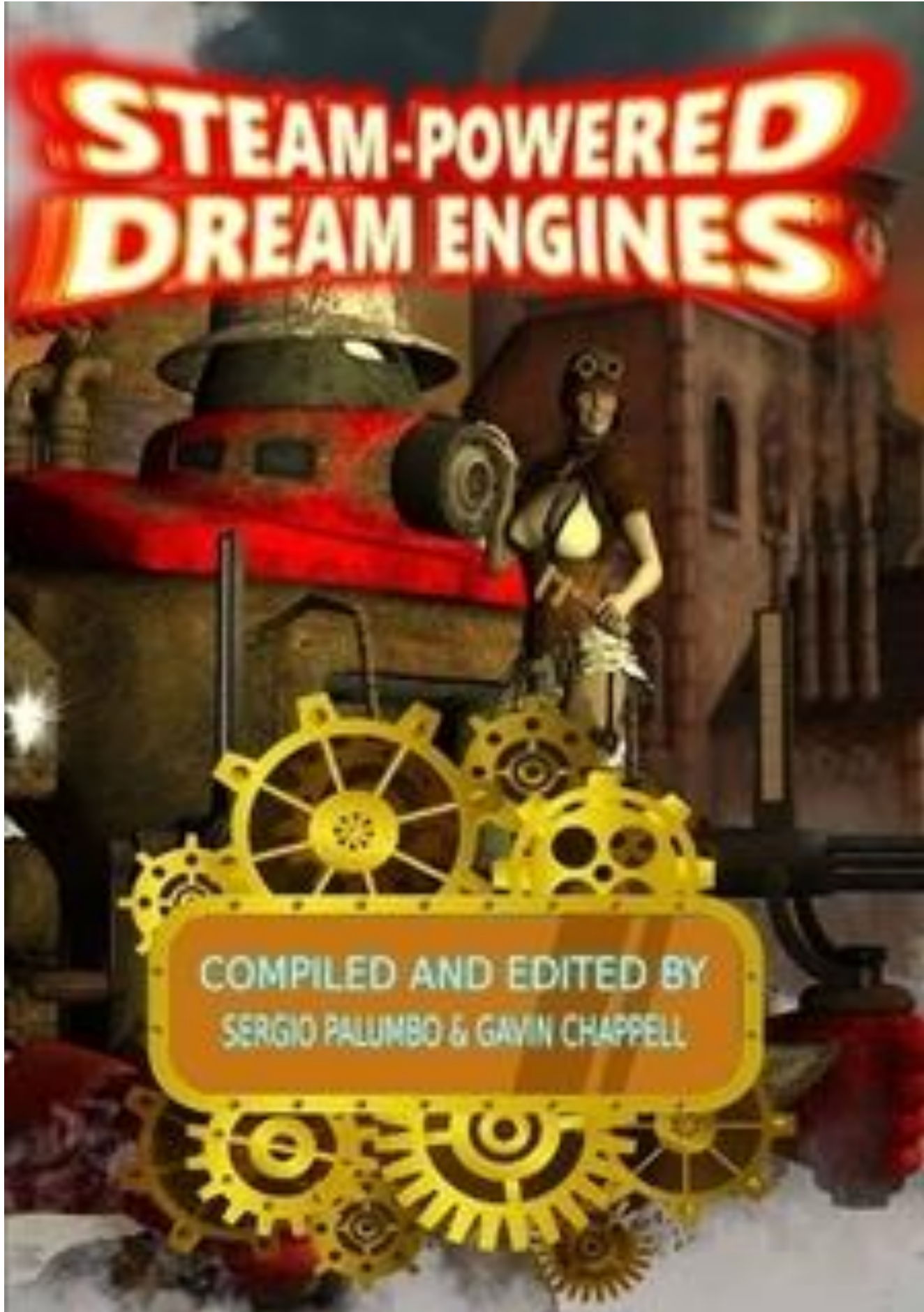
"Honey, what is it?"

The regretful loss of his youngest due to her brashness and lack of knowledge—it could have been him all those years ago. *It could have been*. Dad coughed and swallowed a sandy lump of unease. "I was always glad that I wasn't... *the favourite*... in my family..."

THE END

[Available from Rogue Planet Press](#)

STEAM-POWERED DREAM ENGINES

A detailed steampunk illustration. In the center, a woman with a determined expression wears a dark, form-fitting outfit with a white corset and a leather skirt. She has goggles on her forehead and a small, ornate mechanical device on her chest. She stands next to a large, complex mechanical engine. The engine has a prominent red horizontal band and a large, dark, cylindrical component on top. The background shows a dark, industrial setting with a large building and various pipes and machinery. The overall color palette is dominated by browns, greys, and the bright red of the engine's band.

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
SERGIO PALUMBO & GAVIN CHAPPELL

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ALONE by Sergio Palumbo (Edited by Michele Dutcher)

"Sometimes I feel as if I'm racing with my own shadow"

quote by Haruki Murakami

At what moment during your existence would you like to look at yourself and wonder what your life has really been like? Maybe, you could see your existence from the point of view of your youth, when everything seems to be joyful, pleasing—a time when you were deeply loved and treated well most of the time. Or would you rather focus on your years spent as a young adult, when many promises begin to come true and you start savouring all that your body is developing into—like a flying insect coming finally out of its previous, unimportant, lesser condition? Or what about evaluating your lifetime once you turn middle aged, which is when people usually have a satisfying job that pays well along with a comfortable home, a favourite car and are married to a beautiful wife or a husband who is completely and sincerely in love with you—at least for people who live that long?

Beyond that, you might decide to look at the events you went through, the experiences that brought you to old age, when a person is sickly, tired, almost incapable of walking without assistance and with only a few months to live before the end... What age would prefer most to revisit over and over again? When you were nine years old, or eighteen? Thirty or Sixty? Or maybe even older? It's an interesting question... And this is for you to decide, of course.

Just for a moment, imagine what it would be like if you really could look at your previous experiences and choices from a point of view that turned out to be unending. What if all those actions, gestures and decisions you made in the past that are only faint recollections, turned out to be eternal and weren't meant to disappear or diminish with the passing of the centuries, though they kept marching further and further into the past, having happened at a time that seemed more and more distant from the present period, day by day...? Would it change your impressions of the choices you made or change your way of thinking? Well, for the woman called *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* things were exactly like that, and she couldn't do anything at all to change her situation.

While sitting by a river and reflecting in the morning, these thoughts came to her mind, as she held her empty vase that she was going to fill with water. Some squirrels were running circles around each other on the trees not far from the banks. This was where many tall trees stood proud and silent. Their dark green shades seeming to be unending, their huge forms overpowering everything else in the surroundings.

British Columbia's vast and diverse forests and rangelands had a high level of biological diversity. Those wild areas spanned a wide range of geological ages, composition, and geographic location, and had at least forty nine native tree species growing under different environmental conditions. Many would find the presence of all those plants and the lack of houses, villages or other intelligent living beings a little strange, perhaps overwhelming even after a long time—although the sights and sounds could also prove to be most entertaining... they could be magical. But she saw things differently. As a matter of fact, the woman had grown used to all of it for a very considerable period.

When the moment came to rise to her feet again and go back to her belongings, she would have stopped thinking about it all, putting everything into a box positioned somewhere in the back of her mind. However, the internal journey of such reflections would continue over the course of the following days.

The previous night, while she sat in front of a small lake in a half awake, half asleep stupor, she had attempted to give ‘serious thought or consideration’ to such things, as she watched the full moon in the distance. Months ago, she had passed some pleasant moments while walking on a secluded beach near the same water expanse and swimming in the nude. She enjoyed hiking around the steep slopes full of rocks, cutting undergrowth and flowers with their colours bleached out by the moonlight. It had been a while since she had decided to spend more time in the middle of the forest, wrapped in complete darkness, in silence—although such a place wasn’t noiseless at all when the sun went down; insects and animals perused their many activities then. All the time she was watching, remembering, studying, turning her attention to her many problems, events, strange occurrences and past situations, certainly. What did focusing her attention on these things really mean to her, after all? Perhaps she was getting ready to do something new, like a child about to explore a cave for the first time. Or maybe she was just learning how to do things differently... She couldn’t define it any more than that at the moment.

Born-to-walk-fast-alone allowed herself to think about something that she had long forbidden herself to consider. She thought about taking part in village socials; accepting the invitation of a friend she hadn’t seen for ages; visiting a town and its shops; or simply going hunting. The last activity, however, still made the woman remember terrible things she’d better forget, at least for now.

This would really be one of her favourite places on earth, if only she had freely chosen to stay here, and there weren’t other more serious reasons forcing her to do so. Since she had definitely decided to stay away from everything else, in a way she had become a new person—or so she liked to think. She lifted her arms, and as she did the sleeves of her leather clothes slid back, revealing a skin of various shades of hazel wood and oat, the same shades she had on her face and on the slender legs. She was about six feet tall, with dark hair and beautiful attentive dark eyes, and was also endowed with remarkable features like a slender though strong body, a peculiar nose, and two delicate shoulders which were also wide. It was obvious at first sight that she was Native American, though there was something different in her and you could feel it as soon as you saw her figure, even though you couldn’t say exactly what it really was at once.

The majority of the trees that grew around where she presently stood were spruces, pines and hemlocks. The climate of the Northwest Coast was very specific among the regions that had been previously inhabited by her tribe, with frequent heavy rainfall. Several high mountains did run against the sea and this, combined with high levels of precipitation, created lush, dense forests and an abundance of rivers and streams. The environment also yielded an extraordinary wealth of food sources and of raw materials for housing and clothing, the basic necessities of life. Taking all of that into consideration—in addition to the dense woods and the difficult terrain—meant her tribe rarely moved too far inland away from the coast. Concentrating their villages and their daily activities at or near the water, Northwest Coast peoples had long relied heavily on

fishing for subsistence; they also hunted other game, including bear. Various plants that grew freely along the coast and could easily be gathered, supplemented their primary food sources.

This wealth of resources reduced the demands on time and energy that any tribe from this part of the world had to devote to meeting subsistence needs. The Northwest Coast peoples were thus free to develop their material and ceremonies to a degree that only a few other populations reached. For example, they developed carved objects such as masks and totem poles that are spectacular, certainly.

During the winter months, when less outside work was undertaken, those also used the additional time to create the extraordinary carvings and weaponry—for which they were well known. They placed these objects throughout their beautifully constructed villages and their huge wooden houses. The Kwakiutl, especially, had developed their ceremonies to a point which clearly demonstrated how rich they were in mythology and tradition, and those ceremonies served many religious and social purposes, of course. Individual guests and entire villages—from both neighbouring and distant areas—commonly attended these extraordinary events where, through movement and dance, the imagery of the old traditions came to life and expressed and affirmed the clans' identity and history.

Born-to-walk-fast-alone knew all these facts very well, as she was Native American from a Northwest tribe—an old Kwakiutl tribe. Having been born in a small village on Vancouver Island more than 450 years ago, the woman had survived the disaster that had almost destroyed the shore she had lived in her youth, and had stayed alive in spite of the illnesses that, willingly or unwillingly, the Spanish European newcomers had brought with them—along with their new traditions and strange laws. Eventually no one was left from the community that had made up that long gone settlement where she had spent the first part of her existence, before she had embarked upon her undead life, of course.

The Kwakiutl peoples had always been traditional inhabitants of the coastal areas of north eastern Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia. Originally made up of two dozen communities speaking dialects of Kwak'waka, some groups had died out or joined others with the passing of the time, cutting the number of communities approximately in half. After sustained contact beginning in the late 18th century, Europeans had applied the name of one band, the Kwakiutl, to the whole group, a tradition that seemed to last until today. The name itself meant 'those who speak Kwak'waka', which itself included five dialects. Kwak'waka' was her native language and was slightly related to other British Columbia aboriginal languages like Nuuchahnulth and Oowekyala, their traditions being similar to those of their northern neighbours.

In addition, trails across Vancouver Island had made trade possible with Nootka villages on the west coast of the island itself. Long before contacts with Europeans, her tribe had fished and hunted according to the seasons, securing an abundance of preservable food. Consequently, this allowed them to return to their winter villages each year for several months of intensive ceremonial and artistic activity.

Farther north—and she had seen it happen—in 1849 European men had built Fort Rupert, which

had operated continuously until about 1877, when it was sold to the fort's last member, who was a trader. Today, as far as the woman knew, most Kwakiutl children spoke English as their first language, though many schools in the area sponsored programs in Kwak'waka. The children were also capable of practicing the traditional dances and art, though the tribe's present membership only amounted to 8,000 people. They continued to fish commercially in a highly competitive industry, while hereditary chiefs still passed on rights and privileges during ceremonies. However, band government was conducted by elected councillors today, which was very different from times long gone. A number of original villages had been left in the wilderness as inhabitants moved to communities such as Alert Bay and Campbell River to be closer to schools and hospitals. Which didn't change the overall situation too much anyway.

But what was she really, in frank words? Over the course of the centuries the Native American woman named *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* had been leading an undead life where she had made some investigations, before deciding to finally stay secluded and completely alone in this forested area. Now all that remained in the region where her village had once stood were old legends about the past.

The elder tribal people spoke at times about strange zombies and vampires that were evil souls which inhabited recently dead bodies and caused the corpses to rise and devour the living beings. There were also legendary tales about the undead, she had discovered later, among the Wyandotte of the East Coast. Not that such a tribe was yet known in the area of the West Coast when she was born however...

So, she wondered: if this was an ancient legend, could there be some truth in it? —could there have been others like her before? Perhaps these others were hidden somewhere in this land. But she had never seen any of those beings like her, at least not yet. Really, she had never gone exploring to look for them, as she had stayed in that area for centuries in order not to stumble into other men and women, which might mean giving in to her deep weakness and unholy love for the reddish liquid running inside humans.

In a way, *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* was well aware of the fact that she really didn't need the blood of a living individual to have her undead existence keep going and to sustain herself, as there was no reason at all to take it or to kill men or women in order to achieve that purpose. She simply was immortal, with no end, apparently, and that taste for blood was just like the childish urge a boy would feel to eat a slice of a wonderful, and colourful cake, or an adult to have some good sex from time to time to completely appease his senses anyway. She loved savouring the taste and texture of the reddish, vivid liquid and the fact that doing so would leave someone lifeless when she was done with him, simply couldn't stop her nor make her cease cruelly behaving that way when a new opportunity presented itself. And she had already killed so many humans over the course of the years...

This was why she had decided long ago to head for that part of the forest in the northern regions, and to stay there, being completely secluded from the rest of present ever growing civilization and from Mankind itself, as that was exactly the place where she could better restrain herself, keep her mind far away from any desire to kill, and hopefully miss any chance to meet someone whose presence would render her capable of releasing her wildest will again and making her lose

her grip on her emotions, in the end.

That was also why *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* had ended up staying deep within those woods where the winds didn't get to the undergrowth and the light reached the terrain only at times. This had greatly helped her in maintaining her present behaviour, certainly. The problem was that, even after she had stayed here, alone, for so long, civilization hadn't stopped growing at all. People had begun to look at the far north because they wanted to explore more and to get to live in different and better places, no matter the cost or the problems involved in all that. And, as they usually reached the ends they wanted, sooner or later, this would mean trouble, without any doubts, one day or another. Not to her, of course, but to the unlucky ones who would stumble into her in the near future.

For a long time, the Native woman had thought she had chosen the perfect place to live out her days as well as leave the members of Mankind safe. But that peace hadn't lasted. In fact, she had discovered that also that part of the land had been turned into a Park, called Denetiah Provincial Park, in 1999. This included Denetiah Lake and Dall Lake within its new boundaries, and it was set aside specifically to protect areas of white spruce old growth. It was strange to think that the whole zone was a piece of a large intact predator prey system: she might be among the fiercest predators in history, of course, though she lacked in her usual prey at present, by design.

Unfortunately, recreational activities in this area for humans at times included big game hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. That meant that men—who hadn't stopped extending the regions where they wanted to intrude, or simply visit—might come here at times, especially during the summer to look at its diverse wildlife and spectacular scenery, admiring its great characteristic wonders, obviously. Even if there were no designated roads into the area, people came here either by small airplane or boat, and that could cause problems for her...

As a matter of fact, any form of wildlife might be a danger to humans that approached this huge area, as forest recreation sites and trails were off the beaten track. People might happen to see, and meet, different species around the nature preserve and not all of them would be scared by their coming nearby, so this could bring someone into conflict with the wild animals, especially the bears. This didn't apply to her, as those creatures knew very well and sensed at once that she wasn't a common woman at all, and that she might become more deadly to them than the other way around, given her unbelievable strength and speed that was far beyond human standards.

No matter what warnings and simple rules the travellers were instructed to follow, she had found corpses in the past of people who hadn't paid close enough attention and had fallen prey to hungry beasts long before encountering her. Of course, they didn't accept, or simply forgot, to respect the simple regulations that required the following: never feed bears; do not store food in your tent; never have your tent near heavy brush, the lake shore, stream banks and animal tracks; keep your campsite clean and never bury trash; never surprise bears; do not walk around alone, and never come between a mother bear and her cubs; immediately leave the area if you spot any bear tracks, droppings, or signs; do not run from a bear, instead back away slowly and try to stay calm. Many simply didn't do as wisdom and experience required, and those people never made it back home, in the end.

When she was still young, before her unholy transformation, she had visited and gone through woods and wild areas, and her parents had tried to inspire her to look deeper into nature, but it had only been when she was forced to go there alone, being away from any other intelligent living being, that she had truly begun to learn. During those times, a new openness had proven to be necessary, along with attentiveness, so as to safely move through that part of the country.

The water flowing in the small stream looked so beautiful, so pleasing and fresh, that *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* thought she would really love to take a bath. ‘You can be an undead and a vampire, and you can live alone on your own,’ the woman told herself ‘but that doesn’t mean you don’t feel the need to have your clothes washed from time to time, or that you don’t want to feel water on your skin.’ And so, the Native moved forward, leaving her leather footwear on the ground, and then put her bare feet into the liquid that raced over the stones. She allowed herself to feel a pleasant sensation as her skin touched the water. After her outer clothes were left behind, she started removing her tight greyish corset out of which her breasts spilled in a delightful soft fall, with her long straight black hair hanging over her back.

She cupped her breasts in her hands and rotated her hips, around and around, enjoying the pleasing freshness of the water that she put onto her body and that was now dripped back into the stream both of her bare feet were presently in. Opening her mouth, she allowed the liquid to fill her mouth until it spilled over her chin. Breathing through her nose—even though the way she breathed differently from how common humans did... —the woman spat the water from her mouth. Then both hands went down along the soft skin of her legs where she felt that touch to be pleasing and really satisfying.

What was better than cold water, after all? Only blood, maybe...

Shane, his backpack fastened onto his back, was slowly going through the trees with his expensive modern camera dangling from his neck. The shirt he wore was perfectly suited to such environment, and was conceived to make him move unseen for most of the time, exactly as the rest of his outfit. After all, if you wanted to take some shots of wild animals that roamed completely free in that area, you had to be experienced at walking and hopping about without making a noise, unless it became necessary in order to make some bear move away, by scaring it.

After more than two hours, the 39 year old dark haired man had reached the secluded old growth forest and had kept following a small stream running through it. Suddenly, as he was readying himself to take some great photos of the wondrous surroundings, his eyes found her. And that changed everything.

Just by chance, Shane had seen the young woman bathing in the flowing stream, and her body looked amazing: slender and attractive beyond expectation! He thought about revealing himself and making his presence clear, which would be polite of course. But he hadn’t done that. Instead, he had started using his camera, his fingers bustling about its buttons so as to take all the photos he could in a hurry. Why he had done so was not exactly clear in his mind, but perhaps his interest and professional skills had simply take over.

After a few minutes, it was much to his surprise when the man checked the photos he had taken while in hiding, and had noticed that there was no image of the beautiful woman in his camera storage or on the screen... Or better, there were many shots of the stream and the trees being all around, and the ground, but nothing else. How was this possible? What problem might have affected his modern and very costly device? Was it a lack of light, or not enough exposure or something he couldn't figure out? That was unlikely, as he was very experienced at taking fantastic photos even under the most difficult of circumstances. So, what had caused the image's deletion of the beautiful woman?

Unable to figure out the problem, his eyes went again to the body of the woman bathing in the water. The man considered the impression of that peculiar bear skin skirt still clinging to her legs; the curve of her ankle and the shape of her feet. As she briefly turned sideways, exposing her perfect teeth and lips, he had the chance to have a look at her profile. What an overall wondrous view she was giving of herself now, though unwillingly, he thought.

With her bare feet being still immersed in the stream, *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* was staring blankly at the surroundings, her mind being free and without worries after so long. She also happened to think that, when the last member of her long lost tribe had eventually perished, with her memory becoming a myth before the eyes of the present modern civilization, perhaps those banks would be full of the invisible dead. But who would be around to ever feel them, or know they were there?

The dark ritual her father had performed centuries ago in order to make his wife eventually have a child, a ritual that had produced *Born-to-walk-fast-alone*, had changed everything. The woman didn't know if he was aware of the consequences, or if he had no other way to try, or if he hadn't ever heard of the old myth of that powerful Healer who was kind and ruled his tribe with love. But the wife of that legendary figure, Laughing Sky, had no children. So, in desperation, the man turned to most evil beings for aid in making Laughing Sky fertile. He did things forbidden and one sad day he opened a dark portal using of a long lost ritual, through which entered a dark creature named Jumlin. The monster promised, in exchange for bringing him out of the realms he was previously in, that he would bestow the Healer with many healthy sons and daughters to enrich his later years. But Jumlin had fooled the man. In fact, the unholy creature had kept hidden much of his real power and once in our world, he took over the Healer, going into his heart, mind and body. As Jumlin was a hard and cruel being, evil and hungry, he start feeding on blood of living things. First the animals of the forest, and finally on the people of her tribe, as was predictable.

However, Jumlin was not a male evil creature, as the myth recounted, but a female one, so she finally chose to enter the body of a very young child who was born. Jumlin believed that she could more easily control a female, who—by growing—would soon allow her power and strange tendencies to become stronger and stronger. Of course, that child was *Born-to-walk-fast-alone*. That is how things went back then.

Even though that unholy creature had long left *Born-to-walk-fast-alone*'s body, in order to enter another one according to her dark will, and all of that had occurred centuries ago, something evil had remained in her mind and soul, also leaving her as an undead, in an unpredictable way. And it had kept her connected to the obscure way Jumlin fed and killed. There was nothing that might change it all, and you couldn't say she had really, deeply and continuously tried, anyway.

A well-known feeling reached her senses and made her immediately stop her present recollections. She gradually rose to his feet, slowly turning around, wrapped her arms around herself, and then made her way over to the tall dark haired man who she had sensed behind her a moment before and who stood in front of her now, next to a curved tree trunk. Her slender body was still nude, and she didn't want to cover it, apparently.

Surprised by that unexpected turn events, and a little ashamed for having indulged in such impolite spying while taking those photos—and for having been discovered, most of all—the only thing that came to Shane's mind at that moment was let a sweet smile spread across his lips. This was the same embarrassing smile that he would occasionally give to his parents, or his teachers in school, every time he was caught doing something unlawful or simply forbidden.

As the woman pointed her eyes at him, her skin shone brilliant, and an unwanted, deep desire started moving across her entire body; her breathing becoming more visible, more uncontrollable. The smell of the blood flowing beneath the living skin, so different from hers, and the life that was kept inside that male body standing not far from her were almost overwhelming, it wasn't possible to deny that. She tried control it, to stop what she felt at the present time, but it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy at all.

"Who are you?" was all she could say in the end. It was difficult to say anything—even these few words, as it was something else, more immediate and pleasing, that she had on her mind now.

"Oh, it's not as it might seem. Really! There is some misunderstanding here..." His smile widened, not knowing how much danger he was in. "Actually, I'm a photographer, and I'm pretty famous in my field. Well, I was just walking around, in search of beautiful, new shots, and I just stumbled by chance onto you bathing in the stream. That's it!" Shane added soon after. 'And I also stumbled into your body, your beautiful body...' he thought to himself, without saying anything at all about this part of what was in his mind. In frank words, he had started by focusing on that strange, old fashioned haircut and those beautiful legs that he had had a glimpse of while in the trees, and those seductive features had immediately attracted his interest. The rest had just followed, of course.

The eyes of the woman appeared to be cold and completely focused on him now. "What is that object in your hands?"

"Do you mean this? Oh, it's a digital camera, a Canon EOS 5D Mark III model. This is worth the premium price if better performance and configurability really matter to you. I commonly use this when I take photos of scenery or of a forest."

“Photos?” *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* displayed a thoughtful look.

“Yes, photos... professional shots. I take them and then sell mine for a good amount. Just like those...” and that being said, the man turned the rear of the small machine towards the woman and started showing her a sequence of images on the tiny screen that depicted her surroundings. She had already seen something like that in the past, if she remembered correctly: faces put on metal plates, sun prints, pictures onto some sheets of copper, photos in black and white, paintings with traits in full colour that looked more real than the true features of an individual. And also moving pictures, just like the ones she had seen one day on those strange devices she had found next the remains of some tourists that had died in the surroundings cause of some accidents before... Was this box just one of those new devices that modern science was bringing the world year after year? She hadn’t had the chance to see too many of them, but this was what she thought.

As the woman kept watching him with a surprised look, the man explained it better. “I also publish books full of photos of present Native Americans, to be preserved for the future generations. Actually, I am a Native American myself, and I think it is a good thing to keep alive the memory of our ancestors. I like depicting the way we live today along with the places where they first settled, and that we still know about nowadays. It’s unbelievable how little some of the North West Coast peoples have changed, while the villages who once ruled over those lands are disappearing year after year, sadly. Some of them are already gone, gone long ago...”

“Yes, they are...” she nodded, looking pensive and less cold, at least for the short term.

“There is something I wanted to ask you about in fact. It’s a very strange thing,” the photographer who still held his metallic camera in his hands added. “I was trying to take some shots of this corner in the forest and of this stream...” He didn’t highlight the fact, of course, that he had also been attracted to her nude body. “But I was unable to take photos that included you, probably because of some mistake I made with the exposure. If you want to have a look, I’ll show you. See, like in this one: you can see the undergrowth, the trees, but not you... and this is a pity. But you are a Native American, aren’t you? I can tell this by your traits, by your black hair, your skin and face, of course. So, would you mind if I take some shots of you, once you get dressed, of course? I want to add your picture to my collection, and put it along with the ones of the living Native Americans that exist today in the North West Coast. By the way, my name is Shane, what’s yours?”

The woman seemed to ponder over the other’s question, and then stared at him in silence for a while before replying. “My name is *Born-to-walk-fast-alone*. But you can’t take photos of me, no one can...” Then she moved onwards, placing her feet one after the other, getting out of the stream, thus approaching the photographer that stood nearby. “You will never be able to take a picture of me.”

It was only then that the man remembered the fact that she was still nude, and she was walking towards him without even thinking about putting her clothes back on. She appeared to be complete, almost perfect, but with just enough details to hint that she was more than a common woman. And it was only at that moment that he also noticed that her eyes were very strange,

softly orange and unusually wide. But it was only when he saw those long, incredibly pointed teeth coming out from under their reddish lips that he started to be amazed, and very fearful.

The woman approached Shane closer and closer, and was just next to the man in a very short time, before the other might even try to outdistance her. Not that he would even have had a chance... Then she put her teeth deep into his neck, in a very quick move, and began hurting him before draining all the life out of his body, along with that reddish liquid that was the blood that gave him life.

As *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* tasted it and sensed what it was to be alive again, even though it wasn't true obviously, she raised her orange coloured irises, thus crying out in all of her pleasure; and simply let her darkest wishes out, until she was full and satisfied. When all was done, and the photographer lay lifeless in her arms, she simply let him fall to the ground. Then she bowed towards the corpse and looked at it, full of regret and pain. He hadn't even tried to oppose her, she had proven to be too fast to him... Not that he would have ever had a chance, or strength enough, against her.

Then the woman became desperate, emitting some frightening sounds that spread across the area, making all the wild animals race away from the site. Even the water in the stream seemed to stand still for a moment. As *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* lay next to the corpse of the dead man with her face still covered with blood, a great deep sorrow completely filled her undead heart. She knew she didn't really want to do it, and for two important reasons: Shane was one of her kind, maybe he even came from her own tribe, or one of the villages her people had been in touch with in the past centuries; and he also cared about the preservation of the memory of the Native Americans, of their old history, which was an important thing to be done for the men and women who would walk the earth one day in the future. But she had been forced to follow her unholy path, to accomplish her bloody duty, as dictated by her undead traits, once again, even though she would have preferred to stop her actions and simply move away before it all began.

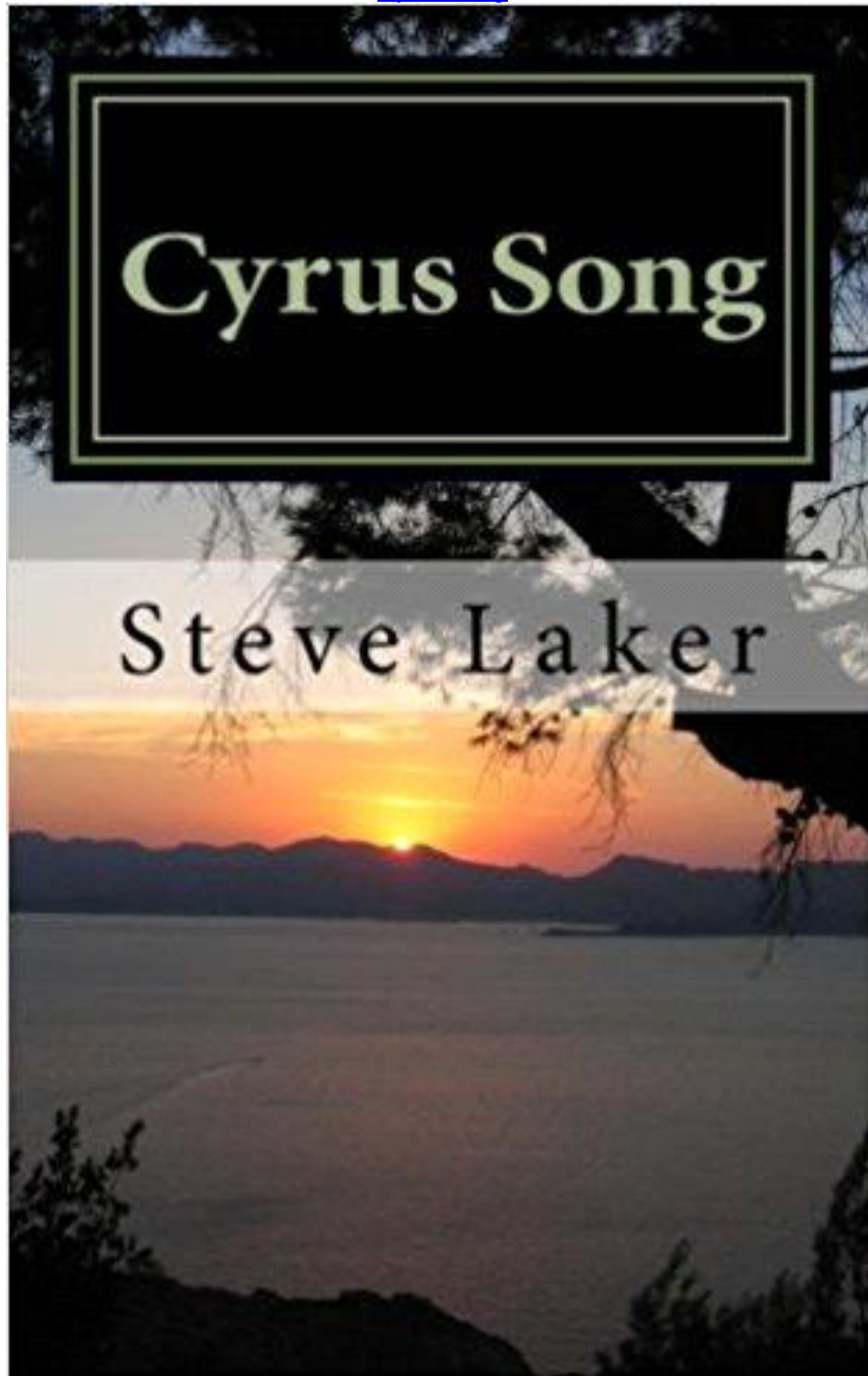
All of this aside, she had other reasons for being forced to act that way. He had tried to take photos of her, and he had ended up not being able to do that. The reality was that her undead body would not show up on photos, videos and the likes. That was a condition she had learned many years ago, and was connected to her unnatural features, though she really didn't know why. Maybe modern civilization and its own unbelievable devices simply didn't accept her, or denied her present existence... Besides, she couldn't allow anyone to talk with someone else about that strange occurrence, nor do further research about that matter, or other people would discover her and the undead life she was leading in that forest.

How deeply she would have preferred not to have been spotted by him. She wished that such an encounter would never have happened! But she couldn't change her actions, because she did exactly what her body had been forced to do.

You can run from a place, and try to hide away, *Born-to-walk-fast-alone* nodded in silence. But you can't really escape your unearthly and unholy being that is what you really are inside, forever...

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



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REVIEW by John C Adams

A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms by George RR Martin
Illustrations by Gary Gianni

Westeros, a century before Jon Snow encounters Aemon Targaryen up at the Wall, with delightful pen and ink drawings running alongside the text. What's not to love?

In *The Hedge Knight*, Dunk and Egg meet quite by chance. Dunk wants to be a knight. He possesses the bare equipment, which he inherited from the knight he squired for. Sir Arlan of Pennytree has just died of a fever and Dunk now has to make his own way in the world. But his old knight taught him well. Egg is masquerading as a stable boy when Dunk stops at an inn for a rest. The little lad's real name is Aegon, and we all have a pretty good idea what that means even before we spot his silver hair and violet eyes. Dunk and Egg cross paths again, at a tourney in Ashford meadow.

He felt foolish standing there with sword in hand over an eight year old orphan. He sheathed it, glowering so the boy would see that he would suffer no nonsense. I ought to give him a good beating at the least, he thought, but the child looked so pitiful he could not bring himself to hit him. He glanced around the camp. The fire was burning merrily with a neat circle of rocks. The horses had been brushed, and clothes were hanging from the elm, drying above the flames.

Continuing their journey in the second tale, *The Sworn Sword*, Dunk and Egg are returning from a trip to Dorne. They are heading for the broken down castle of Sir Eustace Osgrey. Drought has made the local villagers desperate and an adjoining landowner, the Red Widow, has diverted the river further upstream to irrigate her own crops. Dunk loyally raises the best army he can from among Sir Eustace's tenants.

The next day a dozen would be warriors found their way to Standfast to assemble among the chickens. One was too old, two were too young, and one skinny boy turned out to be a skinny girl. Those Dunk send back to their villages, leaving eight: three Wats, two Wills, a Lem, a Pate, and Big Rob the lackwit.

In the final story, *The Mystery Knight*, Dunk and Egg make for Lord Butterwell's castle, hoping for a chance to enter the tourney and win a dragon's egg. The uproar of a wedding and bedding provides the perfect opportunity for someone to snatch the prize, rather than earning it on the field.

Each tale was very different to the others, but all were thoroughly likeable in their own way. In fact, just like Dunk and Egg themselves! It was lovely to follow the two heroes as they faced a variety of enemies with good humour, and came to understand each other along the way. You can't ask for more than that in a book.

Gary Gianni's drawings elevated my enjoyment of the book to a whole new level, informing the action and deepening the vivid portrayal of the wealth of secondary characters. The style of illustration was a perfect match for the writing. There are some books where the reviewer feels

that the drawings were a late add on or that the text could have done just fine without them. This isn't one of them!

Enjoy!

THE END

[Schlock! Presents: Ghostlands](#)

Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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I LOVE THE LITTLE BASTARDS by Steven Havelock

“Did you murder six Muslim women?”

James Price stared at his reflection on mirror opposite on the wall. Ruffled blond hair and pasty white skin stared back at him.

He remained silent. The two detectives opposite seemed puzzled and confused.

What the hell is going on...? I have a banging headache!

Seven year old Jamal Khan was asleep in bed when his mobile vibrated underneath his pillow. He pulled it out and saw who was calling.

That bastard!

He answered, knowing if he didn't then something terrible would happen to his mum.

“Hello...” A small, frightened, timid voice.

The voice on the other end was male, the words he spoke... He knew he would never be able to tell anyone.

My head is spinning...

James awoke.

“Go to hell, you!” He slammed the end call button on the phone.

James had some idea of what he had done but the details seemed fuzzy.

Why did I do it? Was it really me...?

Last night he had a dream, he was walking behind a Muslim woman, someone he had seen exit the tube station late at night... But... But... he didn't remember much else...

The tall detective leaned over and whispered something to his colleague. His ears had always been keen, and he picked up what was said.

“Why would she do it?”

“We have DNA evidence linking this individual to the crime scene.”

Jamal was at the school gates.

My dad is late like usual. My behind is hurting me... Who can I tell? The threats that my parents would die...

Later that night, Jamal answered his phone again.

Why does he hurt me...?

And again, like usual, Jamal's head started to spin. He didn't remember what he said; it was like he was in a dream again.

He swore loudly into the phone and hit the end call button.

James stared at the two police detectives. A memory flashed through his mind. He was in the school toilets, and then... Then he heard the footsteps echoing into... His heart seemed to beat a thousand times faster and his breath got stuck in his throat... There was a knock on the door.

“Open up!”

The dream seemed so real... He remembered bits of it.

He had chosen the victim and now he followed her, walking closer and closer all the time. Soon the woman in female Muslim garb walked down a side street, which was more secluded and... James pulled out a long knife from the back of his trousers and made his move... He thrust the knife deeply, once, twice, three times...

A long scream rang out into the dark pitch black night. Then he was running along secluded alleyways that he had memorized from street maps online.

His heart was pounding and his breath coming in short sharp bursts... And then... And then the dream seemed to fade away.

“Where were you last night at 9pm?” asked the tall, stern detective to his right.

“I was at home in bed.”

“We have CCTV footage of someone matching your description following a young lady who was later found murdered.”

Murdered... The words echoed round his head... Murdered... But how...? Who...?

The caretaker had told him he loved him. Jamal was too young to understand all that the caretaker said, but bits of it stuck in his mind.

I love you little bastards... I really do...

Jamal knew if he told anyone no one would believe him... After all he was just a seven year old boy and the caretaker was an adult who all the teachers and parents seemed to like...

“Why did you do it?” asked the detective on the right.

James felt like there was someone else in his body, who had taken over.

“It wasn’t me.” He stared into their eyes, “I love the little bastards, I really do!”

A flash of confusion registered on the officers’ faces.

“Asiah! You report card says you came first out of all your year in Maths!”

Asiah looked down. “Mum, thank you for sending me to extra classes after school.” She knew it would make her mum happy.

Ten years later Asiah was a young woman. She stared at the four white walls of her bedroom flat. She moved out of her parent’s house after a massive argument.

I’m so confused... Where did those clothes in my closet come from? They’re men’s clothes and yet I don’t have a boyfriend anymore... We broke up two months ago...

She stared in the dressing table mirror opposite her bed. It was something that she really didn’t want to do.

She felt her head spinning... What’s happening to me...? The dreams... I feel like the dreams are about to start again...

The woman walked quietly and slowly. James followed, feeling the coldness of the long kitchen knife in his coat. She walked down a side street and, like many times before, he ran up to her. Thrusting the knife, once, twice, three times and then he was running into the night as the screams of the dying woman rang out...

Asiah woke up. She was in her bedroom again... But there was something wrong. She somehow knew several hours had passed

Something deep inside told her that she was in serious trouble. *I can't look in the mirror. No, don't look...*

She looked down instead.

My hands have blood on them.

She stood upright, shocked by the blood; a knife clattered to the floor.

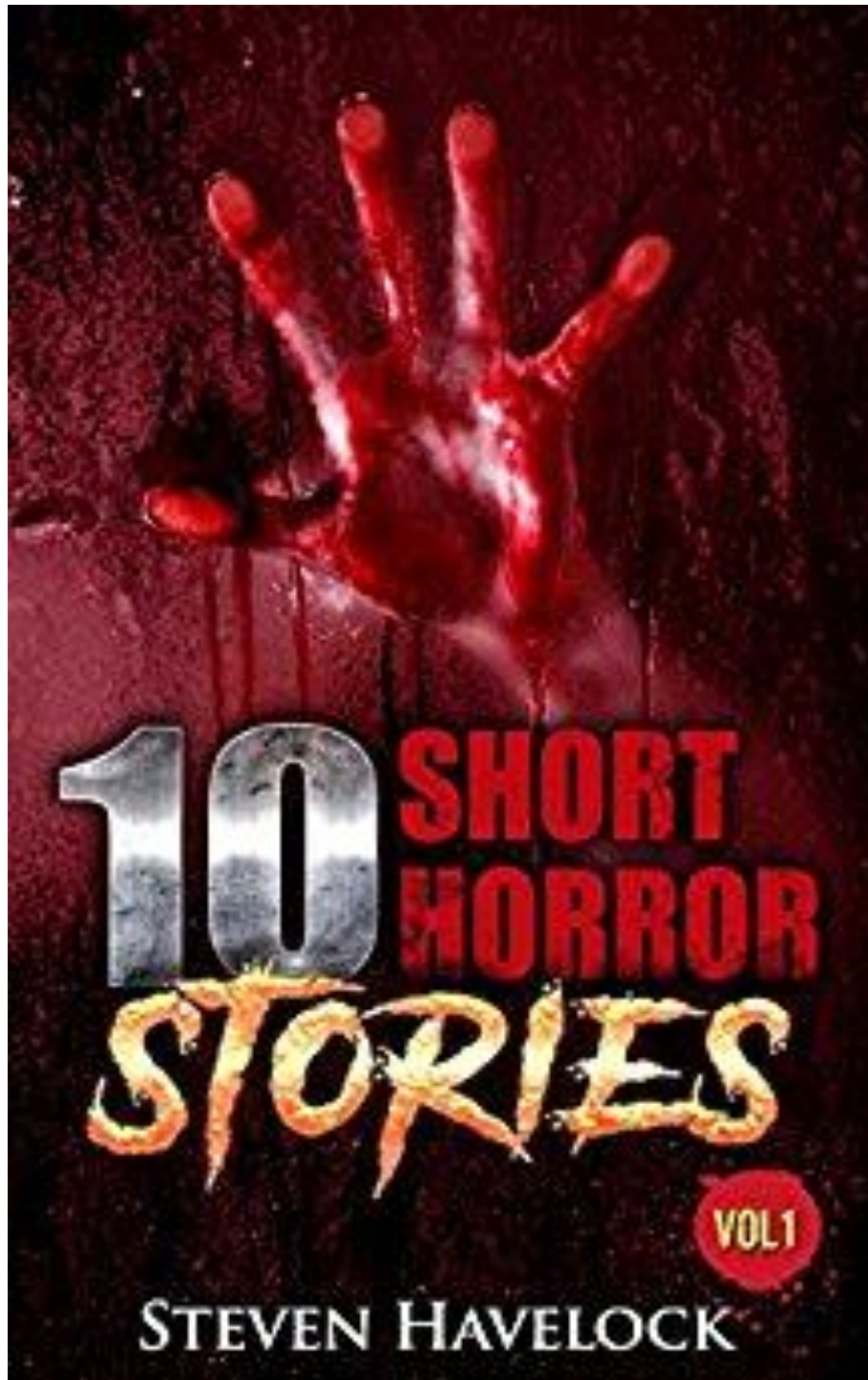
Where did that come from and why do I have blood on my hands and clothes...? Why am I dressed in men's jeans and jacket?

Her head started to spin again.

The policeman again looked genuinely puzzled. He stood up produced handcuffs from his pocket and said, "Asiah Parveen, we are charging you with the murder of six Muslim women."

"What? You can't!" James cried. "It wasn't me! I couldn't have done it! I love the little bastards, I really do!"

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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

Chapter Thirteen

After a long pause, I spoke. ‘I thought you were dead, Holmes,’ I said.

‘So did I,’ he said, smiling. ‘For a moment, as the great apes came over the walls of the boma, I thought that it was the end. What an artist would die in me, I thought. What a waste of one of the finest criminological minds in Europe.’

‘I see the experience did nothing to lessen your conceit,’ said Miss Marency drily.

Holmes rose and gave her a little bow, then sat back down. In the gloom of the hut the glow from his pipe was the only light, and it illuminated his gaunt face eerily. I could see that it had grown gaunter in recent days, and asked him how he had escaped the great apes attack.

‘I could hardly claim to have escaped,’ he admitted. ‘Some of the great apes seized me while their comrades were fighting the blacks and carried me away into the jungle. It was I fearing for your life, Watson, and yours, Miss Marency. I had no notion as to why they had not killed me, but from the grisly sounds I heard as I was carried away, struggling in the iron grip of those filthy, stinking creatures, it hardly seemed likely that anyone else would survive.’

For once, Holmes’ words were tinged with emotion. I gathered that his treatment at the hands of the great apes had not been exemplary. The less he said, the more I imagined the indignities he had known at their taloned paws.

‘And how did you make your escape?’ my friend asked. ‘Since escape you clearly did. Did any of the bearers survive?’

‘The bearers died to a many,’ I said sadly. ‘Miss Marency and I escaped in a pirogue. At first, we had nothing but guns and ammunition; the map itself we lost in our escape. Then we lost even that. Luckily, Miss Marency’s prior experience came to the fore. I was struck down with a particularly virulent bout of fever, and she prevailed upon a local tribe of jungle dwelling pigmies to aid me.’

‘A treatment for malaria?’ Holmes said, intrigued. ‘I was not aware that quinine was available in this continent.’

‘Nor was I,’ I admitted. ‘I understood it to be limited to the American tropics. However, the pigmies were able to procure some form of herbal cure. From the tea they gave me to drink, I would hazard a guess it was some genus of Artemisia.’

‘Once Watson’s fever had been cured,’ Miss Marency added, ‘or at least had abated, we set out into the jungle again, heading for Nkume.’

‘And how did you achieve that?’ Holmes asked. ‘You had lost the map. I know that for certain, since it was still upon my person when I was taken away by the great apes.’

She shrugged. ‘I may not have a memory as adept as yours, Mr Holmes,’ she said, ‘but I studied that map during the voyage, and also as we proceeded across the veldt and into the swamps and jungles. I remembered it well enough to ensure we were travelling in the right direction.’

‘And here you are, prisoners of the people of Nkume,’ Holmes said sardonically.

‘As are you,’ Miss Marency said, nettled by this observation. ‘Or are you free to come and go as you please?’

‘The natives keep me penned in here,’ Holmes admitted, ‘but it is more as if they are hiding me than keeping me prisoner. They feed me, and they do not ill treat me, unlike the great apes.’

‘Holmes,’ I said, ‘precisely how did you escape their clutches? Even after Miss Marency and I fled to the far bank of the river, the great apes followed us. We were pursued up onto the plateau. In fact, although they took us prisoner, the Nkume people saved us from the great apes.’ I remembered how one of the blacks had falsified our trail with the stinking hippo meet. A veritable red herring, leading the hounds of the scent! I told Holmes about this.

‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘it seems that smell is the most significant of the great apes’ senses. Considering how vile their own stink is, that is ironic. So the Nkume people aided you.’

‘They did not treat us as well as they have you,’ I told him. ‘Indeed, Miss Marency was ill treated by the savages. They tore her ears to shreds.’

‘Quite!’ Holmes seemed shocked by this. ‘Why did they do such a thing? They have treated me most courteously, other than depriving me of my liberty.’

‘They tore out my diamond earrings,’ said Miss Marency quietly. ‘My father’s gift.’

I realised at once that she must still be in a great deal of pain, and that the wounds were at risk of infection. I asked her to let me inspect them, and she submitted to this graciously enough. The lobes were ragged and crusted with blood, but there seemed to be no infection. Nevertheless, I suggested we obtain some form of spirit from the natives to clean them at the first convenience.

‘It’s a small matter,’ she said stoically. ‘Mr Holmes. We have yet to hear how you escaped your first captors.’

‘I was carried off into the bush,’ Holmes said. By now the glow from his pipe bowl was dying down, and we heard the tale in almost complete darkness. ‘My captors bound me with lianas or creepers. I was helpless. I feared that they would devour me at their leisure, but there was no sign of that. They carried me through the jungle, taking to the middle terraces at times, swinging from bough to bough with one bearing me on his hirsute shoulders. It was exhilarating enough. Yet trepidation clutched at my heart. I had no notion of my ultimate fate at their hands. I remembered

what Miss Marency said about the raiders who had attacked the mission...’

‘Those attackers were men more like our captors,’ she insisted. ‘My memories are faint, and I heard most of the story from my nurse, but I am sure the war party that slew our blacks and took my parents away into the bush were humans, not animals. Besides, my father made no mention of great apes.’

‘In which case, we are prisoners of the very tribe who carried off Sir Digory,’ I said. ‘Naturally enough, since we are in their city. But what of these priests he mentioned?’

‘For now, they remain a mystery,’ Holmes said thoughtfully. ‘As for the great apes, they carried me for many marches through the jungle, as if I was a package and they were delivery boys. Each day we would lie up in the darkest of thickets and the great apes would drowse, with one of two of their flea ridden number on guard. It would have been hard going to break one’s bonds and escape under such conditions, but after some days of this I succeeded, and fled into the daylight where they feared to follow me.

‘How they are linked to our own species it would require the younger Darwin to determine, but their sense of sights is poor, although that of smell is almost supernatural. I forged on through the jungle, determining that I was headed in the correct direction by the information furnished me by the sun, and the position of moss and other vegetation on trees—it would be wearisome to relate the details here—and after many more marches ascended the plateau to look down upon the city itself from a ledge on a barren mountainside. Before that, I had crossed the river at a narrow point, hoping that this would throw the hounds off the scent, as it were.’

I tried to relate his account to my own adventures with Miss Marency. ‘That would be approximately when the great apes reappeared on our own trail,’ I said. ‘Holmes, you led them down on us!’

In the glow of the pipe I saw him shake his head slightly. ‘I had no notion that you still lived,’ he said. ‘All that interested me was finding the murderer of Miss Marency. And so at last I came to the city of Nkume, such as it is.’

‘And you have found Mr McAllister?’ Miss Marency challenged him. ‘Is he here, with these savages?’

Holmes shook his head. ‘As yet,’ he admitted, ‘I have found no sign of our fugitive district commissioner—or any other people of our own race. On coming to the city’s outskirts at evening, I was seized by guards and taken before the young queen who rules this settlement. I tried to communicate with her in Arabic, but she would not listen to me, instead consigning me to this hut. I had hoped to reason with her, but she has yet to make an appearance here. Yet as I mentioned the Nkume people have treated me well enough, and I had been kept alive on a nutritious stodge of maize and millet which they grow in their fields outside the city walls.’ He gave a shrug. ‘So now we are all here, and yet there is as yet no sign of any other interlopers.’

He yawned. ‘Forgive me. My day has hardly been as exciting than your own, and yet I would

seek my rude bed.' He thumped the hard earth floor. 'The morning will no doubt bring its own revelations.'

At once I realised how weary I was. The flight along the river, the ascent of the cliff, the trek across the plateau... I was exhausted. Miss Marency also confessed to tiredness, and we all lay down on the packed earth and sought sleep.

Despite my disquiet, I must have found what I looked for, because the next thing I remember is sunlight slanting in through the open doorway and pooling on the ground where I lay. Blinking, I saw standing in it two huge dark forms that advanced upon me.

I leapt to my feet in fright, only to see Holmes and Miss Marency both already sitting up, staring at our visitors. It was the musket bearing guards who had incarcerated us.

They were shouting something in their own tongue and beckoning with their flintlocks. I turned to Miss Marency.

'What on earth do these bounders want with us?' I asked.

She turned a steady gaze to me. 'My grasp of this archaic form of Nago is poor,' she admitted with a giggle, 'but I think it's clear that they want us to come with them.'

'Abundantly plains,' aid Sherlock Holmes, rising to his feet and stretching. 'Very well, old chap, we'll come with you,' he told the nearer of the guards.

The bearded man who had led the war party last night shouldered his way into the hut. He stood in the pool of sunlight and looking sternly round at us. He motioned us to silence then gestured to us to follow him.

With the guards at our rear, we came out into the jungle village. The sun shone down on the bare red earth and on the reed thatched huts. The lanes of the settlement were empty, and I assumed that most of the citizenry were out in the fields or remaining within their homes. The guards and the bearded man led us towards the big hut where Miss Marency and I had met the young queen the previous night, but they went quietly, surreptitiously, as if they were escorting us through enemy territory, with many an anxious look towards the stone structures among the trees in the direction of the volcano.

At last we reached the big hut, after a tense journey through the settlement. It became obvious that the stone buildings were home to some kind of enemy, or rulers who the Nkume were defying. I could only assume that this was the home of the notorious priests, Atlantean or Phoenician as they might be. Two more guards welcomed us with dour looks and led us and our escorts inside the big hut.

Last night it had been silent but crowded and illuminated by flaming torches. Now the place was quiet and almost empty, and dark except where light shone dimly down from openings in the roof. Only two people were visible in that great hall. On the stool sat the young queen in her

pillbox hat and brocade robes; at her side stood the scrawny, grey haired Negro with the plumed headdress. Our captors led us into her royal presence. The bearded man gestured to us to kneel before her. Etiquette must be maintained now that the sun was rising, it seemed; where our first visit had been a brief business where we were shown before this girl, now we must make our obeisance, our kowtows. Giving the musket bearing blacks a rueful glance, I swallowed my British pride and joined Holmes and Miss Marency grovelling on the packed earth floor.

As we did, a musical voice thrilled my sinews. It played with them as an expert violinist plays her instrument. 'Please ignore my war chief,' it said; a feminine voice more seductive than any Parisienne, speaking English better than any Frenchwoman or indeed any foreigner. 'I waive the rules this day. For are you not of my own race? Rise, I beg of you. And let me welcome you to my palace. But also permit me to warn you of the danger that you are in. You are not the only English people to visit Nkume in recent weeks. The others fell into the hands of the priests, and I fear that they will be offered to the god of the volcano.' The girl's voice paused. 'Rise, I beg you,' she added. 'Rise!'

Chapter Fourteen

'I am Ayaba,' she went on, speaking English with the most aristocratic voice imaginable, as we rose to our feet in obedience to her command. 'Queen of Nkume. Welcome to my realm.'

'Thank you, your majesty,' said Sherlock Holmes, speaking for all of us. 'May I be so bold as to say that your English is excellent?' Queen Ayaba inclined her head in thanks. 'Won't you introduce us to your gruff companions?' Holmes added, indicating the bearded man and the old fellow in the plumed headdress.

'I am quite forgetting my manners,' the queen said with a coquettish giggle. 'This is my War Chief, Keobula,' she pointed with her staff at the bearded man, 'and this is Ulu-Oru,' she added, indicating the man in the headdress, 'my chamberlain. They are my advisers in all matters of rule.' She smiled. 'Their English is very limited,' she confided. 'But they are invaluable in matters of politics and statesmanship.'

Miss Marency raised her eyebrows. 'You have many responsibilities for one so young, your majesty,' she said. 'You can't be much more than fifteen. You have my sympathy. I too have had responsibility thrust upon me at an early age.'

'But we are also forgetting our manners.' I spoke for the first time. 'This is Miss Kate Marency, daughter of the famous explorer, Sir Digory Marency. This is Mr Sherlock Holmes, the finest consulting detective in all the British Empire. My own name is Watson, Doctor John Watson.'

'Your companion's fame precedes her,' Queen Ayaba replied. 'My people know Miss Marency as Amotekun Iyaafin. Welcome, Mr Sherlock Holmes and Doctor John Watson. Welcome to my kingdom, all three of you. But I must tell you that this country is not one where white men prosper.'

Her two advisers stood on either side of her ivory throne and were following our discussion as best they could, but at this they both nodded; Keobula sadly, Ulu-Oru avidly. I looked at Holmes. A threat?

‘Thank you for the warning,’ Holmes replied, ‘but we have little option. Business brings us to your realm.’

‘And what business would a consulting detective have in Nkume?’ asked Queen Ayaba, sitting back so the diamonds in her hat winked in the light. ‘What crime we have in our city is summarily punished,’ and she nodded towards the great iron axe that hung from the wall.

‘Is it a crime to wear diamonds?’ I asked, glancing at Miss Marency’s ears.

‘Ah, diamonds,’ said Queen Ayaba thoughtfully. ‘There is much greed for these trinkets. Diamond mining has been stepped up since the coming of the white men. And the nomads from the deserts, the slave traders, they desire them too. I have had diamonds smuggled from the mines to trade with the Arabs for muskets.’ She smiled a little at Miss Marency. ‘Ulu-Oru was overzealous in taking them from you so brutally. But he feared there would be reprisals from the priests if they were seen. All is not well between us and our rulers, especially since I refused to send out war parties to hunt for their sacrificial victims...But I cannot risk the men who I am training to fight for me.’

‘You mentioned that other white men had been seen in your kingdom in recent weeks,’ said Holmes. ‘That they have fallen into the hands of the priests. That they will be offered to the volcano god.’

She inclined her head. ‘The priests believe that whiteness of skin denotes the blood of High Atlantis, from whence they deduce their own origins, long, long ago. To propitiate the god who dwells in the caverns beneath the volcano, they demand sacrifices of white skinned folk. Long ago, they believe, they were presented with their land and its riches in return for a promise of sacrifices of their own kind; should they ever cease, the land will be swallowed up by the fires of the underworld. Only Atlanteans are acceptable to their god, and in a pinch, they will offer their own kind, but they naturally prefer to seek alternatives. Before my day, they sent out war parties to bring back captives, some of Arab blood, others British settlers...’

Miss Marency pursed her lips. ‘You say they send out war parties?’ she asked.

The queen nodded. ‘Whenever the god is hungry,’ she said. ‘But now it seems that the people of the British Empire come en masse to offer themselves.’

‘You must understand,’ I said uneasily, ‘that we are not Atlanteans. We are British! And the Great White Queen’—I pointed impressively somewhere skywards—‘will punish any crimes against our kind.’

‘Indeed,’ said Holmes drily, ‘should she or HM Government ever come to hear of them. What

interests me most, your majesty,' he said, turning to Queen Ayaba again, 'is the prosecution of my duty. Miss Marency's father was murdered some time ago, in England. We have come to Africa on the track of his killer. There are strong reasons to believe he came to your kingdom.'

'No doubt he is one of the white men who have fallen into the hands of these priests,' I added. 'Do you know the names of these captives, your majesty?'

She shook her head. 'I know only that they are in the cells beneath the Great Temple,' she said, 'guarded by the priests.'

'Do you have no influence over these priests?' Miss Marency asked. 'You are queen of this city, after all!'

The young queen gave a throaty chuckle. Her two advisers echoed her, Keobula with a booming guffaw, Ulu-Oru with a wheezing cackle.

'Alas no, Miss Marency,' said Queen Ayaba. 'My people have always been under the sway of the priests, though there are those among us who would have things differently.' At this, Keobula stuck out his chest and rumbled something deep in his throat, but Ulu-Oru's eyes darted about as if he was afraid that they would be overheard. 'Our legends say that hundreds of years ago we came here from our original homelands in the veldt, fleeing much stronger tribes, and found our way into this remote plateau.

'Although much of it is barren, the land beneath the volcano is fertile, and our fields produce a good harvest. My people live well, in many ways, and no one from the lowlands troubles us here, so far from other inhabited lands. But all this came at a price. Already living here, amid the overgrown ruins of their ancient city, were the masked priests of High Atlantis, who wielded strange witchcraft, and my ancestors were forced to acknowledge their suzerainty. Though a shadow of their fallen greatness they may still have many of the powers possessed by their long-lost island empire.'

The expression on my face must have betrayed my feelings at this pronouncement, because Miss Marency gave me a disapproving look and Sherlock Holmes laughed out loud, adding, 'Doctor Watson is not a believer in the Atlantis legend, your majesty. What powers, then, are these?'

The queen smiled. 'Why, Mr Holmes, it is said that they have powers of magic. That they can read minds, transport themselves from one spot to another, see into the future, and much more. My people believe this devoutly, although no doubt these are legends put about by their agents to keep the Nkume in their thrall. It seems to me that the priests have lost much of their greatness, that people who once were superhuman have degenerated over the aeons since their mother island sank beneath the waves and they were abandoned amid barbarism. But still they hold my people in subjection—mainly through the overpowering force that superstition has on primitive minds.'

'If you'll permit me to say so, you don't seem to be so primitive yourself, your majesty,' Miss Marency commented.

‘No indeed,’ Holmes agreed. ‘A very keen intellect in so young a person.’

‘I came to my throne only recently,’ the queen said, ‘succeeding my mother, who died at the end of a long life of intrigue and struggle against the power of the Archpriest. It was my father, however, her consort, who most strongly desired progress in Nkume, to see the power of the priests broken and the Nkume triumphant. Yet he is gone now, as is my mother. I must continue their work of modernisation—and yet every attempt I make to drag my people up from the mire of superstition and savagery is frustrated by the Archpriest, who would have us remain in that dark age that has so benefited his indolent and slothful caste.’

‘I can only applaud you for your efforts,’ said Holmes, and Miss Marency and I agreed.

‘I’m quite relieved to meet so just and enlightened a ruler,’ I said. ‘When your warriors took us prisoner, I feared the worst. But now you will restore us our liberty and allow us to continue our business...?’

Sadly the queen shook her head. ‘Step outside the boma of Nkume,’ she warned, ‘and you will be seized by the priests to be sacrificed to the volcano god when next he is hungry. You must remain here. The other whites were taken by the priests before I could act, and I understand that they will be sacrificed tonight, but I would not see any more of my father’s people slaughtered by them.’

‘Your father’s people?’ I asked keenly. Again I regarded the lightness of her skin beside her dark fellow countrymen. ‘Do you mean that your father was British?’

Miss Marency snorted in disbelief. Queen Ayaba fixed her eyes on the older girl.

‘My father was brought to Nkume as a prisoner,’ she said, ‘much like you. In those days, the power of the priests was much greater, and my people lived in fear of their powers. When they required sacrifices, it was war parties of Nkume who set out into the wilds beyond the city. The presence of white settlers in the British colony on the coast came as a great relief to them, although it proved well-guarded, even better than the camps of the Arabs who we had hitherto preyed upon.’

‘One time, when once again the Archpriest decreed that the hunger of He-Beneath-The-Fire-Mountain was growing, my mother, the queen of the day, sent out a war party led by a young warrior named Keobula. They went for many marches into the grasslands beyond the jungle, having heard word of a small, ill defended settlement where those of the blood of High Atlantis held sway. At last they found the place, and after probing its weak defences, they descended upon it and slew its defenders.’

I saw that Miss Marency’s face had turned white. She moved as if to speak, then shut her mouth again. I went to her, and out a comforting hand on her arm. She shook it off, and turned to stare at the bearded black man.

The queen continued her story, while its ageing hero listened approvingly, paying no heed to Miss Marency's accusing expression.

'Keobula's war party found two whites within the boma. One, a man, defended himself and his mate valiantly, but just as their black servants were slain, they were also defeated. But Keobula did not let his warriors slay them, they were too valuable. Instead, they took the man and woman back up into the mountains, to present them to the Archpriest as sacrifices to the volcano god. At last they returned to Nkume with their captives, and here the white man and woman were both presented to my mother, the queen, so she could yield them up to the Archpriest.

'My mother also succeeded when she was very young, but she was brought up in abysmal superstition and fear of the priests and their fetish worship. Already had she sent the Archpriest gifts of Arabs or other white skinned folk, and she had seen this done many a time in my grandmother's day, so this time should have been no different. But when she saw the white man there, splendid and undaunted beside his mate, she felt the first shoots of love stir in her unripe heart.

'She had a duty to her people—should she not yield a sacrifice to the Archpriests they would suffer. And she found that with her first love came a rival. A cunning girl if she had yet to learn compassion, she saw how she could fulfil all her duties, those owed to her people and those owed to her heart.

'She took my father and concealed him, then gave up his wife to the priests. This white woman was flung into the chasm of He-Beneath-The-Fire-Mountain. The god was sated, until next time. The white man remained hidden in Nkume, his presence unknown to the priests, known only to the queen, and her most trusted advisers. My mother would visit her prisoner whenever she could. Soon they both had a smattering of each other's language. My mother told him that his wife had been killed by the priests, that she had been unable to stop them. It was true in its own way, but he did not learn the full story until some years later. My mother was young and comely then, this white stranger grief stricken—and alone, except for this visitor. It was inevitable that they become lovers.'

I glanced at Miss Marency. She had been listening intently. I wondered if the story was suitable for her tender ears. The young queen, though urbane and cultured in many ways, was still something of a savage.

'And so I was conceived,' Queen Ayaba went on. 'My people have a matrilineal system of inheritance, and it is expected that the queen take lovers. The mysteries of procreation are veiled to them, although my father went some way to enlightening them in this, like many others, during his time as a prisoner. Unable to leave the city, he acquiesced, accepted his situation, and worked from the shadows to turn my people away from their superstitious and priest ridden state to progress towards something better. He raised me to speak and think as a woman of his own white race, and I am proud that in my veins, unknown to the priests, flows the blood of ancient Atlantis—and the modern British Empire.'

I looked from this black queen to Miss Marency. She was pale and trembling. Sherlock Holmes'

face was dark and brooding. No one spoke. I felt that it was beholden upon me to make some contribution.

‘No wonder, then, that you wish to help us,’ I said. ‘We must be grateful to our unknown benefactor. I wish I could have shaken the fellow by the hand.’

‘You may well have done,’ said Miss Marency in a choked voice.

With a shrug I acknowledged that this was true, then turned back to the queen. ‘Does your father still live? You have told us little of how you came to succeed your mother so young.’

‘Surely, it’s obvious, Watson,’ said Miss Marency in impatient tones. ‘Everyone else has realised but you.’

I gave her a hurt, bewildered look.

‘My father left when I was still young,’ said the queen. ‘My mother and he quarrelled when he somehow learnt the truth of his wife’s death. My father somehow escaped in the night, vanished into the jungle. We heard no more of him, and not long after, my mother died of grief and remorse. So I became queen. I had hoped my father would return one day, but now I learn that he is dead. Murdered.’

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirteen

Ward studied the three men who had cornered him, Kharl Stoff and his two cronies. He'd been up against worse.

"You boys sure seem pretty cocksure of y'selves," he said. The man standing to Ward's left removed his laser pistol and jammed it between his ribs.

"Doncha worry about us," he said. "Just get in the cage."

"You heard the man," Stoff said. "Just don't make no trouble and do what yer tol..."

Kharl Stoff had not the time to finish his thought. Before he got the last word out, Ward swung his foot in a huge arc, smashing Stoff's jaw with the heavy tip of his boot. He shattered the jaw and sent Stoff spinning hard against the third man in the group.

Those two went tumbling against the steely bars of the cage, and knocked loose from the floor, they grappled with themselves futilely as they tried to regain their balance in the weightless derelict.

There was the man with the gun to deal with before the other two found their footing. Ward turned and grabbed the hand the man used to hold his pistol. Squeezing hard, he pressed the man's fingers against the pistol, pinching them against the trigger guards and making it impossible for him to fire the pistol.

With his left hand, he closed his fingers in a vice-like grip upon the man's trachea. He cut off the man's breath while simultaneously bashing the back of his head against the bars of the cage.

Kharl Stoff and his other henchman managed to disentangle themselves from each other. Instantly, the henchman let loose with a huge hollering.

"Here! Here! We got 'im! We got 'im! He's murdering us! Come quick! Come quick!"

Stoff, having had his jaw shattered, said nothing, of course, but left it to his henchman to call in for reinforcements.

Which were quick in coming. Ward was astonished to see the darkened silhouettes of dozens of burly figures clambering over the cages and through the stacks, seeking out the cause of the clamour.

Ward didn't dare use his pistol. The flash of laser would draw the hordes directly to him. But he had not time to waste either, not a second. The endless bellowing of Stoff's henchman would bring the shadowed hordes upon him within a minute.

Ward jammed the head of the man his was fighting between the bars of the cage. With his elbow, he smashed the man's nose.

He still moved. A gargling sound came from his shattered face.

Not good enough. Ward didn't have to kill the man, only shut him up. If Ward could shut the guy up, he'd be happy for the time saved.

A second elbow, this one to the mouth. Teeth and blood spilled out into the almost weightless derelict.

Good. That one shut him up. Now on to the next thing.

Yeah, the shadowy figures were converging on Ward. That jackass with Stoff, his loud bellowing brought them on. The two of them, Stoff and the asshole with the mouth, were floating upside down from Ward's point of view, a dozen feet away, in a wide hallway of cages, each of them holding one, or two or more captives.

No time to kill Stoff and his henchman. No point, either. They'd already alerted the shadowy crew of this derelict in space that he was there, and he was to be hunted.

The only thing for Ward to do was to duck out. Obviously the crew—for that is what he assumed the shadowy hordes were—knew this ship better than he did. Though Ward had memorized a map in his head, as Kharl Stoll had led him through the derelict, still there was no point in trying to be cute. Just get out of sight, then make his way back to the O8 111A.

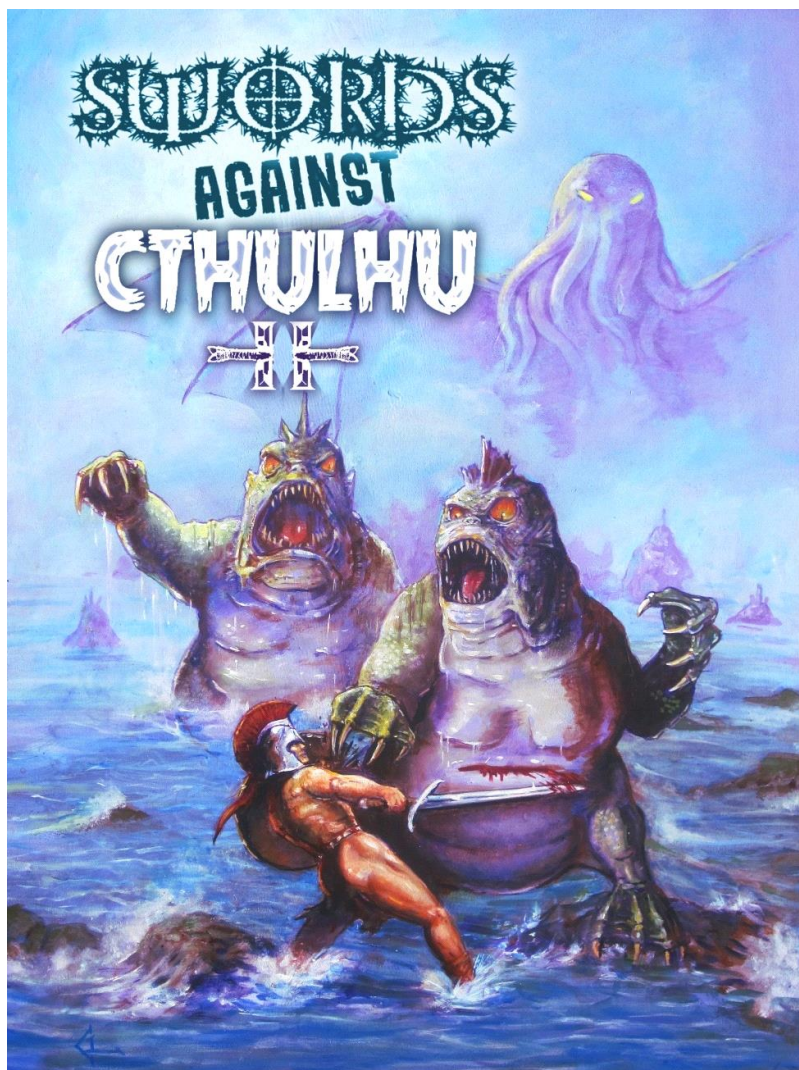
He squeezed himself into the dark alley formed by two cages being placed with some space between them, and moving both swiftly and silently, he managed to wedge his way through to the next. Cautiously, he leaned his head into the next long hallway. Rows of cages stacked upon each other. Above, walkways and platforms, complicated pipes and ruined wiring.

Overhead, dark forms moved swiftly through the shadows. Ward heard the sounds of Stoff's henchman pointing out, "This way. I'm sure I saw him going this way,". Being on the opposite side of the row of cages that separated them, Ward could not see which way the henchman was pointing, so he had no way of knowing how accurate his directions may have been.

There was nothing for it, but to move on. He stepped out from the narrow alley into the dim hallway of cages.

The searchlights came out.

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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XIX—A Complete Establishment.

Before I slept Eveena had convinced me, much to my own discomfiture, how very limited must be any authority that could be delegated to her. In such a household there could be no second head or deputy, and an attempt to devolve any effective charge on her would only involve her in trouble and odium. Even at the breakfast, spread as usual in the centre of the peristyle, she entreated that we should present ourselves separately. Eunané appeared to have performed very dexterously the novel duty assigned to her. The ambau had obeyed her orders with well-trained promptitude, and the carvee, in bringing fruit, leaves, and roots from the outer garden, had more than verified all that on a former occasion Eveena had told me of their cleverness and quick comprehension of instructions. Eunané's face brightened visibly as I acknowledged the neatness and the tempting appearance of the meal she had set forth. She was yet more gratified by receiving charge for the future of the same duty, and authority to send, as is usual, by an ambâ the order for that principal part of each day's food which is supplied by the confectioner. By reserving for Eveena the place among the cushions immediately on my left, I made to the assembled household the expected announcement that she was to be regarded as mistress of the house; feminine punctiliousness on points of domestic precedence strikingly contrasting the unceremonious character of intercourse among men out of doors. The very ambau recognise the mistress or the favourite, as dogs the master of their Earthly home.

The ladies were at first shy and silent, Eunané only giving me more than a monosyllabic answer to my remarks, and even Eunané never speaking save in reply to me. A trivial incident, however, broke through this reserve, and afforded me a first taste of the petty domestic vexations in store for me. The beverage most to my liking was always the carcarâ—juice flavoured with roasted kernels, something resembling coffee in taste. On this occasion the carcarâ and another favourite dish had a taste so peculiar that I pushed both aside almost untouched. On observing this, the rest—Enva, Leenoo, Elfé, and Eiralé—took occasion to criticise the articles in question with such remarks and grimaces as ill-bred children might venture for the annoyance of an inexperienced sister. I hesitated to repress this outbreak as it deserved, till Eunané's bitter mortification was evident in her brightening colour and the doubtful, half appealing glance of tearful eyes. Then a rebuke, such as might have been appropriately addressed yesterday to these rude school girls by their governess, at once silenced them. As we rose, I asked Eveena, who, with more courtesy than the rest of us, had finished her portion—

“Is there any justice in these reproaches? I certainly don't like the carcarâ today, but it does not follow that Eunané is in fault.”

The rest, Eunané included, looked their annoyance at this appeal; but

Eveena's temper and kindness were proof against petulance.

“The carcarâ is in fault,” she said; “but I don't think Eunané is. In learning cookery at school she had her materials supplied to her; this time the carve has probably given her an unripe or overripe fruit which has spoiled the whole.”

“And do you not know ripe from unripe fruit?” I inquired, turning to Eunané.

“How should she?” interposed Eveena. “I doubt if she ever saw them growing.”

“How so?” I asked of Eunané.

“It is true,” she answered. “I never went beyond the walls of our playground till I came here; and though there were a few flower beds in the inner gardens, there were none but shade trees among the turf and concrete yards to which we were confined.”

“I should have known no better,” observed Eveena; “but being brought up at home, I learned to know all the plants in my father’s grounds, which were more various, I believe, than usual.”

“Then,” I said, “Eunané has a new life and a multitude of new pleasures before her. Has this peristyle given you your first sight of flowers beyond those in the beds of your Nursery? And have you never seen anything of the world about you?”

“Never,” she said. “And Eveena’s excuse for me is, I believe, perfectly true. The carve must have been stupid, but I knew no better.”

“Well,” I rejoined, “you must forgive the bird, as we must excuse you for spoiling our breakfast. I will contrive that you shall know more of fruits and flowers before long. In the meantime, you will probably have a different if not a wider view from this roof than from that of your Nursery.”

After all, Eunané’s girlhood, typical of the whole life of many Martial women, had not, I suppose, been more dreary or confined than that of children in London, Canton, or Calcutta. But this incident, reminding me how dreary and limited that life was, served to excuse in my eyes the pettiness and poverty of the characters it had produced. A Martial woman’s whole experience may well be confined within a few acres, and from the cradle to the grave she may see no more of the world than can be discerned from the roof of her school or her husband’s home.

Eunané, with the assistance of the ambau, busied herself in removing the remains of the meal. The other five, putting on their veils, scampered up the inclined plane to the roof, much like children released from table or from tasks. Turning to Eveena, who still remained beside me, I said—

“Get your veil, and come out with me; I have not yet an idea where we are, and scarcely a notion what the grounds are like.”

She followed me to my apartment, out of which, opened the one she had chosen, and as the window closed behind us she spoke in a tone of appeal—

“Do not insist on my accompanying you. As you bade me always speak my thought, I had much rather you would take one of the others.”

“You professed,” I said, “to take especial pleasure in a walk with me, and this time I will be careful that you are not overtired.”

“Of course I should like it,” she answered; “but it would not be just. Please let me this time remain to take my part of the household duties, and make myself acquainted with the house. Choose your companion among the others, whom you have scarcely noticed yet.”

Preferring not only Eveena’s company, but even my own, to that of any of the six, and feeling myself not a little dependent on her guidance and explanations, I remonstrated. But finding that her sense of justice and kindness would yield to nothing short of direct command, I gave way.

“You forget my pleasure,” I said at last. “But if you will not go, you must at least tell me which I am to take. I will not pretend to have a choice in the matter.”

“Well, then,” she answered, “I should be glad to see you take Eunané. She is, I think, the eldest, apparently the most intelligent and companionable, and she has had one mortification already she hardly deserved.”

“And is much the prettiest,” I added maliciously. But Eveena was incapable of even understanding so direct an appeal to feminine jealousy.

“I think so,” she said; “much the prettiest among us. But that will make no difference under her veil.”

“And must she keep down her veil,” I asked, “in our own grounds?”

Eveena laughed. “Wherever she might be seen by any man but yourself.”

“Call her then,” I answered.

Eveena hesitated. But having successfully carried her own way on the main question, she would not renew her remonstrances on a minor point; and finding her about to join the rest, she drew Eunané apart. Eunané came up to me alone, Eveena having busied herself in some other part of the house. She approached slowly as if reluctant, and stood silent before me, her manner by no means expressive of satisfaction.

“Eveena thought,” I said, “that you would like to accompany me; but if not, you may tell her so; and tell her in that case that she must come.”

“But I shall be glad to go wherever you please,” replied Eunané.

“Eveena did not tell me why you sent for me, and” ——

“And you were afraid to be scolded for spoiling the breakfast? You have heard quite enough of that.”

“You dropped a word last night,” she answered, “which made me think you would keep your displeasure till you had me alone.”

“Quite true,” I said, “if I had any displeasure to keep. But you might spoil a dozen meals, and not vex me half as much as the others did.”

“Why?” she asked in surprise. “Girls and women always spite one another if they have a chance, especially one who is in disfavour or disgrace with authority.”

“So much the worse,” I answered. “And now—you know as much or as little of the house as any of us; find the way into the grounds.”

A narrow door, not of crystal as usual, but of metal painted to resemble the walls, led directly from one corner of the peristyle into the grounds outside. I had inferred on my arrival, by the distance from the road to the house, that their extent was considerable, but I was surprised alike by their size and arrangement. On two sides they were bounded by a wall about four hundred yards in length—that parting them from the road was about twice as long. They were laid out with few of the usual orchard plots and beds of different fruits and vegetables, but rather in the form of a small park, with trees of various sorts, among which the fruit trees were a minority. The surface was broken by natural rising grounds and artificial terraces; the soil was turfed in the manner I have previously described, with minute plants of different colours arranged in bands and patterns. Here and there was a garden consisting of a variety of flower beds and flowering shrubs; broad concrete paths winding throughout, and a beautiful silver stream meandering hither and thither, and filling several small ponds and fountains. That the grounds immediately appertaining to the house were not intended as usual for the purposes of a farm or kitchen garden was evident. The reason became equally apparent when, looking towards the north, where no wall bounded them, I saw—over a gate in the middle of a dense hedge of flowering shrubs, which, with a ditch beyond it, formed the limit of the park in that direction—an extensive farm divided by the usual ditches into some twenty five or thirty distinct fields, and more than a square mile in extent. This, as Eunané’s native inquisitiveness and quickness had already learnt, formed part of the estate attached to the mansion and bestowed upon me by the Campât. It was admirably cultivated, containing orchards, fields rich with various thriving crops, and pastures grazed by the Unicorn and other of the domestic birds and beasts kept to supply Martial tables with milk, eggs, and meat; producing nearly every commodity to which the climate was suited, and, as a very short observation assured me, capable of yielding a far greater income than would suffice to sustain in luxury and splendour a household larger than that enforced upon me. We walked in this direction, my companion talking fluently enough when once I had set her at ease, and seemingly free from the shyness and timidity which Eveena had at first displayed. She paused when we reached a bridge that spanned the ditch dividing the grounds from the farm, aware that, save on special invitation, she might not, even in my company, go beyond the former. I led her on, however, till soon after we had crossed the ditch I saw a man approaching us. On this, I desired Eunané to remain where she was, seating her at the foot of a fruit tree in one of the orchard plots, and proceeded to meet the stranger. After exchanging the usual salute, he came immediately to the point.

“I thought,” he said, “that you would not care yourself to undertake the cultivation of so

extensive an estate. Indeed, the mere superintendence would occupy the whole of one man's attention, and its proper cultivation would be the work of six or eight. I have had some little experience in agriculture, and determined to ask for this charge."

"And who has recommended you?" I said. "Or have you any sort of introduction or credentials to me?"

He made a sign which I immediately recognised. Caution, however, was imposed by the law to which that sign appealed.

"You can read," I said, "by starlight?"

"Better than by any other," he rejoined with a smile.

One or two more tokens interchanged left me no doubt that the claim was genuine, and, of course, irresistible.

"Enough," I replied. "You may take entire charge on the usual terms, which, doubtless, you know better than I."

"You trust me then, absolutely?" he said, in a tone of some little surprise.

"In trusting you," I replied, "I trust the Zinta. I am tolerably sure to be safe in hands recommended by them."

"You are right," he said, "and how right this will prove to you," and he placed in my hand a small cake upon which was stamped an impression of the signet that I had seen on Esmo's wrist. When he saw that I recognised it, he took it back, and, breaking it into fragments, chewed and swallowed it.

"This," he said, "was given me to avouch the following message: —Our Chiefs are informed that the Order is threatened with a novel danger. Systematic persecution by open force or by law has been attempted and defeated ages ago, and will hardly be tried again. What seems to be intended now is the destruction of our Chiefs, individually, by secret means—means which it is supposed we shall not be able to trace to the instigators, even if we should detect their instruments."

"But," I remarked, "those who have warned you of the danger must know from whom it proceeds, and those who are employed in such an attack must run not only the ordinary risk of assassins, but the further risk entailed by the peculiar powers of those they assail."

"Those powers," he answered, "they do not understand or recognise. The instruments, I presume, will be encouraged by an assurance that the Courts are in their favour, and by a pledge in the last resort that they shall be protected. The exceptional customs of our Order, especially their refusal to send their children into the public Nurseries, mark out and identify them; and though our places of meeting are concealed and have never been invaded, the fact that we do meet and the persons of those who attend can hardly be concealed."

“But,” I asked, “if a charge of assassination is once made and proved, how can the Courts refuse to do justice? Can the instigators protect the culprit without committing themselves?”

“They would appeal, I do not doubt, to a law, passed many ages ago with a special regard to ourselves, but which has not been applied for a score of centuries, putting the members of a secret religious society beyond the pale of legal protection. That we shall ultimately find them out and avenge ourselves, you need not doubt. But in the meantime every known dissident from the customs of the majority is in danger, and persons of note or prominence especially so. Next to Esmo and his son, the husband of his daughter is, perhaps, in as much peril as any one. No open attempt on your life will be adventured at present, while you retain the favour of the Camptâ. But you have made at least one mortal and powerful enemy, and you may possibly be the object of well-considered and persistent schemes of assassination. On the other hand, next to our Chief and his son, you have a paramount claim on the protection of the Order; and those who with me will take charge of your affairs have also charge to watch vigilantly over your life. If you will trust me beforehand with knowledge of all your movements, I think your chief peril will lie in the one sphere upon which we cannot intrude—your own household; and Clavelta directs your own special attention to this quarter. Immediate danger can scarcely threaten you as yet, save from a woman’s hand.”

“Poison?”

“Probably,” he returned coolly. “But of the details of the plot our Council are, I believe, as absolutely ignorant as of the quarter from which it proceeds.”

“And how,” I inquired, “can it be that the witness who has informed you of the plot has withheld the names, without which his information is so imperfect, and serves rather to alarm than to protect us?”

“You know,” he replied, “the kind of mysterious perception to which we can resort, and are probably aware how strangely lucid in some points, how strangely darkened in others, is the vision that does not depend on ordinary human senses?”

As we spoke we had passed Eunané once or twice, walking backwards and forwards along the path near which she sat. As my companion was about to continue, we were so certainly within her hearing that I checked him.

“Take care,” I said; “I know nothing of her except the Camptâ’s choice, and that she is not of us.”

He visibly started.

“I thought,” he said, “that the witness of our conversation was one at least as reliable as yourself. I forgot how it happened that you have diverged from the prudence which forbids our brethren to admit to their households aliens from the Order and possible spies on its secrets.”

“Of whom do you speak as Clavelta?” I asked. “I was not even aware that the Order had a single head.”

“The Signet,” replied my friend in evident surprise, “should have distinguished the Arch Enlightener to duller sight than yours.”

We had not spoken, of course, till we were again beyond hearing; but my companion looked round carefully before he proceeded—

“You will understand the better, then, how strong is your own claim upon the care of your brethren, and how confidently you may rely upon their vigilance and fidelity.”

“I should regret,” I answered, “that their lives should be risked for mine. In dangers like those against which you could protect me, I have been accustomed from boyhood to trust my own right hand. But the fear of secret assassination has often unnerved the bravest men, and I will not say that it may not disturb me.”

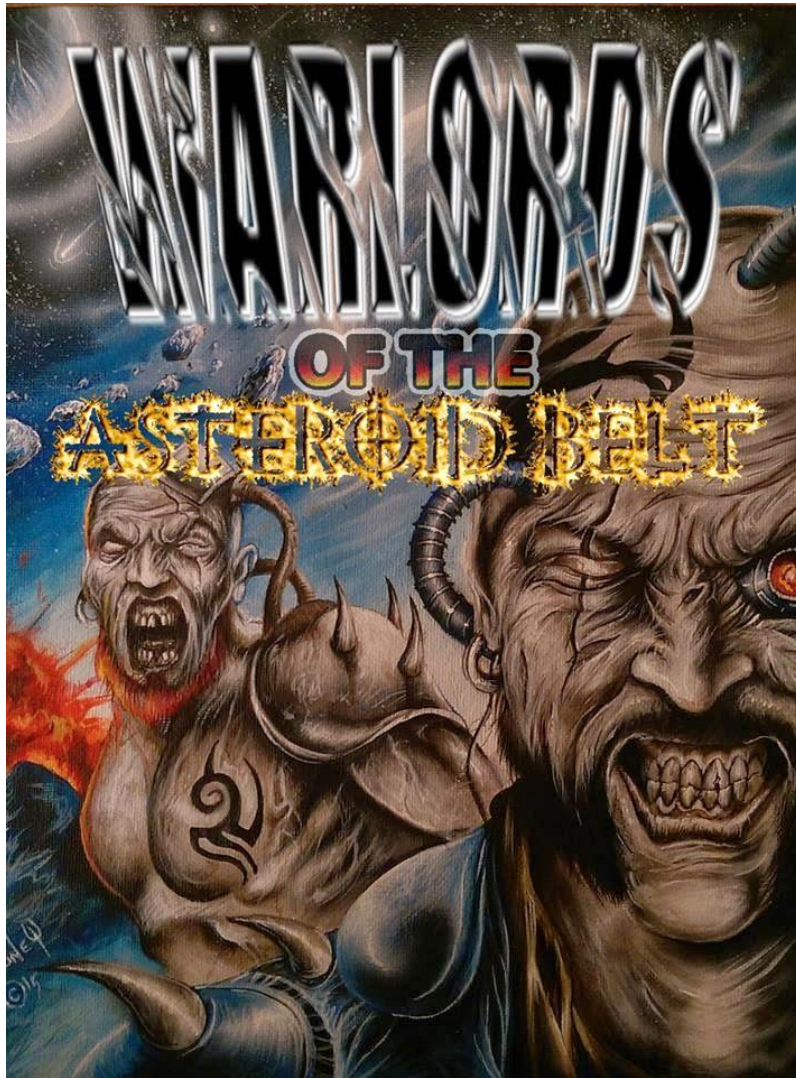
“For you,” he answered, “personally we should care as for one of our brethren exposed to especial danger, For him who saved the descendant of our Founder, and who in her right, after her father and brother, would be the guardian, if not the head, of the only remaining family of his lineage, one and all of us are at need bound to die.”

After a few more words we parted, and I rejoined Eunané, and led her back towards the house. I had learnt to consider taciturnity a matter of course, except where there was actual occasion for speech; but Eunané had chattered so fluently and frankly just before, that her absolute silence might have suggested to me the possibility that she had heard and was pondering things not intended for her knowledge, had I been less preoccupied. Enured to the perils of war, of the chase, of Eastern diplomacy, and of travel in the wildest parts of the Earth, I do not pretend indifference to the fear of assassination, and especially of poison. Cromwell, and other soldiers of equal nerve and clearer conscience, have found their iron courage sorely shaken by a peril against which no precautions were effective and from which they could not enjoy an hour’s security. The incessant continuous strain on the nerves is, I suppose, the chief element in the peculiar dread with which brave men have regarded this kind of peril; as the best troops cannot endure to be under fire in their camp. Weighing, however, the probability that girls who had been selected by the Sovereign, and had left their Nursery only to pass directly into my house, could have been already bribed or seduced to become the instruments of murderous treachery, I found it but slight; and before we reached the house I had made up my mind to discard the apprehensions or precautions recommended to me on their account. Far better, if need be, to die by poison than to live in hourly terror of it. Better to be murdered than to suspect of secret treason those with whom I must maintain the most intimate relations, and whose sex and years made it intolerable to believe them criminal. I dismissed the thought, then; and believing that I had probably wronged them in allowing it to dwell for a moment in my mind, I felt perhaps more tenderly than before towards them, and certainly indisposed to name to Eveena a suspicion of which I was myself ashamed. Perhaps, too, youth and beauty weighed in my conclusion more than cool reason would have allowed. A Martial proverb says—

“Trust a foe, and you may rue it;
Trust a friend, and perish through it.
Trust a woman if you will; —
Thrice betrayed, you’ll trust her still.”

As to the general warning, I was wishful to consult Eveena, and unwilling to withhold from her any secret of my thoughts; but equally averse to disturb her with alarms that were trying even to nerves seasoned by the varied experience of twenty years against every open peril.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book Two: The Earth Under the Martians

Chapter Seven: The Man On Putney Hill

I spent that night in the inn that stands at the top of Putney Hill, sleeping in a made bed for the first time since my flight to Leatherhead. I will not tell the needless trouble I had breaking into that house—afterwards I found the front door was on the latch—nor how I ransacked every room for food, until just on the verge of despair, in what seemed to me to be a servant's bedroom, I found a rat gnawed crust and two tins of pineapple. The place had been already searched and emptied. In the bar I afterwards found some biscuits and sandwiches that had been overlooked. The latter I could not eat, they were too rotten, but the former not only stayed my hunger, but filled my pockets. I lit no lamps, fearing some Martian might come beating that part of London for food in the night. Before I went to bed I had an interval of restlessness, and prowled from window to window, peering out for some sign of these monsters. I slept little. As I lay in bed I found myself thinking consecutively—a thing I do not remember to have done since my last argument with the curate. During all the intervening time my mental condition had been a hurrying succession of vague emotional states or a sort of stupid receptivity. But in the night my brain, reinforced, I suppose, by the food I had eaten, grew clear again, and I thought.

Three things struggled for possession of my mind: the killing of the curate, the whereabouts of the Martians, and the possible fate of my wife. The former gave me no sensation of horror or remorse to recall; I saw it simply as a thing done, a memory infinitely disagreeable but quite without the quality of remorse. I saw myself then as I see myself now, driven step by step towards that hasty blow, the creature of a sequence of accidents leading inevitably to that. I felt no condemnation; yet the memory, static, unprogressive, haunted me. In the silence of the night, with that sense of the nearness of God that sometimes comes into the stillness and the darkness, I stood my trial, my only trial, for that moment of wrath and fear. I retraced every step of our conversation from the moment when I had found him crouching beside me, heedless of my thirst, and pointing to the fire and smoke that streamed up from the ruins of Weybridge. We had been incapable of cooperation—grim chance had taken no heed of that. Had I foreseen, I should have left him at Halliford. But I did not foresee; and crime is to foresee and do. And I set this down as I have set all this story down, as it was. There were no witnesses—all these things I might have concealed. But I set it down, and the reader must form his judgment as he will.

And when, by an effort, I had set aside that picture of a prostrate body, I faced the problem of the Martians and the fate of my wife. For the former I had no data; I could imagine a hundred things, and so, unhappily, I could for the latter. And suddenly that night became terrible. I found myself sitting up in bed, staring at the dark. I found myself praying that the Heat Ray might have suddenly and painlessly struck her out of being. Since the night of my return from Leatherhead I had not prayed. I had uttered prayers, fetish prayers, had prayed as heathens mutter charms when I was in extremity; but now I prayed indeed, pleading steadfastly and sanely, face to face with the darkness of God. Strange night! Strangest in this, that so soon as dawn had come, I, who had talked with God, crept out of the house like a rat leaving its hiding place—a creature scarcely larger, an inferior animal, a thing that for any passing whim of our masters might be hunted and

killed. Perhaps they also prayed confidently to God.

Surely, if we have learned nothing else, this war has taught us pity—pity for those witless souls that suffer our dominion.

The morning was bright and fine, and the eastern sky glowed pink, and was fretted with little golden clouds. In the road that runs from the top of Putney Hill to Wimbledon was a number of poor vestiges of the panic torrent that must have poured Londonward on the Sunday night after the fighting began. There was a little two wheeled cart inscribed with the name of Thomas Lobb, Greengrocer, New Malden, with a smashed wheel and an abandoned tin trunk; there was a straw hat trampled into the now hardened mud, and at the top of West Hill a lot of blood stained glass about the overturned water trough. My movements were languid, my plans of the vaguest. I had an idea of going to Leatherhead, though I knew that there I had the poorest chance of finding my wife. Certainly, unless death had overtaken them suddenly, my cousins and she would have fled thence; but it seemed to me I might find or learn there whither the Surrey people had fled. I knew I wanted to find my wife, that my heart ached for her and the world of men, but I had no clear idea how the finding might be done. I was also sharply aware now of my intense loneliness. From the corner I went, under cover of a thicket of trees and bushes, to the edge of Wimbledon Common, stretching wide and far.

That dark expanse was lit in patches by yellow gorse and broom; there was no red weed to be seen, and as I prowled, hesitating, on the verge of the open, the sun rose, flooding it all with light and vitality. I came upon a busy swarm of little frogs in a swampy place among the trees. I stopped to look at them, drawing a lesson from their stout resolve to live. And presently, turning suddenly, with an odd feeling of being watched, I beheld something crouching amid a clump of bushes. I stood regarding this. I made a step towards it, and it rose up and became a man armed with a cutlass. I approached him slowly. He stood silent and motionless, regarding me.

As I drew nearer I perceived he was dressed in clothes as dusty and filthy as my own; he looked, indeed, as though he had been dragged through a culvert. Nearer, I distinguished the green slime of ditches mixing with the pale drab of dried clay and shiny, coaly patches. His black hair fell over his eyes, and his face was dark and dirty and sunken, so that at first I did not recognise him. There was a red cut across the lower part of his face.

“Stop!” he cried, when I was within ten yards of him, and I stopped. His voice was hoarse. “Where do you come from?” he said.

I thought, surveying him.

“I come from Mortlake,” I said. “I was buried near the pit the Martians made about their cylinder. I have worked my way out and escaped.”

“There is no food about here,” he said. “This is my country. All this hill down to the river, and back to Clapham, and up to the edge of the common. There is only food for one. Which way are you going?”

I answered slowly.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I have been buried in the ruins of a house thirteen or fourteen days. I don’t know what has happened.”

He looked at me doubtfully, then started, and looked with a changed expression.

“I’ve no wish to stop about here,” said I. “I think I shall go to Leatherhead, for my wife was there.”

He shot out a pointing finger.

“It is you,” said he; “the man from Woking. And you weren’t killed at Weybridge?”

I recognised him at the same moment.

“You are the artilleryman who came into my garden.”

“Good luck!” he said. “We are lucky ones! Fancy you!” He put out a hand, and I took it. “I crawled up a drain,” he said. “But they didn’t kill everyone. And after they went away I got off towards Walton across the fields. But—— It’s not sixteen days altogether—and your hair is grey.” He looked over his shoulder suddenly. “Only a rook,” he said. “One gets to know that birds have shadows these days. This is a bit open. Let us crawl under those bushes and talk.”

“Have you seen any Martians?” I said. “Since I crawled out——”

“They’ve gone away across London,” he said. “I guess they’ve got a bigger camp there. Of a night, all over there, Hampstead way, the sky is alive with their lights. It’s like a great city, and in the glare you can just see them moving. By daylight you can’t. But nearer—I haven’t seen them——” (he counted on his fingers) “five days. Then I saw a couple across Hammersmith way carrying something big. And the night before last”—he stopped and spoke impressively—“it was just a matter of lights, but it was something up in the air. I believe they’ve built a flying machine, and are learning to fly.”

I stopped, on hands and knees, for we had come to the bushes.

“Fly!”

“Yes,” he said, “fly.”

I went on into a little bower, and sat down.

“It is all over with humanity,” I said. “If they can do that they will simply go round the world.”

He nodded.

“They will. But—— It will relieve things over here a bit. And besides——” He looked at me. “Aren’t you satisfied it is up with humanity? I am. We’re down; we’re beat.”

I stared. Strange as it may seem, I had not arrived at this fact—a fact perfectly obvious so soon as he spoke. I had still held a vague hope; rather, I had kept a lifelong habit of mind. He repeated his words, “We’re beat.” They carried absolute conviction.

“It’s all over,” he said. “They’ve lost one—just one. And they’ve made their footing good and crippled the greatest power in the world. They’ve walked over us. The death of that one at Weybridge was an accident. And these are only pioneers. They kept on coming. These green stars—I’ve seen none these five or six days, but I’ve no doubt they’re falling somewhere every night. Nothing’s to be done. We’re under! We’re beat!”

I made him no answer. I sat staring before me, trying in vain to devise some countervailing thought.

“This isn’t a war,” said the artilleryman. “It never was a war, any more than there’s war between man and ants.”

Suddenly I recalled the night in the observatory.

“After the tenth shot they fired no more—at least, until the first cylinder came.”

“How do you know?” said the artilleryman. I explained. He thought. “Something wrong with the gun,” he said. “But what if there is? They’ll get it right again. And even if there’s a delay, how can it alter the end? It’s just men and ants. There’s the ants builds their cities, live their lives, have wars, revolutions, until the men want them out of the way, and then they go out of the way. That’s what we are now—just ants. Only——”

“Yes,” I said.

“We’re eatable ants.”

We sat looking at each other.

“And what will they do with us?” I said.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” he said; “that’s what I’ve been thinking. After Weybridge I went south—thinking. I saw what was up. Most of the people were hard at it squealing and exciting themselves. But I’m not so fond of squealing. I’ve been in sight of death once or twice; I’m not an ornamental soldier, and at the best and worst, death—it’s just death. And it’s the man that keeps on thinking comes through. I saw everyone tracking away south. Says I, ‘Food won’t last this way,’ and I turned right back. I went for the Martians like a sparrow goes for man. All round”—he waved a hand to the horizon— “they’re starving in heaps, bolting, treading on each other...”

He saw my face, and halted awkwardly.

“No doubt lots who had money have gone away to France,” he said. He seemed to hesitate whether to apologise, met my eyes, and went on: “There’s food all about here. Canned things in shops; wines, spirits, mineral waters; and the water mains and drains are empty. Well, I was telling you what I was thinking. ‘Here’s intelligent things,’ I said, ‘and it seems they want us for food. First, they’ll smash us up—ships, machines, guns, cities, all the order and organisation. All that will go. If we were the size of ants we might pull through. But we’re not. It’s all too bulky to stop. That’s the first certainty.’ Eh?”

I assented.

“It is; I’ve thought it out. Very well, then—next; at present we’re caught as we’re wanted. A Martian has only to go a few miles to get a crowd on the run. And I saw one, one day, out by Wandsworth, picking houses to pieces and routing among the wreckage. But they won’t keep on doing that. So soon as they’ve settled all our guns and ships, and smashed our railways, and done all the things they are doing over there, they will begin catching us systematic, picking the best and storing us in cages and things. That’s what they will start doing in a bit. Lord! They haven’t begun on us yet. Don’t you see that?”

“Not begun!” I exclaimed.

“Not begun. All that’s happened so far is through our not having the sense to keep quiet—worrying them with guns and such foolery. And losing our heads, and rushing off in crowds to where there wasn’t any more safety than where we were. They don’t want to bother us yet. They’re making their things—making all the things they couldn’t bring with them, getting things ready for the rest of their people. Very likely that’s why the cylinders have stopped for a bit, for fear of hitting those who are here. And instead of our rushing about blind, on the howl, or getting dynamite on the chance of busting them up, we’ve got to fix ourselves up according to the new state of affairs. That’s how I figure it out. It isn’t quite according to what a man wants for his species, but it’s about what the facts point to. And that’s the principle I acted upon. Cities, nations, civilisation, progress—it’s all over. That game’s up. We’re beat.”

“But if that is so, what is there to live for?”

The artilleryman looked at me for a moment.

“There won’t be any more blessed concerts for a million years or so; there won’t be any Royal Academy of Arts, and no nice little feeds at restaurants. If it’s amusement you’re after, I reckon the game is up. If you’ve got any drawing room manners or a dislike to eating peas with a knife or dropping aitches, you’d better chuck ‘em away. They ain’t no further use.”

“You mean——”

“I mean that men like me are going on living—for the sake of the breed. I tell you, I’m grim set on living. And if I’m not mistaken, you’ll show what insides you’ve got, too, before long. We

aren't going to be exterminated. And I don't mean to be caught either, and tamed and fattened and bred like a thundering ox. Ugh! Fancy those brown creepers!"

"You don't mean to say——"

"I do. I'm going on, under their feet. I've got it planned; I've thought it out. We men are beat. We don't know enough. We've got to learn before we've got a chance. And we've got to live and keep independent while we learn. See! That's what has to be done."

I stared, astonished, and stirred profoundly by the man's resolution.

"Great God!" cried I. "But you are a man indeed!" And suddenly I gripped his hand.

"Eh!" he said, with his eyes shining. "I've thought it out, eh?"

"Go on," I said.

"Well, those who mean to escape their catching must get ready. I'm getting ready. Mind you, it isn't all of us that are made for wild beasts; and that's what it's got to be. That's why I watched you. I had my doubts. You're slender. I didn't know that it was you, you see, or just how you'd been buried. All these—the sort of people that lived in these houses, and all those damn little clerks that used to live down that way—they'd be no good. They haven't any spirit in them—no proud dreams and no proud lusts; and a man who hasn't one or the other—Lord! What is he but funk and precautions? They just used to skedaddle off to work—I've seen hundreds of 'em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season ticket train, for fear they'd get dismissed if they didn't; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back for fear they wouldn't be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of the back streets, and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world. Lives insured and a bit invested for fear of accidents. And on Sundays—fear of the hereafter. As if hell was built for rabbits! Well, the Martians will just be a godsend to these. Nice roomy cages, fattening food, careful breeding, no worry. After a week or so chasing about the fields and lands on empty stomachs, they'll come and be caught cheerful. They'll be quite glad after a bit. They'll wonder what people did before there were Martians to take care of them. And the bar loafers, and mashers, and singers—I can imagine them. I can imagine them," he said, with a sort of sombre gratification. "There'll be any amount of sentiment and religion loose among them. There's hundreds of things I saw with my eyes that I've only begun to see clearly these last few days. There's lots will take things as they are—fat and stupid; and lots will be worried by a sort of feeling that it's all wrong, and that they ought to be doing something. Now whenever things are so that a lot of people feel they ought to be doing something, the weak, and those who go weak with a lot of complicated thinking, always make for a sort of do nothing religion, very pious and superior, and submit to persecution and the will of the Lord. Very likely you've seen the same thing. It's energy in a gale of funk, and turned clean inside out. These cages will be full of psalms and hymns and piety. And those of a less simple sort will work in a bit of—what is it? —eroticism."

He paused.

“Very likely these Martians will make pets of some of them; train them to do tricks—who knows? —get sentimental over the pet boy who grew up and had to be killed. And some, maybe, they will train to hunt us.”

“No,” I cried, “that’s impossible! No human being——”

“What’s the good of going on with such lies?” said the artilleryman. “There’s men who’d do it cheerful. What nonsense to pretend there isn’t!”

And I succumbed to his conviction.

“If they come after me,” he said; “Lord, if they come after me!” and subsided into a grim meditation.

I sat contemplating these things. I could find nothing to bring against this man’s reasoning. In the days before the invasion no one would have questioned my intellectual superiority to his—I, a professed and recognised writer on philosophical themes, and he, a common soldier; and yet he had already formulated a situation that I had scarcely realised.

“What are you doing?” I said presently. “What plans have you made?”

He hesitated.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said. “What have we to do? We have to invent a sort of life where men can live and breed, and be sufficiently secure to bring the children up. Yes—wait a bit, and I’ll make it clearer what I think ought to be done. The tame ones will go like all tame beasts; in a few generations they’ll be big, beautiful, rich blooded, stupid—rubbish! The risk is that we who keep wild will go savage—degenerate into a sort of big, savage rat... You see, how I mean to live is underground. I’ve been thinking about the drains. Of course those who don’t know drains think horrible things; but under this London are miles and miles—hundreds of miles—and a few days rain and London empty will leave them sweet and clean. The main drains are big enough and airy enough for anyone. Then there’s cellars, vaults, stores, from which bolting passages may be made to the drains. And the railway tunnels and subways. Eh? You begin to see? And we form a band—able bodied, clean minded men. We’re not going to pick up any rubbish that drifts in. Weaklings go out again.”

“As you meant me to go?”

“Well—I parleyed, didn’t I?”

“We won’t quarrel about that. Go on.”

“Those who stop obey orders. Able bodied, clean minded women we want also—mothers and teachers. No lackadaisical ladies—no blasted rolling eyes. We can’t have any weak or silly. Life

is real again, and the useless and cumbersome and mischievous have to die. They ought to die. They ought to be willing to die. It's a sort of disloyalty, after all, to live and taint the race. And they can't be happy. Moreover, dying's none so dreadful; it's the funking makes it bad. And in all those places we shall gather. Our district will be London. And we may even be able to keep a watch, and run about in the open when the Martians keep away. Play cricket, perhaps. That's how we shall save the race. Eh? It's a possible thing? But saving the race is nothing in itself. As I say, that's only being rats. It's saving our knowledge and adding to it is the thing. There men like you come in. There's books, there's models. We must make great safe places down deep, and get all the books we can; not novels and poetry swipes, but ideas, science books. That's where men like you come in. We must go to the British Museum and pick all those books through. Especially we must keep up our science—learn more. We must watch these Martians. Some of us must go as spies. When it's all working, perhaps I will. Get caught, I mean. And the great thing is, we must leave the Martians alone. We mustn't even steal. If we get in their way, we clear out. We must show them we mean no harm. Yes, I know. But they're intelligent things, and they won't hunt us down if they have all they want, and think we're just harmless vermin."

The artilleryman paused and laid a brown hand upon my arm.

"After all, it may not be so much we may have to learn before—Just imagine this: four or five of their fighting machines suddenly starting off—Heat Rays right and left, and not a Martian in 'em. Not a Martian in 'em, but men—men who have learned the way how. It may be in my time, even—those men. Fancy having one of them lovely things, with its Heat Ray wide and free! Fancy having it in control! What would it matter if you smashed to smithereens at the end of the run, after a bust like that? I reckon the Martians'll open their beautiful eyes! Can't you see them, man? Can't you see them hurrying, hurrying—puffing and blowing and hooting to their other mechanical affairs? Something out of gear in every case. And swish, bang, rattle, swish! Just as they are fumbling over it, swish comes the Heat Ray, and, behold! man has come back to his own."

For a while the imaginative daring of the artilleryman, and the tone of assurance and courage he assumed, completely dominated my mind. I believed unhesitatingly both in his forecast of human destiny and in the practicability of his astonishing scheme, and the reader who thinks me susceptible and foolish must contrast his position, reading steadily with all his thoughts about his subject, and mine, crouching fearfully in the bushes and listening, distracted by apprehension. We talked in this manner through the early morning time, and later crept out of the bushes, and, after scanning the sky for Martians, hurried precipitately to the house on Putney Hill where he had made his lair. It was the coal cellar of the place, and when I saw the work he had spent a week upon—it was a burrow scarcely ten yards long, which he designed to reach to the main drain on Putney Hill—I had my first inkling of the gulf between his dreams and his powers. Such a hole I could have dug in a day. But I believed in him sufficiently to work with him all that morning until past midday at his digging. We had a garden barrow and shot the earth we removed against the kitchen range. We refreshed ourselves with a tin of mock turtle soup and wine from the neighbouring pantry. I found a curious relief from the aching strangeness of the world in this steady labour. As we worked, I turned his project over in my mind, and presently objections and doubts began to arise; but I worked there all the morning, so glad was I to find myself with a purpose again. After working an hour I began to speculate on the distance one had

to go before the cloaca was reached, the chances we had of missing it altogether. My immediate trouble was why we should dig this long tunnel, when it was possible to get into the drain at once down one of the manholes, and work back to the house. It seemed to me, too, that the house was inconveniently chosen, and required a needless length of tunnel. And just as I was beginning to face these things, the artilleryman stopped digging, and looked at me.

“We’re working well,” he said. He put down his spade. “Let us knock off a bit” he said. “I think it’s time we reconnoitred from the roof of the house.”

I was for going on, and after a little hesitation he resumed his spade; and then suddenly I was struck by a thought. I stopped, and so did he at once.

“Why were you walking about the common,” I said, “instead of being here?”

“Taking the air,” he said. “I was coming back. It’s safer by night.”

“But the work?”

“Oh, one can’t always work,” he said, and in a flash I saw the man plain. He hesitated, holding his spade. “We ought to reconnoitre now,” he said, “because if any come near they may hear the spades and drop upon us unawares.”

I was no longer disposed to object. We went together to the roof and stood on a ladder peeping out of the roof door. No Martians were to be seen, and we ventured out on the tiles, and slipped down under shelter of the parapet.

From this position a shrubbery hid the greater portion of Putney, but we could see the river below, a bubbly mass of red weed, and the low parts of Lambeth flooded and red. The red creeper swarmed up the trees about the old palace, and their branches stretched gaunt and dead, and set with shrivelled leaves, from amid its clusters. It was strange how entirely dependent both these things were upon flowing water for their propagation. About us neither had gained a footing; laburnums, pink mays, snowballs, and trees of arbor-vitae, rose out of laurels and hydrangeas, green and brilliant into the sunlight. Beyond Kensington dense smoke was rising, and that and a blue haze hid the northward hills.

The artilleryman began to tell me of the sort of people who still remained in London.

“One night last week,” he said, “some fools got the electric light in order, and there was all Regent Street and the Circus ablaze, crowded with painted and ragged drunkards, men and women, dancing and shouting till dawn. A man who was there told me. And as the day came they became aware of a fighting machine standing near by the Langham and looking down at them. Heaven knows how long he had been there. It must have given some of them a nasty turn. He came down the road towards them, and picked up nearly a hundred too drunk or frightened to run away.”

Grotesque gleam of a time no history will ever fully describe!

From that, in answer to my questions, he came round to his grandiose plans again. He grew enthusiastic. He talked so eloquently of the possibility of capturing a fighting machine that I more than half believed in him again. But now that I was beginning to understand something of his quality, I could divine the stress he laid on doing nothing precipitately. And I noted that now there was no question that he personally was to capture and fight the great machine.

After a time we went down to the cellar. Neither of us seemed disposed to resume digging, and when he suggested a meal, I was nothing loath. He became suddenly very generous, and when we had eaten he went away and returned with some excellent cigars. We lit these, and his optimism glowed. He was inclined to regard my coming as a great occasion.

“There’s some champagne in the cellar,” he said.

“We can dig better on this Thames side burgundy,” said I.

“No,” said he; “I am host today. Champagne! Great God! We’ve a heavy enough task before us! Let us take a rest and gather strength while we may. Look at these blistered hands!”

And pursuant to this idea of a holiday, he insisted upon playing cards after we had eaten. He taught me euchre, and after dividing London between us, I taking the northern side and he the southern, we played for parish points. Grotesque and foolish as this will seem to the sober reader, it is absolutely true, and what is more remarkable, I found the card game and several others we played extremely interesting.

Strange mind of man! that, with our species upon the edge of extermination or appalling degradation, with no clear prospect before us but the chance of a horrible death, we could sit following the chance of this painted pasteboard, and playing the “joker” with vivid delight. Afterwards he taught me poker, and I beat him at three tough chess games. When dark came we decided to take the risk, and lit a lamp.

After an interminable string of games, we supped, and the artilleryman finished the champagne. We went on smoking the cigars. He was no longer the energetic regenerator of his species I had encountered in the morning. He was still optimistic, but it was a less kinetic, a more thoughtful optimism. I remember he wound up with my health, proposed in a speech of small variety and considerable intermittence. I took a cigar, and went upstairs to look at the lights of which he had spoken that blazed so greenly along the Highgate hills.

At first I stared unintelligently across the London valley. The northern hills were shrouded in darkness; the fires near Kensington glowed redly, and now and then an orange red tongue of flame flashed up and vanished in the deep blue night. All the rest of London was black. Then, nearer, I perceived a strange light, a pale, violet purple fluorescent glow, quivering under the night breeze. For a space I could not understand it, and then I knew that it must be the red weed from which this faint irradiation proceeded. With that realisation my dormant sense of wonder, my sense of the proportion of things, awoke again. I glanced from that to Mars, red and clear, glowing high in the west, and then gazed long and earnestly at the darkness of Hampstead and

Highgate.

I remained a very long time upon the roof, wondering at the grotesque changes of the day. I recalled my mental states from the midnight prayer to the foolish card playing. I had a violent revulsion of feeling. I remember I flung away the cigar with a certain wasteful symbolism. My folly came to me with glaring exaggeration. I seemed a traitor to my wife and to my kind; I was filled with remorse. I resolved to leave this strange undisciplined dreamer of great things to his drink and gluttony, and to go on into London. There, it seemed to me, I had the best chance of learning what the Martians and my fellowmen were doing. I was still upon the roof when the late moon rose.

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